
Nothing that is not useful

As mid century modern runs its course, the search is on for the next great historical design influencer. The Arts & Crafts movement, with its focus on craft and rejection of soulless manufacturing processes chimes well with current concerns about the environment and consumerism. Could this be the next big revival? Xanthe Brookes finds out.

The parallels are self-evident. The often excessive and unashamed consumerism of the Victorian age that appalled William Morris and his cohorts mirrors many of our own concerns, albeit against the current background of catastrophic climate change. As younger consumers focus more on experience rather than acquisition, the time could not be more right for adopting a design philosophy that rejects objects all too often produced with little thought for practicality.

While for many the Arts & Crafts message has been lost under a slew of Morris prints on tea towels, a closer look at the thinking behind this late 19th century aesthetic movement reveals something a whole lot more radical. Many of leading proponent William Ruskin's ideas speak clearly to dilemmas facing today's design community. Concerned about the servile labour generated by the industrial revolution, Ruskin harked back to a previous age, where craftspeople and makers sold what they made directly. Today, environmental woes about finite resources, zero hours contracts and worries about the unsustainability of thoughtless consumerism echo many of Ruskin's concerns.

The Internet has also acted as a ready if surprising enabler of Ruskin's

ethos. By enabling direct selling from maker to consumer, crafts previously in danger of extinction have once again begun to emerge. Instagram has become a showroom for the (artfully photographed) creative process. This demand for products with a soul and story is a very Arts & Crafts message. Studio Pottery, much influenced by Arts & Crafts, is flourishing globally, while traditional artisan techniques are being reinvented for a new consumer demographic. The proliferation of craft all over the world would have made Ruskin very happy indeed.

It's important to point out here that we are not suggesting a literal adoption of familiar Arts & Crafts tropes. While these are classic and will always have a place in design interiors, the approach we are advocating is more about inspiration and less about pastiche. So instead of looking at the end products of Arts & Crafts, we want to look to what initially inspired the designers.

In Morris's case this was often vegetation-based motifs; perhaps most famously the almost gothic intertwining leaves of the acanthus plant, the delicacy of the willow branch and the almost Triffid-like shape of the larkspur flower. For an extraordinary cache of further inspiration, it's really worth visiting

the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, London to see its collection of furniture, drawings and wallpapers.

If you look at the architectural and design work of Charles Voysey there's a 'sense of proportion and puritanical love of simplicity' that feels almost Scandinavian at times. Arts & Crafts drew from regional crafts and traditions, emphasising the importance of place, simplicity and honest forms. If you look at Charles Robert Ashbee's tableware, held in the Victoria & Albert Museum, it is a model of restraint, with hammer marks clearly visible on the metal. Likewise, Ernest Barnsley's furniture keeps decoration to a minimum, focusing instead on utility.

There is a reason why William Morris's golden rule on design, 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful' is returned to time and time again. Looking beyond the gift shops, Arts & Crafts offers a rich seam of inspiration in tune with the overarching drivers of our time. ●

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