The Earthly Paradox: A Personal Recollection

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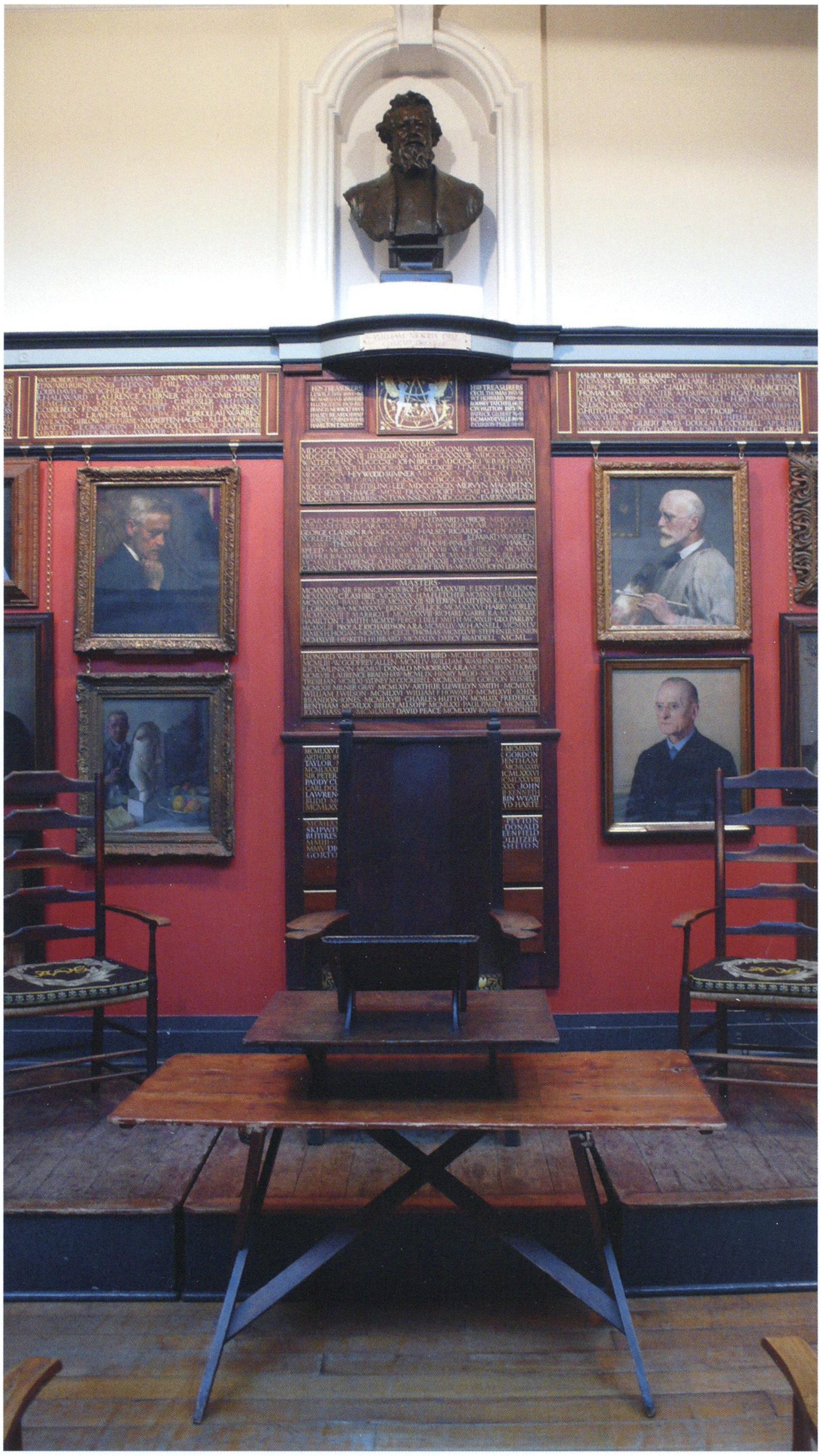


The Hall of the Art Workers' Guild, 6 Queen Square, London;
designed by the Scottish Arts and Crafts architect Francis William Troup and opened on 22 February 1914.
Troup was Master of the Guild in 1923; Peyton Skipwith was Master in 1998.

The Earthly Paradox: A Personal Recollection

Peyton Skipwith

> 'It is true that it is not until the first beginnings of the revival that we ever even hear of the neglect. Until that moment even the neglect is neglected.' [1]

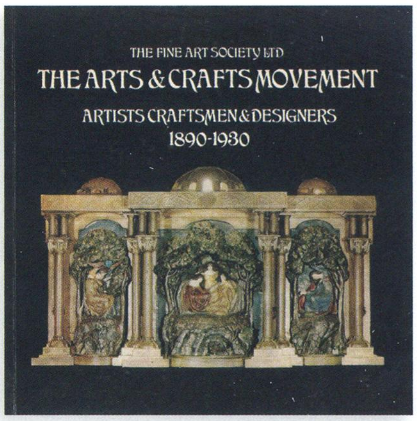
This truism, which was written by G.K. Chesterton in the introduction to his 1925 biography of William Cobbett, sums up more perceptively that old saw, 'out of sight out of mind'. Two world wars, the Wall Street crash, the depression years of the 1930s, plus the seemingly unstoppable rise of modernism, had all helped to create the cultural climate which appeared to have consigned much of the artistic productivity of the second half of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century to the dustbin of history. These decades had been amongst the most inventive and creative, beginning with the Gothic Revival and embracing Pre-Raphaelitism, the New Sculpture, the Aesthetic and the Arts and Crafts Movements, as well as the various *plein air* groups such as the Newlyn and Glasgow Schools, and the pioneers of the New English Art Club. With few exceptions their work, and even their names, had fallen out of popular awareness. This almost total denial of such an important and diverse era of design history was universal, applying also to similar movements on the Continent and in the United States. It was to take a new generation to rediscover their virtues.

I had the good fortune to be of that new generation and, looking back in retrospect, to have had by chance a grounding which by the 1960s made me receptive to this re-emergent aesthetic. I was born shortly before the outbreak of World War II in a large red brick Victorian house in the middle of a six-hundred acre wood above William Cobbett's favourite Hampshire village of Hurstbourne Tarrant, always referred to by him as Uphusband. At the end of the war my parents moved to a more accessible house down the Bourne valley, and when my father died in 1949 my mother migrated to the outskirts of Salisbury, just a couple of miles from Pugin's St Marie's Grange at Alderbury, of which one could get intriguing glimpses from the main Southampton road. After prep school I was sent to Canford in Dorset, and although I did not particularly enjoy my time there, it had its compensations, not only in its magnificent buildings by Blore and Barry and the *cottages ornées* of Canford Magna, but in two enlightened masters, Robin Noscoe and Andrew Davis. Robin ran the art school as a refuge for misfits as well as taking his pupils in one of his largely rebuilt vintage Rolls Royces -- Noscoebiles as we knew them -- to view the treasures at Kingston Lacey, the Russell Cotes Museum and other places of interest as well as to lectures in Bournemouth by Hugh Casson, among others. Andrew taught English literature and introduced me to the joys of Thomas Hardy, Richard Jefferies and Oscar Wilde.

After leaving school I had a gap year awaiting my call-up for National Service, which I filled in by attending Salisbury Art School, assisting with an archaeological dig at Old Sarum and spending a summer as a guide at Wilton House conducting tours through this Inigo Jones masterpiece with its double cube room hung entirely with Van Dycks and furnished by William Kent. The head guide, Rosemary Olivier, was the niece of Edith Olivier, author of *Four Victorian Ladies of Wiltshire* (1945), from whom she inherited the Daye House within the park walls, filled with watercolours by Rex Whistler, who had also designed the embroidery which embellished her dining chairs. Nearby was the splendid mid-nineteenth-century Italianate church of St Nicholas by Thomas Wyatt and David Brandon, who had also worked at Canford. My chief mentor during this period was an elderly antiquarian mediaevalist, G.E. 'Judd' Chambers, who had once challenged Augustus John to draw some mediaeval tracery. In the interwar years he was the only Englishman to have been invited to lecture to French universities on French mediaeval architecture. The next two years doing military service in England and Germany were thin on aesthetic stimuli but gave me time to consider my future options: I had quickly discovered that other people painted a great deal better than I ever would and, lacking any formal qualifications, had ruled out the idea of a museum career, so dealing seemed the most obvious and desirable option. By sheer luck, having been back in the UK for a few weeks after my demobilisation, I saw an advertisement in the Times for a West End Gallery requiring an assistant, 'no previous experience required'! Perfect. Two interviews later, with no previous experience but a wide canvas of aesthetic curiosity, I started working at 148 New Bond Street on 8th May 1961.

The Fine Art Society was to prove, as far as I was concerned, the ideal training ground and university. Founded in 1876, it had become in many ways a time-warp, having gently atrophied at some point in the 1930s. It appeared oblivious to the aesthetic changes of the twentieth century and remained the one gallery in London where it was possible to see the work of such painters and sculptors as G.F. Watts, Alfred Gilbert, Bertram MacKennal, George Clausen, Frank Brangwyn and their like. Alongside the works of these older, and neglected, masters, there was a ready supply of watercolours by Russell Flint and flower pieces by Cecil Kennedy to fill the remaining wall space. Catalogued exhibitions were a rarity apart from the one fixture in the gallery's calendar, the annual spring exhibition entitled 'Early English Watercolours', a field in which the gallery was an important and respected player, carrying on a tradition going back into the previous century when it had shown Ruskin's collection of Turners. John Rothenstein, who I got to know well in the early 1970s while curating 'Men and Memories', a centennial tribute to his father, told me that he had never been into The Fine Art Society during his years as head of the Tate because we only showed unfashionable pictures, a statement that was more revealing about him than the FAS!

In 1961 the staff at number 148 was small; there were the two octogenarian directors, Sydney Growse and Edgar Blake; Andrew McIntosh Patrick (five years older than myself); the company secretary, Mary Jewell; a porter, a cleaner, and on the top floor a mounter and framer. This was to change over the next few years. Walker's Galleries at 118 New Bond Street closed in 1962 and Jack Naimaster, an authority on English watercolours, moved down the street and gradually took over from Mr Blake, who retired at the end of the year. Sydney Growse retired a couple of years later and Naimaster became the titular Managing Director although, in effect, it was Andrew Patrick who largely took over the direction of the business. Simon Edsor joined the team at this time. The biggest influence, however, on the aesthetic direction of the gallery came as a result of Andrew's friendship with Charles and Lavinia Handley-Read. Although I got to know the Handley-Reads quite well and was an occasional visitor to their amazing home in Ladbroke Road, I was never part of their inner circle of friends which included, among others, Simon Jervis, Clive Wainwright, Richard Dennis, Charlotte and John Gere, Stuart Durant, Lionel Lambourne, the Noel Blakistons and John Brandon-Jones, who designed Voyseyesque furniture for them. John Brandon-Jones, a practising architect and Master of the Art Workers' Guild in 1967, had been blessed as a baby by the Rev Mr Voysey, knew C.F.A. Voysey and worked with his son Cowles; he had also made the first survey of Melsetter, the Lethaby designed house in the Hebridean island of Hoy.



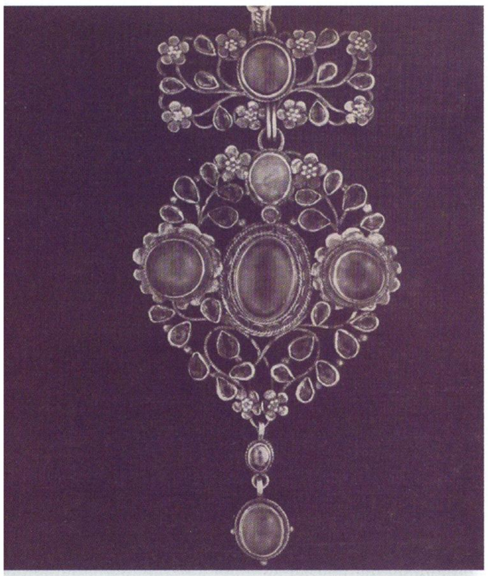
1 Cover, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: Artists, Craftsmen and Designers, 1890-1930* (London: Fine Art Society, 1973).

The first fruit of Handley-Readian influence was the major exhibition of October 1968: 'British Sculpture, 1850-1914', curated by Lavinia Handley-Read. Reactions of press and public alike were of amazement and bafflement. Much the same reaction greeted 'The Earthly Paradise' the following year, an exhibition concentrating on the work of Frederick Cayley Robinson, Joseph Southall and other members of the Birmingham School curated by Charlotte Gere. These were followed in quick succession by such groundbreaking exhibitions as 'The Aesthetic Movement and the Cult of Japan' of 1972, coupled with an exhibition in the first-floor gallery of the work of Christopher Dresser mounted by Richard Dennis and John Jesse, and 'The Arts and Crafts Movement: Artists, Craftsmen & Designers, 1890-1930' in 1973. (Fig 1) Both the Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts exhibitions were mounted in conjunction with Michael Whiteway. A refinement on the latter was the 1975 exhibition, 'Jewellery and Jewellery Design, 1850-1930', with a special section devoted to the work of John Paul Cooper. This was again curated by Charlotte Gere, and it travelled to Australia as part of the 1976 Adelaide Festival. This included a beautiful Cooper pendant that adorned the cover of the catalogue in a jeweller's shop in Beauchamp Place, where it was described as Hungarian. (Fig 2)

As John Jesse (who started trading in the Portobello road in 1964, two years before opening his Kensington High Street shop) so succinctly puts it in his amusingly name-dropping (including mine) autobiography:

> When I began, the top end of the antiques trade was fixed in its ways. It was believed that all antiques had to be made before the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838. Anything Victorian and later was considered inferior, particularly 'High Victorian'. Edwardian was treated as second-hand goods and Art Nouveau was beneath contempt. [2]

This attitude was highlighted in 1973 by the blinkered bureaucracy of the officials at the Inland Revenue with the introduction of Value Added Tax, which coincided precisely with our major Arts and Crafts exhibition. [3] Realising that certain categories of good were liable to reappear on the market, HMRC devised the 'Special Scheme' for art, antique and second-hand car dealers, by which they paid VAT on their profit margin. However, 'antiques' were defined as being more than one hundred years old, thus precluding virtually the entire production of the Arts and Crafts Movement.



2 Detail of cover, *Jewellery and Jewellery Design. 1850-1930* (London: Fine Art Society, 1975).

Disdain for high Victorian taste has its antecedents in Lord Palmerston's dismissal of Sir George Gilbert Scott's Gothic Revival design for the Foreign Office, and Sir William Harcourt's 1898 attack on Norman Shaw's New Scotland Yard, quoting Byron's line, 'the most recent was the least decent.' [4] In the wake of the Great War there was a strong reaction against the mood of pomposity and self-satisfaction which had marked the declining years of Queen Victoria's reign, which was fostered by the popularity of such publications as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* of 1918. Strachey's long essays were scholarly, readable and witty, far removed from the pious three volume biographies of an earlier generation. For instance, writing about Florence Nightingale's conception of God he wrote that, 'She felt towards Him as she might have felt towards a glorified sanitary engineer... hardly to distinguish between the Deity and the Drains' [5], while General Gordon was 'alien to the subtleties of civilised statesmanship.' [6] Strachey's irreverent debunking of these great figures eased the path for the protagonists of the Modern Movement, who by imposing their concept of linear history rather than evolution, convinced a largely willing, or at least quiescent, public that Pugin, Morris, *et al,* although important, should be considered as stepping stones leading towards the glories of Walter Gropius. In this, ironically, the premise of the argument was underscored to a considerable degree by the very success of the Arts and Crafts Movement, itself.

William Morris was, of course, an 'eminent Victorian' but, as he made clear in his 1882 lecture, 'The Lesser Arts of Life', the Arts and Crafts Movement, which he had come to symbolise, was a revolutionary movement with, among other objects, a mission to reform ill-digested design and banish the clutter of overstuffed furniture which epitomised the Victorian domestic interior. Through the influence of Hermann Muthesius's various reports to the German government, as well as his direct contacts, the Arts and Crafts aesthetic came to inspire many members of the Deutscher Werkbund. However, there was one big difference in approach between the British and their German counterparts: the Germans were not 'hung up' on the Morrisean ideal that hand-making was inherently superior to machine manufacture. Nikolaus Pevsner felt that England had, 'forfeited her leadership in the shaping of the new style just about 1900, that is, at the very moment when the work of all the pioneers began to converge into one universal movement.' [7]

German industrial production quickly outstripped that of Britain and, in their turn, many of the younger British designers and manufacturers, especially those who were able to visit the 1914 Cologne Exhibition, were inspired by the design products of the Deutscher Werkbund. Galvanised by this enthusiasm -- and only a country as tolerant as Britain could have conceived the idea -- the Government, through the Board of Trade, sponsored an exhibition of well-designed German manufactures at Goldsmiths' Hall in London in March 1915. This resulted within a matter of months in the foundation of the Design and Industries Association (DIA) under the chairmanship of Lord Aberconway, with founder members including Cecil Brewer, Harold Curwen, Ambrose Heal, Frank Pick, Harry Peach and Sir Lawrence Weaver, and its office was established at 6 Queen Square, the home of the Art Workers' Guild. It was here twenty years later that the young and gullible Nikolaus Pevsner sat at the feet of Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo, accepting as gospel the fantasies of that white-haired old guru who claimed, among other things, to have designed Waterloo Station and the Savoy Hotel. The same but a wiser Pevsner wrote the foreword to the catalogue of The Fine Art Society's 1968 exhibition, 'British Sculpture, 1850-1914'.

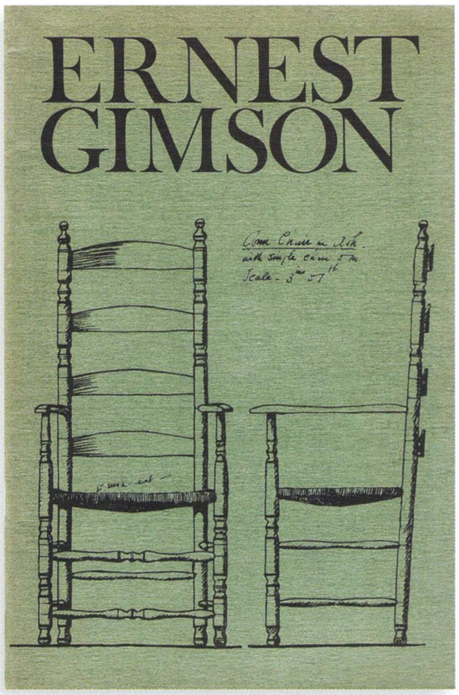
Six Queen Square had been the home of the Art Workers' Guild since the architect Cecil Brewer first drew the Guild's attention to the availability of the building in 1912, and its impressive Hall, designed by F.W. Troup, was opened in February 1914. Brewer and Mackmurdo, along with a number of members and past Masters including William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Lewis F. Day, Walter Crane, Harrison Townsend, Alfred Gilbert, C.F.A. Voysey, C.R. Ashbee and Ernest Gimson, were singled out by Pevsner as nineteenth-century 'Pioneers' in his brilliantly organised and argued linear history of design. Thus, by depicting them as the foundation stone of rational design, he downplayed the importance of the Arts and Crafts Movement while reinforcing their links to the Modern Movement, a state of affairs that endured until the late 1960s, despite the fact that all Pevsner's 'Pioneers', with the exception of Harrison Townsend, had featured in Peter Floud's 1952 exhibition, 'Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts'. As explained in the catalogue, Townsend was only omitted because the curators had failed to trace any of his textiles or wallpapers. In his introduction, Floud described this vast exhibition, with its 960 exhibits, as an attempt to 'bring some clarity into a period which has hitherto been the simultaneous victim of academic indifference and dilettante enthusiasm.' He also highlighted the difficulty of tracing objects:

> Every known contemporary reference has been checked, but the great majority are tantalisingly imprecise and only a small proportion could be followed up with any chance of success. In many

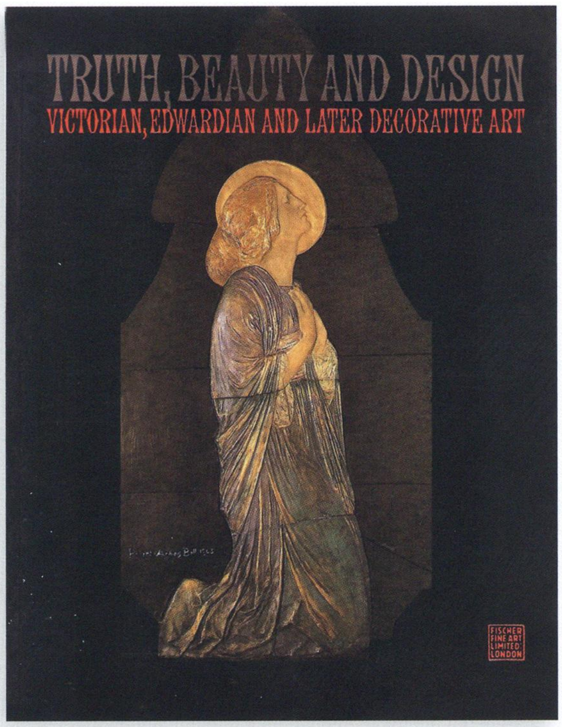
> cases contemporary clues were successfully followed down to the last war only to die out as the result of the breaking up of homes, the dispersal of possessions, and the destruction of records for salvage by auctioneers and dealers. [8]

Seldom in the history of aesthetics can a period as rich in design as that covered by Floud's exhibition, 1837-1910, have been consigned to semi-oblivion so quickly and so comprehensively. Many of the children of the designers were still alive, as was C.R. Ashbee's widow, Janet, who had been intimately involved with the activities of the Guild of Handicraft, and they were generous lenders to the exhibition. Forty-five years later, when I was Master of the Art Workers' Guild, Ashbee's daughter, Felicity, gave the inaugural lecture of my year. As she stood on the dais in the Hall to deliver her lecture, above her head was the board recording her father's election to the Guild a hundred and one years previously. The spirit of the Arts and Crafts Movement had been kept alive in Queen Square even during the darkest days of public opprobrium, and the list of Masters during the 1940s and 50s includes such figures as Sir Albert Richardson, Hesketh Hubbard, Cyril Kenneth Bird (whose professional name was Fougasse) and Donald McMorran. They were, of course, vastly aided by the fact that the Guild owned the freehold and rents from the upper stories, just enabled it to remain financially solvent. Surprisingly, the Guild does not appear on the list of lenders to the 1952 exhibition, but it lent several items to The Fine Art Society's exhibition of 1968, 'British Sculpture, 1850-1914', including Conrad Dressler's bust of William Morris, William Frith's bust of Selwyn Image, Stirling Lee's bust of John Brett, and Blackhall Simonds's bust of Walter Crane. In addition to the Guild's loans there were works by many of its past members, including Gilbert Bayes, Robert Anning Bell, George Frampton, Onslow Ford, Richard Garbe, Alfred Gilbert, F. W. Pomeroy and C.F.A. Voysey. Despite this galaxy of stars, plus those of the previous generation like Alfred Stevens, Lord Leighton, Edgar Boehm, *et al*, one leading critic commented that it was lucky there was a good catalogue to the exhibition as the names 'were virtually unknown'.

'British Sculpture, 1850-1914' was followed at The Fine Art Society in June and July 1969 by 'The Earthly Paradise', showcasing the work of Frederick Cayley Robinson and the painter-craftsmen of the Birmingham School. By chance this coincided with the Ernest Gimson exhibition at Leicester organised by Lionel Lambourne, marking the fiftieth anniversary of that great craftsman's death. (Fig. 3) Although there was no direct overlap, the sympathy in spirit between the tempera paintings of Joseph Southall, Arthur Gaskin and the other Birmingham craftsmen, and Gimson's superbly designed and crafted furniture and metalwork, was self evident. It was this happy conjunction of exhibitions which really kick-started the revival of interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the following decade witnessed the publication of a plethora of books, catalogues and magazine articles. Amongst the books were Gillian Naylor's *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (1971), Isabelle Anscombe and Charlotte Gere's *Arts & Crafts in Britain and America* (1978), Lionel Lambourne's *Utopian Craftsmen: The Arts and Crafts Movement from the Cotswolds to Chicago,* Roderick Gradidge's *Dream Houses: The Edwardian Ideal,* Peter Davey's *Arts and Crafts Architecture,* and Mary Comino (later Greensted)'s *Gimson and the Barnsleys* (all in 1980). The significant exhibitions included the Victoria and Albert Museum's 'Victorian Church Art' of 1971, with a major section devoted to the Arts and Crafts; 'Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Art: the Handley-Read Collection' at the Royal



3 Cover, catalogue of the Ernest Gimson exhibition, Leicester, 1969.


TRUTH, BEAUTY AND DESIGN
VICTORIAN, EDWARDIAN AND LATER DECORATIVE ART
FISCHER FINE ART LIMITED LONDON

4 Cover, *Truth, Beauty and Design: Victorian, Edwardian and Later Decorative Art* (London: Fischer Fine Art, 1986).

Academy; and Robert Judson Clark's 'The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876-1916', in Princeton, New Jersey (both in 1972); 'Beauty's Awakening: The Centenary Exhibition of the Art Workers Guild, 1884-1984', at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery; and Adrian Tilbrook's 'Truth, Beauty and Design: Victorian, Edwardian and Later Decorative Art', at Fisher Fine Art in 1986. (Fig.4)

The opening of Sotheby's Belgravia in 1971 finally drew a line under the decades during which the neglect had been neglected. Housed in the spacious rooms of the old Pantechnicon building in Motcomb Street, this new auction venue provided an outlet for a raft of furniture, ceramics, decorative arts and paintings which previously would not have found a place in the major salerooms. Cataloguing was still hit-and-miss, which is not surprising as original archives and first-hand references were hard to track, and the new scholarly works were yet to come. Among the plethora of lots that passed under the hammer, there were bargains galore to be had, including one of Voysey's spider tables which went through unrecognised, but even when its authorship was known, the competition was modest. In March 1973 Mackintosh's unique pair of mother-of-pearl inlaid armchairs from the Blue Bedroom at Hous'hill came up for sale fully catalogued and were bought by The Fine Art Society for £4,500, to be greeted by a mocking leading article the following day in the *Glasgow Herald* -- 'Scotland's Own Paper' -- with a banner headline: 'What Price Toshie Now?' ('Toshie' was the familiar and derogatory name by which Mackintosh is referred to in Glasgow.) A few years earlier Charles Handley-Read had bought an unattributed Mackintosh clock of the type made for Derngate by German craftsmen interned on the Isle of Man from the Lacquer Chest in Kensington Church Street. Gretchen and Vivian Anderson had always had an eye for the interesting and offbeat, as well as for quality, and it was here that Charles had also purchased the Burges Tower House bedroom suite, now in the Higgins Museum at Bedford. His memorial service at Holy Trinity, Sloane Street, afforded a rare opportunity to see this great Arts and Crafts ecclesiastical interior, and was an important contribution to the Victorian Society's battle to save what Betjeman described as 'the cathedral of the Arts and Crafts Movement.'

Sotheby's Belgravia made Motcomb Street into a Mecca for the decorative arts for a time; Christopher Wood opened up next door, and several other dealers moved into the Halkin Arcade opposite, including Dan Klein and Andy Tilbrook. A new and slightly younger generation were now taking up the running. Paul Reeves and Martin Levy responded with enthusiasm, insight and ever increasing knowledge, sifting what was, for a short time, a liberal supply of stock. Martin had tactfully to persuade his father, George, that Arts and Crafts was as good - and actually more interesting - than much of the Georgian furniture for which Blairman's was renowned, thus gradually shifting the focus of the business, while Geoffrey Munn was doing the same at Wartski's, displaying the work of Henry Wilson alongside that of Fabergé, Giuliano and Castellani. Although it was the trade that made much of the running in reintroducing the public to the virtues of these various neglected areas of late nineteenth-century aesthetics, the museum world still supplied much of the background scholarship. Shirley Bury, Elizabeth Aslin and Barbara Morris, all at the V&A, had worked with Peter Floud on the 1952 exhibition and had both retained their enthusiasm and remained friends with many of the lenders, particularly when there was a family relationship. Lionel Lambourne had interspersed his years at the V&A with productive spells at the William Morris Gallery and Leicester, while among younger curators Clive Wainwright was to me the most brilliant, combining knowledge with intuition. He had that enviable ability to look at an object, the likes of which he had never seen before, and slowly begin to think around it and build up a context for its creation.

Museum and curatorial interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement was not confined to the UK, as witnessed by Robert Judson Clark's far-sighted 1972 exhibition at Princeton. The incipient Musée d'Orsay under the leadership of Michelle Laclotte and its curator of decorative arts, Marc Bascou, became enlightened and courageous collectors, as did Micky Wolfson in Miami, and his curator, Wendy Kaplan, moving on later to the Los Angeles County Museum. Of course there was rivalry, particularly where acquisitions were concerned, but the late 1960s and early 70s was a unique and fascinating period in which scholars, dealers and collectors had the same objective and a shared quest for knowledge with the ultimate aim of reinstating this rich and unfairly neglected swathe of aesthetic history to its due place. Looking back now from the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the surprise is that such a long period of neglect could ever have existed at all. What is needed now is a study and reappraisal of those forces, aesthetic and cultural, which created the climate that made such blanket visual and intellectual amnesia possible.

NOTES

1 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *William Cobbett*, facs ed. (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008).

2 John Jesse, *A Fridge for a Picasso* (London: Muswell Press, 2014), p.125.

3 For fuller details see note 2 to my article, 'The Handley-Reads and the Renaissance of The Fine Art Society, 1966-1976', *Decorative Arts Society Journal 25* (2001), p. 47.

4 See Andrew Saint, *Richard Norman Shaw* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 271.

5. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Chatto and Windus 1974), p.18.

6. Ibid., p.263.

7. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 175.

8. Peter Floud, *Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts*, ex cat. (London: HMSO, 1952), Introduction.