WALTER CRANE

IDEALS IN ART: PAPERS THEORETICAL, PRACTICAL, CRITICAL

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PREFACE

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The collected papers which form this book have been written at different times, and in the intervals of other work. Most of them were specially addressed to, and read before the Art Workers' Guild, as contributions to the discussion of the various subjects they deal with; so that they may be described as the papers of a worker in design addressed mainly to art workers. They are not, however, wholly or narrowly technical, and the point of view frequently bears upon the general relation of art to life.

Some of the papers were delivered as lectures to larger audiences, and others have appeared as articles, mostly in journals devoted to art.

Of the former, the one upon the Arts and Crafts movement was prepared for and read as one of a series of lectures given during a recent exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, and is now for the first time printed in its entirety.

The "Thoughts on House-Decoration" was read before the convention of the National Association of Master Painters and Decorators recently held at Leicester.

"The Influence of Modern Social and Economic Conditions on the Sense of Beauty" was the substance of an address at the opening of a debate on that question at a meeting of the Pioneer Club.

The paper on "The Progress of Taste in Dress" was written for "The Healthy and Artistic Dress Union," and appeared in their journal "Aglaia." The article on Mr.

Chesterton’s book appeared in “The Speaker”; that on “The Teaching of Art” in “The Art Journal.”

The notes on “Gesso” work appeared in an early number of “The Studio,” and I have to thank the editor, Mr. Charles Holme, for kindly allowing me to reprint it here, and also for the loan of the blocks used for the illustrations, both for this and others of the papers.

My best thanks are also due to Mr. Ernest Gimson for the loan of photographs of his cottage at Stoneywell; to the Earl of Pembroke for enabling me to obtain those of the double cube room at Wilton; to Mr. Charles Rowley, and Mr. Charles W. Gamble of the Municipal School of Technology, Manchester, for photographs of the Madox Brown frescoes; to Mr. Augustus Spenser and Mr. FitzRoy, the Principal and the Registrar of the Royal College of Art, for their help in obtaining for me the examples of the work of the students given; and to Mr. Arthur P. Monger for the care he took in photographing them; also to Mr. Kruger of the Royal College, for the use of his admirable drawing of the decorations of Westminster Bridge, which appeared in “The Magazine of Art,” and is now reproduced by permission of Mr. M.H. Spielmann and Messrs. Cassell.

I should like to add a note or two on some of the illustrations, on other points not commented upon in the papers.

The sketch plan and elevation of a collective dwelling (at page 116), for which I am indebted to my architect-son, is offered as a suggestion of what could be done in this way on very simple lines. Each tenant in such a collective dwelling would have his private house or cottage, with the advantage

of the use of the common dining-hall, and the service of a collective kitchen; also a general reading-room, and to these rooms a vaulted way with an open arcade on the side next the quadrangle would enable each tenant to reach this part of the building under cover from his own dwelling, which comprises a private garden, as well as the use of the common quadrangle.

From the architectural point of view grouped dwellings, upon some such principle as here suggested, would undoubtedly lend themselves to artistic and pleasant treatment, and would mitigate the depressing effect of the monotonous rows of squat dwellings intended for our workers' homes, and the mean sameness of the streets, which are spreading around our great towns in every direction, only, it is to be feared, to form slums in the future.

In regard to Manchester, spoken of on page 119, another practical step has been taken in the much-needed direction of school-decoration. Through the public spirit of Mr. Grant, one of her citizens, who has found money enough to start the work, students of the Municipal School of Art are enabled to carry out on a large scale mural paintings upon the upper walls of the class-rooms in one of the principal primary schools. The subjects have been enlarged from some of my coloured book designs such as "Flora's Feast." Such work might not only be made to bear most helpfully on the general work of education, but in itself be an important side of school influence, since by means of large simple typical mural designs great historical events and personages, as well as natural form, might be made familiar

to the eyes of children at the same time that their sense of beauty and imaginative faculties were appealed to.

Local history might in this way be preserved also. In this connection one was glad to see the other day at Hoxne (the ancient Eagles-dune) in Suffolk the school-house connected with the history of the place by having a figure of St. Edmund carved as a finial of the chief gable, with a relief in stone let into the wall beneath, illustrating the incident of the saintly king being taken by the Danes at the bridge, while an inscription mentions that the building marks the spot, and the date of his death in 870.

WALTER CRANE.

YEW TREE FARM,

September, 1905.

IDEALS IN ART

OF THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT: ITS GENERAL TENDENCY AND POSSIBLE OUTCOME

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It seems a strange thing that the last quarter of the nineteenth—or what I was going to call our machine-made—century should be characterized by a revival of the handicrafts; yet of the reality of that revival there can now be no manner of doubt, from whatever point we date its beginnings, or to whomsoever we may trace its initiation.

Indeed, it seems to me that the more we consider the characteristics of different epochs in the history of art, or of the world, the less we are able to isolate them, or to deal with them as phenomena by themselves, so related they seem to what has gone before them, and to what succeeds them, just as are the personalities associated with them; and I do not think this movement of ours will prove any exception to this rule.

Standing as we do on the threshold of a new century—which so often means a new epoch in history, if not in art—it may, perhaps, be allowable to look back a bit, as well as forward, in attempting a general survey of the movement. Like a traveller who has reached a certain stage of his journey, we look back over the region traversed, losing sight, in such a wide prospect, and in the mists of such a far distance, of many turns in the road, and places by the way,

which at one time seemed important, and only noting here and there certain significant landmarks which declare the way by which we have come.

To take a very rapid glance at the phases of decorative art of the past century, we see much of the old life and traditions in art carried on from the eighteenth century into the early years of the nineteenth, when the handicrafts were still the chief means in the production of things of use or beauty. The luxurious excess of the later renascence forms in decoration, learned from France and Italy (though adopted in this country with a certain reserve), corrected by a mixture of Dutch homeliness, and later by French empire translations of Greek and Roman fashions in ornament, often attained a certain elegance and charm in the gilded stucco mirror frames and painted furniture of our Regency period, which replaced the more refined joinery, veneer, and inlaid work of Chippendale and his kinds.

Classical taste dominated our architecture, striving hard to become domesticated, but looking chilly and colourless in our English gray climate, as if conscious of inadequate clothing.

This Greco-Roman empire elegance gradually wore off, and turned to frigid plainness in domestic architecture, and to corpulency in furniture, as the middle of the century was approached, when the old classical tradition in furniture, handed on from Chippendale, Sheraton, and Hepplewhite, seemed to be suddenly broken into by wild fancies and fantastic attempts at naturalism in carving, combined with a reckless curvature of arms and legs supporting (or supported by) springs and padding. Drawing-rooms revelled

in ormolu and French clocks, vast looking-glasses, and the heavy artillery of polished mahogany pianos, while Berlin-wool-work and anti-macassars in crochet took possession of any ground not occupied by artificial flowers, and other wonders, under glass shades.

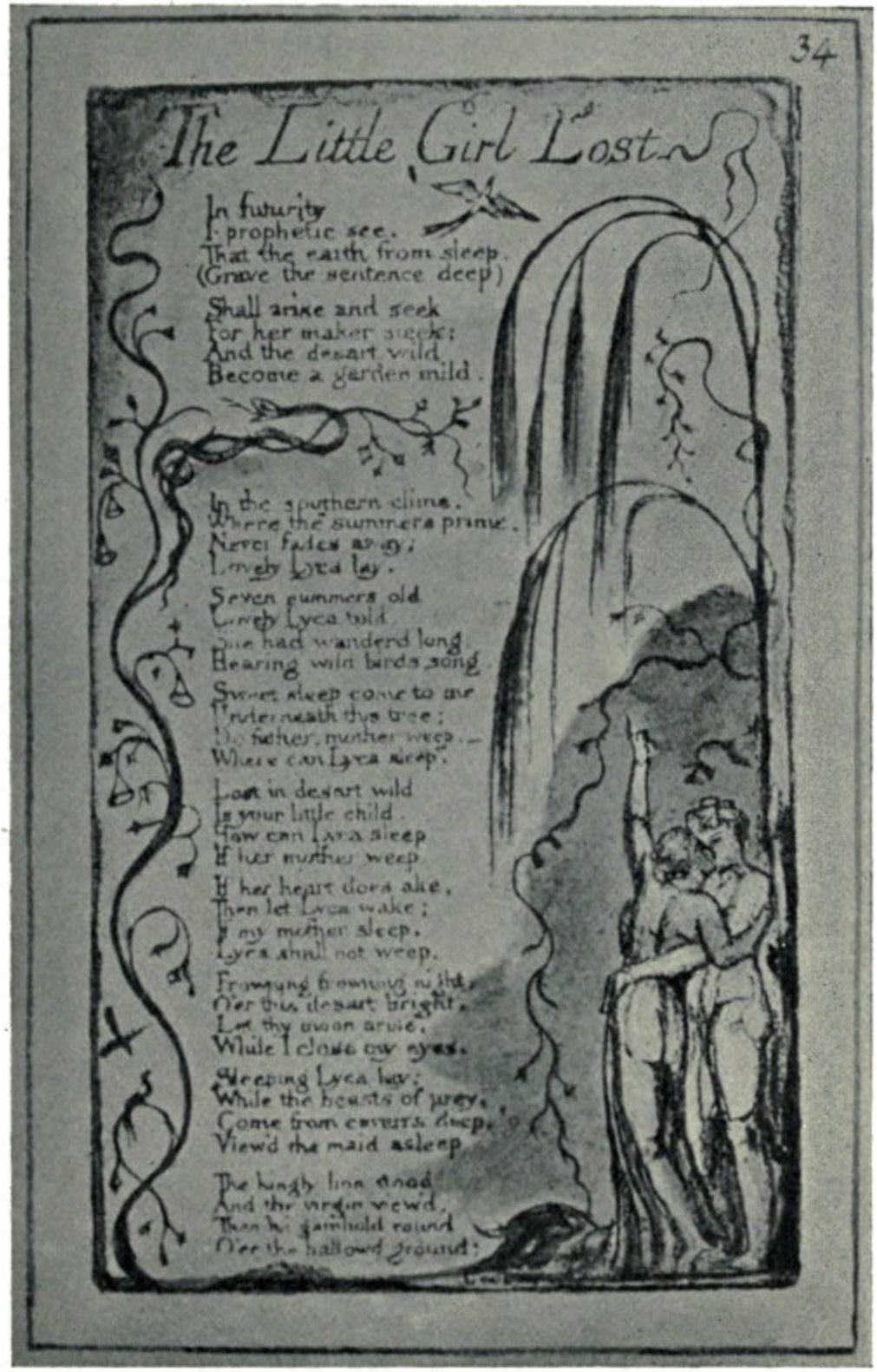
The ’51 Exhibition was the apotheosis of mid-nineteenth century taste, or absence of taste, perhaps. The display of industrial art and furniture then, to judge from illustrated catalogues and journals of the period, seemed to indicate that ideas of design and craftsmanship were in a strange state. The new naturalism was beginning to assert itself, but generally in the wrong place, and in all sorts of unsuitable materials. Those were the days when people marvelled at the skill of a sculptor who represented a veiled figure in marble so that you could almost see through the veil!—but that was “Fine Art.” Industrial art was in a very different category, yet it was influenced by fine art, and, generally, greatly to its disadvantage. We had vignetted landscapes upon china and coalboxes, for instance, and Landseer pictures on hearth-rugs—and our people loved to have it so.

These things were done, and more also, in the ordinary course of trade, which flourished exceedingly, and no one bothered about design. If furniture and fittings were wanted, the upholsterer and ironmonger did the rest.

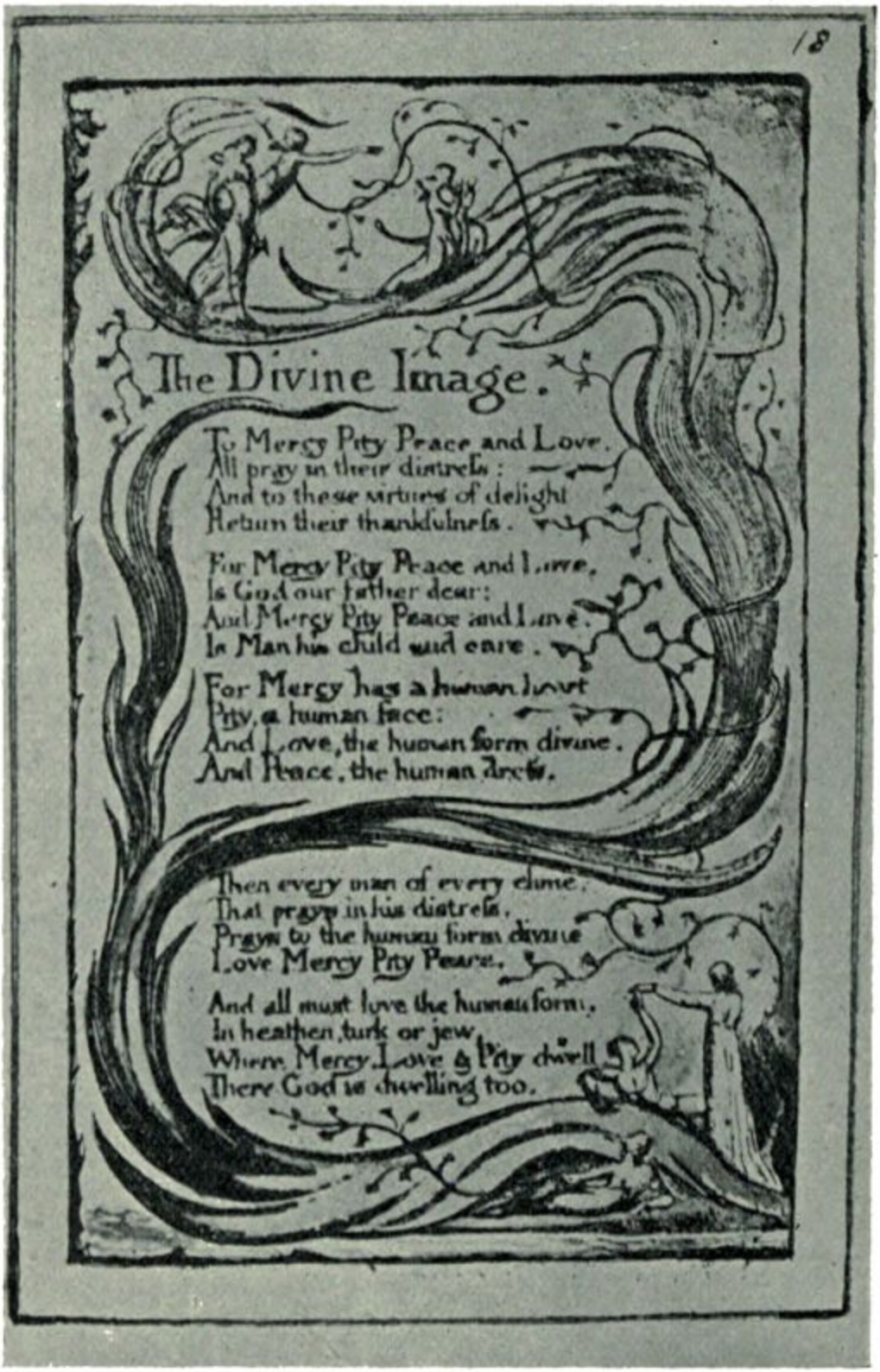
Yet was it not in the “fifties” that Alfred Stevens made designs for iron grates? so that there must have been *one* artist, at any rate, not above giving thought to common things. Designers like Alfred Stevens, and his followers Godfrey Sykes and Moody, certainly represented in their day a movement inspired chiefly by a study of the earlier

renascence, and an honest desire to adapt its forms to modern decoration. Their work, though suffering—like all original work—deterioration at the hands of imitators, showed a search for style and boldness of contour and line, touched with a certain refined naturalism which gives the work of Alfred Stevens and his school a very distinct place. It was mainly a sculptor’s and modeller’s movement, and represented a renascence revival in modern English decorative art; and through the work of Godfrey Sykes and Moody, in association with the government schools of art, it had a considerable effect upon the art of the country.

But I think many and mixed elements contributed to the change of feeling and fashion which came about rather later, in which perhaps may be traced the influence of modes of thought expressing themselves also in literature and poetry, as well as the study of different models in design.



Page from Blake’s “Songs of Experience”



Page from Blake’s “Songs of Innocence”

Wood Engravings by
Edward Calvert

The Return Home

Ideal Pastoral Life

The Chamber Idyll

Wood Engravings by
Edward Calvert

The Flood

The Lady and the Rooks

The Brook

One cannot forget that the early years of the nineteenth century were illuminated by the inspiration and clearness of inner vision were expressed in so individual a form with such

fervour of poetic feeling and social aspiration, both in verse and design, in the books engraved and printed by himself which remain the remarkable monument of his neglected genius.

Illustrations to Tennyson

“The Ballad of Oriana.” By Holman Hunt

The group of artists associated with him, too, such as Edward Calvert and Samuel Palmer, marked an epoch in English poetic illustration, associated with wood engraving

and printing, of very distinct character and beauty, the influence of which may be seen at the present day in some of the woodcuts of Mr. Sturge Moore.

The more conscious classical designs of Flaxman and Stothard were colder, but graceful, and mark a period from which we seem more widely separated than from others more remote, yet seemingly nearer in sentiment.

Illustrations to Tennyson

“The Palace of Art.” By D.G. Rossetti

Quite a different kind of sentiment was fostered by the writings of Scott upon which so many generations have been fed, but they had their effect in keeping alive the

sense of romance and interest in the life of past days, still further enlightened by the researches of antiquarians, and the increased study of the Middle Ages, and above all of Gothic architecture. All these must be considered as so many tributary streams to swell the main current of thought and feeling which carried us on to the artistic revival of our own times.

Illustrations to Tennyson
The Bride (from “The Talking Oak”). By Sir J.E. Millais

The poetry of Tennyson, with its sense of colour, sympathy with art and nature, and the romance of the historic past, its thoroughly English feeling, and its revival of the Arthurian Legend, and its association (in the Moxon edition of 1857) with the designs of some of the leading pre-Raphaelite painters must be counted if not as a very strong influence upon, at least as an evidence and an accompaniment of that movement.

The names of Ford Madox Brown, of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, of William Holman Hunt, at once suggest artists of extraordinary individuality, remarkable decorative instinct, and carefulness for, and scholarly knowledge of, beautiful and significant accessories of life, of which all have not only given evidence in their own craft of painting, but also as practical designers.

The name of another remarkable artist must be mentioned, that of Frederick Sandys, contemporary with the pre-Raphaelites, imbued with their spirit, and following their methods of work. A wonderful draughtsman and powerful designer, who in all his work shows himself fully alive to beauty of decorative design in the completeness, care, and taste with which the accessories of his pictures and designs are rendered. His powers of design and draughtsmanship are perhaps best shown in the illustrations engraved on wood which appeared in “Once a Week,” “The Cornhill Magazine,” and elsewhere, which were shown with the collections of the artist’s work at the International Society’s last exhibition at the New Gallery, and at the Winter Exhibition at Burlington House in the present year (1905).

Manoli. By Frederick Sandys

From “The Cornhill Magazine”

In some quarters it appears to be supposed that the pre-Raphaelite movement consisted entirely of Rossetti, and that to explain its development you have only to add water—or caricature. It is extraordinary to think in what uncritical positions professional critics occasionally land themselves.

I cannot understand how any candid and fairly well-informed person can fail to perceive that the pre-Raphaelite

movement was really a very complex movement, containing many different elements and the germs of different kinds of development in art.

If it was primitive and archaic on one side, it was modern and realistic on another, and again, on another, romantic, poetic, and mystic; or again, wholly devoted to ideals of decorative beauty.

The very names of the original members of the brotherhood, to say nothing of later adherents, suggest very marked differences of temperament and character, and these differences were reflected in their art.

The stimulating writings of Ruskin must also be counted a factor in the movement, in his recognition of the fundamental importance of beautiful and sincere architecture and its relation to the sister arts: in his enthusiasm for truer ideals both in art and life: in the ardent love of and study of nature so constantly, so eloquently expressed throughout his works.

Despite all controversial points, despite all contradictions —mistakes even—I think that every one who has at any time of his life come under the influence of Ruskin’s writings must acknowledge the nobility of purpose and sincerity of spirit which animates them throughout.

It is the fashion now in some quarters to undervalue his influence, but at all events it was at its best a wholesome and stimulating influence, provocative of thought, and no man must be held accountable for the mistakes or misapplications of his followers—the inevitable Nemesis of genius.

It was an influence which certainly had practical results in many ways, and not least must be counted its influence upon the life, opinions and work of the man to whose workshop is commonly traced the practical revival of sincere design and handicraft in modern England—I need hardly say I mean William Morris.

It is notable that at the outset the initiation of that practical revival was due to a group of artists, including the names already mentioned, and although in later days the practical direction of the work fell into the hands of William Morris, the fact that the enterprise had the sympathy and support of the leading artists of the pre-Raphaelite School must not be forgotten.

Indeed, it is said that the initiative or first practical proposal in the matter came from D.G. Rossetti, and it must be remembered that originally the main object of the firm was to supply their own circle with furniture and house decorations to suit their own tastes, though the operations were afterwards extended to the public with extraordinary success. The work, too, of the group was strengthened on the architectural side by such excellent designers as Mr. Philip Webb, who, in addition to architectural and constructive work of all kinds is remarkable for the force and feeling of his designs of animals used in decorative schemes, both in the flat and in relief.

The hare and hound in the frieze of the dining-room at South Kensington Museum are early works of his, as well as the woodwork of the room.

The study of mediaeval art had, however, been going on for many years before, and books of the taste and

completeness of those of Henry Shaw, for instance, had been published, dealing with many different provinces of decorative art, from alphabets to architecture. The well engraved and printed illustrations of these works afforded glimpses even to the uninitiated of the wonderful richness, invention and variety of the art of the Middle Ages—so long neglected and misunderstood—while the treasures of the British Museum in the priceless illuminated manuscripts of those ages were open to those who would really know what mediaeval book-craft was like.

Then, too, the formation of the unrivalled collections at South Kensington, and the opportunities there given for the study of very choice and beautiful examples of decorative art of all kinds, especially of mediaeval Italy and of the earlier renascence, played a very important part both in the education of artists and the public, and helped with other causes to prepare the way for new or revived ideas in design and craftsmanship.

The movement went quietly on at first, confined almost exclusively to a limited circle of artists or artistically-minded people. It grew under the shadow of the atrocious Franco-British fashions of the sixties, now (or recently) so much admired, crinolines and all, in some quarters, because I suppose they are so old-fashioned.

Independent signs of dissatisfaction with current modes, however, were discernible here and there. It was, I think, about this time that Mr. Charles L. Eastlake (late Keeper of the National Gallery) who was trained as an architect, published a book called “Hints on Household Taste,” in which he says somewhere: “Lost in the contemplation of

palaces we have forgotten to look about us for a chair." This seemed to indicate a reaction against the exclusive attention then given to what were called "the Fine Arts."

Associations were formed for the discussion of artistic questions of all kinds, and I mind me of a certain society of art students which used to meet in the well-known room at No. 9, Conduit Street, the existence of which indicated that there were thought and movement in the air among the younger generation and new ideas were on the wing, many of them carrying the germs of important future developments. Even outside Queen Square there were certain designers of furniture and surface decorations not wholly absorbed by trade ideals, who maintained a precarious existence as decorative artists.

There were architects, too, of such distinction and character as Pugin, William Burges, and Butterfield, who were fully alive to the value of mediaeval art, and were bold experimenters as well as scholars and enthusiasts in their revival of the use of mural decoration in colour.

Mr. Norman Shaw's work, which has so much influenced the newer architectural aspects of London, comes later, and is more distinctly and intimately related to our movement, which it may here be said has owed much of its strength to its large architectural element.

There were, of course, builders and decorators in those days, but the genus "decorative artist" was a new species as distinct from the painter and paper-hanger.

While these, and the historic, the landscape, the animal, and *genre* painter had their exhibitions, were recognized, and some of them duly honoured at times, decorative artists

and designers may be said to have had nowhere to lay their heads—in the artistic sense—so they laid their heads together!

The immediate outcome of this sympathetic counsel took the form of fireside discussions by members of a society of decorative artists founded by Mr. Lewis F. Day, strictly limited in number, called “the Fifteen.” This small society was in course of time superseded, or rather absorbed, by a larger body known as the Art Workers’ Guild, which contained architects, painters, designers, sculptors, and craftsmen of all kinds, and grew and increased mightily; it has since thrown out a younger branch in the Junior Art Workers’ Guild.

Guilds, or groups of associated workers were also formed for the practice and supply of certain handicrafts, and societies like that of the Home Arts and Industries Association organized village classes in wood-carving, pottery, metal-work, basket-making, turning, spinning, and weaving linen, embroidery, and other crafts.

These efforts, mostly due to a band of enthusiastic amateurs, must all be counted, if not always satisfactory in their results, yet as educational in their effects, and as creating a wider public interested in the handicraft movement, and therefore as adding impetus to that movement, which in 1888—the year of our own society’s foundation—even rose to the height of—or extended to the length of—a “National Association for the Advancement of Art in Relation to Industry” (such was its title) which actually held congresses in successive years in Liverpool, Edinburgh, and Birmingham—as if they were scientists or sectarians.

Members of our society were more or less connected with these developments.

All this time we had, as we still have, a Royal Academy of Arts. But somewhere in the early eighties arose certain bold, bad men who—not satisfied with an annual picture-show of some two thousand works or so, always fresh—desired to see a national exhibition of art which should comprise not only paintings, sculpture, and architectural water-colours, but some representation of the arts and handicrafts of design.

Another plank in this artistic platform was the annual election of a selection and hanging committee out of and by the whole body of artists in the kingdom. This movement attracted a considerable number of adherents, largely among the rising school of painting, until it was discovered that several of the leaders desired to belong to the garrison of the fortress they proposed to attack.

The Arts and Crafts section of this movement, mostly members of the Guild aforesaid, seeing their vision look hopeless in that direction, then withdrew, and formed themselves into the present Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, with power to add to their number. And I think they gathered to themselves all the artists and craftsmen of standing who were sympathetic and willing to subscribe to their aims.

We may note here that since the directors of the Grosvenor Gallery in its Winter Exhibition of 1881 arranged a collection of designs for decoration, including cartoons for mosaic, tapestry, and glass, no attempt to show contemporary work of the kind had been made.