
This is a most interesting and important book, and I am surprised not to have seen reviews of it, except, I'm glad to say, in the recent Newsletter of the William Morris Society in the US; it was first published in 1999 in New York. Saler's unexpected thesis is that the cultural tradition deriving from Ruskin and Morris, which he describes as 'medieval modernism', was the most important aesthetic tradition in England between the wars (more so than the formalism of Bloomsbury that has attracted so much more attention), and that its leader, Frank Pick 'turned the Underground into the culminating project of the arts and crafts movement - a work of public art that united modern painting, sculpture, and architecture into a glorious Gesamtkunstwerk, a thing of joy to its makers and its users' - though by the late '30s Pick was to see the project as a failure, and the optimistic assumptions on which it was based were to fade entirely away.

Those who recall the opening of *News from Nowhere*, where the narrator calls a carriage on the Underground 'that vapour bath of hurried and discontented humanity' - or indeed those of us with recent experience of the rush hour - will at first be disconcerted. But we may then recall the improvements in travel conditions between Morris's time and Pick's (if not since), and begin to consider Saler's case with respect. One thing that it does do is to show that the ideas of Ruskin and Morris, which in many accounts simply disappear into the pit of the
Great War, continued to exert a strong influence into the 1920s, particularly in their insistence on the integration of art and life. Saler’s main focus is on the life and work of Pick, as has already been implied. But he shows that Pick was part of a grouping that also included as its elder statesman, Lethaby, and as its main protagonists William Rothenstein and Herbert Read, along with Epstein, Charles Holden and Eric Gill - though it does not seem to me that Gill is given as much attention as he deserves: none of his important writings on art and society are cited. Saler calls this group the ‘medieval moderns’, taking the term from the politician Arthur Greenwood who wrote enthusiastically of the new London Underground headquarters (built in 1929 by Holden, who commissioned sculpture for it from Epstein, Gill and Henry Moore) that it represented the outlook of the new generation: ‘the nineteenth century was adaptable economically but not spiritually. Now we are catching up and [I am] trying to be a medieval modern’.

Saler gives plenty of evidence that this new outlook was widely influential, especially in education and cultural journalism in magazines like The Studio and The Listener, and claims that its great achievement was Pick’s Underground, with its buildings by Holden, its posters by McKnight Kauffer, its lettering by Edward Johnston. The medieval modernists are said to have had in common a certain sensibility – Northern, nonconformist, practical and ‘English’ – in their avoidance of the extremes of the contemporary continental avant-garde; and for the same reason, in Saler’s view, they were the more effective. They held high hopes of what could be achieved by art when integrated into society, but thought that this could be done in some non-political fashion. W. A. S. Benson is quoted as writing in 1919 that while a few members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society still followed Morris in seeing revolution as ‘a condition precedent to real improvement in the position of the arts ... the procedure of the Society really implied a basis now recognised as more truly scientific, that the arts were likely to be, not the result, but the means of bringing about better conditions of life’.

Such high hopes were not to be fulfilled (as Morris the Marxist would have expected). But Britain did make strong efforts during and after the war to integrate art and industry. The government established the Design and Industries Association in 1915; one of its founding members, Harry Peach, wrote in a letter in the same year that ‘Morris & Ruskin each in his own way laid the foundation, and the Arts and Crafts people failed to join it up with everyday conditions. Our job is to do that’. The DIA’s first manifesto was written by Arthur Clutton-Brock, whose Home University Library book on Morris had appeared in 1914, and in it he wrote of ‘the regeneration of English industry and art’ as its aim. Its ideals were to be expressed most forcefully by Herbert Read in his widely influential book Art and Industry in 1934, but Pick was one of those who contributed most substantially to its considerable success in spreading its key idea of ‘fitness for purpose’ to a wide public. Believing in planning and integration, Pick was responsible for the choice of Holden as architect for the London Underground, and thus not only for its headquarters but also for the excellent stations built for the extension of the Morden line. He was also able to cooperate with the LCC in developing art education in London schools. The success of the new outlook, Saler suggests, is also shown by the agreement of the Royal Academy in 1934 to the staging of an exhibition of ‘Art in Industry’. The President explained patriotically
that 'it was entirely against their constitution, but they were doing it for the sake of the country'.

However, Pick was not able to sustain his confidence in the ideals of the DIA. The creation of the London Transport Passenger Board in 1933 increased the range of his responsibilities, but also put him into a larger organisation in which his word held less sway. He did become chair of the newly established Council for Art and Industry in 1934, but his private life was apparently unhappy, and the disturbing images of the Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936 helped to destroy his belief that modern art could be a useful element in the creation of a rational and harmonious society. His views became more pessimistic, and he sometimes retreated into a 'Little England' mentality; he chose Oliver Hill as the architect for the British pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937, and encouraged him to work on timidly traditional lines—though one must find some sympathy for his claim that, contrasted with the German, Italian and Soviet buildings, the British pavilion did not sound 'a false, grandiloquent note of aggressive pride'. Pick's health and confidence declined, and the outbreak of war put an end to the CAI. He died, disillusioned, in 1941, and 'medieval modernism', Saler argues, rapidly declined, with a renewed emphasis on the separation of art from industry becoming predominant. An interdepartmental report in 1943 apparently asserted that Morris's ideal of 'Man the Maker' was no longer relevant, and that more consumer goods would in future be the 'compensation for the (alleged) fun of being a medieval hand worker'. Robin Darwin became Principal of the RCA in 1959 and—reversing the policy for which Rothenstein had stood—encouraged greater specialisation. In 1950 Darwin wrote: 'William Morris’s ideas were all confused with the “dignity of labour” and so on... I think this whole attitude is muddle and bunk'.

Thus the enterprise to which Pick and others had given their energy and idealism came to its apparent close. But Saler is well aware that history does not offer us tidy boundaries. He concludes by telling us that Pick wrote to Holden in 1940 after the bombing of Coventry Cathedral, arguing against the building of a replica and in favour of a new building which would express truthfully 'the design and craftsmanship of our own days'. Sir Basil Spence was to try to do this with the incorporation of Piper’s stained glass and Sutherland’s tapestry into his modern building. The point of view that asserts the social utility and value of art, as it derived from Ruskin and Morris and was shared and developed by Pick and others of his generation, remains important for us today, and we are greatly indebted to Michael Saler for having drawn attention to such an important and neglected aspect of our recent cultural history in this excellent and thought-provoking book.

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