
‘If you arrange pebbles at a beach or put together a stunning building or an incredible tapestry; why isn’t that as important as a painting?’ (p. 169), asks Kaffe Fassett in his article on knitting, and his question might be seen as the fundamental question of *The Beauty of Craft*, a collection of articles taken from *Resurgence*, the international journal of radical thought on ecology, art and culture.

Morris would have been thrilled with the publication of *The Beauty of Craft*, not only because he is mentioned several times but also because the contributors extend the word art beyond matters which are consciously works of art. As one of the editors of the collection, Maya Kumar Mitchell, notes in her introduction,
craft often gets described in negative comparison with art, craft being ‘a bit like art only useful and not so amazing’ (p. 11). However, for the contributors to this collection, ‘craft’ and ‘art’ have ceased to be divided, since they see ‘craft’ referring to both the work of creating and the finished piece: ‘Craft brings us into contact with nature and with environmental issues. Craft is a way of developing creativity, consciousness and spirituality . . . Craft is for doing and for having, for using and for enjoying’ (Mitchell, p. 13).

Informed by such an understanding of craft, the contributors to this anthology are not concerned with the glamour, originality or brilliance often associated with being an artist, but with the daily relationship, both harmonious and confrontational, with materials, intentions, necessities and possibilities. Through these essays, which focus on living craftspeople, most of them still producing, we can see the role of craft in relationship to community, to work, the natural environment and economics, and it soon becomes obvious that these craftspeople understand their craft as a way of life as well as a profession.

The inspiration for this anthology was the articles already published in Resurgence, and the editors have supplemented these in order to expand the range of crafts covered. Six chapters, each comprising between seven and ten articles, focus on the world of craft (e.g. glassblowing, recycling, design and pottery), ways of living (e.g. furniture and basket making), the culture of community (tribal art, quilting, cooking, the local community), caring for nature (e.g. architecture, gardening, bodging and willow work), enduring skills (e.g. lithography, bookbinding, silversmithing and hand skills), and seekers of meaning (e.g. craft traditions, cabinet making, weaving and knitting). One of the delights of the collection is that several types of crafts are covered in different sections and seen from different cultures and perspectives. Pottery, for example, is discussed in chapter one, ‘The World of Craft’, in the context of Breon O’Casey (son of playwright Sean O’Casey), but also in chapter two, ‘Ways of Living’, in the context of the Devon potter Clive Bowen, the Dorset potter Richard Batterham, the city potter Edmund de Waal and the Japanese potter Shoji Hamada. Similarly, architecture is
focussed upon both in chapter three, ‘Caring for Nature’, under the aspect of sustainable architecture, but also in chapter six, ‘Seekers of Meaning’, under the aspect of the metaphysical dimension of Indian architecture.

In the light of this holistic treatment of craft, the reader of this journal will be delighted that Morris is a constant presence in the book. The first statement by Morris, next to a beautiful photograph of ‘New Sentinels’ by the American artist Philip Baldwin, serves as the introductory quotation to chapter one: ‘Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful’ (p. 14). The second reference to Morris is a picture of Cray (p. 25), the printed chintz by Morris (in the William Morris Gallery) in John Lane’s article ‘Art Elevated, Craft Degenerated’. Lane, a painter and the Art Editor of Resurgence, gives a short exposition of art history and explains how in traditional cultures, on the Indian continent and in other cultures, such as Balinese, the ‘Fine Arts’ were not separated from craftsmanship, craftsmanship from labour, and beauty from everything else. Today, however, some artists dissociate themselves from craftsmen and craftswomen, and some crafts are considered more important than others. Although Morris is not mentioned in the text, Lane argues in a distinctly Morrisian tone that all skills should be equally celebrated: hairdressers, cooks, boat builders, plasterers and restorers should be considered alongside their more favoured creative contemporaries.

The next reference to Morris appears in Sara Hudston’s intriguing article on the furniture-maker John Makepeace. As we learn early in the article, ‘Makepeace’s thinking is strongly influenced by Ruskin, William Morris and the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement’ (p. 59), and we soon realise why. Sentences such as ‘Good design is when an object expresses its role, its particular function, with delight’ (p. 59) and ‘I am particularly attracted by woods that are grown in England, trees which have been grown over aeons and have come to thrive in our particular climate. That has a kind of wholeness about it’ (p. 59) call to mind Morris’s belief in the importance of the functionality of objects and his campaign to protect nature and the local environment. Makepeace’s Hooke Park, 330 acres of mixed
broad-leaved and conifer woodland near Beaminster in Dorset, would have particularly appealed to Morris. Trying to help protect woodlands while creating wooden structures with woodland thinnings – that part of the crop which in the UK usually gets burned or thrown away – Makepeace makes ‘an ecologically-aware attempt to realise the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts philosophy using twenty-first-century knowledge’ (p. 60).

On a similar note, the fourth reference to Morris surfaces in Alexander Murdin’s article ‘Treading Lightly’, which focuses on environmental responsibility in, and a sustainable approach to, craft. Embracing practices in craft that help protect resources, many craftspeople are working towards what Murdin calls ‘a new counter-culture of sustainability’ (p. 98). In practical terms, this means using local or recycled materials, insisting that wooden materials come from sustainable forestry, and avoiding imported hardwoods such as mahogany and indeed any imports that involve energy-consuming transportation. Murdin quotes Bernard Leach, the famous St. Ives potter, arguing in 1940 that craft, ‘since the day of William Morris, represents the chief means of defence against the materialism of industry and its insensibility to beauty’ (p. 99). As Murdin rightly reminds us, perhaps ‘the widespread acceptance of the need for environmental responsibility has finally confirmed this [Morris’s] point of view and contemporary craft will reach the larger audience it deserves’ (p. 99).

The fifth reference to Morris appears in Peter Bunyard’s article on the ‘bodger’ Tino Rawnsley (in the nineteenth century, bodgers were highly skilled itinerant wood-turners, who worked in the beech woods on the chalk hills of the Chilterns). The problem, according to Bunyard, is that when we buy mass-produced products, we turn a blind eye to the environmental damage caused by long-distance transportation and by the destructive exploitation of natural resources. By contrast, Rawnsley, who works near Liskeard in Cornwall, sees his mission, in addition to making his living out of wood, as helping to bring back the woodlands that a few centuries ago provided people with a way to sustain themselves and their families. Bunyard introduces Rawnsley to the reader as someone whose individual approach to
the raw material he uses leads to extremely high quality and beauty of the product. As Bunyard succinctly notes, ‘the challenge is to revive the good quality of the past so as to compete with the mass-production of the present, a return to many of the principles embodied in William Morris’s social artisan revolution of a century ago’ (pp. 120-21).

The next direct reference to Morris appears in John Brown’s article on woodwork and hand tools. Brown argues that hand work is not only a source of livelihood but also a source of spiritual and aesthetic fulfilment. Handmade work, according to Brown, may have soul, verve, a sparkle that a machine cannot reproduce. Deploiring the fact that with the introduction of machinery in the nineteenth century the quantity of products increased while the quality decreased, Brown argues that factory owners were only interested in maximising profits while unskilled labourers could be trained in days to work a single-operation machine. It is in this context that Morris is mentioned: ‘The fact that these operators had no interest in their work and did the job for what money they could get interested no one, except people like John Ruskin, C. R. Ashbee and William Morris’ (pp. 145-46). Although Morris was not against machinery per se, he certainly would have supported Brown’s claim that ‘There is no excuse for lazy or shoddy work, by hand or machine, but it is nice to think that this table or this chair was made by a human being’ (pp. 146-47).

Given the importance of the quotation, it is perhaps no coincidence that the last direct reference to Morris is the same as the first. In David Charlesworth’s article on cabinet making, Morris’s first quote appears again, slightly adapted, as ‘Have nothing in your house that is not useful and beautiful’ (p. 179). In distinctly Morrisian terms, Charlesworth, a cabinet maker from North Devon, argues that simplicity is the key in design and that satisfaction comes from the work, or making the work, itself, rather than from making money. Working with wood, for Charlesworth, is ‘a communion: one does have a relationship with the piece one is working with’ (p. 179).

If the number of times Morris is mentioned appears frequent, then the number of times Morris is implied in the contributors’
arguments is enormous. Whether we take the idea of simplicity, the concept of co-operation, respecting traditions and the local environment, sustainability or functionality of objects, there is hardly any article that does not establish parallels with Morris’s thought and ideas. Gardening is a good point in case. As Brigitte Nordland argues in her article ‘Growing with Gratitude’, ‘Gardening is not only the practice of a skill, it is an important agent of social and environmental change’ (p. 104) as we desire to reconnect with nature. Her arguments that a garden cannot be viewed as though it were a little aesthetic bubble, and that the surrounding buildings or open spaces are also a part of one’s garden and together make up a communal environment, are strongly reminiscent of Morris’s view of his gardens and the larger environment (one only has to think of Red House, where the house was built around established trees – Morris did not want the trees to be chopped down for building purposes). Similarly, in his article on vernacular architecture (buildings which are modelled according to regional and local climate, the geology and topography of the site), Brian Richardson argues that ‘local methods would be used as a matter of course, other materials being chosen and imported quite exceptionally’ (p. 110). To establish a parallel with Morris, one only needs to think of the way additions were made to Kelmscott Manor, and how proud Morris was of using local materials: bricks made from clay in the vicinity; stone from the neighbourhood; fences and floors from nearby trees. Every nail was fashioned by the village smith, the stone for window repairs came from local quarries, and the roof and dado were made from local elms.

If there is anything to be critical about in this anthology, then perhaps one could cite its tendency to be too spiritual at times. Phrases like ‘the language of harmony’ (p. 160) and ‘You are moving inward and flowing outward’ (p. 184) may appear vague to some readers. But can you criticise a journal that professes to be spiritual and that has been declared by The Guardian as ‘the spiritual and artistic flagship of the green movement’ for being too spiritual? Perhaps more valid a criticism is the neglect of economic necessities that force people to buy certain products. When Peter Bunyard, for example, argues that ‘we can choose to support the
The Beauty of Craft is a celebration of the beauty and importance of the crafts. From quilting, weaving, tribal art and culture, vernacular architecture, sustainable designing, leather work, bookbinding, and making 'green' shoes to sustainable furniture making, gardening, cob sculptures and cottages, cabinet making, wabi-sabi (the Japanese culture of simplicity) and swadeshi (the Indian philosophy of local economy), this collection offers fascinating insights into the usefulness, richness, versatility and, perhaps most importantly, beauty of craft. Quite fittingly, The Beauty of Craft is beautifully designed and illustrated and, for the price of £20.00, not overpriced. Most importantly, almost every article shares some aspect of Morris's ideas. As the editors note, the 'possibility of being reconciled and united with what we depend upon – our work – is truly inspiring in a culture where work is resented as a constraint upon freedom, and the ideal life is an idle life' (p. 13). The Beauty of Craft goes a long way to help achieve this goal.

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