The Arts and Crafts movement began as a reaction to the cold, abstract reasoning of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. At its core, the movement celebrates the direct relationship between the working classes and the arts and crafts. It was in direct opposition to the scientific principles of the time, which focused on the noble effort of handicraft and the benefits of communal and village life. It strove to recapture the interaction between people and their environment.

The movement spread across the globe as each society came to terms with industrial production. It began in Europe, where industrialization had also begun, most notably in England. Intellectuals such as John Ruskin were instrumental in forming the ideology, identifying meaningful artisan traditions (in books such as Stones of Venice, 1860) and calling for a return to artisan production.

It was several students of Ruskin—William Morris and his friends—who fully defined the Arts and Crafts movement. Their written and graphic work, as well as their architecture, furniture and textiles, were studied, reproduced and adapted throughout the world.

**Guiding Principles**

The conviction that life is spiritual was essential to the beginnings of the movement, and was in direct opposition to the scientific principles of the Industrial Revolution, where economy and efficiency were measures of success. Rather than trying to equalize the social classes, the movement focused on the noble effort of handicraft and the benefits of communal and village life. It strove to recapture the interaction between people and their environment.

The effort involved rethinking the most basic assumptions and actions of modern life, a literal return to Eden in order to clarify principles. Morris and his friends constructed a world around the Red House, Morris’ residence designed by Phillip Webb, and his summer home, Kelmscott Manor—always balanced by the workshops and studios in London—based on gardening and crafting.

Gaining their inspiration and instruction from nature, Arts and Crafts followers spent as much time outside as possible. Arts and Crafts gardens are unparalleled for their intensity of design (both horticultural and spatial) as well as their human quality. Morris’ family spent many hours cultivating their gardens and studying plants for use in design, they ate and relaxed in the garden as well. Margaret Beale at Standen often took her family out to weed, leaving piles of refused to be removed.

The Arts and Crafts house, then, is primarily a backdrop for the garden, a jewel in a rich tapestry. Houses are typically sculpted to fit the garden and larger landscape rather than seen as self-contained compositions. Morris realized that by toiling in the garden and at the loom, one bypasses intellect. The mind is instead opened to love and wonder. Philosophers distinguish between two modes of knowing—intellectual (scientia) and instinctive (gnosis)—and the Arts and Crafts movement rejected nosisma in favor of direct knowledge, which they called “symbiosis.” “To draw animals you must sympathize with them; you must know what it feels like to be an animal,” wrote Morris.

Parenthetically, the Arts and Crafts movement in England ended rather suddenly with World War I. As Europeans rebuilt their world in the aftermath of the war, they blamed the nostalgia and regionalism of Arts and Crafts movement for the nationalism that pitted countries against each other. The genius of the Modernists, starting with Le Corbusier, was to insist that the Arts and Crafts movement was actually entrenched in social classes and petty regionalism. They claimed that modern society could free the working classes by eliminating handicraft, and that rational city planning and architecture would provide the conditions for a social utopia.
their own work, expelling any element that was not essential. This paring down to reveal essence could be extended to an entire house or lifestyle: “Have nothing in your house which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful” (The Beauty of Life, 1880).

Models

Morris said there are just two models for craft: nature and history. These are, however, also the models for many modern designers, so it is necessary to explain Morris’ position before examining his models.

The primary goal of the Arts and Crafts followers was gnosis, which makes possible a deep connection between man and his world. Scions separate man from his world through abstraction. This existential distance applies to everything, including how people see the past (as an accumulation of objects and deeds, separated from the present by time and tradition) and the artist (as a set of rules to be abstracted). In scientific, or modern, production, models are studied as relics of another age or for their abstract essence; either purpose reveals a model’s distance from the artist. In Arts and Crafts philosophy, craftspeople strive to overcome any distance of separation by immersing themselves in both the model and the craft. Depicted form is seen by many as the definitive American Arts and Crafts design. The beams and joinery are an essential part of the building’s texture.

Greene and Green’s Gamble House, designed in 1908 and built in Pasadena, CA, was modeled after Dante Rossetti, a close friend of the family. Photo courtesy of The Charles Rufus Design Archives; www.charles-rufus.com

Arts and Crafts followers viewed the past and tradition as craftspeople. They simply focused on their craft, forever improving their skills, and combing the past voraciously for lost techniques. Morris preferred late medieval texts and objects since their craft was furthest evolved before the Industrial Revolution began. As he developed his skill for weaving, Morris studied medieval French texts onloom building. As he searched for better dyes he consulted medieval herbalists, such as Gerard’s Herball or Generalis Historie of Plants, and French dyes’ manuals. Morris also studied objects themselves, not to copy them but to analyze and master their craft. In fact, his entry for stained glass in a competition was so good that it was nearly disqualified because the judges thought it was actually medieval.

The Whole

Arts and Crafts designers strove to create a complete environment that was more than the sum of the parts. They created settings for private and public life where each object – chair, rug, candlestick – invited contemplation. Arts and Crafts ornament is as humble and honest as its designers. As Morris said, “A table itself should be the ornament.” Every detail invites the user to repeat the process of making: one can admire the natural qualities of the raw material that has been shaped, the proportions and craft of the shaping and the care of joining. It is interesting to note that, while materials and surface finish vary from region to region, the more obvious differences in Arts and Crafts styles around the world are in the traditions for joining. Joints are an opportunity to express much about structure, the process of joining and the nature of materials. A terrific amount of thought goes into joining, and the Arts and Crafts object celebrates this. Joints can be bone-like, blocky, sinewy or flowing. Often the pins and fasteners are celebrated rather than hidden. Each joint reveals a reality that is understandable, economical in a natural sense and beautiful in direct (and conscious) opposition to the mechanical world, which seemed so inhuman and incomprehensible to many people.

The surface of wood or fabric is also given much thought, with color and finish/texturing suggesting depth and movement. Morris created great depth in his wallpaper designs by intertwining darks and lights on a medium-tone background.

Interiors

The interior was seen as a sanctuary, a setting for the family to gather, a protected place to work and a place to reflect. Interiors vary significantly, depending upon family, designer and region, but they share a practical simplicity. Many rooms are multi-functional; Morris thought it was ideal to live in one large room (the old “hall”). Rooms tend to be open and light, with spare furnishing, following Morris’ advice to eliminate all that is not useful or beautiful.

Arts and Crafts walls were either neutral – English designers favored whitewash, which was at the time reserved for use in latrines and sheds – or patterned to resemble a bower. Morris designed his textile and wallpaper patterns to be either quiet (an all-over pattern without pronounced lines), restful (with horizontal lines) or lively (vertical lines). He advised, “Choose a pattern that reminds you of life beyond itself.”

Arts and Crafts for Today

For the contemporary designer, working in the Arts and Crafts tradition is less about using Sussex chairs and Morris tapestries than it is about understanding their philosophy. The crafts of home, garden and furniture design will, hopefully, continue to evolve as old skills are rediscovered and new tools and materials are explored. As always, the purpose is to create settings for meaningful life.

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The garden of Redmarton Manor, in Cirencester, Gloucestershire, was designed in 1909 by Ernest Barnsley to comprise a series of separate areas each with its own character, typical of the English Arts and Crafts style. Photo courtesy of Susan Raleigh, Architects-Maker.