

Sex, Skill, and Politics: Art Nouveau and French-English Relation

Introduction.

Art Nouveau is about sex, skill, and politics. While much of what I have to say obviously applies to Art Nouveau internationally, and particularly to nations like Belgium and Germany, today I am going to talk about these – sex, skill, and politics - in relation to Anglo-French relations in the decorative arts, and I will be suggesting that in the decorative arts, the English were against the first two – sex and skill – and that the French had little use for the 3rd – politics – in that particular context.

The generic theme of this strand is the role of the crafts in the formation of Modern design, and the function of Art Nouveau in that process. I thought it would be interesting to look at this notion, that the crafts at the fin de siècle created an intellectual and artistic environment that went on to shape the first Modern Movements in European design, to see how it actually played out at the time, on the ground, in England and France. My first point today, then, is that the crafts as we understand them today were invented and shaped at the fin de siècle.

I want to spend a little time thinking about the *intellectual* and *theoretical* condition of the decorative arts in England and France, and the state they were in . I would argue that to a certain extent, the character of the Art Nouveau style, and its fate in the 20th century, does relate to Anglo-French cultural relations in a number of ways. This tense, and in some ways dysfunctional relationship – England and France - is both analogous to Art Nouveau, and Art Nouveau is in several ways directly affected by it. In other words, I am saying that the contribution of the crafts to Modern design was affected and mediated by Anglo-French relations between 1895 and 1914. Vivaly, the period was also one in which most of the key organizations for design and decorative arts were formed in both countries. As my slide shows, from 1880, government and privately funded think-tanks, institutions, museums and colleges, rapidly emerged and consolidated. Because of this, attitudes formed at the

fin de siècle remained powerful for decades, via these public organisations.

The 'invention' of craft at the fin de siècle casts light not only on the period, but also on design attitudes through much of the twentieth century. There is no doubt that the period laid the foundations of Modern design, but equally – and perversely – it is the case that Modernists were very widely against the three main phenomena that contributed to these foundations: the crafts, the decorative arts, and Art Nouveau. All were destined to be problematized by Modernists through the course of the 20th century, and all were excluded from the Modernist canon at various times, and the histories of Modernism that have been written. I want to look at the intellectual, economic, and political conditions between 1895 and 1914 that explain perhaps why these attitudes formed.

Eclecticism.

Art Nouveau is deeply eclectic. This is key, because it is the eclecticism of Art Nouveau that contributes its one of its other core characteristics: its instability. The style itself was an unstable, complex compound, with different ingredients from country to country, and movement to movement. It was constantly controversial, constantly expanding, constantly popular, constantly hated, and well capable of collapse. This is important to remember as it means that we should not see Art Nouveau simply as a forerunner, or even as *the* first Modern style, but as the big bang, the explosion of activity which provided all of the ingredients for what came after, across the Modernist range. Art Nouveau was different from the Modernisms that came after, but without it, none of those Modernisms would have emerged and developed as they did. Art Nouveau's eclecticism then, is best understood as being an unstable compound that inevitably exploded and dissipated, but was a brilliant, energizing force while it lasted.

Craft

The English fin de siècle idea of craft sat in a complex way with sex, skill, and politics. In some respects, it outlawed the first two, and was obsessed with the third.

During the 1880's and the first half of the 1890's English design was probably at its most influential in Europe generally, and France specifically, since the late 18th century. This was partly bound up in the activities of what became known as the Aesthetic Movement, a wide-ranging design initiative led by Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and James McNeil Whistler. In the current context however, and ultimately of far greater significance, was the rise of an aggressively politicized idea of 'craft', in what was in effect an attempt to inject morality into industrial production and economy.

Fronted by intellectual and artistic luminaries John Ruskin, William Morris, Walter Crane, and Charles Richard Ashbee, William Lethaby, and others, this new culture of craft led to the formation of organisations and communes first in England, and later all over Europe and America. The story of the Arts and Craft Movement has been well told many times, and I won't repeat it here.

What is important though, is the fact that this term, 'Craft', in the way it was being used in Britain and subsequently the English-speaking world, was essentially new. As a term used to define things in the visual arts does not appear until then, the 1880's. At the South Kensington Museum (V&A), for example, the word 'craft' appears virtually nowhere in the literature or displays before then, and inconsistently after then until 1900. Handicraft is the closest term we get, this occasionally appearing in reference to vernacular and folk art. However, in a wider sense, from the 1880's, the use of 'craft' powerfully emerged.

So it would be fair to say that in the English speaking world, in the last part of the 19th century, 'craft' was effectively invented, and then also entered into a process of continual debate and adjustment, that saw it become, in the 20th century, a powerful institutional signifier. It became a *type of activity*, and a *category of practice* that defined the role of a large amount of artistic practice in the modern period.

Crucially, this use of 'craft' did not simply refer to the decorative arts, or to folk art, but implied a political disposition which came to gain significant power in Britain and a number of other countries.

In a very real sense, the new idea of craft implied what we might call a *politics of work*, which owed much to the rise of socialism, trade union politics, and the spread of Marxist ideas in Britain in the last two decades of the century. To use Marx's own terms, it was concerned with the theories of the *alienation of labour*, *surplus value*, and control of the *means of production*. Craft was infused with a Romantic vision of humanity, and committed to the idea that if people took joy in their work, and had some control over the work they did, then society could be re-formed.

Far more than Marx, however, adherents of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and indeed, the new generation of British socialist politicians, looked to John Ruskin as their mentor. Core to Ruskin's political vision was the alienating nature of modern work and life, and the need to make people's work-lives creative:

You must make a tool of the creature or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not made [...] to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will that precision out of them... you must unhumanise them.

'Craft' came to gain a political power well beyond pottery, basketry, or woodwork. It is no coincidence that the main socialist party in England is called *Labour*. The English middle classes were shocked at the 1906 General Election, when for the first time the Labour Party, won 52 seats in Parliament. When interviewed, none of the 52 had read Karl Marx, and all 52 had read John Ruskin. British socialism was squarely about work, and how it was to be controlled.

In 1884, the Arts Worker's Guild was formed, and in 1887 the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. These initiatives were the culmination of a drive by a number of radical visionaries. The most important of these was obviously Ruskin. Alongside,

but distinct from him, was William Morris, his followers, and the Arts and crafts Movement, including C.R. Ashbee. Apparently, the appearance of a work of art was unimportant: the important thing was the process by which it was made, and who controlled that process. C.R. Ashbee, a leader of the Arts and Crafts Movement, expressed the view that:

It was not about art, it was about work... [the] great, over-arching Ruskinian belief was that the crafts could be a vehicle of social reform, a way of making the world a better place.

This is key, as it sums up the Utopianism that dominated the English avant-garde craft scene. Not only did excellence in terms of skill, production values, and virtuosity come second to the bigger agenda of work, but a number of the leading figures in the ACM promoted the idea of inspired amateurism. Everyone, as it were, could be a craftsman, as craft was to do with participation, quality of life, sharing, and unalienated labour. So 'craft' became central to those who believed that the arts had a social and political role. For William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, all art had a moral purpose, and that purpose was to improve the lives of the masses.

The French and Craft.

Much of this relates to sex, skill, and politics. With regard to skill, as we have noted, the definition of 'craft' in the English avant-garde by 1900, counter-intuitively in some respects, was not bound up with skill: In some circles, crafts supporters were actually suspicious of specialized skill, as being against craft as an egalitarian phenomenon. This is key, as the French definition of craft, insofar as the language contains that word, was absolutely bound up in the notion of skill and technical facility.

As a result, the politicized approach to craft received a very mixed reception in France. While the English term clearly carries shades and varieties of meanings that

are obviously related to *métier*, *métier d'art*, *artisanat*, *les arts décoratifs*, and *les arts appliqués*, these are also subtly different from all of them.

Craft' had a very particular process of formation, which was completely different from its French equivalents. *Métier* implies skill, knowledge of technology, invention and engineering perhaps, and is at once wider and more specific than 'craft' in the English sense. *Artisanat* implies the vernacular component of craft, but not a politicized usage. *Les arts décoratifs* and *les arts applique* relate closely to their direct English equivalents, but again, far less to the implications of 'craft'. The term *artiste décorateur* has no exact equivalent in English. Interestingly, the term *design*, which emerged alongside 'craft' from the fin de siècle onwards in England, has come into common use in France, but only in the last 3 decades.

All this is not to do with the two traditions being unaware of each other. French *artiste décorateurs* of 1900, and the wider decorative arts industries, knew what was going on in England. William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement were well known by the 1890's, and English design in this period was probably more influential than at any other time in history, and had a powerful effect, for example, on the Art Nouveau style internationally, and more broadly on craft and design in Scandinavia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy and the Netherlands. And the English Arts and Crafts Movement was well known and widely written about in French publications, and had a presence in Parisian exhibitions and department stores. By 1905, English craft was selling well in France, and by 1908 there were a number of shops in Paris dedicated solely to English luxury goods.

So it was doing well, but it remained peripheral. The English concept of 'craft' was never really embraced probably because the depth and strength of the French luxury goods industries, and the entrenched traditions of workmanship and practice, proved largely impervious to the politics of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Absolutely, the notion of Utopianism, the Amateur, or the universal craftsman was utterly alien to the rarified world of the *Artiste Décorateur*. It was only really among

a small number of the French Art Nouveau designers that the philosophy of craft was embraced and taken seriously.

In turn, by 1900 the French Art Nouveau style came to be deeply distrusted by the English, because English theorists felt that the concept of craft was being ignored by Art Nouveau designers, and especially its ethical and moral dimensions. The English were so offended by this lack of respect for their concept of craft, in fact, that in 1901, the V&A Museum in London took its newly acquired collection of French Art Nouveau artefacts, which it had been donated free, off display, because of aggressive campaigns against them by members of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The English Arts and Crafts Movement began to gain economic value at home, and also to take on the ambiance of a modern national style, with the result that the long-standing love of French decorative art in England temporarily went into decline from 1900 in intellectual and artistic circles of patronage. This had a significant impact on the French luxury goods industries, which had traditionally enjoyed great popularity in England. The decline in sales became a cause for concern, and provoked this interesting comment from a French government official in 1908, who explained why he thought the decline of French sales in England had come about:

We find the explanation of this state of things in the fact that the English are excessively nationalistic and look as far as possible to their own country for their produce... Looking at their gross national product and their current resources, they feel they don't need to look abroad, for their simple taste and their rationale of comfort harmonises well with the things they make in their vast factories, and it is this which explains the regrettable decline in exports over the last five years.

He explains neither why exactly the decline happened then, as opposed to earlier, when the 'vast factories' already existed, nor why the new rise of English exports

was based on craft, not factory production. Retrospectively, one would put forward the idea that the developing concept of 'craft' had indeed given the English a vision of their culture that had previously been absent. The English had come to characterize themselves through their word 'craft' in a way that attracted attention internationally.

So the period 1890 to 1914 is the one in which *métier d'art* and *craft* became separately defined in England and France, and the separation became a source of antagonism between them. This was just at the time, of course, when colleges, museums and galleries were being built and dedicated to craft and *métier d'art*. So the differences between the two nations became somewhat institutionalized. One could affirm that this institutionalization still informs the way that museums, universities and colleges deal with the visual arts to this day.

Crucially, and to repeat myself, much of the English craft avant-garde were uninterested in skill, or the achievement of extreme high levels of quality: they were interested in the social function of the making process. Craft, for them, was a moral position. The French workshops, on the other hand, were proud of ancient and entrenched ideas of skill in the production process.

This led to another area in which the two nations clearly parted company. The open sensuality, decadence, and hedonism of much French Art Nouveau bothered the English avant-garde. It was not a style that they felt they could show to their children. The work of Georges Flamand, Rupert Carabin, and Maurice Bouval, for example, exemplified everything that a thinker like John Ruskin loathed, and by 1900, his influence was still at a great height. The prosecution at Oscar Wilde's Trial in 1895, we must remember, cited Ruskin's work to point to the immorality of Wilde.

To return to eclecticism. Perhaps it would be too simplistic to say that the French were interested in sex and skill, and the English were interested in politics and

morality, and that there was a brief fusion of all these things: English politics and morality, French hedonism and skill, that resulted in some of the greatest achievements of Art Nouveau when designers consciously brought them together.

For example, the oeuvre of Hector Guimard, it seems to me, is utterly steeped in an intense, mystical sexuality, in which his organic forms take on the semblance of genitalia – male and female – but at the same time, there is a powerful sense of social progress and political morality in Guimard’s architecture, street furniture, metal and ceramics. It is as though he is attempting to pull together the heady mysticism of the Symbolist poets and Gothic revivalists, and the moral intensity of John Ruskin and William Morris, whose work he knew well. The same could be said of parts of the oeuvres of Emile Gallé, Bellery Desfontaines, Tony Selmershiem, and Eugene Gaillard. The whiplash line that embraces nature so intensely in this work, also represents the human body in its full, sensual intensity. So in France, for a few brief years, all these things came together to create some of the strangest and most evocative objects of the last three centuries. Obviously, this happened in other nations too, but today my focus is on Anglo-French relations.

But this eclecticism, this combination of myriad disparate sources across centuries and media, and the attempt to fuse the sensual with the political, was unstable. The coming together of sex, skill, and politics was the Big Bang I referred to at the opening of my paper: it was dramatic, it led to most aspects of Modernity in the next generation, but it was so unstable it couldn’t last. This heady mixture of sex, skill, and politics couldn’t be held together for long. And that is why Art Nouveau collapsed as spectacularly as it emerged. Thank you.