

The Value of the Vessel: The Impact of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement on Studio Pottery

Critical discourse and theoretical discussions of what distinguishes craft from art are longstanding. Debate as to their point of intersection has engaged philosophers and scholars ranging from Aristotle through Immanuel Kant to Arthur Schopenhauer to Georg Simmel and Martin Heidegger¹, a consensual point being that while art need serve no obvious function, for craft it is essential.² There is, however, little critical theory devoted to craft. The resulting discourse in this area has, as noted by art historian, Harold Risatti, often borrowed from standards drawn from aesthetics³, a field so richly endowed with diverse theories that philosopher Jerome Stolnitz has come to suggest that rather than being conclusive, aesthetics is a process or inquiry that, as Socrates argued, “is a conversation among earnest minds.”⁴

In the field of craft, perhaps one of the most “earnest minds” was that of the English designer, poet, activist and polymath, William Morris. Building upon the ideas of architect, Augustus Pugin and critic, John Ruskin, Morris’s own writings and his championing of what became known as the Arts and Crafts movement were essential elements in the advancement of craft production generally and studio pottery in particular. As defined by the distinguished contemporary potter and author Edmund de Waal, studio pottery is a term “usually used for nineteenth and twentieth century artist potters who have decided deliberately to reject industrialization.”⁵

William Morris’s philosophies were developed in the 1850’s as an Oxford undergraduate. While there he discovered the writings of the critic, John Ruskin, most especially Ruskin’s chapter on gothic architecture in his book *The Stones of Venice*.⁶ Morris was struck particularly by Ruskin’s emphasis on the joys of labour and the personal involvement of the worker in their work.⁷ These ideas affected all of his subsequent ventures, both in relation to his views on the place of cultural practice in society and politically, in an increasing commitment to socialism. Most immediately, they led to Morris initiating the Arts and Crafts movement, a conceptual construct that could encompass a range of art practices through which to disseminate his ideas. In 1861, Morris and a like minded group of artists actively embraced the concept of *gersamtkunstwerk* or “total design” when they formed Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.,

¹ Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Kindle edition, Location 2578.

² See, for example, Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and Edmund de Waal, *20th Century Ceramics* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003).

³ Risatti, Preface, *A Theory of Craft*, Kindle Edition, Location 51.

⁴ Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1965), 1.

⁵ Edmund de Waal, *The Pot Book* (London: Phaidon London, 2011) 315.

⁶ James Redmond, introduction to *William Morris, News From Nowhere*, ed. James Redmond (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), xiv.

⁷ Fiona MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty: William Morris and His Legacy, 1860-1960* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 11.

a retail design venture that followed principles harkening back to the Middle Ages, a period as they understood it, when there had been little differentiation between “high art” and handicraft. In contrast to the conventional practices of their industrial contemporaries, in which workers were hired to fabricate the ideas of others, each of the firm’s principals and those artisans they supported maintained direct involvement in the production of the objects they designed.⁸

Morris, an articulate speaker, also undertook a series of public lectures. One of these, “The Beauty of Life”, given in 1880, featured his well known dictum: “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful”⁹ an idea that quickly took hold in artistic circles and helped establish the Arts and Crafts movement as a leader in its oppositional role to the industrial. Author and contemporary potter, Suzanne Staubach, summarizes this as follows:

Waves of artistic movements, the Arts and Crafts movement (1850-1890) in Europe and the United States and later the Art Nouveau movement, the Bauhaus in Germany (mid twentieth century), the Studio Potter movement (mid twentieth century to the present) and the *Mingei* movement in Japan (twentieth century) sprung [sic] up in reaction to the cold sterility of the Industrial Revolution. Each was an attempt to restore the integrity of pieces being produced, of maker and the made and to forge a connection between the object material and the artist.¹⁰

Morris also had a successful career as a writer, was a prominent figure in the Socialist League and went on to found the Kelmscott Press in 1891.¹¹ Sandy Nairne, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, London, in her catalogue foreword for the recent exhibition, *Anarchy and Beauty: William Morris and his Legacy* (1860-1960), points out that Morris’s utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* (1890) sets out a fantasy of a transformed, future British society in which collective community ideas are respectful of individuals, where happiness is born of a balanced life of work and leisure and that strives for “pleasure in art suffused through all aspects of life.”¹²

Morris’s focus on the joy in labour found favour with a number of “gentlemanly artisans”, particularly those working in clay.¹³ His colleague, William De Morgan, a noted potter and tile designer, established one of the earliest workshops of the Arts and

⁸ Carole Silver, “Setting the Crooked Straight: The Work of William Morris” in *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and His Circle From Canadian Collections*, Katherine A. Lochan, Douglas Schoenherr and Carole Silver, eds. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1993), 5.

⁹ William Morris, quoted in Carole Silver, “Setting the Crooked Straight: The Work of William Morris” in *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and His Circle From Canadian Collections*, eds. Katherine A. Lochan, Douglas Schoenherr and Carole Silver, (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1993), 13.

¹⁰ Suzanne Staubach, *Clay: The History of Humankind’s Relationship with the Earth’s Most Precious Element*, (Lebanon: University of New England, 2013), 219, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzY3MDI5N19fQU41?sid=23597c70-a600-44e0-af96-10a4d20230ec@sessionmgr4003&vid=1&format=EB&rid=1>.

¹¹ Esme Whittaker, “Glossary of Names” in *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement (1860-1900)*, eds. Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr, (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011), 265.

¹² Sandy Nairne, “Director’s Foreword” in MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty*, 7.

¹³ MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty*, 59.

Crafts movement.¹⁴ He was drawn to Morris's belief that handmade objects improved both the lives of their makers and their users, and Morris's writings about "an art made by the people for the people as a joy to the maker and the user".¹⁵ This democratic view was adopted and carried forward by the hugely influential, British artist-potter, Bernard Leach. In his treatise, *A Potter's Book*, Leach acknowledged Morris as "initiating the concept of the artist-craftsman" and himself, promoted the principle as a determinant for present-day studio potters.¹⁶ Leach lived in Japan for a time where he developed a passion for collecting pottery and honed his skills as a potter, drawing inspiration from *Mingei*, the folk-craft movement. Leach worked in the tradition of the Arts and Crafts movement making useful vessels from earthenware.¹⁷ Upon his return to England, he became a leader in British studio pottery, which emerged as a revival movement after the First World War. In 1920, Leach established his now celebrated Leach Pottery in St. Ives, Cornwall. The Leach Pottery exemplified the type of alternative collective community that Morris had promoted in his Arts and Crafts lectures and it quickly became a place of pilgrimage for an array of international studio potters.

One of the significant legacies of the Arts and Crafts movement is "evident in the large number of twentieth century studio potters who remained faithful to hand-crafted methods."¹⁸ This group included Leach's Canadian apprentices John Reeves, Glen Lewis, Michael Henry, and Ian Steele, all of whom studied at the Leach Pottery between the late 1950s and mid 1960s. Upon their return, they proceeded to introduce the ideas of the British Studio Pottery movement to the Vancouver art scene.¹⁹ The subsequent arrival in Canada of a group of British émigrés that included Robin Hopper, John Chalke and Roger Kerslake, further bolstered the emergence of the Anglo-Asian aesthetic intrinsic to the Leach Pottery.²⁰ In the years following, the group's adherents would adopt these traditions, further solidifying the connection between the Leach Pottery and Canadian studio pottery.

Morris's writings continue impact contemporary studio pottery in both theory and practice. For example, Robin Hopper's text, *Functional Pottery: Form and Aesthetics in Pots of Purpose* - a foundational work in the field - is bookended by references to Morris.²¹ Hopper concludes with Morris's still pertinent observation about labour

¹⁴ Elizabeth Collard, "Ceramics" in *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and His Circle From Canadian Collections*, eds. Katherine A. Lochan, Douglas Schoenherr and Carole Silver, eds. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1993), 185.

¹⁵ William Morris quoted in MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty*, 11.

¹⁶ MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty*, 94.

¹⁷ A.S. Byatt, "Porcelain ghosts: the secrets of Edmund de Waal's studio," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/02/edmund-de-waal-potter-ceramics-essays-as-byatt>.

¹⁸ Edmund de Waal, *The Pot Book* (London: Phaidon, 2011), 312.

¹⁹ For more on Leach's influence in Canada, see, Scott Watson, "Search for Integrity: Bernard Leach's Canadian Apprentices" in *Thrown: British Columbia's Apprentices of Bernard Leach and Their Contemporaries*, eds. Naomi Sawada, Jana Tynes and Scott Watson (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, 2009), 23-37.

²⁰ Rachel Gotlieb, "Connections: Canadian and British Studio Ceramics, May 31, 2012 – January 6, 2013", (Toronto: Gardiner Museum, 2012), np.

²¹ Robin Hopper, *Functional Pottery: Form and Aesthetic in Pots on Purpose*, (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1986), xii.

standards affecting quality of character: “[e] very improvement in the standard of work men [sic] do is followed swiftly and inevitably by an improvement in the men [sic] who do it.”²²

Morris’s interest in the connection between maker and made correlates to the ideas of Heidegger, one of the few contemporary thinkers that Risatti cites as having written directly on craft. As Scott Watson, co-editor of *Thrown: British Columbia’s Apprentices of Bernard Leach and Their Contemporaries* points out; Heidegger’s lecture “The Thing” uses the example of a ceramic vessel to explain the difference between a thing and an object, with the former representing a composite of, material, labour, and function. Watson credits this lecture as contributing both to the revival of interest in Heidegger as a philosopher and, a concurrent revival of interest in craft.²³

There is little doubt that Morris’s political identity as a socialist determined to deconstruct an aesthetic hierarchy affected his views concerning the importance of artist as maker. While Morris’s utopian ideals did not take hold in his own lifetime, they have impacted generations of future artisans, significantly influencing those involved in the studio pottery movement.

When assessing the value of the vessel, it can be useful to keep in mind Morris’s writings and consider the object’s relationship to the social context from which it arose rather than judging it only within the aesthetic framework of art. The experience of making and using beautiful and functional objects is still as elevating and educational today as it was in Morris’s time. It transforms the rituals of the everyday making them more intimate and personal. Imagine for a moment the contemporary cultural worker, the poet or architect, raising a cup to their lips: consider the vessel that contains the liquid that will sustain them; should it be ceramic and handmade or merely a mass-produced, generic paper cup adorned with a corporate logo? How would William Morris respond?

²² William Morris quoted in Hopper, *Functional Pottery*, 244.

²³ Watson, *Thrown*, 15.

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