CHAPTER 1

THE ROOTS OF STUDIO CRAFT

The Industrial Revolution

Studio craft is a recent invention. It was shaped by a few English gentlemen as a protest against their own times. It is not a direct continuation of the old forms of craft, in which artisans supplied necessities for everyone, but began as a concerted effort to put pleasure back into work and to wrest making from the grip of the machine and reinvest it with humanity.

Such ideas were a consequence of industrialization and urbanization in Victorian England during a century of tremendous upheaval. The modernization of manufacturing, with steam-powered factories set up wherever coal could be provided, began in the late eighteenth century. Machines were designed to reproduce—and replace—the motions of hands. What was left to workers was the task of attending the machines, which was far less demanding of skilled techniques than individual craft work had been. Work, once a source of pride and personal identity, was reduced to dull and meaningless repetition.

These changes had enormous social consequences, and nineteenth-century England experienced them first. Families migrated to cities in search of paid work, so cities grew exponentially. In the factories, men, women and children as young as six labored up to sixty hours a week, often for pennies a day. Moreover, the benevolent institutions of rural life (neighbors, guilds, the church) broke down in the cities. There was no public education, no public health care, no pensions. The lack of public water supplies or sewer systems resulted in periodic outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. Rivers were little more than open sewers. Coal smoke was filthy, like smog but worse. There was no zoning: factories and housing occupied the same neighborhoods.

The responses to these appalling conditions took many forms. Novelists such as Sir Walter Scott found refuge in romantic fantasies about medieval Merrie England. Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx saw private ownership of the factories as the problem and called for the reordering of society under the principles of socialism. On the positive side, the Industrial Revolution made England the workshop of the world for much of the nineteenth century. The standard of living rose, even for the very poor, and the middle classes prospered.
Craft and Work

The old ways of manual production were pushed aside, one by one, as new machines were designed and new technologies introduced. Hand weaving was nearly eliminated by factory-made cloth. Natural dyes were replaced by aniline dyes made from coal tar. Hollow bowls and vases of silver and brass could be “spun” on a lathe instead of being hammered by hand. (Both processes require experience and skill, but spinning is much faster.) Wood moldings could be shaped by machine instead of being planed by hand. Glass was pressed into steel molds. These and hundreds of other processes transformed the production of most artifacts.

The nature of industry changed too. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, even mass-produced items were virtually one of a kind. But armies, for example, needed weapons with interchangeable parts to make battlefield repairs easier. Jigs and fixtures (tools that hold work in position for machine operations) were made, and patterns followed precisely. To ensure exactitude, one man operated a machine, performing the same task over and over. Standardization became a watchword of modernity.

Factory workers needed few skills and could easily be replaced by others, as if they were little more than flesh-and-blood versions of machines. Naturally workers grew alienated from their labor. Many critics assumed that this division of labor was the culprit. But in most crafts labor had already been divided into various specialties. A sophisticated jewelry shop, for instance, would have jewelers, stone setters, and enamelists working side by side. None were qualified to do the others’ jobs. The owner of a shop was often designer and salesman and sometimes handled the most difficult operations. Journeymen—employees who had passed an examination evaluating their skills—did most of the demanding handwork. The wife and children of the owner sometimes worked too: some silversmiths’ wives did all the polishing. Apprentices handled the lowest tasks.

De-skilling, then, was a more likely cause of alienation than division of labor. In the most mechanized, least humane situations, factory owners exploited workers ruthlessly. That led to the poverty of the urban workforce and the Marxian rejection of private ownership.

Traditional crafts may have been most changed by the gradual shift to mass markets. In the old system, even if crafts were distributed widely, they were still supplied by small producers. The factory system, however, demanded a larger marketplace and a more efficient distribution system. Regional differences that had survived for centuries were erased.

The Origin of Arts and Crafts

The Arts and Crafts movement was inspired by the writings of three eminent Victorians: A. W. N. Pugin, John Ruskin, and William Morris. Each was a prolific writer widely read in his own lifetime. Their writings, which are both progressive and curiously backward-looking, give the crafts a philosophical basis, particularly since each insisted that design is not just an aesthetic enterprise but is inextricably connected to social conditions. All three hated the rapid industrialization and urbanization of nineteenth-century England and saw dire social and moral consequences. Each believed it impossible to have truly good design without simultaneously creating a better society. All three saw medieval England as a model, and yet each contributed ideas that became part of the foundation of modernism. Their ideas continue to resonate to this day.

Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–52) was the only child of a French-born designer who had immigrated to London. The elder Pugin designed Gothic revival furniture but was best known for illustrated books about French Gothic architecture. At the age of thirteen the boy was helping his father illustrate books, and at fifteen he designed furniture for the king’s new apartments in Windsor Castle. Shortly after, he started his own business designing and making furniture, and expanded his interests to stage design.

In 1835, at twenty-three, Pugin converted to Roman Catholicism. As he imagined an ideal connection between the true religion (the Catholic church) and the true architecture (Gothic), he constructed an elaborate fantasy about French Gothic architecture. At the age of thirteen the boy was helping his father illustrate books, and at fifteen he designed furniture for the king’s new apartments in Windsor Castle. Shortly after, he started his own business designing and making furniture, and expanded his interests to stage design.

In 1835, at twenty-three, Pugin converted to Roman Catholicism. As he imagined an ideal connection between the true religion (the Catholic church) and the true architecture (Gothic), he constructed an elaborate fantasy about life in medieval England, in which servant, master, and king were united in peace and harmony under a munificent church. He claimed that Catholic England was Merry England. It was as if all the ills of the Middle Ages had never happened.

Pugin’s most important book, Contrasts; or, A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, and Similar Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste, was published in 1836. In it, he linked morality, good design and the Gothic style with a strong note of social criticism and disgust with the effects of industrialization. These were extraordinarily powerful connections. Even a century later, long after the Gothic style had been abandoned, good design was
held by its proponents to have both a moral impact and an ability to improve life.

One illustration from Contrasts summarizes Pugin’s arguments. (Figure 1.1) In this drawing he depicts a fictional “Catholic town in 1440” and above it “The same town in 1840.” The “Catholic town” is a pleasant walled city, surrounded by fields and woods, with at least fourteen churches in view. The city’s inhabitants are devout and prosperous, and the architecture is Gothic. The 1840 town, by contrast, is a place of discord and social disharmony. Factory smoke fills the air. There is an enormous prison and a lunatic asylum. The country church in the foreground has a new neoclassical wing and parsonage. An iron toll bridge crosses the river, which is lined with warehouses. Houses of worship for at least six different denominations are scattered around the city, and there is a “Socialist Hall of Science.”

In naming socialism as a modern evil, Pugin displayed his political conservatism, but he endorsed some progressive ideas as well. He noted that medieval buildings revealed their construction materials; by contrast, neoclassical architecture in nineteenth-century Britain was often made of brick but faced with marble. He claimed that hiding the structural materials of a building (and, by extension, any object) was deceitful.

Pugin claimed the same superiority for truth to material that he claimed for the Gothic style, writing of one church that its inspirational qualities did not derive from “richness of detail, for they are remarkably plain for the most part, but it is owing to the absence of all artificial resources, and the severity and simplicity in which they have been raised; there is no attempt at concealment, no trick, no deception, no mock materials; they appear as true and solid as the faith itself.”

Pugin observed that Gothic timber structures and pieces of furniture were often held together with “through tenons” and pegs, requiring no nails. (Iron was scarce in medieval England.) He was fond of the “tusked tenon,” in which a wooden horizontal member passing through a vertical post was secured with a square peg or “tusk.” (Figure 1.2)

Pugin’s theories must be set against the theological and architectural disputes of his time. A moral value in “truth to materials” is not universally valid. Moreover, Pugin compromised his own doctrines when it was expedient. He designed a great deal of ecclesiastical metalwork, most made of alloys like brass or German silver (copper and nickel) but electroplated with gold or silver to look as if it were made of precious metal. In theory,
plating is a form of deception, but in the real world it can be a service to clients.

Pugin also declared that certain forms and processes should follow from the materials being used: “even the construction itself should vary with the material employed, and the design adapted to the material in which it is executed.” This is how an engineer thinks; it has nothing to do with meaning or morality. In Pugin’s time, however, design and architecture were not associated with engineering. At that time, to design meant to decorate, so to suggest that a designer should consider the structural properties of his materials was fairly radical. It was a modern idea.

A corollary applied to patterns. In the early nineteenth century sophisticated wallpaper design consisted of trompe l’oeil florals and repeated images of Gothic architecture in perspective. Pugin, however, believed that because a wall is solid and flat, wall decoration should never create an illusion of depth. He insisted that wallpapers be composed only of two-dimensional shapes and that those shapes be abstracted (or “conventionalized”) so that they could never be mistaken for the real thing.

Pugin’s legacy was complicated. From the time of his death in 1852, design reform in England was bifurcated. One side looked back to the Gothic; the other looked forward to revealed structure and materials, and increasing simplicity of decoration. Younger reformers agreed with his linking of social conditions and design, but this association creates a paradox: which comes first? If social improvement comes first, should a designer or craftsman turn to social agitation? Or should he believe in the reformative power of good design to initiate improvement in the lives of ordinary people? These questions would occupy theorists for the next century and would have a significant effect on the development of modern craft.

Pugin’s legacy was taken up by John Ruskin (1819–1900), the only child of a prosperous and conservative Scottish wine merchant who lived near London. The family traveled often to the Continent and was also deeply religious. Ruskin learned Latin by the age of ten, and his first scientific paper, “On the Causes of the Colour of the Rhine,” was published when he was fifteen. He could also draw and paint watercolors. His father hoped he would become a poet; his mother hoped he would become a clergyman. These factors—the comfort and insulation, religiosity, travels, and political conservatism of his upbringing—aFFECTED Ruskin’s later thinking.

Ruskin’s prolific writing career began with the two-volume work Modern Painters. By 1850 he was England’s premier art critic, and in the 1860s he was one of the most widely read social critics of his time, in part because his writing was vivid, engaging, and persuasive. His contribution to the history of craft came from his writing about architecture. Ruskin was particularly fond of decoration—the carvings and capitals found on every Gothic church—and he placed great importance on Gothic stone carving.

Whenever Ruskin wrote about architecture, he was also thinking about art. Art, to him, was never an isolated thing; it was always connected to the world. To consider a landscape painting was to reflect upon the countryside itself, the larger society in which the landscape was situated, the meaning of the sublime, and the presence of God on earth. Between 1851 and 1853 Ruskin published The Stones of Venice in three volumes. While ostensibly an overview of Venetian Gothic architecture, it encompassed many subjects, including a moral system for design and manufacture. In a chapter in the second volume called “The Nature of Gothic,” the text that inspired and illuminated the whole Arts and Crafts movement, he justified hand labor for an industrializing world.

Ruskin drew a sharp distinction between neoclassical and Gothic architecture, but not for the same reasons that Pugin did. The most influential passages in “The Nature of Gothic” appear in a discussion of the characteristic elements of the style. Ruskin praised the “savageness” of old Gothic churches, by which he meant a certain rude, unfinished quality. (In the early twentieth century such work would be called “primitive.”) He saw the Gothic as noble because (as Christian architecture) it accepted the value of every individual while simultaneously admitting to imperfections. Thus Gothic ornament’s creativity was inseparable from its sometimes awkward, rough carving.

Ruskin contrasted “savageness” with the smooth perfection of ancient Greek architecture and, by extension, all revival styles in vogue in England, in which decoration was formulaic and creativity was reserved for the architect. The stone carver, who spent years executing the decorative details, had no hand in the design. Ruskin sympathized with the carver. Observing the variations and odd details in some Gothic churches, he concluded that much Gothic decoration was invented by the carvers themselves. They had been given some control over their work—empowered, we might say today—and thus derived a vital liberty.

Ruskin saw that most workers could not be artists but could produce something of lasting value nonetheless. He wrote, “This is what we have to do with all our labourers; to look for the thoughtful part of them, and get that out of them, whatever we lose for it, whatever faults and
Ages superior to his own times. He emulated medieval
In all his theories of labor, Ruskin held the Middle
made more available.
the comfort and convenience that mass-produced goods
increased cost of handmade goods or any appreciation of
he wished to eliminate. Yet he showed no concern for the
made by hand would require just the kind of slavish labor
mass-produced. To demand that needles and nails be
production. Instead he proposed that only necessities be
handmade products because of their social benefit, they
were given some creative control. This vision, above
all others, inspired the craft revival. There are gaps in his
thinking: he said nothing, for example, of living wages.
Still he demanded that the public be willing to sacrifice
“such convenience, or beauty, or cheapness as is to be
got only by the degradation of the workman.”
His brilliance was that he intuited how the life
of workers was manifested in their production. He felt
that they could derive satisfaction from their labor only if
they were given some creative control. This vision, above
reason to be proud of anything that may be accomplished
own sake. He urged his readers to “rather choose rough
work than smooth work. . . . Never imagine there is a
reason to be proud of anything that may be accomplished
by patience and sand-paper.”
Ruskin clearly had handwork in mind when he wrote
these rules, for he added an appreciation of old Venetian
glassblowing in the next few paragraphs. In craft, varia-
tion is not only possible; it is almost unavoidable. It is
more difficult to make two identical objects by hand than
to make two different ones. If the public were to embrace
handmade products because of their social benefit, they
would have to be persuaded to refuse perfection for its
own sake. He urged his readers to “rather choose rough
work than smooth work. . . . Never imagine there is a
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Ruskin was clearly thinking of the kind of work
demanded by mass production.

1. Never encourage the manufacture of any article
not absolutely necessary, in the production of
which invention has no share.
2. Never demand an exact finish for its own sake, but
only for some practical or noble end.
3. Never encourage imitation or copying of any kind,
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Ruskin was not calling for an end to all factory pro-
duction. Instead he proposed that only necessities be
mass-produced. To demand that needles and nails be
made by hand would require just the kind of slavish labor
he wished to eliminate. Yet he showed no concern for the
increased cost of handmade goods or any appreciation of
the comfort and convenience that mass-produced goods
made more available.

In all his theories of labor, Ruskin held the Middle
Ages superior to his own times. He emulated medieval
society in one of his most quixotic projects, the Guild of
St. George. Constituted in 1878, the guild was intended
to gather a group of “companions” somewhere in rural
England to till the earth and “learn, and teach all fair
arts.” Not much happened. The guild gathered some
land; Ruskin founded a Museum of St. George in Shef-
field. Otherwise, it was a utopian vision that had little
impact during his lifetime. Nevertheless, the pattern he
established was later influential. It connected craft to a
rural setting, and it inspired people to equate craft with a
vision of a better society. And for the next hundred years,
craft organizations were called guilds.
Frustrated that the aesthetic system he outlined in
The Stones of Venice was so at odds with prevailing condi-
tions, Ruskin started writing about economics. In 1862
he published Unto This Last, an attack on the theories that
justified the profit motive and laissez-faire capitalism.
The Saturday Review complained that he wrote “windy
hysteric”s and “intolerable twaddle.” Yet his notion that
government should be the agent of a just economy was
influential: he proposed both universal public education
and public support of retired workers, ideas that have
been widely accepted. His later life was turbulent and
ultimately sad, including an unconsummated marriage,
the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler
suining him for libel, falling in love with a thirteen-year-
old girl, and finally succumbing to madness. Yet his credo—“In all buying, consider, first, what condition of
existence you cause in the producers of what you buy”—
would influence discussions about craft and design for
another century and remains relevant today.

William Morris (1834–96), the precocious son of pros-
perous parents, was educated by tutors and in a private
boys’ school; he headed off to college intending to be-
come a clergyman. At Oxford, Morris met a talented
fellow student, Edward Burne-Jones. Together they read
The Stones of Venice and toured northern France to see the
The Pre-Raphaelites

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848–54) was founded by three students at the Royal Academy: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais. All had read Ruskin and earnestly wished to create a revolutionary style of painting that would be deeply romantic, moral, and based on the strict study of nature. They hoped to sweep away the pretense and gaudy effects of the current academic style, which held Raphael to be the greatest painter, and so they looked to Italian painters before Raphael for inspiration. Their paintings were famously labor-intensive, minutely observed down to individual flowers and leaves.

cathedrals that Ruskin admired. In 1854 they discovered Pre-Raphaelite painting.

By 1855 both Morris and Burne-Jones had decided to devote themselves to art. Morris intended to become an architect and obtained a position with a prominent Gothic revival architect, G. E. Street. Burne-Jones set out to be a painter. He met Dante Gabriel Rossetti and introduced him to Morris. Rossetti recruited the two to help him paint a series of murals in Oxford in the summer of 1857. Morris was wholly unskilled as a painter. The murals were never finished and soon faded badly. Nonetheless, the idea of a group of artists working toward a noble purpose became the model for all his artistic enterprises.

Another venture was furnishing the new apartment Morris shared with Burne-Jones on Red Lion Square in London, late in 1856. They found a local carpenter to fashion a table, some chairs, and a wardrobe in a chunky medieval style. With Rossetti they painted the furniture with scenes of Arthurian chivalry. Compared with most Gothic revival furniture of the day, the results were clumsy and amateurish but full of enthusiasm.

It seems paradoxical that a club of young rebels would express their modernity by imitating the Middle Ages. But Morris and his friends chose Gothic style because it signified rebellion against everything they despised in contemporary England: the profit motive, the factory system, social injustice. What appears quaint now was politically charged then. These pieces of furniture can be regarded as the first examples of Arts and Crafts work. They were protest made tangible and were resolutely handcrafted.

While Morris didn’t make furniture himself, he was an avid student of craft. By 1855 he had taken up embroidery—a rather unusual pastime for a Victorian gentleman, since embroidering was considered the province of women, but in the medieval guilds the embroiderers had been men. Morris had wooden frames made, had wool yarn dyed by an old French couple, and started stitching a hanging called “If I can.” Manual labor was unsuitable for a gentleman, but Morris literally got his hands dirty: he spent several years in the 1870s with his hands stained blue from working with indigo dye.

Over the next forty years, Morris taught himself how to glaze ceramics, letter and illustrate manuscripts, engrave wooden printing blocks, dye wool and silk, print textiles, and weave tapestries and rugs. Typically he spent an intense period exploring a craft, after which he taught his assistants and employees and then moved on to another pursuit. He was always driven by dissatisfaction with mass-produced goods. For instance, when he started to investigate dyeing, he discovered that colors produced by natural dyes were being driven off the market by the new aniline dyes, which he thought garish and too prone to fading. He researched old techniques of dyeing with indigo, madder, and other natural colors.

Morris’s vehicle for craftwork was Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (later Morris & Co.), founded in 1861. (Figure 1.3) “The Firm,” as it was called, began as a
partnership of Morris, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and four others and created multipurpose interior decoration, including murals, carvings, glass, metalwork, jewelry, furniture, and embroidery. Each partner contributed designs; some were fabricated in-house, while others were jobbed out to London shops. Their first success came with commissions from churches, mostly for stained-glass windows.

By 1875, to end some personal difficulties and put the Firm on secure financial footing, Morris bought out his partners’ shares and became sole proprietor. From then on, he paid close attention to the bottom line, like any businessman. Conflicts between business necessities and his moral ideals troubled Morris for the rest of his life.

The economics of craft are difficult. Hand fabrication is almost always slower than mechanized production and thus almost always costs more. The craftsman has three options: go out of business, earn less, or convince buyers that handwork adds a value that justifies a higher price. The last option falls somewhere between aesthetic theory and salesmanship: what additional value does handwork confer on a product? For a stained-glass window, the argument was easy: it couldn’t (and still can’t) be made by machine.

The uniqueness of handmade goods can be attractive to customers who seek to distinguish themselves by decorating their homes (or themselves) with objects that are unobtainable by the masses. Taste and price draw a line of social difference. Much of Morris & Co.’s business went to upper-class men for whom cost was no object, and Morris came to detest working for them. He famously once told a client why he was upset: “It is only that I spend my life ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich.”

He thought art should be distributed across all levels of society, not reserved for the wealthy: “I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.”

Later designers would embrace machine production as a way to solve this dilemma, and although Morris was suspicious of machines, some Morris & Co. products were mechanically made, such as an early marigold-design floor covering printed on linoleum. Four of the five kinds of carpets Morris & Co. produced were machine-woven, and some wallpapers were machine-printed, too.

The Firm produced some articles that middle-class households could afford. Among these was the Sussex chair, adapted from rush-seated French and English country furniture. It was produced in Morris & Co. shops in lots of four or five dozen at a time. Kits, mostly for embroidery, were also affordable and supplied an existing hobby market.

Perhaps Morris’s greatest contribution was in wallpapers and textiles. He had a marvelous facility for designing patterns that conformed to the theories of both Pugin (who demanded flatness) and Ruskin (who demanded truth to nature). “Chrysanthemum” is a typical mid-1870s Morris & Co. wallpaper. (Figure 1.4) The pattern required at least nine hand-cut woodblocks and nine color printings. A primary pattern consists of two different flowers with acanthus-like leaves, twisting upward. The flowers are rendered without modeling, but leaves and petals overlap in a somewhat realistic way. A secondary rhythm of flat vines provides a visual counterpoint.

Morris & Co. was an international inspiration. Suddenly, to practice a craft was to be avant-garde. Hundreds of painters and architects turned to textiles, wallpapers, furniture, and metalwork. Many of them moved to the countryside. Most saw the home as the proper site for design reform, and their motto became “Art into Life.”

For all his achievements as a maker and designer, Morris was also a thinker with a consistent ethic. Like Ruskin, he felt that the life of the worker was basic to all considerations of art and economy, and that handwork was the only humane form of labor. Morris regarded work as an essential condition of life and thought something was wrong with a system that reduced it to painful toil. “If a man has work to do which he despises, which
does not satisfy his natural and rightful desire for pleasure, the greater part of his life must pass unhappily and without self-respect.”

Art to Morris was not just painting and sculpture but also articles of everyday use, primarily situated in the home, where the fruits of labor could have a beneficial effect on everyone. He thus argued that the fine arts and the decorative arts should be equal and unified. To divide art into high and low caused sickness in both: “I hold that, when they are so parted, it is ill for the Arts altogether: the lesser ones become trivial, mechanical, unintelligent, incapable of resisting the changes pressed upon them by fashion or dishonesty; while the greater, however they may be practiced for a while by men of great minds and wonder-working hands, unhelped by the lesser, unhelped by each other, are sure to lose their dignity of popular arts, and become nothing but dull adjuncts to unmeaning pomp, or ingenious toys for a few rich and idle men.”

Morris elaborated on his vision in a novel he called *News from Nowhere*, in which a Victorian gentleman wakes up in a surprising future. The revolution has come and gone, and the state has withered away just as Marx predicted it would. There are no factories, no modern technology, and no money. All commodities are given away for free. Everybody works for free too, enjoying road repair just as much as wood carving. People perform the most repellant tasks because they receive the most extravagant praise. Men treat women fully as equals. There’s no jealousy, no aggression, no lying, no war. It is a touching fantasy, sweet and sad, and rather remote from human nature.

Morris’s last venture was his Kelmscott Press, which he founded to publish beautiful editions of his favorite books. By the time of his death in 1896, worn out at the age of sixty-two, he had also started the movement for preservation of historic buildings and become a popular poet and one of England’s most important socialists. His influence on the crafts was (and is) immense. By his own example, he elevated craft from a trade to a vocation, linked handwork with idealism, and became a hero for generations to come. Morris & Co. was a successful business but not a cutthroat capitalist one. It gave dignity back to labor (even if its workers weren’t designers, as Ruskin might have wished). Morris insisted that craft could be art and that art must be incorporated into the daily lives of ordinary people. This just might be his most important legacy of all.

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**The Aesthetic Movement**

The years between 1870 and 1885 in England and America have been called the Aesthetic period. Morris and his associates revised popular taste in fabrics and furniture, and in addition there were changes in architecture, interiors, and women’s dress. (Figure 1.5) While many creative men besides Morris deserve credit, Oscar Wilde—who was not a visual artist—is particularly associated with the Aesthetic period in America because of his 1882 speaking tour, which publicized the movement.

By the 1880s “aesthetic” was used to describe almost anything that was currently fashionable. The movement’s underlying doctrine was “art for art’s sake,” and it embraced the entire scope of painting and sculpture, decorative arts, and popular culture. Among the sources of ideas were Owen Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), with its examples of Persian, Moorish, Egyptian, and...
**Whistler the Aesthete**

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, an American painter living in London, was associated with the Pre-Raphaelites and the Morris group in the 1860s. In his paintings he adopted a central principle of aestheticism—the expression of beauty through formal qualities. Famous as a dandy, Whistler is sometimes regarded as the original Aesthete. His contribution to the movement was not just his painting but also his Peacock Room, an interior designed for his patron Frederick Leyland (1876–77; now installed in the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C.).

**Eastlake's Hints**

Charles Eastlake trained as an architect in the 1850s, fell in love with medieval buildings, and then devoted himself mostly to writing. His *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details* (1868) was a compilation of magazine articles illustrated with his furniture designs. Much of it consists of complaints about prevailing taste, such as the overornamentation that he called “the lust of profusion which is the bane of modern design.”

Eastlake's taste was shaped by Pugin and Ruskin, and he advocated the same reforms: flattened patterns on rugs and fabrics; elimination of shading and chiaroscuro; revealing both material and construction. He hated varnish on carved furniture, saying, “The moment a carved or sculptured surface begins to shine, it loses interest.”

Eastlake illustrated his book with designs for what he called “art furniture,” which are plain for the times. Ornamentation consists of incised lines, turned posts, isolated bits of carving and metal strap hinges, handles, and key plates. For ceramics, jewelry, picture frames, and fabrics, he used historical examples as well as the work of a few British designers.

*Hints on Household Taste* immediately caught the public imagination. By 1881 it had been revised and enlarged four times in Britain and had appeared in six editions in the United States. Eastlake’s preferences helped prepare the way for greater change to come.

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Other exotic styles; Japanese taste (“Indian style” became popular later); Ruskin (in writing); and Morris (in practice). *The Two Paths, Being Lectures on Art and Its Application to Decoration and Manufacture*, Ruskin's only book on decorative art, was published in 1859 and went through nineteen American printings between that date and 1891, more than any other book on the subject.

Like the Arts and Crafts movement, which overlapped and followed it, the Aesthetic movement was supported by the middle class. Its legacy is the idea that the interior of a home should reflect the inhabitant’s personal style. Under the influence of a small circle of architects and artists who believed in good design for everyone, antique collecting was introduced as a way of furnishing a home, and interest in plain and simple furniture led to a revival
of traditional vernacular crafts. New magazines devoted to the arts ran articles on home decor (later collected and published as books), with the increasing use of photographs aiding visual influence. Charles L. Eastlake’s was the most popular of these compendiums, but there were many others, such as Clarence Cook’s The House Beautiful and H. J. Cooper’s The Art of Furnishing on Rational and Aesthetic Principles. Writers of the house beautiful manuals regarded taste as an absolute that could be learned.

Amid all this self-betterment writing, the Furniture Gazette asserted in 1876 that “there has assuredly never been since the world began an age in which people thought, talked, wrote and spent such inordinate sums of money and hours of time in cultivating and indulging their tastes.”1 The idea that people should live for art was met with a good deal of suspicion and even ridicule in both Britain and the United States. Aesthetes were seen as poseurs and hedonists. Yet despite the inevitable jokes about the new styles, the public took to it with enthusiasm. Furniture manufacturers soon picked up Aesthetic ideas, although the word they used was “artistic.” Art furniture and furnishings were soon sold in all the major stores alongside revival styles. Morris’s wallpapers (and those of Bruce J. Talbert, 1838–81) were among the earliest Aesthetic productions. Morris’s preferences became the hallmarks of the Aesthetic house. Probably the most important legacy of the movement was the concept of fitness for purpose, which led eventually to the functional design of the twentieth century.

Japan was the strongest external design influence on the Aesthetic movement. By the 1870s “every mantelpiece in every enlightened household bore at least one Japanese fan, parasols were used as summer firescreens, popular magazines and ball programmes were printed in asymmetrical and semi-Japanese style and asymmetry of form and ornament spread to pottery, porcelain, silver and furniture.”18 By the time Gilbert and Sullivan’s Mikado opened in London in 1885, “things Japanese” had been a mania for at least five years.

An article on Japanese houses appeared in the first issue of American Architect in January 1876. Japanese buildings and gardens at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia that year attracted much attention. The first book on Japan’s architecture appears to have been Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings by the Bostonian Edward S. Morse, published in 1886. The understatement, simple line, and sense of proportion that could be seen in Morse’s book became part of the architecture of the Aesthetic movement, the Arts and Crafts movement, and eventually modernism. Another lesson from the Japanese was that everything didn’t have to come in pairs. Also, the whiplash motif in Japanese art may have inspired the art nouveau style.

**From Aesthetic to Art Nouveau**

The Aesthetic movement and the concurrent Arts and Crafts movement had things in common, including their attention to craftsmanship and the geometry of their patterns. But one way to distinguish between them is the latter’s greater concern with structure and the former’s obsession with surface.

In England, art nouveau had few fans, partly because of suspicion of its French origins. The popularity of its organic tendril motif was ridiculed by Gilbert and Sullivan in the operetta Patience as “a sentimental passion / for a vegetable fashion.” Art nouveau was a style rather than an ideology and was short-lived, yet its sinuous and sensuous curves have retained their appeal.

**Oscar Wilde**

Oscar Wilde’s role in the Aesthetic movement was to publicize the views of his more artistic associates and his teachers. (Figure 1.6) Wilde (1854–1900) was an Irishman who studied at Oxford. He was a precocious Aesthete, quoted in the newspapers for saying, “I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.”19 While still at Oxford he was described by a new acquaintance as “aesthetic to the last degree, passionately fond of secondary colours, low tones, Morris papers, and capable of talking a good deal of nonsense thereupon, but for all that a very sensible, well-informed and charming man.”20 His intention, apparently, was to make his life into art. Wilde’s distinctive figure (he was tall and heavy) made it easier for Punch’s cartoonist George du Maurier to satirize the Aesthetic movement, thus making it known to a wider audience.

In 1882 Wilde came to America to lecture. His tour was planned to coincide with a New York production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s Patience, which mocked the Aesthetic movement with a character, Bunthorne, who combined features of Whistler and Wilde. A single man, just twenty-six years old and in need of money—he had already run through his small inheritance—Wilde told the press when he departed from England that he was carrying culture to a continent, armed only with his genius.

His lecture, “The Renaissance in English Art,” was so exhaustively reported in the papers that he had to create...
new talks. One was on the decorative arts and the other, on house decoration, was titled “The Practical Application of the Principles of Aesthetic Theory to Exterior and Interior House Decoration, with Observations upon Dress and Personal Ornaments.” It was more commonly referred to as “The House Beautiful.” He was parroting the ideas of Whistler and the architect E. W. Godwin, with considerable debt to Ruskin and Morris, but of course in his own style. While at the time his only personal experience with decorating was his college room, it was a concern that stayed with him: not so many years later, when he was dying in a cheap hotel, he joked, “My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has to go.”

Wilde’s comments on handicrafts in his American lectures were sympathetic. He observed that “all ugly things are made by those who strive to make something beautiful, and . . . all beautiful things are made by those who strive to make something useful.” His American tour, extended to eighteen months, with appearances in at least seventy-five U.S. and Canadian cities from coast to coast, was a triumph. People bought photographs of him, and popular songs were written about him. As the Aesthetic movement ran its course, Wilde, too, moved on to new concerns: he married, became the editor of a women’s magazine, and eventually a celebrated playwright.

**Aesthetic in America**

The American Aesthetic movement offered no manifestos or official publications and had no unified style. It can be discerned in painting, where the attraction to the decorative and an emphasis on formal qualities of line, color, and shape seems to have helped liberate American artists from academic constraints. It can also be seen in the art pottery, art tiles, and art glass that developed when the Aesthetic movement was at its peak in the United States, about 1875 to 1885.

Major decorators of the time were Herter Brothers, Louis Comfort Tiffany’s Associated Artists, and John La Farge’s Decorative Art Company. Associated Artists’ treatment of the White House state rooms in 1882 was the height of Aesthetic decorating in the United States. Only a few such lavish interiors remain intact today, and while many were photographed for books such as *Artistic Houses* (1883–84), it is hard to appreciate these orchestrations of color and pattern in black-and-white photographs. Flat coloring and outlines of black or gold suppressed the illusion of depth; gold, silver, and silks reflected light so that the walls were visually transformed into “fragile films of nothing more substantial than that precious, shimmering thing, ornament.” In pursuit of these effects, English wallpapers became so popular that some critics called the Aesthetic movement “this wallpaper movement.”

In Boston—probably the American city with the most Aesthetic tastes—H. H. Richardson’s Trinity Church, consecrated in 1877, is the religious masterpiece of the style. Another masterwork is Stanford White’s 1880–81 design for the “living room” (a new term in that era) at Kingscote, the Newport, Rhode Island, house of David King III. In this addition to a Gothic revival “cottage,” White gave architectural elements—ceiling beams, fireplace surround, window mullions, and tilework—a relatively austere, Japanese-influenced, and proto-modernist character.

**English Arts and Crafts**

In England the taste for the Gothic revival passed out of fashion by 1880, and a new style was invented by several
young architects. The first among them was Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo (1851–1942), who had attended some of Ruskin’s Oxford lectures and traveled with him to Italy in 1874. After returning to England, he taught himself stone carving, embroidery, cabinetmaking, and repoussé in brass.

In 1882 Mackmurdo formed the Century Guild. The participants in this collaborative group intended to “restore building, decoration, glass-painting, pottery, wood carving, and metalwork to their rightful place beside painting and sculpture.” The guild set up workshops for furniture and metalwork and started taking commissions for interior decoration. In Mackmurdo’s designs for the Century Guild, all traces of the Gothic are gone. There is no carving, no painting, just exposed dark wood. Mackmurdo stripped down the forms of Chippendale furniture, straightened them, and added exaggerated cornices on top, which, with their distinctive thin, hatlike capitals, were to become icons of the new Arts and Crafts style.

The Century Guild did little work after 1888, but Mackmurdo’s mantle was taken up by another architect, Charles Francis Annesley Voysey (1857–1941), who was committed to the unified and very simple interior. Voysey’s furniture was made of plain wood, often oak, and he frequently used broad slats on the backs of his chairs and bedsteads. His designs were influential in Europe and America. Frank Lloyd Wright’s early architecture owes much to him, as does American Arts and Crafts furniture. After 1912 he earned his living designing textiles and wallpapers.

The Art Workers’ Guild in London was not a business like the Century Guild but a discussion group. It was formed in 1884 in opposition to two fusty British institutions: the Royal Academy, which exhibited mostly oil paintings; and the Institute of British Architects, which discouraged any engagement with either art or craft. The Art Workers’ Guild sponsored lectures and demonstrations and mounted private exhibitions of members’ work. It was a great success, and branches were set up in other British cities. (It still exists.) In 1888 several members decided that the message of the “Combined Arts” needed to be carried to the public and that academic painting and sculpture should be excluded. A splinter group explored the idea of exhibitions. In planning sessions, bookbinder T. J. Cobden-Sanderson invented the term Arts and Crafts to describe the new project.

The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society mounted its first show in late 1888, to broad acclaim. The society recruited many of Morris’s followers (and Morris himself) and members of the Century Guild. It gradually became the focus of the whole British crafts community. Within a decade, Arts and Crafts societies sprang up in cities across the United States, and they have proven surprisingly durable.

A magazine called the Studio published its first issue in April 1893. The magazine exploited mechanized printing technologies such as halftone photographic reproductions (which replaced laborious steel engravings) and full-color chromolithography. The Studio represented the artistic cutting edge in England. Sold in the United States as International Studio, it was required reading for every fan of Arts and Crafts. It inspired many new publications in Europe and America.

One of the last English Arts and Crafts designers to have a great influence in the United States was Charles Robert Ashbee (1863–1942). He refused to join his father’s business, going off to King’s College, Cambridge, where he read Ruskin and the Americans Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, rejected capitalism, and devoted himself to making the world a better place. Ashbee found his calling in the slums of East London, where he was inspired by Toynbee Hall, founded in 1884 by Oxford teachers and students with the goal of improving the desperate conditions of life among the working poor. University graduates would “settle” for a while at Toynbee Hall, teach classes to working men and women, and perform other good works; the term “settlement house” was therefore applied to the institution and its successors. Ashbee joined Toynbee Hall in the fall of 1886, about the same time he started working for a London architect. After he taught a few classes on Ruskin, he and his students turned their hands to practical work, decorating Toynbee Hall’s dining room. The experience fired Ashbee’s imagination, and in 1888 he founded the School and Guild of Handicraft.

The school and guild combination was unique. Unlike art schools, it did not just teach how to draw and design on paper. Courses in carpentry, wood carving, metalwork, embroidery, and other subjects were offered. The guild was a social experiment disguised as a business, meant to provide meaningful work in an industrialized society. It produced cabinetry, metalwork and decorative painting, jewelry, enameling, lighting fixtures, blacksmithing, and even entire interior design commissions.

A silver-mounted decanter of 1904 is typical of the Guild of Handicraft’s work. (Figure 1.7) The glass jug was probably provided by a London manufacturer and the metalwork added in the guild shop. Most of the metalwork is simple; Ashbee hired workers he felt could benefit the most, rather than the best-qualified craftsmen. True to the collaborative nature of the guild, the
decanter’s designer is not known. Other decanters from the same period show subtle differences, which suggests that individual silversmiths were free to invent variations on basic themes.

The guild put on plays, held songfests, gave weekly dinners, and sponsored trips to the countryside. At first it was a fully cooperative workshop, with all workers having a voice in its business affairs. That experiment was abandoned, however, and by 1898 it was a limited company, like any business. Ashbee's school closed in 1895, mired in debt, but the Guild of Handicraft became quite successful, employing more than seventy workers by 1902. In that year it moved to Chipping Campden, a tiny village about eighty miles west of London. The relocation was part of a “back to the land” movement that contrasted the beauty of nature with the noise, dirt, and poverty of the city and found dignity in rural folkways.

In Chipping Campden the school was reopened. Business was good at first, and prominent people came to visit. But guild designs were copied by manufacturers and department stores, which sold them more cheaply. Worse, city clients were less accessible, leading to a decline in sales. To top off the guild’s misery, England was swept by a taste for eighteenth-century revival furniture, rendering the Arts and Crafts look outdated. By 1906 the guild was losing money, and it was liquidated in 1908, twenty years after it began. A dozen craftsmen remained in Chipping Campden to run their own studios. Ashbee had nevertheless shown that Ruskin’s ideal of accepting the faults of untutored laborers could succeed and that Arts and Crafts enterprises could indeed benefit society. The idea of craft fellowships would blossom in the United States, inspired by the notion that a business could operate for the betterment of its members.

World’s Fairs

Almost without exception, the published accounts of world’s fairs that began to be held in the middle of the nineteenth century omit discussion of craft. Yet the fairs were of pivotal importance in the history of craft. They offered an opportunity for both national and international exposure, and the convention of awarding ribbons, medals, and certificates served as personal validation to artists who exhibited and as commercial affirmation to art manufacturers. The fairs also played important educational and cultural roles, providing craftspeople with new technical and artistic ideas.

World’s fairs began with the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, also known as the Crystal Palace exhibition in honor of the marvelous glass and iron building that housed it, designed by Joseph Paxton. The roots, however, go back to more modest national institutions established in France and Britain to promote trade, as well as to gain political standing by showing manufactured objects as “meaningful beyond themselves.”

After the Great Exhibition, an event involving twenty or more nations was held somewhere in the world on an average of every two years, bringing together wide varieties of goods and enormous numbers of visitors. In addition to cultural, political, and social purposes, fairs have inspired the creation of amusement parks and theme parks such as Disneyland and have introduced the public to innovations such as telephones, X-rays, asphalt, and picture postcards. Fairs influenced taste and artistic development both through publicity and directly to those who attended.

The first major fair held in America was the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Almost 10 million people (out of a U.S. population of about 46 million) attended the six-month Centennial Exposition on 236 acres in Fairmount Park. One of the five major halls was devoted to fine arts, introducing much that was new or unfamiliar: “reform” English design, exotic Japanese art,
and the complex patterning of Moorish decoration. The success of a British art needlework display encouraged the immigration of needlework teachers from Britain to the United States. Among the nearly 400 foreign displays of ceramics, Danish reproductions of Greek vessels in museums gave ideas to American manufacturers, and French techniques and Japanese motifs also provided inspiration. In fact, a renaissance in American decorative arts can be traced to ideas generated by the Centennial Exposition displays.

Some women were pleased that the fair’s directors had gathered women’s arts and inventions in a separate Women’s Building, seeing this as a step toward equality. Leaders of the suffrage movement were less sanguine; the Centennial Board had reneged on a promise to provide space in the main building. A women’s committee took matters into its own hands and within months raised $30,000 for the first-ever Women’s Building. Exhibition of Native American work was also a first at this fair, in displays of mannequins and artifacts that cast them as savages. Although the fair did not make a profit for its investors, it restored national pride and encouraged the recovery of American business hurt by the Civil War and a more recent financial panic. Its cultural success and good press launched world’s fairs in America.

The six-month-long World’s Columbian Exposition, nicknamed “The White City,” was held in Chicago in 1893. The fair was meant to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America, but it opened a year late due to the worst depression since 1837. The design consisted of Beaux-Arts-style buildings, but the Palace of Transportation, designed by Louis Sullivan, which did not conform, was one of the high points. A Great Wheel by G. W. G. Ferris that revolved every twenty minutes, electric lighting, and a “moving pavement” to carry visitors around the 666-acre lakeshore site were other impressive features.

Colonial revival displays by a few states emphasized American heritage. The Fine Arts building, which for fire safety reasons was the only permanent structure on the site and is now Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry, had almost 9,000 works on view. Actual Native Americans were part of an array of exotic shows, including Algerian belly dancers, and there were replicas of savages. Although the fair did not make a profit for its investors, it restored national pride and encouraged the recovery of American business hurt by the Civil War and a more recent financial panic. Its cultural success and good press launched world’s fairs in America.

At the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Universal Exposition in Saint Louis, Cass Gilbert designed the Palace of Arts, which is now the Saint Louis Art Museum. Nearly 40,000 medals and 50,000 diplomas were awarded to displays in twelve major classifications. This was the first world’s fair in which the decorative arts, or “Original Objects of Art Workmanship,” were exhibited alongside painting and sculpture rather than with manufactures. The Palace of Arts exhibited and rewarded the achievements of the American art potteries; the exposition established a nationwide standard for Arts and Crafts wares through a selection process coordinated by regional juries.

The 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco was more concerned with fine arts than most previous events. There was a large assortment of outdoor sculptures, and the Palace of Fine Arts (again the only surviving structure) displayed more than 11,400 artworks from all over the world that had been created within the previous decade. The dominance of art potteries ended as ceramics shifted to smaller exhibition venues.

The fine arts came to be seen as an essential feature of world’s fairs, but no one presumed that it was art that drew the crowds. The art chosen for display was usually great works of the past, yet most fairs emphasized the future. While the fairs affected institutional aspects of the art world (constructing buildings, familiarizing the idea of temporary exhibitions, establishing sponsoring organizations), they rarely produced new styles, with the exception of ethnographic displays that introduced artists to unfamiliar forms and peoples.

The Cincinnati Wood-Carving Movement

Throughout the nineteenth century, some individuals and businesses still made objects by hand in traditional craft mediums. But until the Arts and Crafts movement offered a justification, no one distinguished handwork from machine fabrication. All production was industry, from the smallest workshop to the largest factory. “Studio craft” was therefore first set apart from industry by the assertion that handwork was socially valuable.

The first work of this new kind in the United States was done in Cincinnati in the early 1870s. Because of its location on the Ohio River, Cincinnati was a major transportation link and manufacturing center before the Civil War. When the rapid development of railroads eroded the city’s preeminence, leading citizens looked to culture as a means of restoration. They assembled a conservatory, university, symphony orchestra, art academy, and
art museum, all requiring private patronage. The most prominent family supporting the arts in Cincinnati was Nicholas Longworth (1782–1863), his son Joseph (1813–83), and his granddaughter Maria (pronounced ma-rye-uh, 1849–1932). The Longworths’ fortune came from land and agriculture. Both Nicholas and Joseph supported painters and sculptors, and Joseph seeded the Academy of Fine Art with a $60,000 donation in 1887. In the 1850s and 1860s, Joseph built mansions for himself and his daughter and had the interiors enriched with wood carving by English immigrant Henry Lindley Fry (1807–95) and his son William Henry Fry (1830–1929). Joseph Longworth was so proud of the work they did in his daughter’s house—detailed renderings of birds and local plant life on moldings, mantels, cupboards, and elsewhere—that he brought in many visitors to see it.

In 1873 the School of Design of the University of Cincinnati opened a wood-carving department under the direction of Benn Pitman (1822–1910). Pitman had come to Cincinnati from England to teach phonography, a shorthand system invented by his brother some years before. By 1872, perhaps inspired by the success of the Frys, he had taken up wood carving and exhibited his work in an annual industrial exposition. He agitated for the creation of the new department and, with his daughter Agnes as his assistant, began teaching.

A statement in the 1872 catalog for the School of Design explained the new program in the language of the industrial arts education movement that was emerging about the same time (see chapter 2): “The special aim of this School is not merely the study of Painting and Sculpture, but also the improvement of the industrial arts, by affording to the citizens of Cincinnati and particularly to the operative classes, a thorough, technical, and scientific education in Art and Design as applied to manufactures; thereby imparting to them such taste and skill in form and finish of their works, whether large or small, as will always command remunerative employment, and a ready sale for the products of their industry.” Since Cincinnati was home to a sizable furniture-making industry, the “operative classes” in question were supposed to be workers from the local factories.

The program was quite successful, with 121 students in the first class. But 94 of them were women, mostly upper-middle-class women who had the time and money to pursue their own desires. Pitman adapted to his new audience, letting them make items for their families and friends. Presuming that women would not be capable of cabinetmaking (with its rather dangerous machine tools), Pitman had local carpenters make up wood forms that his students could decorate with carving. And presuming that they did not have the strength or endurance to carve in deep relief, he taught them to carve shallowly. Within these limitations, the women carvers of Cincinnati excelled.

In an 1874 exhibition of School of Design student work, woodcarvers showed 822 pieces, most of them small (frames, brackets, boxes, and the like). Then even more people signed up for classes, from both Pitman and Henry Fry. Meanwhile, Cincinnati women raised $5,000 to support exhibits in the Women’s Building of the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Some seventy-three Cincinnati women showed objects ranging from a piano to a chessboard. Written up in the national press, “Cincinnati carving” became a model for emulation. The School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston offered wood-carving classes in 1879, only two years after it opened. And many of the women who formed one of the first arts and crafts societies in the nation, in Minneapolis in 1895, were wood-carvers.

Pitman carefully controlled the School of Design style. He insisted that his students draw directly from nature, which meant that their subject matter tended to be local plant life. (Ruskin would have approved.) He had the students rework their drawings into simplified, asymmetrical designs. The most elaborate floral carvings were generally confined to forward-facing panels and door fronts. Vertical and horizontal members and side panels were decorated with patterns. On occasion, paintings were added to side panels. Dense decoration festooned every edge and surface. The various arches, columns, brackets, and finials often bore no relationship at all to the carving on panels. The effect was completely Victorian.

A desk by an unknown carver is typical. (Figure 1.8) Like most School of Design furniture, it is constructed entirely of American wood: black cherry, pine, and yellow poplar. The upper part is asymmetrical, reflecting Japanese influence. The drop front is decorated with a spray of dogwood blossoms carved in medium relief. The lower left door has another carving, depicting butterflies and a narcissus bouquet. On the upper left there’s a third floral carving, but here the image is carved into the wood surface, instead of standing out from it. Each drawer front is carved with leafy scrolls. Geometric carving decorates the structural parts and both sides. Finally, two twisted columns push the whole composition toward chaos. Nonetheless, the carving is skillful. Taken separately, the designs of the carved panels are quite advanced for their day.

From the vantage point of the present, it is easy to criticize the Cincinnati wood-carving movement. It failed to achieve its goal of educating factory workers,
and the market that Pitman promised never developed. Such labor-intensive furniture could be marketed only as luxury goods, and there was little demand outside Cincinnati. Most of the thousands of objects carved in Cincinnati went to local families, primarily those of the women who made them. The style remained unchanged even after William Fry replaced Pitman in 1893, right up to Fry’s retirement in 1926, by which time it was hopelessly antiquated.

And yet Cincinnati wood carving marked a moment. As members of America’s leisure class, the women faced the question of what to do with their time. Only the very rich had asked this question before, but now thousands of women were free to choose what to do, within the limits prescribed by their social class. The Cincinnati women wood-carvers could evaluate their work on its own terms. Uniting thought and labor by inventing a design and then carving it, using the whole body in physical work, becoming totally absorbed in an activity, and producing an object that was well designed and well made—all were among the satisfactions of the work. The women discovered that the practice of craft contributed significantly to their quality of life, which distinguished studio craft from trade.

Morris had looked outward, from labor to the whole society. In Cincinnati the focus turned inward, to the benefits that accrued to the craftswoman herself. The emphasis was on self-improvement rather than social reform. While less altruistic than Morris’s ideal, it proved to be equally potent. Even today, people are drawn to the crafts for the same reasons.

Many of the Cincinnati wood-carvers went on to play important roles in art pottery. In general, women took the lead in weaving, dyeing, and other textile fields, and they were in the majority among early Arts and Crafts jewelers. Only in the book arts and in glass were men more important than women in the early years of studio craft.

**Art in Textiles**

Needlework was a craft elevated to art status by the Aesthetic movement and the Arts and Crafts movement. The change was anticipated in England during the burst of church building that followed the Catholic emancipation of 1829, which generated a need for vestments, altar cloths, and the like. Pugin’s support of Gothic style included a revival of historic embroidery styles. The royal family and the South Kensington Museum began to collect textiles after midcentury, and these items served as models. A commercial firm, Liberty’s, first used the term “art fabrics,” starting about 1876, and others quickly took it up.

Popular in the early Victorian era was German-originated “Berlin woolwork,” a counted-stitch technique in which a prestamped design on a black wool ground (pets, flowers, biblical scenes, or adaptations of famous paintings) was worked in vibrant aniline-dyed yarn. Art needlework, by contrast, employed softer colors and more stylized motifs. By the mid-1870s, it was the most popular embroidery form.

William Morris’s own embroidery experiments began in the 1850s; he is said to have derived his greatest satisfaction as an artist-craftsman from the embroidery, weaving, and hand-knotted carpets that Morris & Co. produced. His description of needle arts as inherently feminine has been regarded by some contemporary critics as sexist, but he knew of medieval male embroiderers and practiced needlework himself, and his assertive daughter May chose it as her lifework. Walter Crane, who designed textiles, valued embroidery for its direct contact with materials—it is not distanced by the tools or machines of weaving or of fabric printing. May Morris, in an 1893 book on embroidery, distinguished between “pictorial art,” in which the ground material is entirely covered, like the canvas in painting, and “decorative art,”
in which textile character plays a stronger role and there is a balance of figure and ground. The pictorial approach involves greater distance or abstraction from the fabric and then (as now) was seen as more intellectual.

Mostly, late nineteenth-century textile techniques and attitudes migrated from England to America, but crazy quilts, another textile innovation of the Aesthetic period, appear to have been made in America first. Crazy quilts were an adaptation of a Japanese textile technique called kirihame. Perhaps through trade goods sold in American shops, this appliqué was seen by American women familiar with more orderly forms of patchwork quilting. Possibly the most widely adopted Japanese influence, crazy quilts were described as a “mania” by 1882.

**Candace Wheeler:**

**Social Service to Business**

In the nineteenth century, American textiles were either imported from or copied from Europe. Candace Wheeler (1827–1923) was a leader in changing that. She was a social activist who created opportunities for women, an inventor of textile techniques, and a businesswoman. Her achievements began after she was fifty years old. She grew up on a farm where her family persisted in a pioneer lifestyle that was old-fashioned even then. She attributed her color sense and textile skills to the spinning and weaving she learned at home. In 1844, at seventeen, she married Thomas M. Wheeler—a surveyor, civil engineer, and architect—and relocated to New York City. The Wheelers moved in artistic circles, and when they began to travel abroad, she met such leading English figures as Burne-Jones. She lived an unremarkable middle-class life until 1876, when she visited the Centennial Exhibition. Like many women, she was impressed by the embroidery and weaving she learned at home. In 1879, Wheeler went into business with Louis Comfort Tiffany, whom she knew from the SDA. Their company, Tiffany & Wheeler, was soon altered with the addition of two other principals (see below), and the name was changed to Louis C. Tiffany & Company, Associated Artists ("Associated Artists" is said to be Wheeler’s suggestion). In the style of Morris & Co., it specialized in interior design. According to Wheeler’s autobiography (unfortunately not a completely reliable source), she was approached by Tiffany, who said: “It is the real thing, you know; a business, not a philanthropy or an amateur educational scheme. We are going after the money there is in art, but the art is there, all the same. If your husband will let you, you had better join us and take up embroidery and decorative needlework. There are great possibilities in it.”

Probably Tiffany saw Wheeler primarily as the director of a workshop that would embroider portieres and became the parent of about thirty similar organizations in cities across the country. Many grew out of sewing circles, a form of female social gathering that metamorphosed into something new. Through the SDA, women in financial need could sell homemade products to the public. The first president was a woman skilled at public relations, and other founders came from prominent families like the Astors and could easily afford the society’s $100 “subscription” fee, which provided start-up funds.

Wheeler emphasized the SDA’s differences from the Royal School of Art Needlework to escape the sense of one class helping another: anyone could sell work, not just the destitute. Works by men were accepted because, as she cagily noted, people would pay more for unlabeled works by men and women together than for works by women only. The SDA functioned as a school, library, study center, laboratory, workroom, shop, and gallery; it also sold tools, materials, and literature. The society supported multiple crafts, including needlework, china painting, panel painting, tilework, and carving. Wheeler spoke of it as serving social and psychological rather than just physical needs. That sounds surprisingly like the women’s liberation movement of almost a hundred years later: craft as a means of psychological independence.

Wheeler’s own early textile designs are simple, structured patterns influenced by the Royal School and Walter Smith’s popular system of conventional drawing (see chapter 2). Later she came to regard that system as “false in principle.” She asserted that many flowers were naturally simple and regular in form and needed no alteration. Her *Consider the Lilies of the Field* portiere, embroidered and painted with wild meadow lilies, is one of the surviving pieces from her SDA years. (Figure 1.9)

In 1879 Wheeler went into business with Louis Comfort Tiffany, whom she knew from the SDA. Their company, Tiffany & Wheeler, was soon altered with the addition of two other principals (see below), and the name was changed to Louis C. Tiffany & Company, Associated Artists (“Associated Artists” is said to be Wheeler’s suggestion). In the style of Morris & Co., it specialized in interior design. According to Wheeler’s autobiography (unfortunately not a completely reliable source), she was approached by Tiffany, who said: “It is the real thing, you know; a business, not a philanthropy or an amateur educational scheme. We are going after the money there is in art, but the art is there, all the same. If your husband will let you, you had better join us and take up embroidery and decorative needlework. There are great possibilities in it.”

In 1877 Wheeler, with the aid of four other women, formed the New York Society of Decorative Arts (SDA), drawing on skills developed in wartime charity work as well as fund-raising fairs that had been held in the United States since the 1820s for various worthy causes. The SDA supported multiple crafts, including needlework, china painting, panel painting, tilework, and carving. Wheeler spoke of it as serving social and psychological rather than just physical needs. That sounds surprisingly like the women’s liberation movement of almost a hundred years later: craft as a means of psychological independence.
other items to his design, since her expertise was in technique. Their first commission was a ninety-square-yard drop curtain for the Madison Square Theatre that took nearly six months to complete and cost the then-considerable sum of $3,000. When the theater opened on February 4, 1880, the Art Interchange called it “the most important piece of art needlework which has been done in the country . . . being the first fruits of a distinctly American school of art needlework.”

It depicted a pond and shore with flowers, rushes, and a blooming tulip tree with clinging vines leading the eye into a misty background. According to the press, it was designed by Tiffany; Wheeler said that it was adapted from an embroidered silk picture by Mrs. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., a noted needleworker. Extensive appliqué was used to fill a large area economically—an innovation. On February 26, just weeks after the opening, the curtain burned in a fire accidentally started by a lamplighter. It was replaced on May 1 by a new work from Tiffany & Wheeler—who refused to repeat—depicting a Florida inlet at low tide with river, water plants, flowers, birds, butterflies, and trees.

When the firm dissolved in 1883, Wheeler took the name Associated Artists and, with her younger daughter, Dora, expanded her textile business. Dora was both a designer and a painter trained in William Merritt Chase’s studio, as well as in Germany and Paris. Dora and Rosina Emmet specialized in tapestries depicting female figures from literature and mythology. Today these are cringe-inducing Victoriana, but then they related to history paintings and were widely admired.

Wheeler invented and patented the “American Tapestry” technique of “needle weaving,” so called because the needle was used like a shuttle to carry silk embroidery threads into a silk weft. It was time-consuming (and therefore expensive) to produce but appealed to wealthy clients. Her works were characterized by unexpected combinations of materials, such as supple silk and stiff metallics, and by special effects achieved through blended colors. She featured American flower species plus Japanese motifs and historically inspired patterns. She developed a stronger color palette than Europeans used, an idea she adopted from painter friends. She believed that any subject or effect that could be painted could also be used in textiles.

Wheeler observed that “one of the superior charms of embroidery” is that it can show a color and then a second color in reflection. “The same tint in silk will make of itself, according to the light which falls upon it, the deepest, as well as the lightest shades of its own color, and will even reflect its own upon adjacent tints, so that the whole mass will have a color effect that would be beyond the power of the most skilful painter.” She wrote that, in appliqué, design was less important than color.

![Figure 1.9. Candace Wheeler, Consider the Lilies of the Field Portiere, 1879. Cotton panels embroidered with wool thread and painted wool borders; 74.25 x 44.5 in. and 73 x 45.5 in. (The Mark Twain House & Museum, Hartford, Conn.)](image)
and surface relations and noted that this technique could be bold enough for the newly popular large rooms.

Among her best works is a pair of embroidered tulip panels in which the flowers are depicted as past their prime and about to drop their petals. The panels are striking and unusual in their naturalism. Few of the hangings she created have survived, although these ambitious works were the ones she regarded as her most important. They were worn out, apparently, in the homes of the wealthy, including Cornelius Vanderbilt II of New York, Mrs. Potter Palmer of Chicago, and the English actress Lillie Langtry.

Wheeler also embraced mass production. In this she was part of a new wave, going where Morris would not have gone. She partnered with the silk manufacturers Cheney Brothers and other firms to produce woven cottons and silks with repeating patterns. A fabric blanketed with narcissus may have been inspired by the garden at Nestledown, her house in Jamaica, Queens. The staggered placement of leaves and stems creates the effect of a field of flowers and hides the repetition. The fabric is printed in five colors (three tones of green, plus yellow and red) on natural, undyed linen made of unevenly spun yarns that create an irregular texture, a “home-spun” look.

Wheeler searched for an inexpensive cloth that could be available to a wider public, usable in a yacht or country cottage, as she put it. She found indigo dyes and plantation weaving of a cotton fabric known as “Kentucky jean” or “blue jean,” later called “blue denim,” which she popularized, noting that it did not show soil and washed well.

In 1893, at the Chicago world’s fair, Wheeler designed a library sponsored by New York State and was the color director for the Woman’s Building. She also was on the advisory council of the Woman’s Art School of New York at the Cooper Union (one of the few programs open to women) from 1877 until at least 1909. She directed Associated Artists until the turn of the century, when she turned it over to one of her sons. She wrote several books, including The Development of Embroidery in America, published in 1921, when she was ninety-four. From a limited background, Wheeler found her way into society, into creative work, and into business, and for decades she was the national expert on decorative textiles and interiors.

China Painting and Art Pottery

“Art pottery” was a factory product from about 1870 to 1920. The definition is a sliding one: when the process is entirely mechanized, there’s no art to it, but when the process is entirely by hand or entirely by a single person, it is studio pottery; in between is art pottery. This “commercially supported individuality” arose in the United States in tandem with the hobby activity of china painting, which it outlived by a few years. Art pottery was made possible by the Industrial Revolution, which provided the technology for mass production, made the market for decorative work by creating a middle class, and led to the role of the artist in correcting the ugliness and poor quality of industrial products. To emphasize the art angle, the work was often marked not just with the emblem of the manufacturer but also with the initials or signatures of the designer, decorator, and thrower.

The history of art pottery shows a constant tension between creativity and cost. While it was intended to replace boring, standardized forms, intense competition fostered copying as well as the need to contain expenses, which led to more casting than throwing and, ultimately, production of the same kind of dead forms art pottery was meant to replace. The industry headed downhill after about 1915 as interest shifted toward unique works.

In general, art pottery activities were defined by gender. Men made the pots and might decorate them as well, while women were restricted to decorating. But another constant in its history is the efforts of women to do more, usually (by necessity) outside the factory.

Before the art pottery era, fine-quality tableware was imported from Europe, both because it was cheaper than American ware and because Americans thought that European work was better. U.S. manufacturers usually copied European styles; late in the century they copied Japanese and Chinese styles as well. It was, in fact, European and Japanese displays at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition that sparked an American boom in art pottery and China painting.

China painting—mineral pigments painted onto porcelain blanks—offered creative and commercial opportunities for women. While it was “unseemly” for a young woman to be a professional oil painter, she might practice decorative arts without criticism because of their domestic associations. China painting could be done at home, it didn’t require heavy labor, it wasn’t messy, tools were small, materials were inexpensive, teachers were female, and buyers were mostly female, too. The product met Morris’s injunction, “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.”

It is estimated that by 1893 more than 25,000 women were seriously involved in China painting. Beginning in 1887, China Decorator magazine published designs and
advice. *Keramic Studio* was an important successor. The National League of Mineral Painters, organized in 1891–92 by Susan Frackleton, set up chapters in major cities. But the story begins with two Cincinnati women.

**LOUISE MCLAUGHLIN AND THE CINCINNATI POTTERY CLUB**

China painting arrived in Cincinnati by several routes. In 1873 a youth named Karl Langenbeck received a set of china paints as a gift from Germany. His wealthy and artistic neighbor Maria Longworth Nichols was curious; she borrowed his materials so that she could experiment with them until she was able to obtain her own. Early in 1874, Benn Pitman, wood-carving instructor at the School of Design, visited New York and returned with some mineral colors, though not much information. During the summer he invited students from his wood-carving class (all women) to try china painting. A German visitor to the class explained a few things, but they had to learn on their own how to finely grind the powders and apply them. It may have been this very lack of information, requiring the practitioners to work things out for themselves, that led to exceptional achievements.

Within a year the women were selling their painted pots. Some decided to show their wood carving and china painting at the Centennial Exposition. In Philadelphia, one woman from the class, M. Louise McLaughlin, showed a hanging cabinet of her own design with hand-painted tiles in the doors (which she also made) depicting ladies in the garments of 1776 and 1876. She had modeled the hinges in wax, cast them in bronze, and further worked the surfaces. Displayed in the cabinet was her china painting.

McLaughlin visited the exposition and saw new “Limoges” pottery produced by the Haviland factory in France using a secret technique. She later wrote, “This was a new development in the decoration under the glaze which interested me greatly, and I determined to see whether it could not be done in this country.” Back home, she researched the underglaze colors and ordered them from France. It was nearly a year before they arrived. In the interim, she wrote a manual on china painting, dashing it off in a mere two weeks. *China Painting: A Practical Manual for the Use of Amateurs in the Decoration of Hard Porcelain* was published in 1877. It eventually reached ten editions, sold more than 20,000 copies, and “launched a movement.” McLaughlin wrote that “articles for use should be decorated with simple natural, or what is still better, with conventional forms.” That advice could be traced back to Pugin.

“Limoges” (the name of the city where the Haviland factory was located), called barbotine by the manufacturer, can be compared with oil painting for its deep and rich coloration. It was messier than china painting since colors were applied to unfired clay, and for that reason it required collaboration with a potter. The resemblance of the result to then-current impressionist painting made it acceptable to men as well as women. McLaughlin was not the only one interested. Charles Volkmar, an artist who had studied in France for fourteen years and returned to the United States in 1875, also saw the Centennial Exposition and was impressed by Limoges ware. He returned to France to study, and when he came back to the United States in 1879, he set up a studio on Long Island. The Robertson family of potters in Boston also introduced a line about 1877. But neither they nor Volkmar persisted in this work long enough to have an impact. McLaughlin, by contrast, developed her own technique, mixing mineral colors with raw slip and applying them to a damp object (the French, it was later revealed, used a slip made of pulverized fired clay and applied it to a dry pot). In late 1877 McLaughlin fired her first successful piece of “Cincinnati faience,” as she called it. (Figure 1.10)

McLaughlin's underglaze decoration subsequently won an honorable mention at the 1878 Paris Exposition, which made her an instant celebrity in Cincinnati. Her faience used motifs from nature, as had her overglaze china painting. But mixing the oxide colors with slip produced a thick impasto, so application was in broad,
heavy strokes, not in tight, small ones, as with china painting. By February 1879 she decided to start a pottery club, America’s first for women. She prepared and mailed invitations to join. McLaughlin was president, Clara Chipman Newton secretary, and Alice Holabird treasurer through the eleven-year life of the club. Its founding marked the beginning of a major feud.

Maria Longworth Nichols claimed she had not received an invitation and viewed it as a personal slight, refusing a second invitation. (One “vacancy” was carried on the membership list throughout the club’s existence.) Nichols, who had found china painting first, had repeatedly been upstaged by McLaughlin. The rivalry advanced when the Pottery Club rented studio space at the Dallas Pottery, where Nichols and a friend had been working for a few months. Nichols and McLaughlin had special kilns built there because the high-temperature firing used for commercial ware wasn’t suitable for underglaze work.

At the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition that fall, Nichols got the upper hand, according to a newspaper account, when she exhibited underglaze work and also high-relief work. But McLaughlin conceived of making the largest underglaze-slip-decorated vase in America, since “size had become a metaphor for progress.”4 This was her Ali Baba vase, made in at least three versions. It was the center of attention at the Pottery Club’s first reception, turning the tables on Nichols.

The next year, 1880, was a peak for Cincinnati ceramics. McLaughlin published another book, Pottery Decoration under the Glaze. In addition, an illustrator for Harper’s Weekly magazine came to the Pottery Club’s exhibition and sale in May and published an illustration that was the first national acknowledgment of the burgeoning ceramics movement. Cincinnati then suffered an “epidemic of pottery”; Dallas Pottery alone was soon firing the work of more than 200 amateurs, all but two of them female. Women began coming from other states to study and work in Cincinnati. McLaughlin said, “For a time it was a wild ceramic orgy during which much perfectly good clay was spoiled and numerous freaks created.”42 It was also that year that Nichols trumped her by founding Rookwood Pottery.

That year T. J. Wheatley received a patent on McLaughlin’s underglaze slip technique, which he had learned while working at the pottery where she had begun her experimentation. Soon he began teaching the technique; among his students were several men who went on to work at Rookwood, which also used the technique. Nichols, asked if she was worried that Wheatley would sue Rookwood for patent infringement, said no and added, “Miss McLaughlin used to do Limoges work before Mr. Wheatley ever thought of such a thing.”43 (It was a comment she later conveniently forgot.) McLaughlin had considered patenting her method, but her brother, a leading lawyer in the city, advised against it since mixing oxides with slip was not a new idea. When Wheatley patented it, no one stopped using the process, and he never tried to defend his patent. He succeeded in inserting his name in ceramic history on this dubious basis.

Shortly after McLaughlin’s Ali Baba triumph in the spring of 1880, Nichols set to work on her own monumental piece. Completed late in the year, her Aladdin Vase was thirty inches high and eighteen inches in diameter (the Ali Baba was thirty-seven by seventeen inches). The Aladdin Vase is recorded as shape #2 in The Rookwood Shape Book (1883–1900) and is noted as being sold that year to Tiffany & Co.

When the first kiln was drawn at Rookwood on Thanksgiving Day 1880, Nichols gained the upper hand. The Pottery Club rented a room at Rookwood because it was the only ceramic works in town dedicated to art pottery, and, more important, Nichols had hired Joseph Bailey Sr., the club’s technical mentor. Oscar Wilde praised McLaughlin’s work when he lectured in Cincinnati in 1882, but by 1885 she had abandoned Cincinnati faience because of a lack of facilities: her potter, Mr. Dallas, had died, and Nichols had hired all the others. Her Cincinnati faience period lasted only about seven years.

In the Pottery’s Club’s 1884 exhibition, McLaughlin included etchings on brass and copper plaques, panels, bowls, jugs, vases, trays, and one mirror frame. She particularly liked working in metals and ultimately won a silver medal for her etchings on silver and copper at the 1889 Paris Exposition. Invitations for all ten club exhibitions were from her copperplate etchings. She painted oil portraits and began photographic portraiture. Also an illuminator, embroiderer, and lace maker, she has been called “the fulfillment of William Morris’s ideal.”44

At the Pottery Club’s tenth reception, in 1890, business was poor because of a national economic slump, and the members voted to disband. They briefly came back together in 1893 to prepare a display for the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where Cincinnati was the only city in the world honored with a room of its own in the Woman’s Building.

**Rookwood Pottery**

In 1880 Maria Longworth Nichols founded her pottery with money from her father. She had earlier asked him to import a Japanese pottery, including the workmen, so perhaps this new request seemed modest. The osten-
sible reason was that all the local potteries fired stoneware at too high a temperature for her decorative work. A local newspaper reported that Nichols was starting her own pottery “to eliminate the inconvenience of the ‘great distance’ she had to travel from her home to the Dallas Pottery and to exercise her own taste in the choice of forms.”45 A less publicly floated explanation was that her marriage was not happy but that her father would not sanction a divorce, so this was her distraction.

Nichols established her business in an old schoolhouse near the Ohio River and named it after her parents’ country estate, pleased that the name recalled the prestigious English pottery Wedgwood. She later wrote, “It was at first an expensive luxury for which I, luckily, could afford to pay.”46 The pottery became internationally famous and survived for more than seventy years.

Nevertheless, the public image of Rookwood in the twentieth century was based on two misapprehensions: that Rookwood was “a woman’s pottery” and that it was a producer of “individual works.” Its founding was certainly due to Nichols, and she or her father covered its debts for several years. Moreover, she hired her friend Clara Chipman Newton as Rookwood’s secretary, rented quarters to the Pottery Club (all women), and employed women as decorators.

Yet Nichols hired William Watts Taylor, always described as “an old friend” and by some accounts her unsuccessful suitor, as business manager in 1883. He ran Rookwood until his sudden death in 1913—its most successful years. She relinquished her involvement in the pottery in early 1886, following her marriage to Bellamy Storer, six months after the death of her first husband. One of Taylor’s earliest acts was to replace Newton, and he evicted the Pottery Club and ceased production of the blanks china painters used. He paid the highest wages to male decorators. The technical staff was all male, and they were the ones who won individual recognition in fairs. In the beginning, Nichols’s role as entrepreneur was played up because of its novelty, and Taylor may have perpetuated this emphasis out of personal loyalty or because it made good press. But as historian Ulysses Dietz writes, Nichols “never really knew what it was to be a woman worker in the art pottery world.”47

Each piece of Rookwood pottery was indeed individually decorated and marked with the decorator’s cipher plus other identifying information (a monogram adopted in 1886, the year of manufacture, a shape number), and decorators were identified in some of the literature. Yet Taylor seems to have been romanticizing when he wrote in an article: “Rookwood cannot be understood without an appreciation of its radical difference from commercial industries. Its whole history and development centres upon the one idea of individualism, the entire absence of duplication, and the constant progress towards new forms of artistic expression. Rookwood, therefore, does not say to its artists you must do this thing or that thing in this way or that way.”48 Yet one of the best-known decorators, Albert Valentien, remembered strict guidelines and lack of liberty. Essentially, decorators were free to interpret prescribed designs. Moreover, tour guides at Rookwood in later years impressed visitors by telling them that a vase might pass through the hands of as many as twenty-one staff members, which is hardly a description of individuality.

But even if the encomiums to Rookwood must be regarded skeptically, it was in fact the industry leader, an innovative manufacturer that produced many beautiful objects, from collectible vases to New York City subway tiling. Nichols’s unusual taste in china painting did not emphasize florals. She adapted motifs from Hokusai’s Manga, a Japanese book that she obtained via England in 1875, and she was fond of reptiles, insects, and sea creatures. (Figure 1.11) She modeled dragons on the shoulders of some vases and embellished others with

gilding. She and the Rookwood staff worked their way toward a professional style. “Limoges” underglaze painting dominated and grew more accomplished as styles became simpler and more naturalistic. The Shape Book documented each variation by illustration and number. (By 1914, 2,200 shapes had been recorded.)

In 1883 one of the decorators, Laura Fry, conceived of using an atomizer to obtain a subtle gradation of color; this became the basis of Rookwood Standard, the most famous line, which dominated from 1886 to 1910. Rookwood Standard backgrounds consisted of sprayed gradations from yellows and oranges to dark greens or “Rembrandtesque” browns; in the 1890s paler, cooler colors were introduced. Among the popular motifs were portraits of Indians, both bust-length and standing, and studies of dogs, children, and flowers. After the imagery was applied, it was finished with a honey-colored high-gloss glaze that gave an illusion of depth.

Decorator Artus van Briggle was responsible for Rookwood’s first use of mat glazes. He was never credited, probably because he soon left the company. Works using this opaque glaze concentrated on shape, color, texture, carving, incising, or modeling. A transparent mat was later developed by Stanley Burt. Called Vellum, it was introduced in 1904 at the Saint Louis world’s fair, where it earned two grand prizes. Under Vellum, a painted motif could be seen with a slight haziness. It was immediately realized that this moody, atmospheric effect suited landscapes, and they soon competed in popularity with floral imagery. The effect resembled tonalist painting, which flourished in the United States from about 1880 to 1910. Vellum continued to be used until 1948.

Rookwood’s decoration was always conservative and naturalistic. Its consistency contrasts with the emphasis at other art potteries on such techniques as modeling or stylized design. Such continuity might seem to be poor business management, but Taylor was constantly alert for ways to improve his product. When a golden crystal effect occurred by accident, he realized that more technical knowledge was necessary. At the end of 1884 he hired the first ceramic chemist in America: Karl Langenbeck, from whom Mrs. Nichols had first borrowed china-painting colors in 1873. Langenbeck had studied pharmacy and chemistry in Zurich and Berlin and knew how to make analyses.

Taylor patented all Rookwood’s techniques to keep competitors at a disadvantage. He was quick to improve the glaze atomizers, converting them from breath propulsion to steam and then to true airbrush operation. In 1891, when Rookwood moved to Mount Adams, overlooking downtown Cincinnati, the kilns were changed from coal to oil to make the firing more predictable. Temperatures were judged by eye until Stanley Burt returned from his studies in Berlin in 1896 with the first Seger pyrometric cones, a more precise indication of kiln temperatures.

Study in Europe was one of the exceptional benefits Taylor offered to a select few employees. In general,
The Decorators
Two of the best-known Rookwood decorators were Albert R. Valentien (1862–1925) and Kataro Shirayamadani (1865–1948). Valentien was born in Cincinnati and studied at Cincinnati Academy of Art. At nineteen he went to work for Rookwood and soon was made head of design and decoration. He and Annie Bookprinter, also a decorator, were married in 1887, the first of many Rookwood romances that resulted in marriage. Valentien stayed with Rookwood for twenty-four years, then moved to California.

Shirayamadani, who arrived in 1887, has been called one of Rookwood’s most valuable assets. He came to America with the “Japanese Village,” a troupe that visited major cities between 1885 and 1887 to demonstrate Japanese trades and arts; he was directed to Rookwood by a dealer of Asian art in Boston. Except from about 1915 to 1925, when he worked in Japan, “Sherry” (as he was familiarly known) contributed his skills and knowledge of Japanese design to Rookwood. “Under his influence,” Barbara Perry writes, “decoration enveloped the form, moving around the vessel. The old European fear of the void was overcome, and subtly shaded areas of background were deliberately left devoid of ornamentation, and could be enjoyed for their own qualities.”

Shirayamadani worked at Rookwood until his death.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 32.

morale was excellent at Mount Adams—a handsome building in a beautiful location near the Cincinnati Art Museum, with views, gardens, and a library of art and technical books and ceramic journals for inspiration. The pottery seemed to operate in the spirit of Morris’s ideal workplace. It was a popular site for local residents as well as tourists to visit.

Taylor was also skilled at promotion. He cultivated influential friends both locally and nationally. He exploited industrial fairs and art exhibitions to display new lines. To be certain that Rookwood pottery was well represented in Edwin AtLee Barber’s 1893 Pottery and Porcelain of the United States, Taylor sent him more than twenty pieces over the years. When he learned that Barber was going to issue a catalog of the pottery in the Pennsylvania Museum collection, he sent additional pieces so that Rookwood would dominate the list of American work.

In 1889 Rookwood received a gold medal at the Paris Exposition (McLaughlin won a silver for overglaze decoration with metallic effects). At the Chicago world’s fair in 1893, Rookwood works were shown in multiple displays. It was a moment of triumph, yet the old rivalry continued. The catalog for the Woman’s Building identified McLaughlin as having discovered the underglaze method that was Rookwood’s foundation. Taylor objected, asked that the catalog be corrected and reprinted, and insisted, in response to a letter from McLaughlin, that Rookwood was indebted only to Maria Nichols Storer for its methods. McLaughlin wrote to Storer, asking her to set the matter straight, but her nemesis replied supporting Tay-
lor and ending her letter by saying: “I have really never known how or where your work was done, and I must plead guilty to not having read your book on underglaze decoration. Your reputation can rest so well upon what you yourself have done that it is not necessary that you or anyone else, for you, should seek it in outside things with which you have had absolutely no connection.”

At the Paris Exposition of 1900, Rookwood won a gold medal and also the grand prix, and Taylor was named Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. More museums took an interest in Rookwood then, and every pamphlet issued after 1900 named as “patrons” all foreign museums with Rookwood works in their collections.

After Taylor’s death in 1913, new techniques relied less on individual decorators, in an effort to compete with mass-production potteries. By the 1930s Rookwood was deeply in debt, relying on bank loans to get by. It was sold at a bankruptcy sale in 1941, given away to a Roman Catholic foundation, sold to a clock company, and relocated to Mississippi before its ignominious end in 1967. The story of Rookwood suggests that Taylor’s business and promotional skills were essential to the success of the company.

In retrospect, the rivalry that prompted establishment of this storied firm seems to have been a positive stimulus. Maybe both women realized their essential wishes. Maria Nichols Storer accompanied her new husband to Washington when he was elected to Congress, and then to Brussels, Spain, and Vienna in diplomatic posts. She died in 1932, at the age of eighty-three, at the Paris home of her daughter, Countess Margaret de Chambrun. Louise McLaughlin, who never married, was in 1938 acknowledged by the American Ceramic Society as the inventor of the method of underglaze painting used by Rookwood and other potteries.

THE ART POTTERY INDUSTRY

After the Centennial Exposition, American potteries turned to making nonfunctional objects for decorative or expressive purposes. These vessels, though they were produced in factories, were meant to be displayed, exhibited, and collected.

One of the most important potteries was run by the Robertson family in Massachusetts, under the name Chelsea Keramic Art Works and later Dedham Pottery. James Robertson and his sons were British artisans who settled in East Boston in 1859. James brought with him the technique of pressing leaves and grasses into clay, which was new to America. By 1873 Chelsea had established a line of antique reproductions that were praised as the best copies ever made in America.

Displays at the Centennial Exposition spurred Hugh Cornwall Robertson to improve the character of the pottery. In 1877 Chelsea developed a white clay body that made an excellent base for bright glazes. Hugh made plaques and vases in the Aesthetic style, decorated with flowers and birds. He also saw underglaze painting in Philadelphia, and with his technical background he easily reproduced it. After the death of his father in 1880 and the departure of his brother Alexander for California in 1884, Hugh began to focus on creating Chinese glazes. For five years he struggled to perfect such colors as deep sea green and apple green, mustard yellow, turquoise, and the red called sang-de-boeuf or oxblood. He came to call it “Robertson’s blood,” as a reflection of his efforts.

The red was perfected in 1888. Hugh felt that his finest examples were the vases known as the Twin Stars of Chelsea. (Figure 1.12) They are not precisely the Chinese red, but are medium to dark in hue, with golden highlights or iridescent effects. This work followed the Asian idea that an exquisite glaze over a simple form was fine art. Hugh became obsessed with experimentation and bankrupted the family business in 1889, closing it when he could not afford fuel for the kilns. However, a group of patrons financed another pottery for him, first in Chelsea and then in 1891 in Dedham, southwest of Boston. They insisted that he develop a salable line of dinnerware, and he complied by developing the now-famous Dedham crackle, based on a Korean prototype. Stoneware with a gray crackle and cobalt-blue border designs supported the pottery.
Robertson also produced layered glazes that ran together during firing to produce a dramatically rough surface, which he called “volcanic.” His achievement was acknowledged when he received one of the three highest awards at the Saint Louis world’s fair in 1904. He died in 1908. Robertson is said to be “historically important for his glaze science, not as an artist.” Yet his unreasonable dedication to aesthetic effect rather than the profit motive aligns him with later individual artists. Dedham stayed in business until 1943.

Among other art potteries, Edgerton Art Studio, in Wisconsin and Chicago (1893–98; later Pickard China Studio, 1898–1937), was notable for its enlightened business in the Morris mold: the studio was surrounded by lawns, trees, and flowers and provided a library and reading room, an apartment building for employees, and a profit-sharing plan. Avon Pottery of Cincinnati was founded by Rookwood chemist Karl Langenbeck. In 1895 he published The Chemistry of Pottery, which became the standard text in the field.

In contrast to these isolated small businesses, the city of Zanesville, Ohio, became home to so many major producers that it was called the “clay city.” The movement of designers and decorators among these potteries makes it almost impossible to attribute unmarked pots to a specific firm. W. A. Long, a druggist, duplicated Rookwood’s underglaze process and began his own pottery, called Lonhuda, in 1892. Samuel A. Weller began Weller Pottery in 1872; in 1894 he set up a collaborative arrangement with Lonhuda Pottery, and after he learned Laura Fry’s atomizer process, he dissolved the relationship to produce on his own. J. B. Owens Pottery Co. started in 1885 at Roseville, Ohio, and moved to Zanesville six years later. Roseville Pottery was established in 1890 in the plant formerly owned by Owens. Within a decade it had acquired three other potteries. In 1900 the company began to make art pottery, and by 1905 it employed 350 people. Its products were offered at a wide range of prices and as inexpensive premiums for the A&P grocery company. This pottery emphasized shape, which distinguished it in a market filled with Rookwood look-alikes.

THE FASHION FOR TILES

During the Aesthetic period, when refined painting and handcrafted objects seemed necessary to any well-furnished home, tiles were a popular product. They were found on floors, on foyer walls, on the facings of fireplaces, inset into sideboards or cabinets or stoves, used as trivets or as clock faces. At least fifty companies were founded between 1875 and 1920 primarily to produce tiles.

The Tile Club

An unusual tile enterprise, the Tile Club was established in the fall of 1877 by a group of young artists and writers living in New York City who met informally in their studios to talk about art. As one of them later put it, a “decorative mania . . . had fallen like a destructive angel upon the most flourishing cities in America, turning orderly homes into bris-tling and impenetrable curiosity-shops,” and they decided that the club should keep up with the times. They painted on Wedgwood or Minton eight-by-eight-inch blanks; the tiles were monochromatic or nearly so, perhaps because they worked at night by lamplight, which made it difficult to use color.

The height of the club’s activity and fashionable popularity was 1878–79. Among the participants were Winslow Homer, Elihu Vedder, and later the architect Stanford White and the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Oscar Wilde visited during his U.S. tour. A Book of the Tile Club, published in 1887, humorously chronicled activities and outings and publicized the members through illustrations.

In truth, the Tile Club was not as serious as the Cincinnati Pottery Club. Members made little effort to market their wares, nor did they ever really address the particular nature of clay or tile design. The tile was just another painting surface. At most they recognized that special effects could be achieved in the medium, and at the least, the square format was a novelty to them.

NOTE

a method for taking a clay imprint of any natural object in very fine detail. He used soft, monochromatic tones of blue and green or earth tones of golden ocher, amber, and brown. The style reflected European tiles of the 1860s and 1870s but sometimes featured Japanese-style birds and flowers. Most output was architectural tiles for fireplace surrounds, but some pieces had metal frames so that they could be hung on the wall like pictures. The eldest Low retired from the firm in 1883, when his grandson, the chemist John F. Low, joined the enterprise. Tile production stopped in 1902.

There were also individual endeavors in tiles. Charles Volkmar (1841–1914) at first used the underglaze painting technique he learned in France on neoclassical vessels. In 1882 he became the potter of the Salmagundi Club, assisting members in producing a fireplace surround. He also produced plaques and vases decorated with landscapes and creatures. His landscape tiles had soft mat glazes that suited their poetic moods. Volkmar worked in New Jersey, Brooklyn, and Queens with various partners before being joined by his son Leon in 1902. In 1903 they established Volkmar Kilns in Metuchen, New Jersey, making both high-gloss (Asian-influenced) and semimat glazes.

ODDBALLS, INNOVATORS, AND HOBBYISTS

The brothers Cornwall Kirkpatrick (1814–1890) and Wallace Kirkpatrick (1828–1896) operated the Anna Pottery in the Mississippi River town of Anna, Illinois, from 1859 to 1896. The pottery was not included in Barber’s 1893 encyclopedia or in its 1901 and 1909 revisions and was largely forgotten. The editor of the magazine Antiques reintroduced the Anna Pottery in a five-article series during the 1930s, speculating that the brothers had used the same life-casting techniques as the sixteenth-century French potter Bernard Palissy. But again it dropped from sight until, near the end of the century, an Illinois academic published a book in hopes of resurrecting its reputation.  

The Kirkpatricks’ early work followed the pattern of local folk pottery, providing functional items and humorous goods for local buyers. Somewhat less usual was their production of political-themed items or artware employing cold-painting techniques, and especially interesting is the fact that George Ohr seems to have visited them during his tour of potteries (see chapter 2) and been influenced by their forms and their irreverent approach.

Some of the Anna Pottery works were Victorian in style, including molded Staffordshire dogs, Toby mugs, and some frilly hand-built vases and cemetery monuments. What distinguished the pottery, though, was its snake jugs decorated in polychrome or cobalt blue under a salt glaze. (Figure 1.13) The snakes pass around or through the vessels.

The Anna Pottery also produced trick vessels, some with an intentionally repellent aspect, including pig-shaped flasks made from the late 1860s to the early 1890s. Favorite motifs included frogs and toadstools. The Kirkpatricks’ production of grotesquery found sufficient market to allow them to stay in business for nearly half a century. If it was not much discussed or shown, it was at least saved, and works are now in many private collections and in Illinois museums.

Susan Stuart Goodrich Frackelton (1848–1932) was born into the clay business and married into it as well, but it was her own initiative that led her to many notable achievements in china painting, art pottery, and salt glazing. (Figure 1.14) She was the daughter of a wealthy Milwaukee brickmaker and grew up familiar with brickyards; her husband imported china and glass. In the early 1870s she studied painting and, like many women of her time, indulged in china painting. By 1877 she had established her own china-decorating business, and by 1883 she had a staff sufficient to decorate and fire 1,500 to 2,000 pieces a week. She published a book, Trial by
Fire, in 1885; it went to three editions and was called the bible of china painters. She patented a portable gas kiln in 1886 and 1888 and by 1892 had organized the National League of Mineral Painters to link china painters throughout the country for purposes of education and for competitions. By 1900 the league had around 500 members and held an annual exhibition. She developed Frackelton Dry Water Colors, odorless golds and bronzes for painting on china. The colors were awarded medals by King Leopold II of Belgium in a competition at Antwerp in 1894.

Frackleton is of special interest because she managed “to shake the genteel shackles of china painting” and become an artist potter. She took up the potter’s wheel in order to make her own stoneware forms for modeling and carving. She chose local Wisconsin clay, painted decorations in traditional cobalt blue, and used the age-old method of glazing by throwing common salt into the kiln during firing. At the 1893 Chicago world’s fair, her work took a gold medal. “To her belongs the credit of elevating the common salt-glazed stoneware to a place beside the finer ceramic wares in this country,” wrote Barber in 1901.

Frackleton’s recurrent problem was facilities. Her first ware was fired in a brickmaking kiln; later pieces were bisque-fired in Milwaukee and sent to Red Wing, Minnesota, for glaze firing; another arrangement was to throw in Milwaukee and ship to Akron, Ohio, for firing. She abandoned potting before 1904 and relocated to Chicago, where she taught pottery classes in her studio in the Fine Arts Building and wrote and lectured on ceramics and other handicrafts.

Other determined women worked in Nashville and Chicago. Nashville Art Pottery, associated with the Nashville School of Art, was directed by Bettie J. Scovel, who went to Cincinnati in 1882 to visit Rookwood. In 1885 she established the pottery, made molded and modeled forms, and experimented with local clays. By 1888 she used original high-fired glazes: “goldstone” (a dark brown that showed golden on a red body) and “pomegranate” (a red-veined effect on a mottled pink and blue-gray ground). Pauline Jacobus, a china painter, also visited Cincinnati. With help from Rookwood’s kiln builder and advice from Laura Fry, she set up Pauline Pottery, where she “made, fired, and exhibited, in 1882, the first decorated pottery created wholly in Chicago.” She began with one small kiln and two decorators, but by 1888, when she moved to Wisconsin, the pottery had six kilns, and she was selling her ware at Tiffany & Co. In 1893 her husband died, his business failed, and she lost the pottery in the subsequent bankruptcy proceedings. She later operated solo. She experimented with low-fire crazing glazes on a whitish body and worked at blending glazes, notably “peacock,” a deep blue and dark green.

The Atlan Ceramic Art Club of Chicago, the most influential of the many small china-painting clubs, was organized in 1893 by fifteen painters. Atlan members won eighteen medals at the Woman’s Building of the Chicago world’s fair that year, more than any other club in the country. The group sponsored a course on historic ornament, one on nature as a design source, and another on conventionalizing, which became its specialty.

Atlan was active and influential in Chicago ceramics for more than twenty-five years—in part a reflection of the excellence of the work but also due to the energy of the group’s founder, Florence Pratt Steward. Like most Atlan members, she was a graduate of the Art Institute. Another important member was Mabel C. Dibble, who had taught china painting in Milwaukee before moving to Chicago in 1893. She mixed and sold her own enamels, one of which was the popular Dibble Green. Keramic Studio devoted its entire October 1906 issue to her.
She became the first midwestern woman to be named a master craftsman by the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, and in 1909 she was invited to join London’s Royal Society of Arts. In 1911 she published a primer, How to Use Enamels on China. Despite Atlan’s success with conventionalizing, most china painters employed naturalistic motifs because they sold better; naturalistic versus conventional was an endless debate.

Louise McLaughlin, Studio Potter

McLaughlin persisted in her experimentation in Cincinnati. In 1894 she patented a new method of decoration that involved applying colored slips to the inside of a plaster mold and then casting a slip of a different color. The resulting piece would seem to have an inlaid surface. She abandoned this work because firing was a problem. Later that year she challenged herself to develop hard-paste porcelain, working in a studio at her home and firing a small kiln in her backyard. Porcelain was a medium few had attempted; she was the first American woman to work in this material. At first she employed a potter, but eventually she dismissed him.

In the beginning, there were no colleagues with whom McLaughlin could compare notes, there were no published technical instructions to follow, the formulas she could find had to be adapted to American materials, and besides that, her neighbors complained about the burning of coal in the backyard kiln. Her experiments included combinations of eighteen clay bodies and forty-five glazes. The work was produced in a single firing and was creamy white and translucent. She called it Losanti ware (after Cincinnati’s original name, Losantiville) and produced it from 1898 until 1906. (Figure 1.15) The fact that it fired well was more important to her than its lack of the bluish white tint of other porcelains. She admitted, “Altogether my methods would set a practical potter frantic but . . . I feel emboldened to set tradition at defiance and follow any method which proves practicable.”

McLaughlin’s independence and her complete control of the process placed her among the first studio potters in America, and the first working in porcelain. In August 1899 the work received national exposure in the new magazine Keramic Studio. Adelaide Alsop Robineau, editor of the magazine, published parts of a letter from McLaughlin describing the ware. McLaughlin worked small. The largest recorded shape in her Losanti book is twelve inches high, and most were just five to seven inches. Her forms became increasingly simple and classical; she painted with only one tint, or with just a few harmonious colors. Recognition of her success came in 1901, when she was awarded a bronze medal at the world’s fair in Buffalo. Around 1901 she changed from painted to carved decoration, perhaps inspired by European work she saw in magazines; she adapted her skills at wood carving to the new medium. Among her methods was to carve a design in the clay and fill the openings with glaze. She carved twisted vines, leaves, and flowers with the swirling compositional lines of art nouveau, popular at that time. Lusters were among her final experiments in 1906. She stopped because she couldn’t afford to rebuild her kiln.

Historians have compared McLaughlin with Robineau—famous for her later work in porcelain—since both were female and both pioneers, but the comparison is not quite just. Robineau’s work was later, and she had support (see chapter 2). Here, as before, McLaughlin became interested in an obscure subject, experimented, achieved some major goals, and then gave it up for logistical reasons.

Stained Glass and Art Glass

The Aesthetic movement brought great change to stained glass. Technique, style, and setting shifted markedly. In
addition to its traditional religious use, stained glass began to appear in public buildings and opulent private residences, and in the 1890s it moved into middle-class homes, department stores, and even Pullman railroad cars.

The explanation for this growth can be traced back to Pugin’s endorsement of the Gothic and Ruskin’s and Morris’s praise of the translucence and pure color of medieval stained glass. Research in ancient techniques and traditions by Charles Winston—an English lawyer, archaeologist, and connoisseur of ancient glass—and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc—a French architect who was responsible for restoring many ancient French cathedrals—showed that medieval windows were made up of pieces of solid-color glass (known as pot metal) separated by leading. Influenced by painting, however, nineteenth-century windows added painted color, baked for permanence. Pot metal had long been out of favor when Morris took it up.

Prosperity led to the building of new churches in America, which meant more demand for glass. Most was imported from England, Germany, Belgium, and France, and it was not always of the best quality. The first innovations in American churches came from British designers: in 1874 Morris & Co. created a memorial window for an upstate New York church that replaced the usual Gothic-style lancets in a trefoil arch with a large vertical rectangle surrounded by smaller rectangles. Also new was the elegance of the figures and colors more subdued than traditional blues, reds, and greens.

Scotsman Daniel Cottier (1828–91), who had trained in Glasgow and had taken classes with Ruskin, opened a New York City workshop in 1873. He introduced new subjects that were not particularly religious, from floral and figural vignettes to river-and-mountain landscapes. He favored a subtle olive, ocher, blue, and gold palette, as seen in his windows for Trinity Church, Boston. Charles Booth, a stained-glass artist from Liverpool who was in the United States by 1875, is believed to have created windows for Calvary Church, New York City, in 1878. These eschew both the usual church-window palette and the earth tones of Morris and Cottier in favor of such shades as aquamarine, amethyst, pink, and light yellow. Booth spent a decade in New York City and created windows for Grace Church and the Jefferson Market Courthouse. At that time, in addition to the contentious issue of pot metal or paint, there was also debate about whether abstract patterning or pictorial imagery was more appropriate, and if the design was pictorial, whether it should be flat or illusionistic.

Chicago decorator Louis J. Millet, an advocate of conventionalized design, with his partner George L. Healy, used tiny fragments of colored and textured opalescent glass to create contrast and detail as well as the main design in windows. When two works in Healy & Millet’s new “mosaic” style were exhibited at the Paris Exposition in 1889, the French government purchased the entire show for installation in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

Another development was the use of stiff canes of grooved copper or zinc replacing soft lead camees to hold together the glass segments. The new materials expanded possibilities because they were stronger and so required less bracing. They also suited the developing style of geometric designs, particularly strong in the Midwest.

Smith Brothers of New Bedford, Massachusetts, was the largest glass firm in the United States between 1875 and 1895. It was also the only American glassmaker to display its enamel-decorated wares at the Centennial Exposition. But the most important names in the new American glass were John La Farge and Louis Comfort Tiffany. Both became famed for the semitranslucent glass called “opalescent.” It had been produced in America for at least fifty years but had not, as a rule, been used for windows. This glass, which was poured and rolled into sheets, could be porcelain-like in appearance, but against the light it could appear as iridescent as an opal.

Art-glass objects followed the expanded market for windows and became popular as collectibles, like art pottery. Work in glass drew on classical, Asian, and Islamic sources but was also reliant on a revival of Venetian techniques that started on the glassmakers’ isle of Murano about 1850. Venetian glass objects were too expensive for the general public, but pressed glass vessels in a dazzling variety of colors were substituted. Textured ice glass (“craquelle”), very popular in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, was produced by factories from Massachusetts to West Virginia.

Chicago had glass-cutting and glass-engraving industries at the end of the nineteenth century. Glass cutters, like china painters, applied their skills to manufactured blanks. They also tended to follow familiar patterns, and creative design was less important than the quality (depth and precision) of the cut. These pieces were often given as presents on special occasions. Production was curtailed during World War I, when lead—an essential ingredient of prismatic glass—was needed as a war material. After the war, efforts to reduce cost and expand the audience backfired. (“Cheapness,” Frederick Carder warned in 1923, “will ruin the industry.”)
JOHN LA FARGE: LUMINOUS TAPESTRY

John La Farge (1835–1910) was a cultivated man, born in New York City to French émigrés, educated in literature and law. He turned to painting as an intellectual activity and then followed his fascination with color into mural painting and stained glass, in which he became a celebrated innovator. He also wrote art criticism and history, illustrated books and magazine articles, and designed embroideries, portieres, and mosaics. He accomplished all this despite persistent ill health that was eventually attributed to lead poisoning, probably from painting and glass materials.

Some of La Farge’s nonglass work was influenced by Japanese art, which he collected as early as 1856. He regularly visited Europe, beginning in the mid-1850s, when, having read Ruskin, he studied the qualities of medieval windows. He had also read Michel Eugène Chevreul’s theories of the optical laws of color, which influenced his painting and then his glass.

La Farge was commissioned in 1874 to do a memorial window for Harvard. He began to experiment with plating (layering glass within a single leaded segment) and fusing fragments of color together with heat. He inserted opalescent glass cut from bottles plus thin slices of onyx and other semiprecious stones. The window became a kind of relief mosaic. In 1879 he filed a patent for this new system of constructing windows. He limited painting to heads, hands, and faces. Along with plating, he embedded cast and cut nuggets of glass. His friend and biographer, the critic Royal Cortissoz, wrote, “There are many of La Farge’s windows which therefore seem to be but curtains of jewels hung between us and the light, pieces of some new kind of luminous tapestry.”

La Farge opened a glass shop in New York City in 1879; four years later it became the La Farge Decorative Art Company. Although his firm was short-lived, he continued to make windows. His major rival was Tiffany. The two men had much in common and initially had a cordial relationship. Both started as painters, both were influenced by an early acquaintance with American landscape artist George Inness, and both said that encounters with medieval stained glass led them to take up the craft. They both started working with glass in the 1870s and described their frustration with the limited colors available, as well as with the difficulty of finding craftsmen to carry out their ideas. Neither was a hands-on craftsman, but both were attentive to the entire process.

The work of both can be seen as part of the Aesthetic movement’s obsession with textures and surfaces, given a new expression in glass. Both were of their time in throwing off tradition and looking for a decisively American vocabulary. Perhaps they also exemplified an age of invention and patent competition, because in the 1880s La Farge sued Tiffany for “stealing” his ideas. There is some evidence that Tiffany or his father solicited La Farge to enter into a partnership. He shared his procedural information, and then, if the allegations are true, they backed out, and Tiffany used the information in his work.

Probably La Farge’s earliest windows were those in Stanford White’s remodeling of the William Watts Sher-
The root of Studio Craft

man House in Newport, Rhode Island, believed to date to 1877. He seems to have keyed his design to the architectural setting, adopting rectilinear organization by depicting a Japanese-style bamboo lattice interwoven with flowers. He used unusual colors in the Watts Sherman windows, such as acidic hues of yellow, orange, and red against a background of complementary blues.

Much more celebrated, and far more public, were the windows he did for Trinity Church, Boston. When the church was consecrated, only seven leaded windows by an English firm were installed, and these were rather ordinary. As the remaining plain windows were gradually replaced by commissioned memorials, Trinity came to represent all the best stained glass of the era, except for Tiffany's.

Four of La Farge’s Trinity Church windows are regarded as masterworks. His Christ in Majesty is a three-part window installed in 1883. (Figure 1.16) The figure of Christ, his right hand raised in benediction, was inspired by a thirteenth-century sculpture at Amiens Cathedral, an icon to readers of Ruskin: “Christ appears almost silhouetted against a vibrating background of roughly cut blue-green nuggets which, suggesting abstract space beyond, visually lengthen the nave.” The saturation of color provoked comparisons to the windows of Chartres Cathedral. Almost equally impressive in their colors are La Farge’s Resurrection window and his New Jerusalem window beside it in the north transept. These, being near balcony seating, can be examined close up to appreciate the depths and textures.

La Farge’s style grew out of his process. By participating in the production of his windows, he avoided the stiffness that resulted from stained-glass painters following an artist’s cartoon. By piecing and plating, he controlled hue and transparency to achieve painterly effects, and he used cames like lines in a drawing. The layers of plating, when seen close up, “encourage the eye to ‘swim’ inside a window.”

The Peacock Window, in the collection of the Worcester Art Museum, started as a residential commission; he ran into problems, so he made another window for that job and continued working on this one, finally completing it after fifteen years. (Figure 1.17) The peacock’s assembled-glass feathers in this roughly forty-by-twenty-inch panel seem to pour downward in iridescent three-dimensionality with an almost startling lavishness. This work is made of thousands of pieces, most so small they were picked up with tweezers, set in copper wires so fine that their lines are invisible, and joined in repeated fusions, each involving a certain risk. In the Peacock Window, “the background . . . wants to burst beyond its bor-

Figure 1.16. John La Farge, Christ in Majesty, 1883. Stained glass. (Photograph courtesy of Trinity Church in the City of Boston.)
der, yet the bird’s contours provide just enough central balance to prevent the work from falling into chaos. This is stained glass at its most opulent, and perhaps most decadent."

Some of the work of both La Farge and Tiffany can seem clichéd and sentimental today. But La Farge’s best works have a visual intensity coupled with obsessive craftsmanship that is still compelling. He stopped his glass experiments before 1900, as the quality of available material improved and as he did more memorial windows, which were seen from a distance that required him to forfeit details and delicacy for larger patterns.


\section*{Tiffany: Marketing Artistry}

Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933) was a painter of oils and watercolors, a pioneer interior decorator, an architect, a landscapist, a designer of ceramics, jewelry, tableware, wallpaper, textiles, opalescent glass vessels, tiles, and mosaics as well as of memorials, and a planner of pageantry and celebratory events. Little of this activity is remembered today, when he is known almost exclusively for his glass. This work brought him enormous fame but fell out of fashion after the first decade of the twentieth century. In the 1950s it was rediscovered, and today he is a household name, seemingly far more illustrious than his peers. This is probably due as much to his remarkable marketing skills as to his artistic talent.

Scion of Tiffany & Co., the New York City jewelry firm founded by his goldsmith father, he went to school at Eagleswood Military Academy in New Jersey, where his interest in art was encouraged by the tonalist landscape painter George Inness. He studied in Paris with the orientalist salon painter Léon Bailly and traveled across Spain, North Africa, and Egypt with the American painter Samuel Colman, painting watercolors and oils that he showed at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 and at the Paris Exposition in 1878. He was attracted to ancient Roman and Syrian glass, Byzantine mosaics, and Gothic stained glass. In 1872, at the age of twenty-four, exploring one of many interests, he studied glass chemistry and techniques under a Venetian foreman in Brooklyn.\footnote{71}

Tiffany’s first glass works were produced as part of his first business, the Associated Artists decorating cooperative, formed in 1879 with Candace Wheeler, Samuel Colman, and Lockwood de Forest. Within months, only such established firms as Marquand and Co. and Herter Brothers were more fashionable, and Associated Artists surpassed them as most artistic.\footnote{72} Wheeler was a friend of many prominent artists and skilled in needlework; Colman had a collection of rare textiles; De Forest, also a painter, contributed his knowledge of East Indian carvings and fabrics. (De Forest later designed Olana, the Aesthetic marvel that is now a New York State park.)

Associated Artists worked with many powerful people who had conservative tastes in the “High Victorian” style. Although Tiffany missed some commissions because he rapidly developed a reputation for independence and unorthodox methods, he and his partners created a new style by blending exotic elements such as glass tiles, Islamic carvings, embroidered hangings, and painted friezes. The style was probably influenced as well by Whistler’s Peacock Room (1877), widely publicized as an Aesthetic masterpiece of color, metallic leaf, painting, and integral
furniture. Replacing lace curtains with Indian muslin, controlling light by using stained glass rather than shutters or heavy valances, and lightening the palette of wall colors were, however, all innovations.

Associated Artists’ redecoration of the Veterans’ Room at the Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue sheds light on the firm’s collaborative nature. (Figure 1.18) Tiffany was credited with the “general character and scope of the decoration,” and his associates with the details and execution. It could have been more cohesive, but the clients were happy: a booklet printed by the veterans organization in 1881 praised the military effect, with its ironwork and axe-cut beams.

Stenciled design, glass, and textiles by Associated Artists embellished Mark Twain’s Victorian home in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1881 (like the Veterans’ Room, still extant). The firm also worked for the Vanderbilts and other wealthy New Yorkers. Artistic Houses, the book of photographs of the homes of the glamorous and powerful published in 1883–84, included Tiffany’s own apartment and seven other homes decorated by Associated Artists. Another triumph was a commission from President Chester Arthur for the White House. The most striking element was a floor-to-ceiling opalescent glass screen in the first-floor hall, which provided more privacy for the president’s family. It was effusively described by a contemporary journalist as “a thoroughly artistic piece of work, exceptional in taste and in perfect harmony with its surroundings. . . . Four circular sconces, each having seven gas-jets, are each provided with a background, or rosette, 3 feet in diameter, composed of fantastic shapes of colored glass interspersed with little mirrors, to produce a scintillating effect of great variety and brilliancy, which is enhanced by the pendant drops of iridescent glass affixed to the arms that hold the jets.” Only twenty years later, Theodore Roosevelt ordered it broken up and removed when Charles F. McKim remodeled the interior.

Tiffany started out by using decorative glass tiles for fireplace surrounds (the Veteran’s Room features surprisingly intense peacock blue glass) and also for lighting fixtures in some of the interiors decorated by Associated Artists. The tiles were variously opaque, opalescent, transparent, or iridized with a metallic surface, and were usually square shapes up to four inches across. He could create swirls, rosettes, and geometric and irregular patterns by means of molds or by special pouring techniques. Based on this experimentation, he was granted several patents in February 1881. One dealt with the combination of types of glass in the manufacture of tiles and mosaics, another with a kind of plating used in windows, and the third with the use of a metallic luster glass, which was to be characteristic of his objects.

After Associated Artists dissolved, Tiffany continued
doing interiors as Louis C. Tiffany & Co., although his work on the Lyceum Theater in New York soon bankrupted that business. He did a huge house at the corner of Seventy-second and Madison in New York for his father; he also lived there with his wife and children. He did theater and church interiors and occasional private residences, a notable one being the Havemeyer house in Manhattan, built in 1890–91. In the hall Tiffany used colored glass in every possible place, including windows, lighting fixtures, and glass mosaic wall panels. Here and in other mosaics, he used iridescent glass, mother-of-pearl, and transparent tesserae backed with gold or metal leaf.

In 1885 he established the Tiffany Glass Company, reflecting his changing focus. His best-known works are either grand landscape perspectives or close-ups of trees, shrubs, or flowers. Like La Farge, he avoided staining or painting the glass because it dulled the surface and affected the transmission of light. Rather, he relied on the variations of coloring and the thickness of the glass to give shading or modeling effects. He revived old methods and invented new ones to achieve unusual results: for example, he created “drapery glass” by pushing and twisting hot glass until it moved into rippled folds. Like La Farge, he made use of small, thick pieces of colored glass, which he called “jewels,” inserted into windows to punctuate expanses of color.

In 1889 Tiffany, on a European holiday, was astonished to find a window by La Farge displayed (not installed in a building) at the Paris Exposition and drawing great praise. Tiffany’s own moment of public-relations mastery was 1893, when he created a chapel at the Chicago world’s fair. He exhibited in a portion of his father’s commercial space, and the result was a huge success, with more than a million people visiting. The chapel was a neo-Byzantine interior that included a marble altar with mosaic front, a reredos behind the altar decorated with peacocks and vine scroll mosaic set into black marble, a jeweled tabernacle, gold-leafed Romanesque arches, and glass-mosaic-surfaced columns with carved capitals. There were also twelve stained-glass windows and a suspended jeweled sanctuary lamp. The unity of design, theatricality of presentation, and the awesome, dazzling materials made it unforgettable.

By 1898 Tiffany was producing thousands of items a
year (both windows and objects, see chapter 2), and storing vast quantities and varieties of glass. According to contemporary accounts, he stockpiled many tons of glass in about five thousand colors and types. He supervised selection of each color of a window as well as the process of adding colors to blown glass.

While the work was successful and popular, not everyone admired Tiffany’s work. Generally, the criticism was that his technique was fine but his design was wanting. One writer said the work was “harsh in design and vapid in sentiment, [though] always rich in color and varied in texture,” and a writer for The Studio said, “the results still leave much to be desired. The texture is too luscious, the treatment too pictorial, the designs not important enough. The work is a . . . translation from a sketch; the medium still awaits the artist that shall make it his own.”

Since much of Tiffany’s work was ecclesiastical, his creativity was repeatedly constrained by conservative church officials and church architects as well. He extended his preferred naturalism to church windows by introducing flowers to biblical figures, at first in the form of symbolic lilies and vines. He added lettered passages from scripture to support his choices and quoted the contemporary notion that “God is Nature.” But there were still significant objections to this practice, especially when he began to create landscapes without figures. His 1910 Russell Sage Memorial window in the First Presbyterian Church in Far Rockaway, Long Island, was the largest landscape window ever executed. Its startling realism and natural color tones were set within neo-Gothic window frames. The architect was Ralph Adams Cram, a traditionalist who furiously opposed the effect.

It is a measure of Tiffany’s and La Farge’s success in glass that their time was called the opalescent era as well as the Gilded Age. While La Farge was generally considered the greater artist, Tiffany was the better entrepreneur and is far better known today. Of course, Tiffany’s glass objects circulate in antique markets, while La Farge’s windows do not. In any case, the sheer size of Tiffany’s studio and its vast and inventive production make him important to the history of American glass.

In Short

Studio craft is a response to the fact that industry had led to shoddy products and unpleasant work. The Arts and Crafts movement—which originated in England and was based on the ideas of Pugin, Ruskin, and Morris—provided a philosophical basis for change. Good design, linked to criticism of industrialization, gave Arts and Crafts a moral impact that was still resonant a century later.

Pugin’s notions of revealed construction, truth to materials, fitness of form and process to material, and rejection of illusion in walls and floor covering also had a long-lasting influence. Ruskin argued that workers could derive satisfaction from their labor if they had some creative control. Morris taught himself various crafts—a radical, class-defying act—and organized a collaborative decorating business, justifying prices higher than mass-produced goods by quality and uniqueness. He resisted the division of art into high and low, insisting that it should be incorporated in the daily lives of ordinary people.

The spread of these ideas led to the Aesthetic movement, in which design, style, and beauty were popular concerns. Oscar Wilde’s enormously successful lecture tour in 1882 emphasized these ideas in the United States and Canada, where the Aesthetic influence can be seen in painting, art pottery, and interior decorating of the time. Simultaneously in England, young architects turned away from Gothic revival style to simpler, less ornamented lines. A group of them formed the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, providing a model for societies that sprang up across the United States, some of which still exist.

In America, the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 introduced new styles, forms, and techniques that blossomed first in art pottery, in interior decorating by firms such as Louis Tiffany Associated Artists, and in Candace Wheeler’s textile design. These efforts, beginning in amateurism, evolved into distinctively American expressions and produced the first studio craft. The role of women is notable and exceptional in the society of the time. What separated craft from trade, from this beginning, was that it was inherently ideological: it embodied a viewpoint critical of the larger society or insisted on the importance of individual creativity.