

Cotswold School FURNITURE



I know by my own feelings and desires what these men want, ...employment which would foster their self-respect and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows, and dwellings which they could come to with pleasure, surroundings which would soothe and elevate them; reasonable labour, reasonable rest. There is only one thing that can give them this—art.

— William Morris

From an address at the Annual Meeting of the School of Science and Art, The Wedgwood Institute, Burslem, 13th October, 1881.

by John Levitties

The Arts and Crafts Movement in England was borne of two ideas: that utilitarian objects—household furnishings fit for purpose—would reflect the beauty inherent in such fitness; and that the manner in which these objects were produced would imbue them with a moral character that would reflect, in turn, upon their users. Such qualities elevated the status of both designer and craftsman, inevitably leading to a fundamental conviction in the equivalence of fine and decorative art. Such ideals also fostered a belief in good design and fulfilling production

as engines of social change; this not only reflected the Socialist origins and quasi-political nature of these beliefs cultivated by Arts and Crafts champion William Morris (1834–1896) and his circle, but also served to define an archetypal setting for the application of this idea: the craft workshop.

Nowhere were these utopian and craft ideals more fully realized than in the Cotswold School, whose origins lay in the frustrations felt by a small group of young architects whose aesthetic and utopian goals were frustrated within the framework of more traditional business practice. In the early 1890's, Ernest Gimson (1863–1919) and Sidney Barnsley (1865–1926), leaders among that group, left London for the Cotswolds

where they determined to pursue the craft of furniture making amidst the persistent rural traditions in architecture and crafts that they so admired. The area, in the west of England roughly bordered by the town of Bath to the south and Stratford-upon-Avon to the north, was already a popular destination for writers and painters. A small art colony had been formed in the town of Broadway that attracted visitors such as John Singer Sargent and Henry James, and located nearby was William Morris's Kelmscott Manor, the home he shared with Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Gimson and Barnsley established workshops in Pinbury, Gloucestershire, in what the architect Philip Webb referred to as, "a sort of vision of a new Jerusalem,"¹ forming the basis for a distinct school of design that became known as the Cotswold School.

Within a decade, Charles Robert Ashbee (1863–1942) had relocated the Guild of Handicraft from London's East End to the town of Chipping Campden where the group of 150 men, women, and children could more effectively pursue their workshop-based utopian ideals in a pastoral setting. Three decades later, The Russell Workshops, founded in the nearby town of Broadway in the 1920s, espoused similar ideals. Gordon Russell (1892–1980) wrote that the by-products of a society that valued mass-produced period reproductions were evident in the diminished moral distinction between right and wrong. He felt the alternative lay in the appreciation of good work of any sort, and of design that placed fitness to purpose above aesthetics for its own sake. Poor environs bred unruly people, but by returning honesty to the objects of everyday life Russell insisted that beauty, and therefore, morality, would follow.

Typical Cotswold School designs were crafted from local materials using traditional tools and techniques and with decorative details derived largely from utilitarian elements: exposed joinery, unusual panels, interesting pulls and latches crafted either from wood or from metal using traditional smithing techniques, and close attention to form as well as to wood grain and pattern. Where decorative details were added they generally took the form of traditional embellishment of the sort used by simple Cotswold farmers and craftsmen: the long chamfers imparted by a draw



THIS PAGE, TOP:
Server with removable tray top, design attributed to Edward Barnsley (1900–1987) for The Barnsley Workshops, circa 1930. Walnut lined with zinc. H. 30 $\frac{1}{4}$, W. 54 $\frac{1}{4}$, D. 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM:
Candelabrum, Bill Thornton and Charley Downer, English, circa 1910. Wrought iron. H. 19 $\frac{3}{4}$.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Coffer, Ernest Gimson (1863–1919), circa 1903. Oak. H. 19, W. 31 $\frac{3}{4}$, D. 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.





knife or spoke shave or chip carved edge details; even forms for farm implements such as hay rakes or ox carts were adapted to table stretchers and plate rails.

Certainly, more elaborate pieces were also produced in a few of the workshops; exotic materials with elaborate inlay and decorative carving were well known, but this sort of material was also well accounted for in the larger Arts and Crafts tradition. After all, it was William Morris who wrote that not all furniture need be strictly utilitarian; some, what he called “state” furniture, was to be created, “for beauty’s sake as for use; we need not spare ornament on these, but may make them as elegant and elaborate as we can with carving, inlaying, or painting; these are the blossoms of the art of furniture, as picture tapestry is of the art of weaving.”

With each succeeding generation the circle grew. Harry Davoll (1876–1963), Ernest Gimson’s second apprentice, established his own workshop in 1933, and Peter Waals (1870–1937), who oversaw the Gimson workshop, kept it running upon its founder’s death, eventually opening up his own premises in Chalford. Arthur Romney Green (1872–1945), who likely became acquainted with Gimson through his brother, the architect Curtis Green (1875–1960), left teaching for a career in furniture-making, settling in Christchurch where he opened a very well-respected workshop; two of his most talented employees, Stanley Davies (1894–1978) and Eric Sharpe (1888–1966), left Green’s employ in 1926 and 1929 to found their own shops in Windermere and Hampshire respectively. Sharpe preferred to work with a single assistant, but some of those who trained in Davies’s larger studio opened shops of their own in turn.

THIS PAGE, TOP:

Easy chair, designed by Gordon Russell (1892–1980) for The Russell Workshops, circa 1927. Walnut with leather upholstery (Replaced). H. 38½, W. 27, D. 27¾ in.

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM:

Breakfast table, designed by Gordon Russell for The Russell Workshops, circa 1929. Walnut. H. 29, L. 57, W. 35½.

In terms of its dissemination of Cotswold craft traditions, the most important and prolific workshop belonged to Edward Barnsley (1900–1987), son of Sidney Barnsley, who assumed the shop of Geoffrey Lupton (where he had apprenticed for several years in 1925). The longevity of the Edward Barnsley workshop (the shop has remained open since Barnsley's death), its relatively prolific output, and Barnsley's sense of himself as an educator all meant that a significant number of craftsmen passed through its doors as either apprentices or pupils: Oliver Morel (1916–2003), John Briggs, Bernard Osmond, Alec McCurdy (b. 1914), and Alan Peters (b. 1933), to name only a few, all went on to work independently.

Scholars of Modernism have long accepted the notion that the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England provided the basis for the modern movement that followed. Certainly, basic principles of good design found continuity as did the ideal of imbuing utilitarian objects with an aesthetic merit derived from their function rather than from extraneous decoration. In the transition, however, the Arts and Crafts model, which rejected a distinction between the object and its means of production, gave way to a modern movement that embraced mass production in an effort to disseminate good design. Only in the Cotswold School did the ideal of hand-craftsmanship and the close relationship of designer and craftsman hold fast, as it does to this day. 

John Levitties is a scholar and dealer in British Arts and Crafts and is principal of John Alexander Ltd of Philadelphia. The gallery is currently celebrating its tenth anniversary with the exhibition Modern Pastoral: Cotswold School Design 1890–2006, on view through November 25, 2006.

¹ Philip Webb to Sidney Barnsley, 10 Aug., 1900, quoted in William Lethaby, *Philip Webb and His Work* (Oxford University Press, London, 1935), 206.

Chest of drawers, Alan Peters (b. 1933), circa 1981.
Walnut with cedar and oak secondaries.
H. 48½, W. 16, D. 14¼ in.

