

The Case for Deeper Readings of the Arts and Crafts Writings and Theories

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The Arts and Crafts movement is the beginning of our modern understanding of graphic design practice and theory. The theoretical underpinning of so much of how we think about and talk about materials, the relationships of elements (interior and exterior), the choices that designers make to solve communication problems, everything that we consider, every choice we make is trying to solve the questions of fitness of purpose and the relevance and value of our choice of materials to solving our design problems. The very modern ideas of design systems are modern retellings of Emery Walker's harmonies on new and different scales, but at the core still very much asking the same questions and trying to work inside of a set of ideals set forth by Ruskin, Morris, and others.

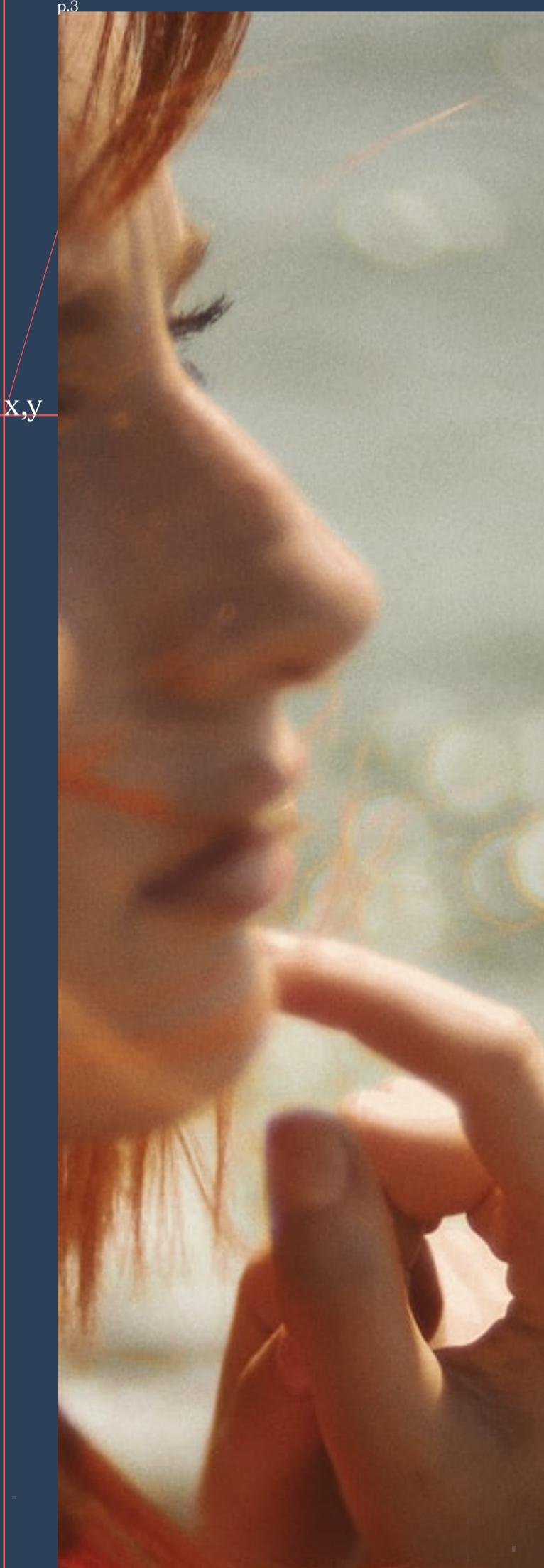
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Meggs' says it as well as anyone else when describing the ideas of Williams Morris. He writes that he "called for a fitness of purpose, truth to the nature of materials and methods of production, and individual expression by both designer and worker." I have not been able to find a primary source for these words, but as a theme, something like them is repeated very often when talking about Morris. As an example The Red House project created by Philip Webb and William Morris was designed to be useful, to create a house that did not gain its shape and structure from contextless historical models, but that was built with the people living in the home in mind, with the purpose of the space determining what it would look like and built to its function. Each element of the design, each piece of furniture, each wall decoration, they all attempted to be in harmony with the other, the totality of the home and the single teaspoon were related.

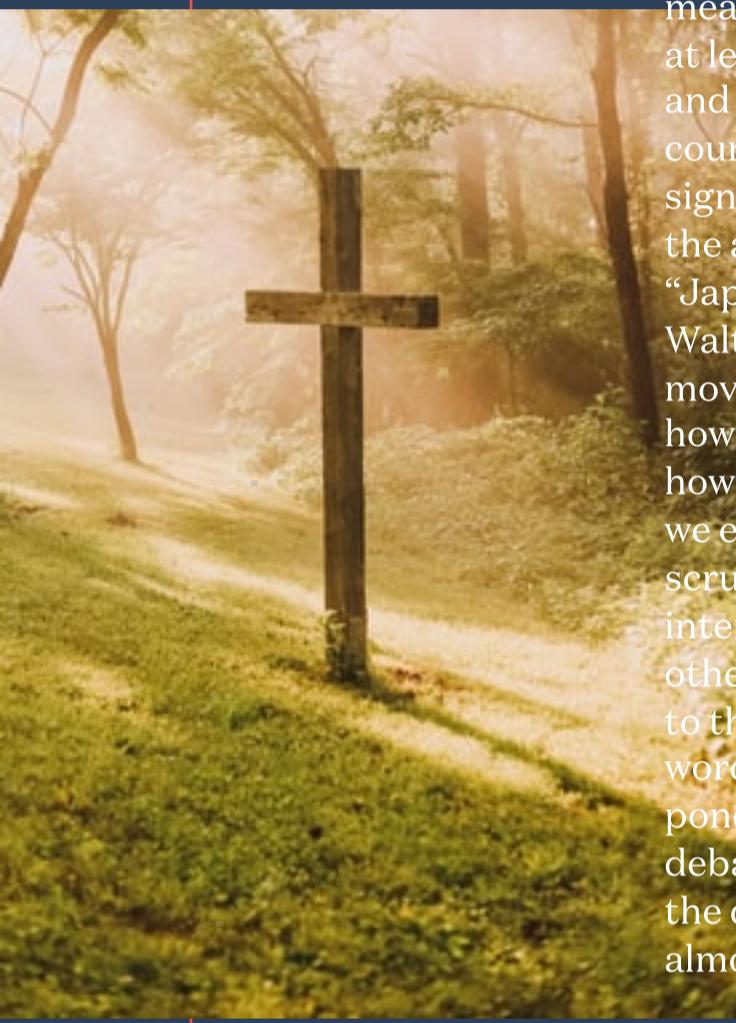
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The words shift, the languages change, the contexts are new, but the base of which the theories build, the ideas of shared purpose of elements, of truth to materials, of relationships of parts to one another working toward a greater whole, these are the fundamental themes that the Arts and Crafts movement express and practiced. A traceable narrative or story of these ideas, and this philosophy begins on November 15, 1888. Emery Walker gives a presentation titled “Letterpress, Printing and Illustration” at the New Gallery, where he called for elements of the page to “to harmonize with the printed page regarded as a whole.” According to Williams Morris’s daughter, he said that this talk, which he attended with Walter Crane, inspired him towards book design as a project . The German concept of gesamtkunstwerk, a theory that calls for considering the overall of the thing being made, had been in use as a literary and musical idea for some time before this, but was introduced as a concept in architecture in 1895 in the Villa Bloemenwerf in Uccle in Belgium designed by Henry van de Velde, “his designs embracing all aspects of the project, even to the extent of clothing for his wife.” Similarly, Frank Lloyd Wright in 1908 wrote about “organic architecture”, which he later described in a 1958 tv interview as “Organic means, in a philosophic sense, entity. Where the whole is to the part, and the part is to the whole. Where the nature of the materials, the nature of the purpose, the nature of the entire performance becomes a necessity, and out of that comes what significance you can give the building as a creative artist.” These ideas are repeated and repeated throughout our modern history, they are seen in the Bauhaus , the Deutscher Werkbund , and in the Modern design movements .

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The ideals and philosophies of the Arts and Crafts have become so fundamental to modern graphic design that they are hard to see. They have become so ingrained into each step of the evolution of graphic design over the past century that almost all of the studied movements in that history refer to something that owes its inclusion to the Arts and Crafts. The concepts, flexible enough to be mapped onto the numerous changes that have occurred in the past 120 years, reappear with slight variations, but never too far off and never in opposition. They create a resilient system. But terms like “fitness” and “truth,” repeated and restated, are not so simply understood; their meaning is dependent on context. They can become suspect, or at least worth debating when the original source of these words and ideas also say things like “Since the race of man began its course of sin on this earth, nothing has ever been done by it so significative of all bestial, and lower than bestial degradation, as the acts of the Indian race” said by John Ruskin , or “Japanese-like spirit of deviltry and the grotesque,” said by Walter Crane . I think that the ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement are ~~enormously important to our understanding of~~ how we see and define the borders and edges of graphic design, how we think about the work and theories we create, and how we educate new designers. Still, I also believe that is should be scrutinized and read deeply, and thought about with the intensity that academic research requires. When we consider other writings of the time, we bring a critical lens through which to think about and consider the impacts and meaning of the words. When we read Emily Dickenson, the words are each pondered, each phrase is considered and written about and debated. Our understanding of Dickenson is vastly improved by the deep reading, and our understanding of the wider world in almost every respect is more nuanced.

The Bram Stoker novel Dracula has been read and reread numerous times with different theories through which to try and understand it, its impacts, and its effects on culture. These deep-readings scrutinize every aspect of the novel, the specific words used and omitted, the choice of place, character, and action. Stoker, a writer contemporary to Ruskin, Morris, Walker etc. and his novel have become somewhat iconic as a tool to describe the culture of late Victorian England , and that England is one “obsessed with the preservation of a pure, homogenous, and unchanging identity increasingly under siege from subversive elements.” I am bringing up Stoker and Dracula as an example to add context to the cultural feelings of the time and place, and also to point out that the ideas and themes of the novel are not left unchallenged, undiscussed, or ignored, that they have been considered again and again and has been made more compelling and important by it.



The pure homogenous and unchanging ideal England, the nostalgic longing for a history that never really existed, the celebration of the fantastic beauty of a magical time that was only ever stories, these are stories being told by the Kelmscott Press, by Ruskin, by Morris, by Crane. They express a longing for a past that never was, populated by a homogenous people that never were.

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No one and no group will ever be perfect, be without misstep, without blind spots, without the limits of the cultural moment in which they live or lived. While William Morris's thoughts on British rule of India are racist and insulting generally, they are mild when compared to Ruskin's overt and very public bigotry towards the people of India. Walter Crane's casual racism towards the Japanese is similar to the Orientalist views of Morris; racist, demeaning, dismissive, and insulting.

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The combination of the shared Orientalism, Ruskin's more overt racism, the nostalgic Disneyfied and idealized depictions of British history, and the late Victorian cultural of racial "anxiety" and fear of the "other" in an Empire in decline, all point to a flawed thinking about the world that we as modern designers and design academics should consider. When Heidegger's notebooks were published, his anti-Semitism, and having had been an actual member of the Nazi party could not be dismissed any longer. It caused Heideggerian academics to reconsider him and his theories. The Arts and Crafts movement are not Nazi's, they are not little British Heidegger's, but they are racists, and I don't think we have talked about it enough as a community. We have not discussed what it means to our theories and histories that these men writing about "truth" and "fitness of purpose" might have meant something very different than we have traditionally thought, and we have not traditionally thought much about it at all. We will learn more about the Arts & Crafts movement, we will find new meaning in the words, new ideas in the phrases and collections of works, we will read the Red House as text that could have impacts on how we think and work today. We will learn more about ourselves, and we will be better for it.



Like Heidegger, we can want them to not have been what they were. To be “a Nazi in a different way than other people were Nazis,” as Heidegger’s admirers hoped for . As we think through these issues, as we discuss the impacts of these designers and thinkers on our modern practice, we will have to decide if we can put aside these flaws because the ideas they developed are too fundamental and too important to the philosophy and practice of graphic design. We can excuse bigotry because it was common at the time, we can accept a closed-mindedness and narrowness of thought because of the shared culture of the Late Victorian era. I can accept that that is true, that to judge someone from history with the benefits of my cultural hindsight today is perhaps not fair. But these men are lionized, they are celebrated in textbooks, they are respected, they are thought to be some of the greatest of us, some of the best makers and thinkers. So, while I am fine to give the average English person of that era a pass on being, what I consider in my modern view, a bigot, I am not fine to let these men’s ideas continue to be shared without real interrogation. A more in-depth look into the meaning of all of this might come to nothing; we might decide that these issues ~~have no effect on the modern understanding and thinking of~~ graphic design, but not questioning these, I think, shows a lack of academic rigor in our thinking and philosophies.



The End

