

Textiles of the Arts and Crafts Movement

LINDA PARRY

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Movement







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*with 153 illustrations,
50 in colour*



THAMES AND HUDSON

For Sarah, Max and Daniel

1. (*frontispiece*) Samuel Rowe: silk and wool double cloth woven by A. H. Lee & Sons, c. 1896.

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Printed and bound in Spain by Artes Graficas Toledo S.A.
D.L.: TO-519-1988

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Acknowledgments

THE PREPARATION of this book has only been possible through the cooperation of colleagues in the Department of Textile Furnishings and Dress at the Victoria and Albert Museum; my thanks go to each and every one of them. I would particularly like to mention Santina Levey for allowing the project to get off the ground, Natalie Rothstein for spending many hours reading my text and offering advice, Debbie Sinfield for listing and typing and Alyson Morris for helping prepare items for photography. Hilary Young of the Department of Designs, Prints and Drawings has been very helpful and Daniel McGrath has taken most of the beautiful photographs. My especial gratitude goes to Neil Harvey without whose excellent assistance I could not have written the book in so short a time.

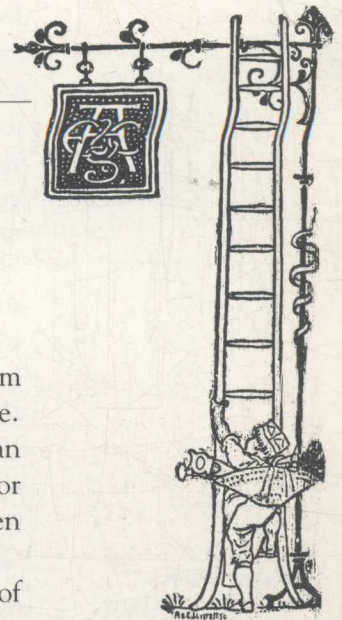
Colleagues in Europe and America have been very helpful to me over the past two years and, whereas my work abroad concerned a wider based research project, I would like to take this opportunity to offer them all my heartfelt thanks. For providing information and illustrations for this book I am particularly grateful to Astri Aasen of Trondheim, Dr Sigrid Barden of Zurich, Ursula Strate of Hamburg, Carol J. Callahan of the Glessner House, Chicago, Gillian Moss of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York, Charlotte Paludan of Copenhagen, Dr Heike Schroder of Stuttgart, Brigitte Tiesel of Krefeld, and Ann Wardwell of Cleveland, Ohio.

Norah Gillow of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, Dr Jennifer Harris and Maud Wallace of the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, Elizabeth Arthur of Glasgow City Museum and Art Gallery, Mr J. Rogers of Liverpool City Libraries and David Chandler of the National Portrait Gallery have also been of assistance. I have been grateful for the opportunity to study at the Public Record Office, National Monuments Record, Westminster Public Libraries, the Silver Studio Collection at Middlesex Polytechnic and the National Art Library Archive, of which I would like to thank the staff, especially Meg Sweet and Eva White. A number of textile firms have allowed me to study their historic collection and I am indebted to Ann Lynch and Audrey Duck of G. P. & J. Baker and Bernadine Gregory of Courtaulds.

Finally I would like to acknowledge the help and encouragement of a number of individuals: Andrew Cox, A. R. Dufty, Christopher Harrison, James and Lucilla Joll, Stephen Lee, the late Jocelyn Morton, Mrs June Randall, Paul and Siobhan Reeves, Margaret Swain, Mark Turner, Jean Wells, Michael Whiteway, and Christine Woods. I owe a special form of gratitude to my family and friends whose patience and forbearance has often gone far beyond the call of duty.

LINDA PARRY
January 1988

Preface



2. Tailpiece used in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition catalogues.

IHAVE never been happy to use the expression 'Arts and Crafts' as a descriptive term as there is no one historic style that matches such an all-embracing yet nebulous title. Despite this, it has been over the years applied to most forms of British and American decorative art produced between 1880 and 1920, irrespective of origin, design or manufacture. Unifying factors do exist, however, and no alternative expression has been found that would do as well, despite the words having little meaning in themselves.

This book concentrates on one particular craft, textiles, which, through the efforts of the individuals involved, was for a short period elevated to a higher art form because of its popularity throughout the fashionable centres of the world and because of its influence on manufacture, which has lasted since that time. To explain that phenomenon, this study concentrates on the individuals involved and work shown in London by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. The importance of the Society cannot be overestimated: it not only provided a name for the Movement but gave a group of artists and designers a chance to display their work in socially and artistically sympathetic surroundings.

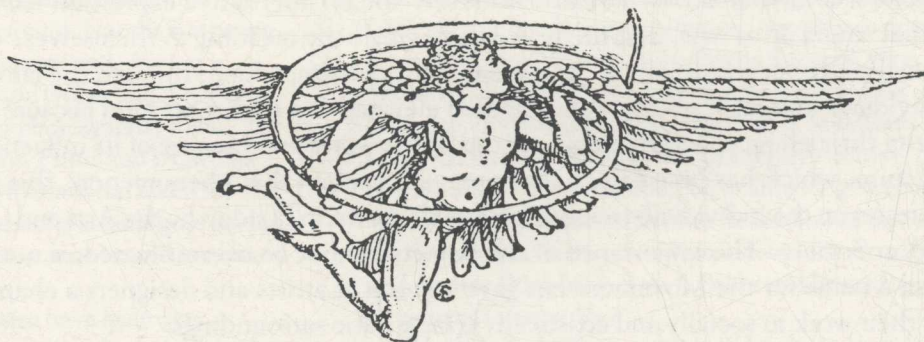
The formation of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and the opening of the first exhibition were recorded by participants, and accounts have appeared since then offering different interpretations of their aims. While I have tried to present a full and accurate picture as a fitting celebration of the Society's centenary, my study is limited to a single art, textiles, and is confined to work exhibited between 1888, when the first exhibition was held, and 1916. All aspects of textile manufacture are included as they appeared in the various exhibitions with hand-made tapestries, carpets and embroideries alongside commercially produced woven and printed fabrics. The finest collection of these textiles and the designs for them belongs to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, although there are important pieces in other collections.

To conclude this study in 1916 might seem somewhat arbitrary but that date marks the end of the period because of changing styles and techniques. It is also significant as the exhibition for that year was held at the Royal Academy, the institution whose prohibitive display policy had forced the setting up of the Society in 1888. It was the last exhibition before the catastrophic effects of the Great War were felt, while the Omega Workshop had already produced its first textiles with purely abstract designs. Plain handloom weaving had become one of the most popular craft techniques together with hand block-printing. The commercial textile industry, unable to produce such effects, and lacking the confidence which had been such an important factor in earlier success, turned away from encouraging individual skills and original designs to the reproduction of historic patterns. All this was

done in an attempt to compete in the fashionable interior design market in which eclecticism now prevailed. Similarly, May Morris and Grace Christie advocated a return to traditional skills in embroidery despite the new order of experimental work influencing the teaching of needlework in schools. The First World War proved to be the turning point and never again did industrial and craft work have the unity of production and design or the comradeship of spirit experienced in the preceding twenty years. One of the most original artistic movements seen for centuries had come to an end.

The Catalogue on pp. 117-53 lists the main designers, craftsmen, institutions and firms involved in textile production during this period. Literally hundreds of individuals took some part in the production of textiles displayed at the exhibitions, whether as designer, weaver, printer, embroiderer, manufacturer or retailer. Although it is impossible to list them all (one of the most important rules of the exhibitions), it is hoped that by a closer study of their textiles the aims and ramifications of the Movement can be fully appreciated.

3. Walter Crane:
ornament from an early
Arts and Crafts Exhibition
Society leaflet.



Introduction



THROUGHOUT the latter part of the nineteenth century efforts were made to reform the Royal Academy, which had become an institution of privilege and limited scope. From 1886, this subject became one of the main discussion points in the art press, where certain revisions to the rules of the Academy were advocated in an attempt to bring democracy to the hallowed steps of Burlington House. As well as limiting the number of works submitted by each contributor (to two, with four for each Academician, was suggested) journalists and correspondents alike believed that a fairer election of members would be gained by offering all exhibitors equal suffrage and that elected membership of the Council and the Hanging and Selection Committees should be for a fixed term only. Their aim was to break the stranglehold of a small clique of leading artists and to restore the scope of the Academy's exhibitions beyond the easel paintings which dominated every show. Furthermore, the Academy had, for a number of years, reneged on its duties towards education.¹ Holman Hunt in an article, 'The Reform of the Royal Academy' (*The British Architect*, 27 August 1886), called for a revision of the Academy's attitude towards teaching, to 'render needless the exodus of students to Paris'.

The art press, always at variance with the Academy because of the high-handed and shoddy treatment it had experienced at its hands,² was keen to show the strong feelings of the art world towards revision. The *Art Journal* conducted a survey of exhibiting oil painters resulting in 273 in favour and only 6 against general reforms (they were at pains to point out, in their report of March 1886, that two of the latter were women), and *The British Architect* for 3 September 1886 further stressed the unfairness of the Academy's attitude towards all the arts except painting. This show of teeth by the architectural fraternity, in particular, led to such drastic outside reform that within ten years the attention of practising artists and the general public had been so forcefully turned away from the Academy that it never regained its prestigious place as the ultimate exhibiting institution for the arts in Britain.

For a number of years the Academy had failed to represent architecture adequately in its exhibitions. In 1886 there were fifty-nine painters and only five architects among the Academicians (seven sculptors and two engravers completed the numbers), and there had been no attempt to appoint a Professor of Architecture since the death of G. E. Street in 1881. From the second quarter of the nineteenth century architects, following the lead of A. W. N. Pugin, had become more involved in all aspects of the arts, concerning themselves not only with the decoration and furnishing of their own buildings but also with free-lance design for all branches of the decorative arts. It is likely that this new more

rounded attitude had a direct bearing on the views of the Academy which relegated architecture to the 'Lesser' or 'Applied Arts' and as such no longer its concern.

Loss of confidence in the Royal Academy had been felt for some years before the evidence of unrest was shown in the press of 1886. With no unifying body, opposition took the form of a number of small groups set up by disenchanted architects, painters, sculptors and designers who met in an effort to discuss their work and art in general. Even at this early stage, the prevailing attitude at these meetings quickly changed from one of iconoclasm to enthusiasm for a new future, a mood encouraged by a more rational attitude towards art and life as advocated in the writings of John Ruskin (in particular his chapter 'The Nature of Gothic' in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, published in 1853) and by William Morris in his published works and through the evidence of his own workshop. The prevailing optimism of the times set the tone for the movement that followed and greatly contributed to its style and subsequent success.

Two of these groups, one comprising architects and the other more general designers, proved particularly significant. The 'St George's Art Society' was formed by pupils and apprentices of the architect Richard Norman Shaw³ and took its name from a church in Bloomsbury. Set up in 1883 in opposition to both the Royal Academy and the Institute of British Architects, the group hoped to recruit members 'who were neither the oil painters of the Academy nor the Surveyors of the Institute, but craftsmen in architecture, painting, sculpture and the kindred arts'.⁴ The other group, 'The Fifteen', first met in 1881 at the instigation of Lewis F. Day, the decorative arts designer and art critic, and included Walter 105 Crane, Henry Holiday, T. M. Rooke, J. D. Sedding and Hugh Stannus amongst its 6 members.⁵ The name was derived from a popular puzzle ('some trick with fifteen numbers and one blank in a square box'⁶) and an amusing drawing of the symbol incorporates 4 caricatures of the founding members, coincidentally also fifteen. They met at members' houses once a month from October to May 'to discuss subjects of common interest to themselves and bearing upon various branches of design'.⁷ As some of the Fifteen produced designs for textiles they are of particular interest but the only existing information concerns work done individually outside the group.

In 1884 the Art Workers' Guild was formed. As the leading members of this new organization were taken from the two smaller clubs, it has always been seen as the direct result of their amalgamation, although this is a simplification. However, it obviously met with the approval of both groups as each was subsequently absorbed by it. The Guild was set up specifically as a forum and meeting place for practising artists and designers, and its social benefits are appreciated to this day. 'It is not a school, it is not a Club, it is not a Debating Society. In the A.-W. G. I find something of the spirit of the Studio life of Rome', wrote the Guild's first master, the sculptor George Blackall Simonds, in 1885.⁸ However, this 'Studio' was neither an exhibition centre nor a revision parlour for the arts and despite acceptance by all that the fine and applied arts were worthy of equal artistic endeavour, there was still no means for members to prove this point publicly or to advertise their own work.

In the wake of an inevitable refusal by the Royal Academy to reform, a letter signed by Holman Hunt, Walter Crane and George Clausen was sent to the news and art press and published in a number of papers including *The Times* on the morning of 7 August

1886.⁹ Describing the Academy as 'a private society' they stated, rather sarcastically, that it 'should be left to enjoy its rights in peace'. The signatories went on to suggest that instead of trying to force small reforms, the public would be best served with the 'establishment of a really national exhibition, which should be conducted by artists on the broadest and fairest lines – in which no artist should have rights of place; and all works should be chosen by a jury elected by and from all artists in the kingdom.'¹⁰

The letter had dramatic and far-reaching effects, galvanizing the art world into direct and positive action after years of apathy. Within a short time a printed sheet entitled 'National Exhibition for the Arts', signed by more than four hundred of the country's leading artists and designers, was circulated, inviting membership of 'an artistic co-operative society in which all who join will have a distinct voice in its management'.¹¹ Lively interest was shown in the new movement and press reports were accompanied by letters of support. In 1887 the organization was established. Documents concerning the first meetings¹² show proposals that it should comprise five sections covering architecture, the applied arts, painting, sculpture and engraving, and that each should have equal representation on the Committee. Official recognition of the equality of all the practical arts was long overdue, but not simply because of the intransigence of historic precedent and the prevailing hierarchical attitude of the Royal Academy. With the popularity of Japanese art in Britain from the 1860s the Eastern attitude, in which no barriers between the various branches of the arts were perceived, had become widely adopted in artistic circles and was now both fashionable and sensible in an increasingly commercial world.

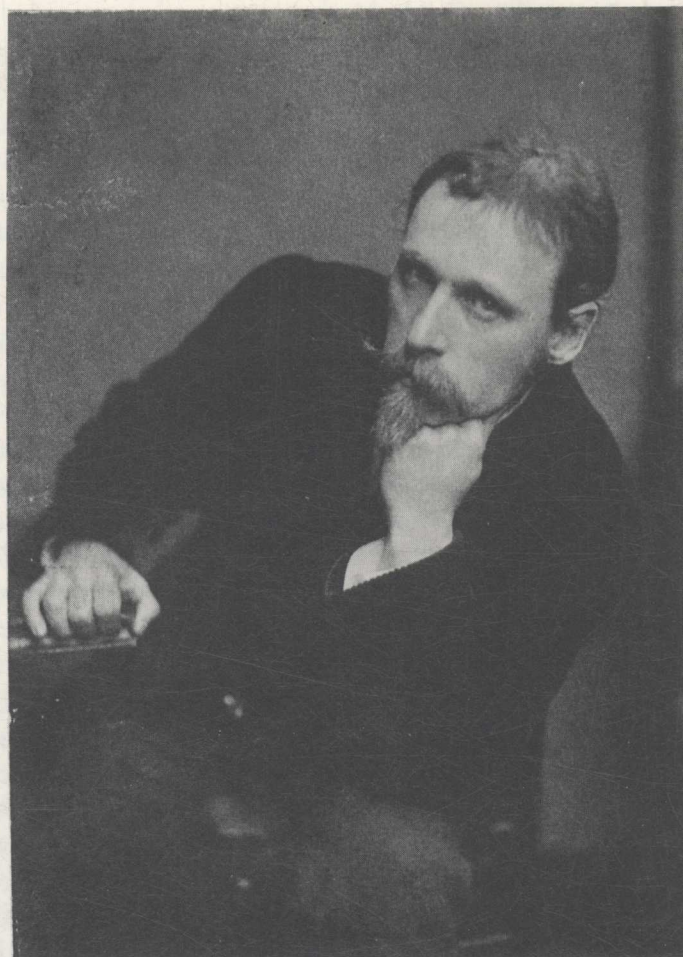
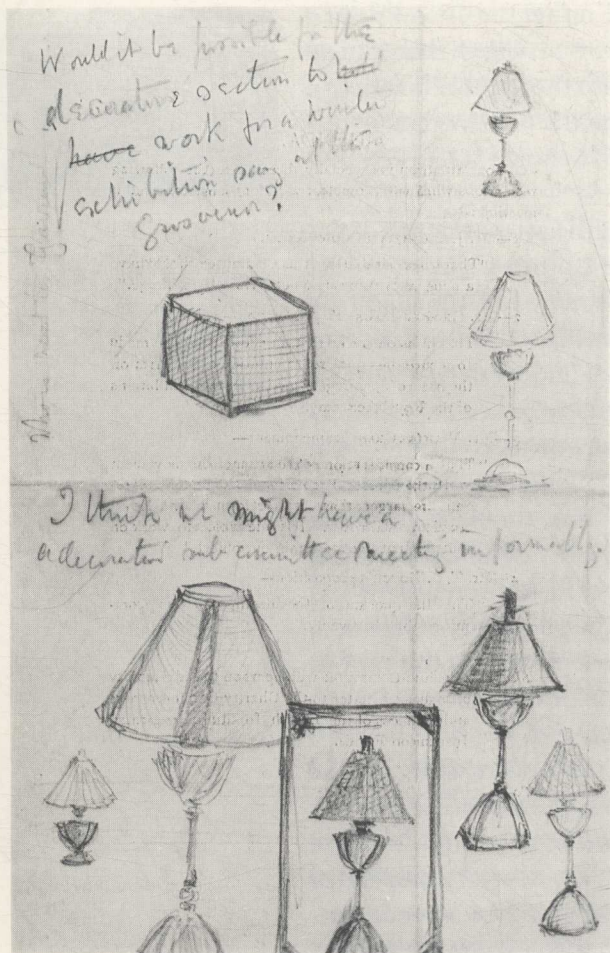
It was not long before plans to hold a national exhibition ran into trouble. At the Committee's meeting in February 1887 George Clausen, with the support of other artists of the New English Art Club, proposed that 'an effort should be made to secure the equal suffrage of the Artists in the Exhibition of the Royal Academy'. Somewhat exasperated with this continued pandering to the Academy, Walter Crane proposed an amendment, recorded as follows: 'That in consideration of the aims of the movement which the present Provisional Committee represent are larger than any reform of the Royal Academy will cover. It is desirable to work on independant lines to attain our object.'¹³ With this statement Crane sealed his fate and that of a few of his colleagues. Clausen's proposal was accepted and they resigned.¹⁴

This action can be seen as the true beginning of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and the subsequent Movement to which it gave its name, although claims of authorship were made by both W. A. S. Benson and A. H. Mackmurdo. Mackmurdo believed that the Society was a direct development of his own Century Guild set up in 1882 'to render all branches of art the sphere no longer of the tradesman but of the artist'.¹⁵ Whereas the artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement also believed that an improvement in the standard of design would come from the designer and not the trader, they saw this improvement developing from the harmonious relationship of craftsmen and designers (often the same) of like artistic views. Objects designed under the Guild's name, furniture and textiles for instance, were manufactured by commercial firms, the designers having little involvement in their manufacture. It is in this important point that the two organizations differed.

The proof of Benson's claim is far more tangible, being two scribbled notes to his
5 neighbour (probably Heywood Sumner) at the fateful meeting of the National Exhibition



4. Walter Crane: detail of the symbol of the Fifteen, with caricatures of the Secretary, Lewis F. Day, in a chariot, and Crane himself, riding a crane.



5. W. A. S. Benson's notes, on the back of a printed programme, in which he suggests an exhibition of decorative arts.

6. Walter Crane, photographed by Frederick Hollyer in 1886.

for the Arts at which Clausen's proposal was read. In these notes Benson asked 'Would it be possible for the decorative section to work for a winter exhibition say at the Grosvenor?' and added 'I think we might have a decoration sub committee meeting informally'.¹⁶

Ironically, important events often have such humble beginnings but in reality most individual aspirations only come to fruition through much collective effort. In March 1887 seven artists and designers (Benson, Crane, Day, Heywood Sumner, Henry Longden, Mervyn Macartney and J. Hungerford Pollen) met at the metalworker Longden's house in order to draw up a letter inviting artists and craftsmen to form the nucleus of an association 'for securing an Exhibition of the Combined Arts'. Of the twenty-five people contacted sixteen replied positively and the first meeting of the Provisional Committee was held at the Charing Cross Hotel on 11 May 1887. At this meeting Crane was elected Chairman and Benson agreed to act as Secretary and temporary Honorary Treasurer. The experience of several false starts by other organizations led the Committee to write immediately to Sir Coutts Lindsay requesting the use of the Grosvenor Gallery, then the most fashionable venue in London, for their first exhibition. At the second meeting on 25 May, the



7. Walter Crane: original ink design for the letterhead of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society.

bookbinder T. J. Cobden-Sanderson proposed that the name 'Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society' should be adopted and the motion was seconded by Lewis F. Day. With a new identity and plans for the first exhibition the Society had achieved more in three months than had been possible in the preceding four years.

The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society did not provide either the first ideas or the first opportunity for the display of decorative arts in nineteenth-century Britain. The International Exhibitions of 1851 and 1862 and the shows which followed set up by the Royal Society of Arts had all concentrated on this aspect of the arts. However, as trade fairs, and as a means of advertising British manufacture, they concentrated on technical innovation rather than original design, for it was in this sphere that foreign investment was most easily attracted and British industry had the best chance for expansion. Manufacturers were consequently listed in the catalogues and received the various prizes but few individual designers or craftsmen were mentioned.

The effect on the working man of the mechanical free-for-all, which demanded centralization of manufacture and created both great wealth and great poverty, was well documented in the literature of the day and led to much needed social reform. With a less exclusive approach to art and the consequent broadening of their design activities, artists became aware of the conditions in the industries for which they designed and many found these conditions not to their taste. William Morris, alerted to them by Ruskin, criticized a system that allowed British craftsmen to lose both their skills and their self-respect while at the same time industry became rich by manufacturing technically brilliant yet artistically dead products. In his publications, in his lectures and in his own work he attempted to redress the balance by improving the standard of design and restoring pleasure and self-respect to the worker. The revival of traditional techniques, including vegetable dyeing and the block-printing of textiles, at his own factory enabled him to achieve an aesthetically pleasing balance between the craft (technique) and art (the decoration) and a public ready for a new look in their shops saw what could be achieved.

Although modern misconceptions deny it, Morris and his contemporaries were not opposed to all forms of mechanization. To facilitate textile production Morris would have used steam-driven jacquard looms if he could have afforded to install them. Lewis F. Day in his book *Everyday Art* (1882) suggested that machinery, steam power, and 'electricity for all we know' were likely to have an effect on future design. Both men, however, despite differing political views, firmly believed that its use in industry required careful consideration.

While the example of workshops producing a number of artistic products under one roof was to be emulated some years later by a few rural groups, the scope of Morris & Co. was never equalled and it can be said that the industrial and artistic world benefited more from Morris's views than from his actual designs.

Recent critics have tried to minimize the influence of William Morris. Yet writing in 1902, just six years after Morris's death, J. Scarratt Rigby, himself a successful designer, described Morris's profound effect on contemporary decorative arts.¹⁷

Some of these arts almost owe their existence to the prodigious mental force and untiring vigour he brought to bear upon them; in others his work, if examined and compared with that of today, will be seen to be the direct parent of some important phases; while many which even his enormous capacity was unable to cope with have received inspiration directly from him or from the group of men of whom he was the acknowledged centre of radiation.

A yearning to return to the traditional skills of the land saw a renewal of interest in the countryside, abandoned by many in the search for employment. Charles Godfrey Leland, an American writer, suggested in his book *Minor Arts* (1880) the formation of classes in rural districts 'for the teaching of simple arts and crafts';¹⁸ and rural classes were indeed soon established. In 1884 the various regional groups were consolidated under the Home Arts and Industries Association (Leland was a Committee member) by a Mrs Jebb with the modest aim 'to teach the minor arts to the working classes thus spreading a knowledge of artistic handiwork among the people'.¹⁹ Annual exhibitions were organized at the Albert Hall and membership automatically guaranteed a display space with each class having its own stall. Work was sold and certificates of merit and medals awarded. Although amateurish in its organization and in much of the work produced, the Association deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. By 1886, schools or classes had been established in fifty-four areas. 'The interest of manufacturers will only be better served by the promotion of sound knowledge and practical skills in the homes of our working classes', wrote *The British Architect* for 25 June 1886, indicating not only an artistic but a sociological interest in the exhibitions and work shown – factors which had become intertwined in the new reforms. Because of the similarity between the views of this organization and those of the later Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, and the development of a number of the classes into regular Arts and Crafts exhibitors, a description of its working methods can only help to further our knowledge of the later Movement. In an article on the 1905 Albert Hall exhibition the *Art Workers' Quarterly* published the following report:

The classes commence usually by purely voluntary effort on the part of those who have the welfare of country dwellers or working people at heart. Classes are held in the homes of these voluntary teachers, or in rooms lent by those interested in the work. As the pupils become proficient, professional teaching is engaged, and perhaps work is executed in response to local orders. The class may in time develop into an industry doing work sufficiently well to attract regular custom and thus become self supporting.

Many of these classes developed into commercial concerns and the influence of the Home Arts and Industries Association increased. A review in 1899 expressed delight that

what had been 'a small and unnoticed exhibition, should have grown into one so important as to become one of the events of the London season',²⁰ and early twentieth-century shows were praised in particular for the high standard of embroidery.

The Grosvenor Gallery was not available after all for the first exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1888 and other venues were considered, including the Albert Hall and Waterloo House. The New Gallery in Regent Street, described by Benson as 'then a derelict provision market, afterwards so skillfully converted',²¹ was finally chosen for an Autumn exhibition and the £1 collected from each member (originally to meet the Committee's expenses) was further supplemented by larger sums from individuals²² to meet the costs that would be incurred. The Directors of the New Gallery were offered £300 with a bonus contingent on the success of the first exhibition²³ and a tenancy agreement was signed on 17 September 1888. Ernest Radford was appointed Secretary of the Society at an annual salary of £150 and Finance, Literary and Selection Committees were all formed.

The business-like manner in which the proceedings were organized, with evening lectures and a printed catalogue, must have surprised many onlookers but helped secure what was considered to be a successful venture. Despite such hard work, the members did not lose sight of their original aims in organizing the Society. A. H. Mackmurdo set out these aims in his unpublished memoirs some years later;²⁴ and although wordy and over flowery, this document provides an invaluable guide to the Movement as an ideological and practical exercise, being written by an artist who was personally involved:

1. To show the British public what could be done by their contemporary fellow craftsmen in making beautiful things for the homes of simple and gentle folk.
2. To revive the desire for beauty in the things of everyday use and to educate the public taste to a preference for art born of one's own day and in one's own country, by periodic exhibitions of standard examples.
3. To arouse among art workers an emulation to excel by placing the work of various craftsmen and designers side by side.
4. To turn industry in the direction of producing such kind of decorative form and ornament as can be produced without detriment by mechanical processes.
5. To raise the status of both craftsman and designer by such publication of authorship as is customary in the fine arts.
6. To give the public some elementary knowledge of, and an intelligent interest in, the processes which determine a thing's formative and decorative character; so that it will look for and esteem those materials and methods which are appropriate to the process of manufacture. This object would be gained by lectures upon principles underlying various types of techniques.

Colour plates

8. Lindsay P. Butterfield: 'Tiger Lily', watercolour design for a printed textile manufactured by G. P. & J. Baker in 1896. The fabric was sold through Heal's from 1898 to 1903 (see Ill. 123).

9. George C. Haité: 'Picotee', watercolour design for a block-printed fabric manufactured by G. P. & J. Baker in 1903. It is likely that the use of colour washes in textile designs of this period was inspired by architectural drawings. This encouraged the use of new techniques, such as rainbow printing, to achieve such effects.

10. Lindsay P. Butterfield: roller-printed cotton manufactured by Turnbull and Stockdale, 1901. The pattern was also used for wallpaper.

11. Lindsay P. Butterfield: block-printed linen manufactured by G. P. & J. Baker, 1903. The pattern was printed with a solid ground from 1904.

12. C. F. A. Voysey: 'Daisy', silk and wool double cloth woven by Alexander Morton & Co., c. 1898.

13. C. F. A. Voysey: sample strip of colourways for a silk and wool double cloth from Alexander Morton & Co.'s 'Helena' range, c. 1895-1900.

14. Lewis F. Day: roller-printed cotton manufactured by Turnbull and Stockdale in 1888, probably shown at the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition.

15. Arthur Silver: 'Peacock Feather', roller-printed cotton manufactured for Liberty's by the Rossendale Printing Co. c. 1887, and shown that year at the Manchester Royal Jubilee Exhibition.

16. George C. Haité: 'Crocus', block-printed by G. P. & J. Baker in 1903 on a cotton and linen fabric with a woven figured ground. The effects of shaded colour or rainbow printing can be seen in a number of fabrics at this time.

17. Lewis F. Day: 'Tulip Tree', roller-printed cotton manufactured by Turnbull and Stockdale in 1903.