

Liberty's Furniture

1875-1915

The Birth of Modern Interior Design

Daryl Bennett



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The Birth of Modern Interior Design



Antique Collectors' Club

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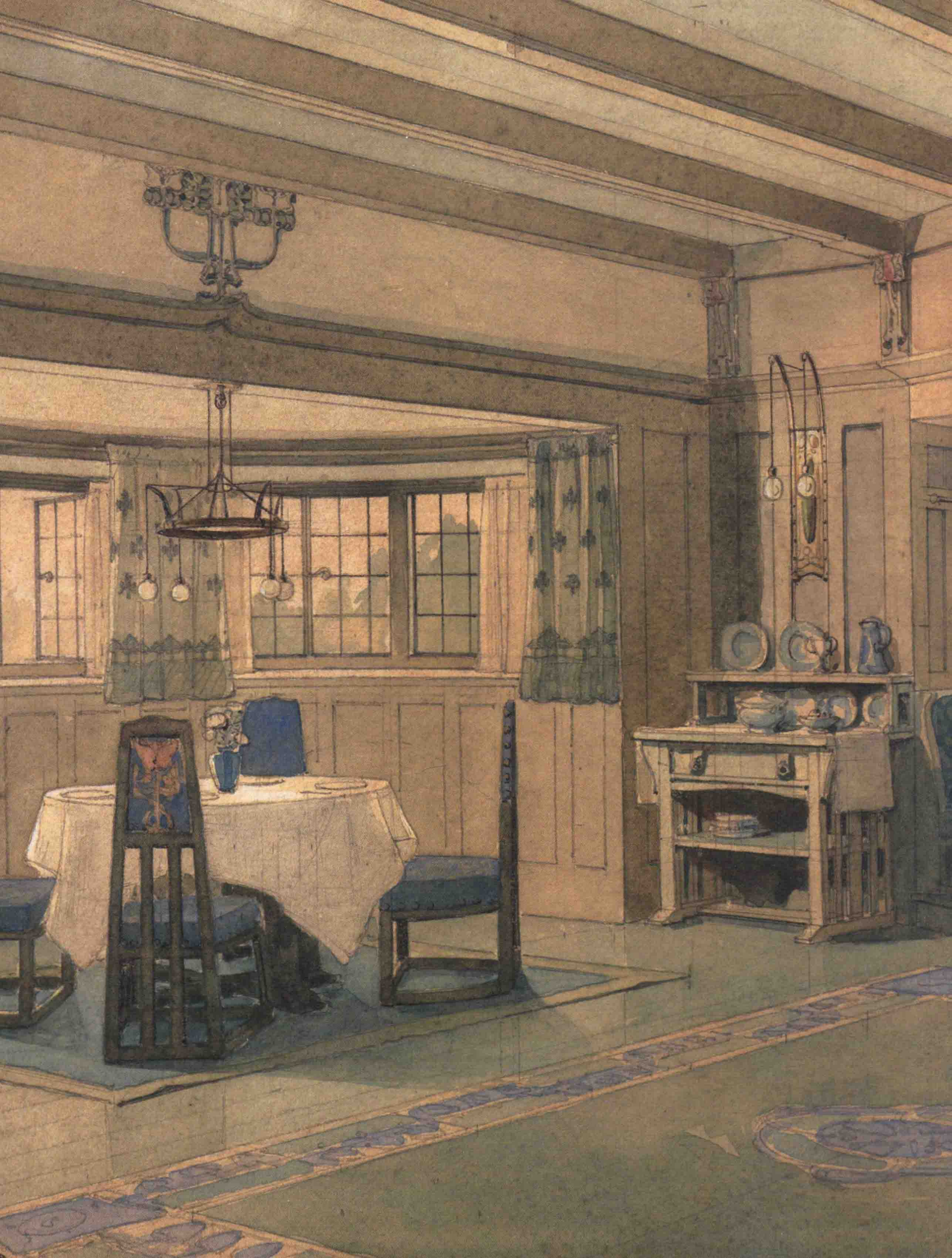
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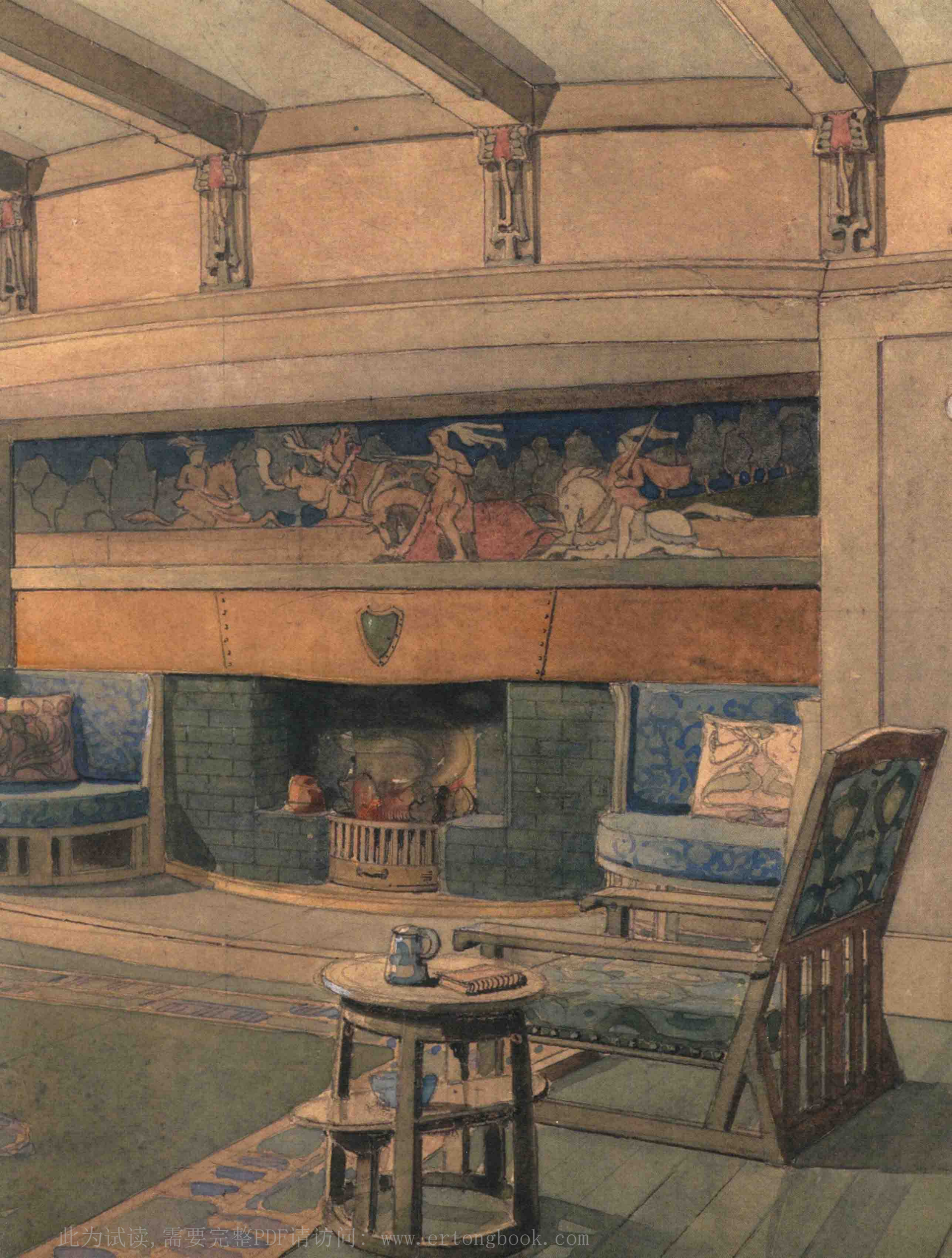
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Frontispiece: Liberty & Co. oak revolving bookstand with pierced tulip design.
Title-page: Detail showing the stencilled and painted panel on a Liberty & Co. Athelstan wardrobe (see pl. 5.59).

Printed in China
for the Antique Collectors' Club Ltd, Woodbridge, Suffolk









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Introduction

This book is about the furniture of Liberty & Co., covering the period from 1875, when Liberty opened his shop in Regent Street, through the Victorian and Edwardian periods, and up to the outbreak of War in 1914. The central focus of the book is to examine the different styles and key features in the design of Liberty furniture as it evolved through the genres which can be loosely described as Oriental, Arts and Crafts, and 'modern country cottage'. Whilst much of the Liberty furniture from the 1880s onwards conforms to the Arts and Crafts style associated with architects such as C.F.A. Voysey and Baillie Scott, and the early influences of William Morris and E.W. Godwin, not everyone would see Liberty & Co. as a part of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain.

Unlike some Arts and Crafts workshops or Guilds, founded by philanthropic gentlemen from the universities of Oxford or Cambridge, the Liberty furniture venture was simply one of a number of entrepreneurial schemes designed to make profit for Liberty & Co. The founder, a drapers' son who grew up in Nottingham, Arthur Lasenby Liberty was an extremely talented businessman who strove to influence taste and also ensure growth and profit in his business. A great socialite, he appears not to have shrunk from the limelight and showed no embarrassment at being featured in the article *Fortunes Made in Business*. At Liberty's in Regent Street, he created a shopping empire through his business acumen rather than the altruistic principles of the Arts and Crafts movement as might be defined by C.R. Ashbee or William Morris. Nevertheless, the furniture of Liberty & Co., seemed to capture perfectly the sentiments, design and construction which defined the Arts and Crafts style for more than two decades. With imaginative design, high quality construction, and state of the art marketing through catalogues and advertising, it is not surprising that Liberty & Co. emerged head and shoulders above their competitors. Highly successful in providing the new middle classes with 'artistic' and tasteful furnishing, Liberty & Co. also created some of the most beautiful and enduring examples of Arts and Crafts furniture, and they did so in sufficient volume to sustain a strong community of collectors.

The Liberty style is today recognised above all as bearing the essential characteristics of the Arts and Crafts movement, and Liberty has become a generic term for a range of furniture with characteristics ranging from Arabian to Art Nouveau. Whilst such generalisations have helped to secure a concept of furnishing style and design within our culture, much exploitation of the term Liberty has been apparent in the buying and selling of furniture from the period. Characteristics of design such as heart piercing, dark oak stain, mottoes, Glasgow roses and beaten copper work have become associated with the Liberty style, with some justification. However, it is increasingly common to see such elements cited as defining proof of an article being made by or sold by Liberty & Co. without any reference to evidence; almost like the 'King's new clothes', the Liberty style is paraded and commended without any underlying proof.

One of the key motivations to produce this book has been to develop evidence-based attribution. Working to establish an evidence base for the verification of Liberty furniture is

fairly easy in one respect, essentially because there is public access to the company's archives of catalogues and documents describing and illustrating the range of furniture sold. In another respect, the practice of labelling and stamping Liberty pieces, adopted from the earliest days of the firm, helps also. Verification, however, can often be difficult as there are pieces which conform in all respects to those of Liberty origin, yet are not labelled, nor do they appear in the illustrated catalogues. Occasionally such pieces are illustrated in period journals such as *The Studio* or *The Cabinet Maker* and their Liberty origin is confirmed. In addition, there are pieces which have no period illustration, label or mark to verify their origin, but conform so closely to characteristics known to be exclusively linked to the Liberty design, that we might accept them as such. Of the rest which appear to have been made in the Liberty style, we cannot say they are not, as new evidence appears over time, but they surely cannot be attributed just as a matter of opinion, without any evidence which can be independently verified.

It is important to put the furniture of Liberty into the context of the whole enterprise. The Liberty furniture which is known constituted a relatively small amount of the daily trade and transactions of the company, the majority being concerned with fabrics, fashion and smaller decorative items for the home. The annual Yuletide Gifts catalogues which set out the Liberty stall for many years, list and illustrate hundreds of small artistic knick-knacks, many of Oriental design and origin. Furniture is illustrated but constitutes a small percentage of items, less than five per cent on average. There were several other major catalogues in which furniture was dealt with more fully, including *Art Furniture* (1884), the *Handbook of Sketches* (1889), and the *Inexpensive Furniture* catalogue c.1907, which provide essential pictorial and descriptive evidence. Earlier catalogues also give some insight into the range of goods imported: exotic furniture, antiques and objets d'art upon which the Liberty reputation for craft skills and quality was generated. In addition to this archive there are special collections, notably that in the Westminster City Archive, providing robust evidence in the form of drawings and photographs. Together, these sources make up the documentary evidence for attribution, and all are open to scrutiny and study by members of the public.

From this evidence base we can see the evolution of the Liberty style, from the Japanese, Egyptian and Moorish of the early years, to the robust Gothic and medieval styles of the Wyburd period, to the urbane and sophisticated 'modern' style reflecting the influence of C.F.A. Voysey and the later Arts and Crafts designers. There is, too, a major preoccupation with decorated 'artistic' furniture which spans the period from the 1890s to the early twentieth century, with inlaid designs, painted panels, carved mottoes, leaded and stained glass. Whilst there is a clear evolution through the styles of the day, from the obsession with the Oriental in the 1870s and 1880s to the 'modern country cottage' movement, some preoccupations, particularly the Moorish and Japanese styles, were still shown in catalogues after 1910. The Thebes stools, icons of Liberty design, are perhaps the best examples of these long-running favourites, but there are others such as the inlaid Turkish or Moorish tables which were advertised for many years.

In attempting to explain and illustrate the development of Liberty furniture, a key interest is to understand how taste developed amongst the new and aspiring middle classes. It is clear that the growth of department stores in major cities, combined with the production of catalogues and reviews, stimulated artistic shopping; 'conspicuous consumption' enabled people to define and display their status by their purchases. By the turn of the century, creating

an artistic home became a major preoccupation for many home owners. The art magazines of the day provided illustrated guidance and 'peeps' into celebrity homes to show how it was done. The movement which started through the influence of a small group of affluent artists and architects, gradually percolated down through the social classes. This evolution was driven by an aversion to the industrial monotony of Victorian society and also by an appetite for modernisation. It is important, however, to understand that changing preferences for furnishing and the choice of 'Household Gods' was also influenced by individual efforts to educate popular taste. Understanding the popularity and pervasiveness of the Liberty style requires some exploration of the role of advertising and of individual writers such as Baillie Scott and the efforts of Arthur Liberty himself to tell people how they should and should not furnish their homes.

In looking back over the early years, it would be wrong to assume that the Liberty enterprise was simply commercial and superficial. Everything one reads and learns about the founder, his colleagues and his company, indicates a very determined mission to provide the highest quality fabrics, furnishings and objets d'art, all of which had one thing in common – they were the product of art in design and craft in manufacture. The Liberty style was built upon integrity and the meticulous efforts of Liberty and his team to source and present the most beautiful handmade goods, initially from the pre-industrial societies of Japan, India and Africa, and then from the craft workshops of late-Victorian Britain. Without the luxury of the inherited wealth enjoyed by rival Arts and Crafts pioneers, Arthur Liberty built an empire and a generation of customers for craft and art work, lending his hand to supporting the struggling associated industries. Success brought him a grand country house, Lee Manor, as well as a knighthood. In his frequent travels abroad, though always on the lookout for treasures to trade, he must have appeared as an emperor, and as he aged gracefully, it is said that he was 'gratified to be mistaken for the Prince of Wales' (A. Adburgham, 1975, p.69).

In any assessment of Liberty furniture, however, we need to look behind the charismatic founder and seek out Leonard Wyburd, the modest yet supremely talented designer of the most important elements of the Liberty style. It is astounding that no serious study of his work has been carried out, and amongst the many publications on Liberty and Arts and Crafts furniture, he receives only the briefest mention. For over two decades, he led the Liberty Furnishing and Design Studio from whence came icons of furniture design now much prized in private collections, museums and national art galleries. Good news for collectors is that there is a robust database from which previously unrecognised Wyburd pieces can be verified, and there still appears to be a regular trickle of pieces coming onto the market. One tantalising factor is that much of the work of the Liberty studio consisted of the decoration of private houses, not only in the UK, but also across Europe, India and South Africa, and we may never see the variety and quality of the built-in features – from ingle-nooks to bookcases – which came from the Wyburd design team. Nevertheless, in the following pages, every effort has been made present the known work of Leonard Wyburd, in order that he might receive the appreciation that he deserves.