

## **Origins of the American Handicrafts Revival**

Like the American Settlement House Movement, the American Handicrafts Revival actually originated in England. The movement may be traced specifically to art critic John Ruskin, who decried the “dehumanizing” effects of industrial labor -- or the notion that machine work degraded the human spirit by separating artisans from the joy of creating -- and encouraged consumers to reject mass-produced goods. So dedicated was Ruskin to this notion that he urged Britons to shed the trappings of capitalism and industrialism -- including such technologies as the steam engine -- and form tight-knit, “utopian” communities based on handcrafting and agriculture. This idea never gained widespread appeal; but his insistence that wealthy young people take time out from their college careers, living and working among the urban poor, certainly did. Historian Eileen Boris credits Ruskin with sparking the English and American Social Settlement Movements.

A second English handcrafting advocate, wealthy artist William Morris, likewise insisted that industrial capitalism “polluted the landscape, mechanized men, and falsified architecture.” His solution was to found his own handcrafting firm, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co., Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture, and Metals, as an example of the marketability of finely crafted, non-mass produced items, and to advocate a return to the days of “true craftsmanship” -- or, more specifically, to the days of the Medieval European guilds, when artisans (presumably) crafted tools, furniture, and other items for their own use and for the use of others -- employing ornamentation and embellishments as they saw fit -- and were accorded a degree of respect unknown to unskilled nineteenth century industrial laborers. Not surprisingly, Ruskin’s ideas -- and his handcrafted goods, for that matter -- found favor among middle and upper class Britons, many of whom were Marxist-socialists and many of whom indeed worried

that industrialization stood to rob British laborers of their dignity and degrade the nation's artistic culture.

It was these middle to upper middle class Britons who carried the English Arts and Crafts movement forward, primarily by paying to establish craft guilds, schools, and shops that became the hallmarks of the movement; by supporting the "artistic work of designers and craftsmen" who were then "challenging the existing [industrial capitalist] economic system"; and by shunning mass-produced craft items when furnishing their homes and businesses. Given the Socialistic political bent of many of the movement's patrons, it should come as no surprise that the movement was rife with revolutionary theorizing -- specifically a belief that a return to individualistic craftsmanship might serve to topple the capitalistic order, thereby diminishing the role of "market forces" and "competition" in day-to-day human existence (and perhaps even abolishing them altogether). Ultimately, the movement succumbed to the industrial-capitalist forces that it sought to defeat. But it left its mark; industrialists, having learned that consumers were interested in purchasing "beautiful things," even if said beautiful things were somewhat expensive, began hiring craftsmen and designers to raise the aesthetic quality to mass-produced wares.

Aware as they were of the political and social currents then sweeping Great Britain, American Progressives in the late nineteenth century adopted Ruskin's and Morris's theorizing as their own. The resulting American Arts and Crafts Movement was less blatantly socialistic than its British predecessor, but it nevertheless shared a number of similarities with the parent movement. For example, American arts and crafts advocates sought to free laborers from the drudgery and "dehumanization" associated with mass production; to separate the "profit motive" from the creative process; and to ensure that craftspeople produced objects that were at once

beautiful *and* useful. The primary differences between the American and English branches of the movement were, according to Boris, the fact that the American movement “never played a role in the [nation’s] socialist [political] program,” and the fact that American arts and crafts revivalists were more divided on the value of labor-saving machinery, with some condemning it altogether, and others, such as architect Frank Lloyd Wright, insisting that a machine was “nothing more than an enlarged [craftsmen’s] tool.” Otherwise, the two movements manifested themselves in remarkably similar ways, with middle class “esthetes” establishing handcrafting societies, shops, and craftsmen’s guilds across the United States.

Given their desire to elevate the urban immigrant poor, their belief that handcrafting offered a viable solution to the economic and social ills arising from industrialization, and their realization that the next generation of middle and upper class Americans would need training if they were to develop the sense of “taste” needed to perpetuate the movement, it should come as no surprise that Progressive American educators sought to integrate principles of the Arts and Crafts Revival into the nation’s public education system. This they accomplished with a two-pronged strategy: on the one hand by introducing vocational arts and handicrafts courses into American school curricula, and on the other by forming “Public School Art Societies” whose job it was to donate paintings, sculptures, and other art objects to schools, thereby guaranteeing that children were exposed early and often to “beautiful art.” For much the same reason, urban social settlement workers began offering similar programs to their constituents. The first president of the Chicago Public School Art Society was none other than Hull House co-founder Ellen Gates Starr, who together with Jane Addams sought to enrich the lives of their urban immigrant neighbors by loaning them art objects, treating them to slide shows of renowned artistic works, and providing them with opportunities to draw.

In time, social settlement workers ventured out from America's urban spaces and into the rural countryside -- particularly into the Appalachian South. As they went, they carried the principles of the Arts and Crafts Revival with them, applying them wherever possible to the task of elevating the region's poor. Over the next several decades, settlement workers labored to save, and in many cases revive, traditional Southern Appalachian handicrafts. These handicrafts were then marketed to an American public who, having been taught by arts and crafts revivalists to shun mass produced goods in favor of the "traditional" and the "handmade," were eager to furnish their homes with "authentic" American crafts.

Founded as it was in 1912, the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School, with its emphasis on weaving and handicraft production, played a prominent role in bringing the Arts and Crafts Revival to the Southern Appalachian region. For more on this topic, please see the essay entitled "Arrowcraft."