

The Politics of Ornament: the interior as building block of a political project

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Abstract

Although the name “Arts & Crafts” was coined in 1887, it describes a far older trend in the decorative arts movement. Its ideological backbone, forged by John Ruskin and William Morris, already provided support for the Morris Company, which was founded in 1861, and for Pre-Raphaelite art in general after the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was created in 1848.

The result of this ideological continuity is the presence of strong political undertones in this form of art. In the minds of William Morris and his collaborators, the purpose of decoration is not only to make things beautiful, but also to change society. Aesthetic enjoyment goes beyond the intimate, and fits in with a global political project, which includes how interiors are organised but also how decoration is produced and crafted and what this production and craft means for the world.

However, this coming and going between the interior – the decorated room – and the exterior – the social world in which the decoration is produced – is not limited to decorative arts. As I will show, the same movement guides the entire Pre-Raphaelite art, especially in its ambition to represent not only the outwardly shape of the world, but its interior development. This development is achieved through the use of psychology and natural sciences to show the life force at work in the subjects dealt with in paintings and poems. The physical interior of decorated lodgings and the mental interior of represented life converge to reach a common political objective: to promote a new society on the basis of a more perfect union between art, humankind, and nature.

This paper will show how the interior, whether it is decorated or made into art, meets the social and political exterior environment. Decorating the interior with paintings and craftwork and writing the intimate and the subjective become two converging movements: decoration makes the exterior interior by establishing a continuity between public and private ornament, while poetry makes the interior exterior by showing to the world what lies at the heart of humanity.

This double movement has an aesthetic goal and a political one. The aesthetic goal is reached by taking down the walls separating a supposedly inferior decorative and technical craft and a

supposedly superior pictorial, normative, and academic art. The political goal ensues: breaking down the separated social spheres, between workers and bourgeois (those who create decorations and those who enjoy it), women and men (the mistresses of houses and the masters of the public sphere).

This study will be grounded on theoretical texts by William Morris (“Useful Work versus Useless Toil”, “The Lesser Arts”) and texts by John Ruskin (“The Nature of Gothic”), compared to creations of the Morris Company (wallpapers for instance) and poetical productions by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (especially the sonnet-sequence *The House of Life* and some dramatic monologues).