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The Bensons: a Family in the Arts and Crafts Movement

At the end of the nineteenth century there were two main attitudes to the position of the artist in society. On the one hand, in Symbolism, there was a strong current of art for art's sake, of the artist living in his Ivory Tower, remote from ordinary men. This idea was utterly foreign to William Morris, who felt very strongly that workers should share in art through producing beautiful things and having joy in creation. The younger designers of the Arts and Crafts Movement followed Morris in being extremely conscious of their social mission and in believing that art was for everyone. Their reaction to the horrors of industrialism and to the ugliness and materialism of most Victorian lives was the wish to spread beauty.¹ Two of the founding members of the Arts and Crafts Movement were W. A. S. Benson and his brother-in-law, Heywood Sumner, who like many of their fellow designers worked in a number of fields. Sumner produced wallpaper and tapestry as well as working in book design and decorating a number of churches with sgraffito work. Benson, a metalsmith and furniture designer, was closely associated with Morris and was Chairman of Morris & Co. after the latter's death. His sister Margaret, my grandmother, was a favourite model of Burne-Jones before her marriage. Their brother, Sir Frank Benson, was an actor-manager who took Shakespeare's plays to the furthest corners of the British Isles. The following will show the way that the Bensons, as typical representatives of the Arts and Crafts Movement, not only enriched their own lives but also tried to improve the quality of other people's lives through their art.

By the early 1880's William Morris's work as a designer had led to a rebirth of the decorative arts in England. Younger designers, influenced by Morris and following his precepts, were working in such crafts as furniture, stained glass, wallpaper and fabrics. Some were fired by Morris's enthusiasm for the medieval guild system and united in co-operative groups, such as Mackmurdo's Century Guild. Both Benson and Sumner were members of the Art Worker's Guild, which was set up in 1884. The younger designers in the Guild felt that Morris's belief in the equality of the arts would not be generally acknowledged until there were more opportunities for craftsmen to show their work. Benson sent out a circular, "The Combined Arts," suggesting a scheme for an exhibition society and stating "the test of the condition of the arts in any age must be sought in the state of the crafts of design."² A committee was set up under Walter Crane to consider forming a society which would make their work more widely known. This led to the foundation of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1888 and to their first exhibition in the same year at the new Gallery in Regent Street. In preference to the "Combined Arts," Cobden-Sanderson suggested the title "Arts and Crafts," a phrase which has become part of the English language. Morris was somewhat sceptical of the venture at first, but in 1893 agreed to be president and kept this office until his death in 1896. Benson was the first secretary of the society and remained an active member until after his retirement.

William Arthur Smith Benson (1854-1924) was the eldest son of William and Elizabeth