

*Arts and Crafts Objects* by Imogen Hart. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. 246 pp. + 10 colour, 39 b/w illus. ISBN 978-0-7190-7972-6. £17.99; \$34.95.

Yet another Arts and Crafts book? Surely by now we all know the story of how John Ruskin and William Morris, inspired to rail against the dehumanization of industrial progress, had called for designers and craftspeople to turn to tradition and the handmade in an effort to restore intrinsic value to design. Enough words perhaps had already been written especially on Morris, the “godfather” of the movement – especially the explosion of publications in 1996 to commemorate the centenary of his death. More on the movement as an international force for good design appeared in 2005, when parallel exhibitions had been displayed in Britain and the United States. Conferences were held, again demonstrating the vastness and complexities of the subject and the high standard of research.

At first glance this book may disappoint. A reader today might expect any book on Arts and Crafts to be lavishly illustrated by objects whose beauty would be apparent. As far as text is concerned, no more might seem to be needed, perhaps, other than updated biographical information on the makers. A quick flip through Dr. Imogen Hart’s book shows few new illustrations to savour. Furthermore, the scope of the text seems to be tightly limited, focussed mainly on Morris and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (ACES), bookended by a quick trawl of existing general histories and what at first seems an odd chapter on the Arts and Crafts museum at the Manchester School of Art. Despite any initial disappointment, however, a closer reading reveals the book to be questioning the very identity of English mainstream Arts and Crafts.

The collective production of thousands of craftspeople, architects, and designers takes many forms; to modern eyes, some look quaint and old-fashioned, and others more like precursors of today’s best crafts. Many writers on the Arts and Crafts (including myself) have seen the sheer variety and individual approaches as indicative simply of a loosely shared, often localized philosophy within the creative arts. In fact, it is this very diversity and the attendant evolving cultural politics which so engage us. Innumerable independent and, at times, contradictory agendas have been identified as operating for the most part simultaneously. The highly personal, artistic approach within Arts and Crafts practice meant that its spectrum allowed ample room for both simplicity and splendour of materials. There is no one neat manifesto against which to tick off attributes found in the work: instead, the historian has to sort through a generous number of completely diverse texts by makers, manufacturers, and critics over a thirty- or forty-year period. Within this body of work, the boundaries between commerce and handcraft have long been