

HARMONIZING “MEANS AND PURPOSE”:
THE INFLUENCE OF RUSKIN, MORRIS, AND CRANE
ON J.E.H. MACDONALD

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To those who know of J.E.H. MacDonald (1872-1932) only as a painter and as senior founding member of the Group of Seven, commonly regarded as Canada's national art movement, the idea of associating this artist with titans of design and applied-art theory and practice of the stature of John Ruskin, William Morris, and Walter Crane may seem far-fetched. For while deserving of international renown for his vigorously expressive yet lyrical canvases and oil sketches of wilderness, rural, and urban subject matter, MacDonald, like the vast majority of his Canadian contemporaries in the arts, remains a strictly national figure, one whose contributions to the applied arts, furthermore, are unheralded even by those who profess an interest in the visual culture of their country.

The picture becomes a little clearer when it is remembered that, in common with so many of their artistic coevals, most members of the Group got their starts, in the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s, as commercial draughtsmen, lithographers, engravers, and illustrators in Montreal, Toronto, and Hamilton, Ontario, and many continued to work in these fields long after they had achieved prominence as painters and teachers. And the connection, however outwardly tenuous, can then be made to these late-nineteenth-century leaders of the movement to revive and elevate what Morris called “the art of the people: the art produced by the daily labour of all kinds of men for the daily use of all kinds of men” (Morris, “Ornamental Art,” 137). A democratic art which, though this inclusion caused qualms among those who rightly feared the vulgarizing influence of print advertising, embraced even such lowly forms as the travel poster, the magazine illustration, the insurance broker's brochure, the newsagent's window-card, and the property developer's prospectus.

Increasingly, commentators on the Group have concentrated on their project of “selling” a vision of Canada by means of techniques that ultimately derive from the promotional industry with which most of them were so intimately connected, at least in the formative stages of their careers. Even so unsoiled and spiritual a being as J.E.H. MacDonald was involved, at a craft level, in this entrepreneurial exercise and, as will become clear, saw no conflict between the depicting of a