

The Poetics and Politics of Decoration

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Morna O'Neill, *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics, 1875–1890* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2010), viii + 296 pp., hardback, ISBN 978-0-300-16768-9, £35.

Morna O'Neill and Michael Hatt (eds), *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design and Performance in Britain, 1901–10* (Yale Center for British Art and The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art: New Haven and London, 2010), vii + 328 pp., hardback, ISBN 978-0-300163353, £45.

In 1900, while he lay dying in a Parisian hotel, Oscar Wilde famously quipped: 'My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has to go'.¹ Wallpaper was, in the nineteenth century, a serious business and of all the artists who designed wallpaper for industrial manufacturers, and the mass market, Walter Crane (1845–1915) is perhaps the best known. Like his toy books, designs for ceramics, stained glass, printed fabrics, and embroidery, Crane's wallpaper designs may have seemed innocuously decorative, maybe even poetic, but they were shot through with a complex political symbolism that had evolved previous to his conversion in 1884 to socialism which thereafter shaped his pictorial/political imagery. It would be straightforward to unpick the complex interrelationship between the poetic and the political in Crane's career as a designer but problematically, of all his multifarious activities, Crane considered himself foremost a painter. Morna O'Neill's new book *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics, 1875–1890* (Yale) sets itself the difficult task of deciphering the political from the poetic in Crane's art through a close reading of his major paintings between 1875 and 1890. In addition to socialism Crane's painting was influenced by the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Algernon Swinburne as well as the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer but by 1890, O'Neill postulates, Crane had devised his own 'strikingly individual' style and ideology (p. 1).

Any study of Walter Crane's work aiming to interrogate his use of political symbolism may have easily focussed on the possible tensions arising from his commercial designs and political prints. Crane was, after all, Herculean in his output designing and working for manufacturers such as the publishers Edmund Evans, George Routledge, Marcus Ward, and John Lane, the ceramic companies Wedgwood, Maw & Co., Pilkington's, and Minton, the wallpaper and textile printers Edmund Potter & Co., A. Sanderson & Son, Jeffrey & Co., John Wilson & Sons, Thomas Wardle & Co., Templeton & Co., and Warner & Sons, as well as working for numerous political organisations such as the British Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Fabian Society, the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League, the International Socialist Workers, the Trade Union

Congress, and the Independent Labour Party. His humanism was not limited to socialism proper either: in 1895, Crane apparently signed a clemency petition on behalf of Oscar Wilde.² However, it is in painting that O'Neill contends Crane sought to reconcile all his ideas. For O'Neill:

The goal of the book is threefold: to explicate Crane's consideration and practice of painting as a decorative art; to suggest how the decorative constructs meaning; and to demonstrate that the decorative is a crucial expression of Crane's socialist politics... [i]n creating his public, political art, Crane placed painting at the all-important nexus of decoration and socialism.

A founder member of the Art Workers Guild (in 1884) and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (in 1888), which aimed to bring "pre-industrial paradigms" to bear on the commercial market' and reinstate the denigrated value of 'individual labour and handicraft', Crane was also at the nexus of Victorian Aesthetic circles (p. 98). He was unquestionably the most modern-minded of artists (like Wilde he was acutely aware of the power of proselytising, social networking, and celebrity) yet he is, in the historiography of Aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts movement, often cast somewhere in the background.³ O'Neill toils to reinstate Crane's integrity, originality, and significance and bring him back to the forefront of debates about art of the period by showing how he sought to reconcile Arts and Crafts 'truth to materials' and painting; by reinventing painting as craft and elevating craft to the level of painting (p. 75). However, it does remain surprising that for an artist and designer of his generation Crane sought to find a voice for his socialism in what had, in some ways, become by the late nineteenth century the most commodified and bourgeois of all art forms – i.e. painting. Although recasting himself an art worker in Arts and Crafts terms, in the context of Aestheticism Crane's 'thoughtful questioning of the popular characterisation of the Aesthetic work of art as a hermetic, self-reflexive, and "subjectless" entity' pushed him to go further, to investigate the "redemptive power of beauty" which could transform society (p. 20).

Crane's decorative interpretation of socialism through mythology and allegory in painting and print stood in contradistinction to his immediate context in the 1870s and 1880s which was dominated by languid Aestheticism and biting Social Realism. For O'Neill, Crane's concept of the decorative was more modern and forward-looking. Her own conceptualisation of the decorative derives much from recent studies by Jenny Anger and Elissa Auther about the hidden history and disavowal of decoration within Modernism.⁴ Crane favoured seemingly out-dated mythological subjects not as a fantastical retreat but in order to subvert their readings, and according to O'Neill, Crane's paintings can be read as modern, relevant, even prescient (p. 14). Crane often painted both classical heroes and modern labourers wearing the *bonnet rouge*, or the 'Phrygian bonnet', a complex emblem intended to indicate

'the conflation of mythological and political meaning' and interrelationship between the past and the present, myth and modernity (p. 51). In this, he was influenced by Walter Pater's idea that 'mythology is open to continual re-use and re-interpretation' (p. 33). As an artist his use of the decorative has much in common with European Symbolism and Art Nouveau, which helps explain his remarkable popularity, during his own lifetime, in Europe. O'Neill argues that Crane, although sharing formalist tendencies in painting with Claude Monet, and even Maurice Denis, was distanced from the political radicalism and anarchism of artists such as Georges Seurat and Camille Pissarro (pp. 8, 13–14). In her discussion of Crane's development of his 'portable decorations', she analyses how he distanced himself from the process of commodification by deliberately choosing archaic subject-matter, methods, and materials.

The five chapters in O'Neill's book are given over to the detailed analysis of a dozen or so major paintings by Crane which use mythological or allegorical figures whose historical meanings Crane subverts in his desire to imbue them with contemporary resonance (pp. 15–16). Through the chapters, O'Neill traces *The Renaissance of Venus* (1877) and *The Fate of Persephone* (1878) as critiques of capitalism (p. 20); *Europa* (1881) as a meditation on the 'origins of craftsmanship' (p. 53); the *Bridge of Life* (1884) as resonant with evocative imagery of labour during the bitter 1889 London dock strike; the complex illusions to contemporary morality in mural schemes such as *The Skeleton in Armour* at Vinland, Newport, Rhode Island in the USA (1881–1883) and the depicting of modern heroic deeds at Red Cross Hall, Southwark, London (1889–95); and finally *Pandora* (1885), *Freedom* (1885), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1905) as later-day allegories of the destruction of beauty in modern society.

For an artist who presented something that looked so quintessentially English, O'Neill's draws her study towards conclusion with a brief discussion of Crane's German patrons. Crane's appeal to the haute bourgeoisie is thrown into sharp relief, for instance, by 'the German industrialist Baron Julius Heinzl von Hohenfels' or the mysterious 'German Ernst Seger of Berlin' who purchased several important 'portable decorations' by Crane whilst a major show of his work toured Europe just after 1900 (p. 253). Crane was himself aware of the paradox that his work was affordable only by industrialists (for private rather than public consumption) and the twilight of his career echoes William Morris's comment that he had misspent his life 'ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich'.⁵ Although O'Neill is quite right to point out that Crane should not be seen, as Nikolaus Pevsner suggested, as a mere disciple of Morris their ideas share many points of intersection. Crane himself commented that Morris produced 'costly things for the rich' but never seems to have extended the critique to himself.⁶ It is curious, therefore, that since World War II the political Left in Britain have sought to reclaim William Morris and British Marxists, from the politician Tony Benn to the literary critic Raymond Williams, have all extolled Morris's continuing relevance. From the 1934 V&A exhibition to

celebrate the centenary of Morris's birth to the 1984 *William Morris Today* conference at London's ICA to the major Morris retrospective at the V&A in 1996 held on the centenary of his death, Morris and the history of British socialist thinking seem inseparable. Even though some commentators have cautioned that today we are 'too pious about Morris's late politics' there seems a remarkable reticence to acknowledge, and disentangle, Crane from the legacy of Morris.⁷ If the centenary of Crane's death, in 2015, will soon be upon us, it would be an interesting point to meditate upon Crane's real significance and legacy.

In concluding her book, O'Neill argues, a bit too briefly, that Crane's legacy can be found in the development of working class political banners 'as a liberating agent' and as a truly 'portable art' (p. 171). This brings her full circle, in some ways, from her opening discussion of Crane's most famous political print, *The Triumph of Labour* (1891), which established a reputation for Crane that caused H.M. Hyndman in 1912 to call him the 'artist of socialism' (p. 5). O'Neill argues that Crane had an important impact in the Edwardian era especially on the Suffrage movement. The art historian Lisa Tickner has suggested that Crane's influence on Edwardian Suffrage imagery 'was considerable' and the young Sylvia Pankhurst inspired directly by Crane's *Triumph of Labour* 'longed to be a "draughtsman in the service of the great movements of social betterment"'.⁸ Indeed, the designs of Sylvia Pankhurst, who had trained at Manchester Municipal School of Art whilst Crane was Director (1894–1896), for the Women's Social and Political Union, like those by artists such as Mary Lowndes and Charlotte Townsend for organisations such as the Suffrage Atelier, owe much to Crane's pictorial style and radical ideology. Clearly, Crane's work has a greater significance in the Edwardian era, and perhaps even in early Modernism, than that of his immediate artistic fraternity of his Victorian Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts circles. The complex changes in British art after 1900, in which Crane's socialist art was undoubtedly a force, is the subject of a second book by O'Neill (co-edited with Michael Hatt) entitled *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design and Performance in Britain, 1901–1910* (also published by Yale).

In 1907, Crane published his *An Artist's Reminiscences*, stating that 'I did not intend these reminiscences to extend beyond the nineteenth century' but his prodigious activity ensured that his work continued into the new century.⁹ Indeed, Crane's *Reminiscences*, which ran to just short of 500 pages, went into immediate reprint in its year of issue. The curious position of art in the Edwardian era betwixt Victorianism and Modernism has received slim art historical attention. The series of remarkable exhibitions held at the Barbican Art Gallery in London in the 1980s and 1990s, aimed to navigate this hiatus in scholarship: these included *The Edwardian Era* in 1985, *The Last Romantics* in 1989, and *Modern Art in Britain, 1910–14* in 1997. It was only *The Last Romantics* exhibition (and publication) that really captured the remarkable complexity, and decorative impulse, in British art of the period and Crane of course played a central role in this; the show included amongst

other paintings by Crane, his *The Fountain of Youth* (which is the last image in Crane's 1907 *Reminiscences*). Although his major artistic and commercial achievements lay in design, book illustration, interior decoration, etc., Crane 'always maintained that painting was his first love'.¹⁰

The focus of O'Neill and Hatt's book on the Edwardian era differs radically from the Barbican exhibitions as 'most scholarly discussions of Britain during the reign of Edward VII (1901–1910) have characterized the era as one of continual upheaval and cultural flux in Britain' and marginalised artistic practice that cannot be seen as prophetic of Modernism (p. 1). The book opens discussion by tackling head on the idea of the Edwardian era as the clichéd 'golden summer' of British culture which was largely perpetuated in the late twentieth century, and into early twenty-first century, through the visualisation of the period in films such as the Walt Disney produced *Mary Poppins* and George Cukor's *My Fair Lady* (both 1964) to Merchant-Ivory's painterly reinterpretation of E.M. Foster's Edwardian idylls, *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987), and *Howard's End* (1992), to Chris Noonan's recent biopic of Beatrice Potter (2006) as well as a steady stream of adaptations of the 'golden age of childhood' novels by Edith Nesbit, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Rudyard Kipling, and J.M. Barrie for television as well as film. Although 'one month after the death of Edward VII, the exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* opened at the Grafton Galleries in London' the supposed secession of Modernism after 1900 'elides "Edwardian" almost entirely from art historical discourse, and it disregards vital debates over the form and meaning of art in the first decade of the twentieth century' (p. 3). As O'Neill argues, analysis of the complexity of Roger Fry's ideas themselves reveals the 'Victorian chestnuts of morality and utilitarianism coexist with a "means-ends" calculus of Edwardian imperialism and late capitalism' (p. 4).

As editors, O'Neill and Hatt aim the volume to cut across all sorts of debates, using a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, to complicate our 'cosy' understanding of the period. Aside from an introduction by O'Neill the volume contains a remarkable seventeen essays divided into three sections under the loose headings of 'spectacle, setting, and place'. Unusually, the essays take two different forms: either 'short, focused responses to a single object or image and longer, synthesizing essays' which interrogate a diverse range of 'painting, sculpture, design, decorative arts, film, public spectacle, and mass media' to highlight 'the visual, the spatial, the geographic' (p. 6). The volume itself rather than being a commissioned compilation was 'developed as a multiauthored book rather than a collection of essays' based upon three workshops held in London in 2005, 2006, and 2008 (p. vii).

Under the grouping of 'Spectacle' Tom Gunning, Bromwen Edwards, and Angus Trimble consider, from various viewpoints, cinematic renderings and imaginings of Edward VII's coronation in 1902: Deborah Sugg Ryan considers the role of pageants and exhibitions as 'distinctive forms of public spectacle [that] emerged in Edwardian Britain'

(p. 43); David Gilbert assesses the 1908 Olympics in London; and Lynda Nead analyses the 'the distinctive perception and experience of space and visuality' in Edwardian Britain (p. 99). In 'Setting' Imogen Hart, Barbara Penner, Charles Rice, and Michael Hatt all present different readings of William Nicholson's painting *The Condor Room* (1910) with its complex social and spatial rendering of decoration; Christopher Breward considers the complexity of fashion in Edwardian theatre design; and Christopher Reed reconsiders the complications in defining the Edwardian interior. In 'Place', Anne Helmreich, Gillian Beer, and Martina Droth all consider George Frampton's sculpture *Peter Pan* (1912) in London's Kensington Gardens; Tim Barringer considers Edward Elgar's music as the epitome of Edwardian England; and Andrew Stephenson reconsiders the 'new internationalism' evident in the new networks and contexts of British art in the period (p. 278).

This volume 'cuts across the Victorian/Modern divide to ask what was "Edwardian" about art of this period' (p. 3). It asserts that 'artistic modernism is not merely a matter of style; rather, as the Edwardian art world demonstrates, it is also a product of politics and public debate, as well as exhibitions, publicity, and organizations' (p. 6). However, although many of the volume's authors are acutely conscious of periodisation and many are attentive to their reach being limited to England only, and some even mention those geographic fringes of what made-up Edwardian Britain such as Scotland and Ireland, on the whole the one criticism that could be levelled at this book is that Britain and England are not interchangeable terms. This England-centric sensibility that pervades the volume does give us an acute 'sense' of the Edwardian era but skews the complexity of the intersection of Edwardian politics and culture as something that only happened in one country rather than four; always in the metropolis rather than the periphery.¹¹ *The Edwardian Sense* ends with O'Neill's culminative essay 'A Political Theory of Decoration, 1901–1910' in which she argues that the Edwardian period 'witnessed an equally important attempt to provide art with a theory' in which the decorative became 'both the apex of a moralizing public understanding of fine art and the epitome of its private, quotidian substitute' (p. 288).

This brings O'Neill full circle to her arguments in *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics, 1875–1890* in which decoration was both a poetic and a political force in reshaping the private and the public, individual, and society. Both *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics, 1875–1890* and *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design and Performance in Britain, 1901–1910* are important books that move scholarship forward. They are engagingly written, rigorously edited and they have the highest production values: beautiful illustrations, copious notes, and excellent bibliographies. As O'Neill points out, Virginia Woolf stated that the Edwardians laid 'an enormous stress upon the fabric of things' and although 'on or about December 1910, human character changed' the 'decorative', like artistic wallpaper, was already falling quickly into eclipse (p. 305).¹²

Notes

1. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Hamish Hamilton: London, 1987), p. 546.
2. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 463.
3. This even extends to studies of the organisations that Crane played a crucial role in such as the Art Workers' Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. See, for instance, the treatment of Crane in Gavin Stamp and others, *Beauty's Awakening: the Centenary of the Art Workers' Guild 1884–1984* (Brighton Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museum: Brighton, 1984); Wendy Kaplan (ed.), *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe and America: Design for the Modern World, 1880–1920* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2004); and Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry (eds), *International Arts and Crafts* (V&A: London, 2005).
4. Jenny Anger, *Paul Klee and the Decorative in Modern Art* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004) and Elissa Auther, 'The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg', *Oxford Art Journal*, 2004, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 339–64.
5. William Morris quoted in Fiona McCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (Faber & Faber: London, 1994), p. 412.
6. Walter Crane quoted in Caroline Arscott, 'William Morris: Decoration and Materialism', in Andrew Hemingway (ed.), *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (Pluto Press: London, 2006), p. 9.
7. Tim Hilton, 'Paper Tiger', *Independent on Sunday*, 5 May 1996, p. 21.
8. Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery and the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–1914* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1988), p. 32.
9. Walter Crane, *An Artist's Reminiscences* (Methuen & Co.: London, 1907), p. 496.
10. John Christian (ed.), *The Last Romantics: The Romantic Tradition in British Art – Burne-Jones to Stanley Spencer* (Lund Humphries and Barbican Art Gallery: London, 1989), p. 88.
11. In fairness, though, Morna O'Neill's essay goes some way to balance this as it includes an important section on 'Decorative Politics in Dublin' (pp. 295–300).
12. Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', in Leonard Woolf (ed.), *Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (Hogarth Press: London, 1966), p. 319.

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