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Programme of Study: BA Hons Illustration

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Module: Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Essay 1: From the lecture series, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practise or interests, and construct a 2,500 word essay.

Consider primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Word Count: 2489

Overlooked Craftswomen of the Arts and Crafts Movement

This essay will focus on craftswomen in the Arts and Crafts Movement and how their work was undervalued and overlooked compared to their male peers. Women in the Victorian era were in a position where they were controlled by the patriarchal society and cultural norms as they were expected to be devoted to household duties and domestic life as a housewife, mother and were often referred to as the 'Angel in the House' (Dačić, 2018). Their roles were to provide comfort from the horrors of industrialisation, a cultural phenomenon that discouraged women from working outside of the home. Craftswomen of the Arts and Crafts Movement, have influenced and inspired the way artists work today. Though their names were omitted, their work clearly reflects the timeless beauty of art in the Victorian era. Craftswomen in the Arts and Crafts Movement are considered revolutionary in the modern world as they created art in a time where it was frowned upon for women to work outside of the home. My practise focuses on the portrayal of women and how they are represented in our modern world. As a practitioner in today's society, I believe it is my duty to illustrate important social issues relating to women and to focus on topics that are controversial and very feminist driven. Throughout my practice, I have focused on subjects that will not only educate my audience on current issues, but will also shock my audience and will evoke memories and an emotional response. My work has focused on subjects such as; Female Genital Mutilation, the discomforts and ailments of childbirth, gender inequality, sexual assault and harassment in Hollywood and the way in which women are portrayed in the media. My practise pushes the boundaries between illustration and textiles as my work focuses on using mixed mediums and various materials as a way to pay homage to the craftswomen who sculpted the era.



Figure 1. 'Travail' by Author (Taylor, 2018)

The Arts and Crafts Movement started in Britain, in the mid 19th century as a reaction to industrialisation, Mass Production, Capitalism and factory work, the movement sought to reunite artists with the traditional subject of nature and inspired many artists to convey the beauty around them. Different to other radical movements, The Arts and Crafts Movement was constructed by intellectuals such as; John Ruskin and William Morris. William Morris is known as the primary artist involved in The Arts and Crafts Movement as his company; Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, created work that was momentous towards the movement and the writings of John Ruskin heavily influenced William Morris and The Arts and Crafts Movement. The role of Craftswomen in The Arts and Crafts Movement was contradicting as craftswomen had very limited opportunities and art specialisms that they were allowed to participate in, but they were also celebrated for improving upon their household skills.

Craftswomen were both encouraged to refine and enhance their skills and contribute towards the Arts and Crafts Movement, whilst also being criticized for creating work that was considered 'Women's art'. Male practitioners were convinced that women had copied their work and therefore their work wasn't considered their own and was overlooked by society. 'Female entry into professional and public life was so fiercely contested and many women seeking a life beyond or in addition to domesticity, found themselves subjected to individual and general abuse, ridicule and opposition' (Morris, 2002). Craftswomen of the Arts and Crafts Movement, were not considered as competitors by male artists. Male practitioners believed that the only way embroidery and needlework could be useful, was if it was created by an artist with years of experience that a woman didn't possess the time or skills to create. In today's society, textiles is a craft that is still practised worldwide and has continued to influence fashion, surface pattern and design for centuries.

The American Arts and Crafts Movement influenced many upcoming artists at the time. 'One of the most conspicuous developments in American Arts and Crafts - and one developed again by craftswomen rather than men - occurred in the field of ceramics' (Adams, 1987). The amateur craftswomen of Cincinnati, attended the city's School of Art at a time where it was frowned upon for women to educate themselves. These craftswomen became highly regarded for their contribution towards the American Arts and Crafts Movement. An influential female artist of the Arts and Crafts Movement includes; Sadie Irvine, who was an American pottery artist and her work changed the movement forever.

'Embroidery was the one field men did not want to dominate' (Marsh, 2002). In the Victorian era, embroidery was considered a 'Woman's art' as male practitioners seemed to believe that the only skills required to create hand embroidered pieces was 'a sedentary life, industry and patience' (Marsh, 2002). Textiles is an ancient artform that has structured the way artists work for many centuries and majorly contributed to the success of the Arts and Crafts Movement. 'Embroidery in various forms has existed as long as man has been able to produce fabric' (Magnusson, 2019). In the Victorian era, people of wealth and power began to commission craftswomen to

create hand stitched garments, ornamental objects and intricate wall hangings. Though wealthy women were fond of needlework and textiles they were unable to practise the craft as it was degrading for a woman of such status to involve themselves with the work of a commoner.

The Arts and Crafts Movement allowed women to have the opportunity to show artistic expression and develop their practise, without having to become a professional in the artworld and to continue to be paid for their work. The movement expanded their influences outside of the home, allowing them to attend some art associations and educate themselves at colleges, that were strictly for men. The Feminist Art Movement encouraged women to fight for equality in the artworld 'by addressing the traditional notions of crafts and decorative arts and the idea of female aesthetics' (Dačić, 2018).

As the artists ability began to improve, the Arts and Crafts Movement enabled women to participate at the level of their choice and for middle class women who had no need to earn a living, this meant that they were free to express their artistic, creative ability. However, for working class women the movement did not offer many jobs as women were seen as secondary to men and craftswomen could only participate in feminine art such as; embroidery, weaving, jewellery making, creating floral designs and garment making. Architecture was considered as one of the main specialisms in the Arts and Crafts Movement and was strictly reserved for male artists only, and this influenced the exclusion of female artists from the Art Workers Guild. The Art Workers Guild was an association where artists could converse and express theories and ideologies with fellow artists. The exclusion of female practitioners from the Art Workers Guild encouraged women to keep fighting for equality in the artworld and inspired artists such as Julia Morgan, to become an architect in a time where it was strictly a male dominated artform. Though craftswomen were frowned upon for their artistic practise, this didn't stop female artists from creating extraordinary pieces that are still marveled at today. Some of the most influential female artists in the Arts and Crafts Movement include; Jane Morris, May Morris and Sadie Irvine.

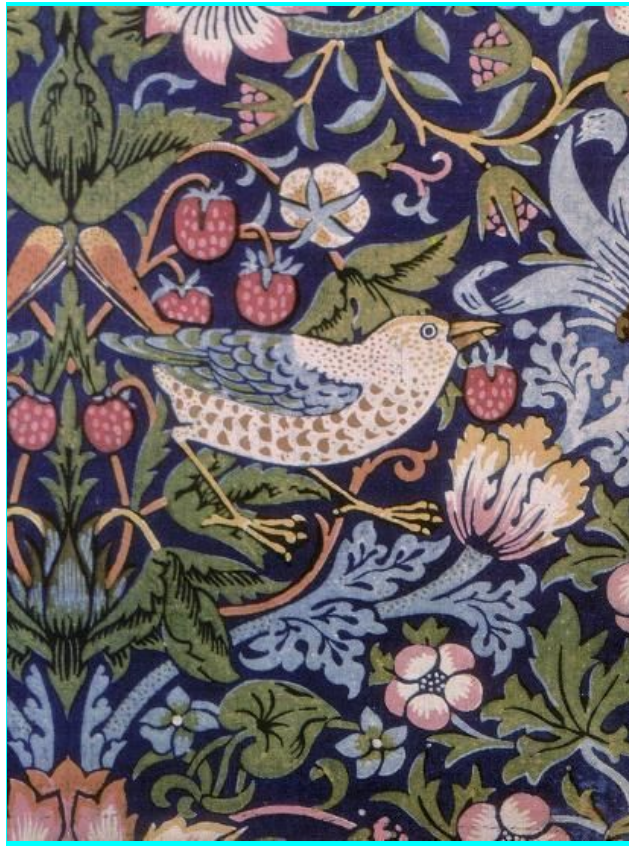


Figure 2. 'Strawberry Thief' by Author (Morris, W. 1883)

The Arts and Crafts Movement challenged the process of industrial design and the manufacture of overused, mass produced art. The Steam Age had brought mechanisation to the industry, transportation and agriculture, which changed the way people saw the world. Fascinated with new technology and machinery, the practice of artists worldwide began to decline. The Arts and Crafts Movement was considered a rebellion, a reaction to the negative impact industry had on Miners, labourers and factory workers that were forced to work long hours with no breaks. The Arts and Crafts Movement sought to inspire artists to return to traditional art that was inspired by nature and to create unique, intricate and handmade pieces such as; jewellery, weaving, book binding, architecture, paintings, illustrations, textiles, embroidery, ceramics, metalwork, ornamental objects, enameling and creating floral fabrics. The Arts and Crafts Movement was founded by William Morris, a British craftsman and radical political whose practices focused on textiles, poetry, and writing. William Morris appreciated the importance of craftsmanship in a piece of art and believed industrialization removed skill from the manufacturing

process and lacked inspiration and originality compared to handcrafted work. Morris believed that he could change the way people viewed art, by creating functional patterned designs and textiles that were available to people of any class, not just the rich. 'For Morris, the history of art was the history of the people and the surest record of the society which produced it' (Harris, 1984). William Morris created art in a time where people were adjusting from farmwork to factories. This meant that working class people were overworked and underpaid, whilst rich people were gaining profit due to their hard work. William Morris found beauty in domestic objects and wanted to produce truthful artwork as he considered factory made goods, to be dishonest and uninspiring. Throughout the Arts and Crafts Movement, Morris shared his political and socialist ideas with fellow artists, who were determined to change the life of poor people in Victorian England.

In the Victorian era Textiles art involved weaving, hand embroidery and delicate needlework to create timeless tapestries, that not only had beautiful imagery and narrative but was created with the purpose of insulating castles in the Middle Ages. The first documented embroidery was the Bayeux Tapestry that depicts the battle of Normandy in 1066, this means that embroidery has been influencing modern day society, for centuries.

Though needlework was considered a 'woman's art', the most highly regarded textiles workshops in London included Morris and Co and The Royal School of Art Needlework. Both of these establishments were run by highly talented craftswomen, that employed hard working women to create textiles for professional and personal uses. One of the most inspiring and influential craftswomen of the Arts and Crafts Movement was May Morris, her practise focused on embroidery and activism as she was the first person to create an Art Guild for female practitioners.



Figure 3. 'Honeysuckle' by Author (Morris, M. 1883)

Mary, May Morris was born in 1862 and is the youngest daughter of William Morris, the father of the Arts and Crafts Movement and Jane Morris, a renowned embroiderer and famous subject of the Pre Raphaelites paintings. May Morris continued her family's legacy of textiles and floral patterns. May Morris started working at Morris & Co at a very young age alongside her older sister, Elizabeth Morris. This meant that May Morris was introduced to textiles and the artworld at a very young age and although her hopes of becoming a female practitioner in the Victorian era seemed dim, William Morris' reputation as the founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, meant that she was given some leniency compared to other craftswomen. Though William Morris and Jane Morris are highly credited for their contribution towards the movement, May Morris possessed a wider variety of skills compared to her parents as she could design, create and embroider unique floral wallpaper designs. At the young age of 23, May Morris began to create house style, floral designs for her fathers embroidery firm, Morris and Co. This allowed May Morris' work to be showcased to a variety of different people, allowing her work to gain popularity. In May 1887, Morris was given the opportunity to exhibit pieces of

her own work and her collaborative pieces with Morris and Co, at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. May Morris' involvement in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, was a big step towards equality for craftswomen in the artworld. May Morris created illustrious designs that reflected the beauty of nature and its wildlife. May Morris was fascinated with British birds such as; barn owls, blue tits, sparrows and blackbirds and included them into her unique floral designs. Similar to other artists in the Arts and Crafts Movement, May Morris preferred to use a Hedgerow Bryony design as a linking device in her pattern designs. May Morris also included decorative embroidered lettering, within her designs that were often inspired by poetry and old English proverbs.



Figure 4. 'Discomforts of Pregnancy' by Author (Taylor, 2018)

May Morris was one of the most influential craftswomen of the Arts and Crafts Movement and her work has inspired many contemporary artists including my own practise. May Morris's practise primarily focused on creating intricate hand embroidered pieces that featured birds, flowers, leaves and poetry as she was clearly

inspired by the beauty of nature. I have also created nature inspired work by creating hand embroidered pieces such as; shells, birds and the human form. May Morris was also a feminist, socialist and teacher, As one of the only women to study the fine crafts at the Royal Collage of Art, May Morris's sheer determination and fight for equality during the Arts and Crafts Movement has heavily influenced my practise. In past works I have commented on womens issues such as; gender inequality, female genital mutilation, childbirth, representation of women in the media and sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood. I believe that it is incredibly important that women's issues are heard and I use textiles and illustration to convey this message.

May Morris was not only a successful craftswomen, designer, hand embroiderer, jeweller and writer. Her practise also contributed towards literature, education and teaching. The contribution of such an influential heroin such as May Morris, showcased the commitment that people made, in the Arts and Crafts Movement, to knowledge and to further educate themselves on the current issues of the era. May Morris was a campaigner for women's rights and her amazing achievements such as; creating an art workers guild for women, were underestimated by society and the male perception of female artists in the Victorian period. May Morris pathed the way for future female artists as without her contribution to the Arts and Crafts Movement, women today might not be able to attend art associations and art colleges. May Morris's accomplishments have been overshadowed by her famous Father, William Morris and his illustrious lifestyle, all of her career and some of her designs are mistaken as William Morris designs. May Morris is known as the 'anonymous woman' as her work isn't credited as highly as her fathers because the role of a woman in the Victorian era, was to be a submissive, devoted housewife with no aspirations outside of the home. Many textiles artists in the Arts and Crafts Movement went uncredited as they were either female or they practised textiles and the specialism was therefore considered inferior and useless compared to male practitioners, inventors and creators involved in the industrial revolution.

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