

## An Arts and Crafts vision: A Pot and a Lecture

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**Abstract:** This garden pot was made around 1898 at the Compton Potters' Arts Guild (PAG) in Surrey, established by Mary Seton Watts (1849–1938). The lecture 'The Decorative Arts' was given by William Morris (1834–1896) on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1877. Although this, his first public speech, took place shortly before he became a committed socialist, Morris's political opinions are clear: he argues for the status of craftsmen and women and their products to be valued more highly. He deplores the degenerative effects of mechanization, the profit motive and fashion. This essay will seek to compare his vision of the future of handcrafting with what the pot, the finished product of a handcrafting process, represented twenty-five years later. The comparative anonymity of Mary Watts, whose surviving pots are now costly antiques, reflects her position as the wife of one of the most fêted fine artists of the Victorian era, a role she could exploit commercially to market her products whilst diverting attention away from herself.

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Figure 1: Scroll pot, 35cm x 35cm. (Photo: P Fraser)

Mary Fraser-Tyler married George Frederick Watts RA (1817-1904) in 1886 and four years later they built a country home near Guildford as a winter escape from the polluted air of London, where they lived in the artists' colony of Holland Park. Near their property 'Limnerslease' at Compton, where Mary Watts established the pottery, there was a usable source of gault clay. Her design for the pot is plain, the simple, lipped bowl shape with integral handles reminiscent of classical pots from the Mediterranean from earliest times. The technique for making this pot is ancient: clay was dug up, placed in a settling tank and water added to remove impurities. After a few days it was transferred to a horse-driven pug mill, a pit in which a central shaft of blades mixed it to obtain a homogeneous consistency. After kneading to eliminate air bubbles it was ready for modelling. Large pots were either formed in a mould or thrown. A wood fired bottle kiln, built with the help of family friend and commercial potter William De Morgan, was used for firing the pots once they had been stamped with the logo of the Guild, a 5 cm wide wheel mark with the inscription from the Book of Ezekiel chapter 1, verse 16: "This work was as it were a wheel within a wheel". This is a reference to the wheel of labour and its eternal round, reflecting Mary Watts's personal Christian belief. There is no comparable explicit linking of faith to craft in Morris's work.

Morris wrote the script for his first public lecture 'in a beautiful hand with only an occasional abbreviation or correction' between November 24<sup>th</sup> and December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1877.<sup>1</sup> In order to gauge the acoustics of the Co-operative Hall in Castle Street near Oxford Street he visited it with his colleague George Wardle and read out extracts from Robinson Crusoe. The audience was a gathering of members of the Trades Guild of Learning. His business Morris and Company was well established in London and 1877 was also the year he took the lease on a retail premises at 264, Oxford Street selling fabric, wallpaper, carpets, furniture and ceramics for the domestic interior. Earlier in the year Morris had been elected to the Council of the Guild, founded to broaden the education of skilled tradesmen and apprentices. He therefore spoke with authority in the field as a practicing craftsman and member of the Guild. The title of this lecture was originally 'The Decorative Arts', published on December 8<sup>th</sup> in *The Architect*. The following year it was published as one of a series of five he gave on domestic decoration and its title changed to 'The Lesser Arts', ironically reflecting the conventional academic superiority of fine arts, a relationship he identified early in this lecture as undesirable.

Morris wanted to raise the status of decorative art. From the outset he struck a positive note and spoke with optimism of the future. He also saw far-reaching implications in his theme, since present circumstances – 'change and stir about us' – will lead to 'the bettering of all mankind'.<sup>2</sup> He defined the lesser arts as 'the crafts of house-building, painting, joinery and carpentry, smiths' work, pottery and glass-making, weaving and many others'.<sup>3</sup> For Morris these crafts were fundamental to humanity and studying their history was essential:

those wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms invented, which men have so long delighted in...<sup>4</sup> and '...no man... can sit down today and draw...the form of an ordinary vessel...that will be other than a development or a degradation of forms used hundreds of years ago.'<sup>5</sup>

Both Morris and Mary Watts had become experts in their crafts through practice and study. Mary trained formally in clay-modelling under Aimé Jules Dalou (1838-1902) at the

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<sup>1</sup> E.P.Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, (London: Merlin Press, 1996) p 252.

<sup>2</sup> William Morris, *The Lesser Arts*, in *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, (London: Penguin 2008) p56.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Slade School (1872) and at the South Kensington Schools (1870-72). She originally wanted to be a painter but gave that up after marriage in deference to her husband, the most famous portraitist in England. Morris (whose portrait was painted by Watts in 1871) was largely self-taught in a wide range of crafts including tapestry, book-binding, printing and stained glass. He, and later Mary, visited the London museums to study the history of design. Mary travelled throughout the Mediterranean on her extended honeymoon (1886-87), visiting Athens, Messina, Constantinople and Egypt. She sketched designs constantly during her 'Grand Tour'. In the previous century large quantities of sculptured ornament had been brought back by English tourists as fashionable souvenirs. The 'antique' urns and vases could be genuine or reproductions even then. Italian manufacturers of expensive terracotta were exporting garden wares to England until the early 1900s when potteries such as Compton provided competition in quantity and quality – our native clay was more likely to withstand British winters.

Morris emphasised that the artisan must find satisfaction in his work. 'To give people pleasure in the things they must perforce use, that is one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce make, that is the other use of it.'<sup>6</sup> Personal involvement with the arts is fundamental to human happiness: 'they (the arts) are the sweeteners of human labour, both to the handicraftsman, whose life is spent in working in them, and to people in general...they make our toil happy, our rest fruitful.'<sup>7</sup> Mary Watts and her husband were supporters of the Home Arts and Industries Association, which aimed to give practical, free instruction in a wide range of crafts to the working classes in order to encourage a love of the work for its own sake and an appreciation of art. It was dependent on the involvement of educated, leisured women like Mary to run the classes. Launched in 1885 its aim was to do exactly what Morris wanted – to revive the dying art of handicrafts. Where possible this should draw out natural talent and lead to professional standards of work and gainful employment. In establishing her pottery, Mary had brought together a small workforce of around twelve young local men and set up a guild to train them in clay modeling. Four trained potters worked under her with the trainees. She was as concerned for the workers' 'fruitful' rest as for their working lives, building a hostel for them in the grounds with a housekeeper and a recreation room.<sup>8</sup>

Profit and fashion are features of the modern commercial environment which Morris castigated repeatedly during this lecture. Intelligent popular art could not be born of the desire to satisfy fashion and have commercial success, a subject close to the reality of life for Morris, whose businesses did both. Yet he distanced himself from such motives: 'People say to me often enough: If you want to make your art succeed and flourish, you must make it the fashion: a phrase which I confess annoys me' and later refers disparagingly to the motives of those engaged in making such goods: 'who spend their time in pushing fashion this way and that for their own advantage.'<sup>9</sup> Mary had her reservations with regard to profit but not where the latest marketing opportunities were to be found. She was not motivated by profit because she did not need to be – her husband had sold portraits to fund the setting up of her business when she had started terracotta classes in Compton.<sup>10</sup> She sold pots directly from the pottery, by mail order and through Liberty's department store on Regent's Street. Writing to James Nichol, a Scottish potter she hoped would come and work for her, she stated: 'I believe that if rightly worked, terra cota (*sic*), used as we use it, will have a good market'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Morris, *The Lesser Arts*, p 58.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p 63

<sup>8</sup> Mark Bills, *An Artists' Village*, (London: Philip Wilson Ltd, 2011), p 105.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, *The Lesser Arts*, p 69.

<sup>10</sup> From 1895 Mary Watts was training locals to make terracotta panels to decorate the local cemetery chapel.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Nichol, Dec 11<sup>th</sup> 1900.

Later that month she wrote again to Nichol:

Mr Watts wishes to encourage the industry and is prepared to spend all that is necessary for its true development – not that I wish it to be a charitable gift from him, but money laid out, not hoping at first for any return, or ever for anything but a small percentage – desiring to see and to have the pleasure of knowing that a beautiful work is being created about him.<sup>12</sup>

Her motives were both commercially pragmatic yet virtuous in Morris's terms with regard to profits. Marketing was vital to the success of her undertaking. She chose to make a wide range of garden ornaments because gardening was popular, especially with women, and the locally available terracotta was perfectly suited to this, 'there is a big opening for our work. In the present fashion for gardening and garden decoration I believe we have a good assurance that we can keep the work from being given chiefly to Italians'.<sup>13</sup>

Morris protests somewhat ingenuously about marketing, since his firm was effective in promoting their goods at many international exhibitions in London and in the USA as well as taking advertising space in the press. At Compton, Mary's classical designs were produced alongside others inspired by natural, native forms decorated with the Tudor rose, apples, poppies and Celtic knots and symbols to broaden their appeal. The foremost garden designer of the period, Gertrude Jekyll, gave Compton many commissions. She also designed a pot for general production, 'the Jekyll pot'. This was a marketing coup. At Jekyll's suggestion, miniature versions of Compton pots were produced to decorate the garden of the dolls house Lutyens was making for Queen Mary in 1921. The PAG products also won prizes at the Chelsea Flower Show and from the Royal Botanical Society. Ironically Clough Ellis commissioned pieces for his Italianate village at Portmeirion. The pot therefore also corresponds to Morris's requirement that any object claiming to be a work of art must also be useful. Morris puts utility on a par with artistic merit in the course of this lecture: 'nothing can be a work of art which is not useful.'<sup>14</sup> The pot is a utilitarian object yet could be used as pure ornament, as a feature in its own right in formal gardens, as a focal point in a vista or filled with plants.

Morris linked the lesser arts to the importance of the artisan throughout this lecture. The degenerative effects of mechanization on quality could only be countered by people in the field. First must come the acceptance of responsibility to act. 'it is not by accident that an idea comes into the heads of a few; rather they are pushed on, and forced to speak or act by something stirring in the heart of the world'.<sup>15</sup> This is exactly what Morris is doing by speaking out and by attempting, in his own manufacturing practices, to be true to a moral framework he was beginning to formulate for the welfare of the workers in a craft enterprise. Mary Watts did not publish her thoughts on such matters but welcomed press attention and journalists were quick to foreground the philanthropic aspects of her pottery.<sup>16</sup> Compton Pottery catalogues printed around the turn of the century contain brief explanations of the aims and standards of their work which are as close as Mary Watts ever came to theorizing about her undertaking.

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<sup>12</sup> Letter to Nichol, Dec 17<sup>th</sup> 1900.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *The Lesser Arts*, p 82.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p 68.

<sup>16</sup> See Erskine for a typical example : 'A great deal has been written lately concerning the depopulation of the country and the migration of the labouring classes to London, where, often from mere superfluity of numbers, they drift into the ranks of the unemployed....It was from a perception of this need that the present industry arose – an industry which, to give an interest and employment tho' the neighbourhood, has developed step by step into its present healthy proportions and bids fair to become one of the most successful and artistic enterprises of the sort in this country.'

The introductory page states:

the guild.... having for its object the development of ARTIST CRAFTSMEN under exceptionally favourable circumstances who would in the end be capable of using to the best purpose the very noble material provided by British Clays.

The catalogues also drew the attention of the prospective customer to the hand crafting of the pots and the fact that art is being created here based on true principles of beauty:

In the Potters' Arts Guild the WORKERS desire to keep before them the knowledge that a great NATIONAL ART flourishes upon the root of a fine NATIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP, and greatly desire that while they are endeavouring to supply such things as are commonly required by the public, their work should be marked by a distinction of manner, and should make evident the knowledge of true principles of beauty.

Another booklet mentions the appeal of these products 'as the figures are hand modeled (*sic*) they have a distinction which cannot be obtained by mass-production methods.'<sup>17</sup> One may imagine Morris approving of this. He regrets the historical anonymity of the worker who has helped powerful men realize their plans. In a phrase that directly placed him on a par with the men in his audience that night in London he described: 'men like you and me, handicraftsmen, who have left no names behind them, nothing but their work'.<sup>18</sup> This was also disingenuous since he had named his firm after himself whilst Mary Watts was reluctant to claim personal credit for her business. She was quick to credit her husband, despite the fact that his involvement was financial rather than artistic. The Watts's contribution to the revival of handcrafting on the proceeds of fine art is probably not what Morris envisaged. Mary renamed her pottery to foreground the importance of its guild structure. Originally known as Compton Terra Cotta Home Arts it became the Compton Potters' Arts Guild, a co-operative scheme overseen by a committee with worker representation, though she remained at the head, directing design, as Morris did at Morris & Co. The new name Potters' Arts Guild foregrounded the three aspects of the enterprise that really mattered to her. She insisted her goods be marketed by Liberty's under that name, not their own, as was usually their practice.

As the lecture ends Morris admits that this has all been a dream. He has said nothing about the practicalities of change, this is no plan of action and he does not go into the skills needed for any one of the decorative arts. His criticisms are moral – he uses the revolutionary language of liberty, equality and fraternity - and his vision of the future is idealized but hopeful: 'men will then assuredly be happy in their work, and that happiness will assuredly bring forth decorative, noble, popular art.'<sup>19</sup>

The utopia he so often described in his prose works of fiction is also here as a rural idyll.<sup>20</sup> Everyone is happy in contrast to the city where filth and poverty overwhelm: 'these hideous streets', 'hideous hovels' with their 'everyday squalors'.<sup>21</sup> Rather 'the kitchen in a country farmhouse is most commonly a pleasant and homelike place'. Morris wanted to create a new world where 'the contrast is less disgraceful between the fields where beasts live and the streets where men live'.<sup>22</sup> Making pots in their own village was less disruptive than

<sup>17</sup> PAG catalogue, undated, capitals original, William Morris Gallery.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, *The Lesser Arts*, p 61.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p 86.

<sup>20</sup> See: *The Earthly Paradise* (1865), *A Dream of John Ball* (1886).

<sup>21</sup> Morris, *The Lesser Arts*, p 72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p 85.

leaving to seek work in the town for those young men engaged by the PAG. Both William Morris (at Kelmscott Manor and the Red House) and George and Mary Watts (at Limnerslease and Freshwater on the Isle of Wight) had built their own rural utopias, sanctuaries to enjoy away from their London lives and the sight of all that squalor. The garden theme, fundamental to the success of the Compton products, was the enduring, dominant design story behind Morris & Co's house style.

After the lecture Morris commented 'it went off very well and I was not at all nervous but made myself well heard'.<sup>23</sup> The reaction of the audience to the lecture is not otherwise recorded, though Philip Webb, Morris's colleague and friend, was moved to tears.<sup>24</sup> The pot is an example of what Morris wanted artisans to make. It was handcrafted, useful, made by a rural workforce living as a community and subordinating profit to the production of high quality decorative art. Mary Watts's largely anonymous role in inspiring the Compton pottery contrasts with the enduring familiarity of Morris's name and what he achieved on a much larger scale. Whilst the rarity of surviving examples of PAG pots makes them costly antiques in the modern age, Morris's designs are still widely available for traditional home furnishings as well as in applications such as mouse mats. His talent for presenting an idealized view of society as a utopian dream resulted in his writings having a political legacy which he could not have foreseen – in the twentieth century they were adapted as fairy tales for inclusion in educative children's literature in Communist countries, Morris was called one of the first Communists and the origins of Socialism traced to Victorian industrialisation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p 383.

<sup>25</sup> *Ein Buch vom Kommunismus für junge Leute* by Hans Bentzien (Berlin DDR, 1976) is a typical example.

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