



A Hundred Years of the Art Workers' Guild

The Art Workers' Guild

By Gavin Stamp

What is the Guild? The sculptor and first Master of the Guild, **George Blackall Simmons**, concluded in 1885 that, 'The AWG differs from all art societies in that it is not formed for the propagation of any one branch or style of art. It is not a school, it is not a club, and it is not a debating society. In the AWG I find something of a spirit of the studio life of Rome'. In the dark days of the Great War, the Master for 1917, **Henry Wilson**, had a less high-flown answer. 'For myself, I know no more consoling atmosphere, few more recreative, regenerative influences than those to be found in the Guild.'

To the outer world however, the Guild is a club of artists, and, as everybody who is anybody knows, artists are unpractical cranks. A very great crank, **C.R. Ashbee**, writing in 1938, thought the Guild 'spirit' had a very high purpose. 'It is the yeast of revolution. Its roots of course are in the Middle Ages and in Hellas: but it lived on through the classic Renaissance and as such is a main thread in what we call civilization itself, which is but a gathering together of many traditions. The Art Workers' Guild, indeed, has been dubbed: the last citadel of traditionalism'. So, by the 1930s, tradition was enshrined at No. 6 Queen Square, London WC1.

Writing in 1982, **Frederick Bentham** recalled how, then, 'The Guild' was something indeed to inspire awe. From earliest boyhood this had been the place to which father had vanished, every other Friday, to mingle among the greatest artists in the land. Yet by 1962, the greatest artists in the land apparently no longer wanted to join, complained **Gordon Russell**. 'Unless we can recruit young and keen members I cannot see a future for the Guild. It isn't as if such people no longer exist; in architecture, in pottery and in stained glass for example there are many such. At one time they all wanted to come in. Can we honestly say that is the case today? And whose failure is this, theirs or the Guild's or both? Is the Guild perhaps showing signs of middle age spread with the resulting lethargy and dullness?'

In 1984, the Art Workers' Guild is still with us: indeed, is alive and well. Given the history of 20th century Britain, with artistic fashions so hostile to the Arts and Crafts idealism which produced the Guild, its survival may seem miracle. Other similar societies and guilds – **Mackmurdo's** Century Guild, **Ashbee's** own Guild of Handicrafts, for instance – are now historical phenomena. But the Art Workers' Guild

survives, and survives much as its founders intended. At the half-centenary, in 1934, the Guild appeared old-fashioned. Today, it may seem less so. Indeed, with a strong revival of interest in handwork and the crafts, with the mechanistic philosophy of the Modern Movement in retreat, the Guild has come into its own again, while institutions committed to avant-garde seem reactionary. It is ironic that the Guild's centenary coincides with the 150th birthday of the Royal Institute of British Architects, as well as appropriate that it is also **William Morris's** 150th birthday. The Guild was founded by architects, yet, in the 'Architecture: a Profession or an Art?' debate of 1892, the Guild was firmly on the side of art. And perhaps art may yet triumph over professionalism.

Yet what is the Art Workers' Guild today? It remains a sort of club, whose members may agree on a general attitude to craftsmanship and quality but are united by no one partisan philosophy or style. That may be the Guild's strength, as **Ashbee** long ago recognised: challenge the individual opinions of Guildsmen and you will find respectable conservatives, ardent socialists, Catholics, protestants, Jews and freethinkers rubbing shoulder to shoulder. Reality for them is outside all this. Something beautifully done, be it a jewel, a lithograph, a basket, a cathedral may reveal the truth. A respect for quality, for craftsmanship, for the work of the hand, still characterises the Guild and, in the second industrial revolution, with a future of electronics, with unemployment or leisure a feature of life, recognition of the healing, humane value of craftsmanship is as vital as it was during the first industrial revolution.

So the Guild as a sort of club. Members are elected after their work is submitted for approval by the Committee, although it used to be by the whole Guild. Meetings are held fortnightly in the hall built in the yard of No 6, Queen Square, Bloomsbury. This hall is a convivial place; it was designed by **F.W. Troup** and built in the 1913-14. Around the wall are painted the names of Guildsmen since 1884: white when still with us, gilded when not. In niches sit busts of some of the founders, while the walls are covered with portraits of Past Masters. The current Master wears a strange red robe, designed, some say, by **Voysey** (though **Ashbee** thought this, and other traditions, were created by **Troup** along with the Hall). He wears a chain of office made by **Sir George Frampton**, sits in a chair designed by **W.R Lethaby** for the short-lived firm Kenton & Co, behind a table provided in 1888 as a temporary measure by **W.A.S Benson**. Members sit on (uncomfortable) ladder-backed, rush seated Clissett chairs, based on a design by **Ernest Gimson**. All very formal, very quaint, very traditional; yet within the Guild, as in civilization in a more general sense, a tradition may enshrine and pass on great truths about human nature and life. In the case of the Guild this truth is summed up in the motto on the Master's chain and in the symbol above the Master's chair, designed by **Walter Crane**: 'Art is Unity'.

What the Guild is can be explained by its foundation: in 1884 there was no hall, no Master and no Guild tradition, but there was a climate in which the Guild idea flourished. The ideas of Pugin, Ruskin and **Morris** encouraged much questioning of both industrial society and of the state of art and architecture. Men seemed to be separated from the products of their hands; art seemed the product of convention rather than the creative craftsman. One answer was the idea of the Guild, a re-creation of the social organisation of the Middle Ages, those craft societies which, apparently, built the cathedrals.

A.H Mackmurdo regarded his own Century Guild, which has a hallowed place in the history of the Arts and Crafts movement, as the forbear of the Art Workers' Guild but, in truth, the AWG was based on more than the Gothic utopianism of advanced architects. In 1881, a group of designers and decorative artists began to meet to discuss matters of common interest in **Lewis F. Day's** house. This, 'The Fifteen' was later disbanded and most members joined the Guild after it was founded. The Art Workers' Guild itself had similar origins. In 1883, pupils and assistants of the great architect, **Richard Norman Shaw**, formed a society to discuss art and architecture. This was called the St George's Art Society as it met under the shadow of Hawksmoor's St George's, Bloomsbury. A principal concern of the society was the apparent decline of the artistic basis of architecture and the increasing separation of art and architecture, with the Royal Academy becoming exclusively concerned with oil painting and the R.I.B.A increasingly dominated by surveyors. It was decided that there was a need for a larger society, with artist and sculptors among the membership as well as architects. The moving spirits behind this idea were five of **Shaw's** best men, all still under thirty: **Gerald Horsley, W.R. Lethaby, Mervyns McCartney, Ernest Newton** and **E.S. Prior Newton**. 'A society composed of painters, architects, sculptors and other artists would tend very much to improve art, and to found a school of artists in touch with one another. Architects have much to learn from painters and sculptors, and versa.' **Lethaby** considered that 'The drifting apart of architecture, painting and sculpture is shown on the one hand in the trade decoration of our buildings, and on the other in the subject-painting and portrait-sculpture of our galleries. But any art-revival can only be on the lines of the unity of all the aesthetic arts.'

The belief that Art is Unity was the key to the success of the Guild, as **Selwyn Image** recognised as he celebrated the first quarter-century in 1909. 'The central idea, the vivifying principle, which so appealed to our founders, was the idea, the principle, of the unity, the interdependence, the solidarity of all the arts...I find that at the first meeting of the Guild it was settled, that "The Society should consist of handicraftsmanship and designers in the arts': and, immediately, handicraftsmen and designers were brought together to meet one another, to know one another, to talk to one another, to discuss with one another - yes, but how? On terms of an absolute

equality, as common servants of one great mistress, Art'. The five architects were joined by 'friends' – a diverse and distinguished group of sculptors, painters, designers and more architects, making twenty-five in all. The first meeting took place in the Charing Cross Hotel on 15 January 1884. At a second meeting at the hotel, on 11 March, **Prior's** proposal that the society should be called 'The Art Workers' Guild' was agreed upon. By 1890 there were 150 members and it is fair to say that these included some of the best artists and craftsmen in the land.

The Guild was an immediate success: it was right for the times. The Guild first met in the rooms of the Century club in Pall Mall in 1888. A temporary home was found in the hall of Barnards Inn, but Cliffords Inn became the home of the Guild until the house in Queen Square was acquired in 1913. No.6 had been used by James Ackerman & Co, the lithographers and printers, while Queen Square itself had associations with **William Morris**. A bust of **Morris** sits in pride of place in the niche above the Master's chair in **Troup's** Hall, yet when **Morris's** name was first put up forward as a member in 1888, he was literally blackballed in the election. Fortunately, owing to what **Gordon Russell** called 'an entirely reprehensible and utterly justifiable bit of fiddling on the part of a scrutineer', the black ball was deftly removed from the box. The incident is revealing about the Art Workers' Guild: already it was a club and not a handicraft body or a pressure group. The members may not agree and, indeed, may argue vigorously, but the Guild has survived because of a general agreement to avoid public controversy. The Art Workers' Guild was not created in the image of **Morris**.

Some shared **Morris's** mediaevalist tastes: many did not. The Guild has been catholic about style – it is technique that matters – but if any one thing has united members it is reverence for St Paul's Cathedral. St Paul's Cathedral indeed, was the subject of an embarrassing and serious internal controversy which made the Guild all the more determined to be a private club rather than a campaigning public body like the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, with which the Guild had close connections.

The controversy was embarrassing as it concerned **William Blake Richmond**, the painter and mosaic designer, who was Master in 1891. It was in that year that disquiet was first expressed about **Richmond's** application of mosaic to the choir vaults of St Paul's, requiring the blunting and spoiling of Wren's classical mouldings. In 1889 the controversy became public, and the then Master – appropriately a future surveyor of St Paul's, **Mervyn McCartney** – wrote to the Dean 'that in the opinion of this Society the scheme of decoration at St Paul's proposed and partially executed by **W.B. Richmond** has proved injurious to the Cathedral.' The Dean retorted that other members of the Guild had written in support of the mosaics. At the Annual General Meeting in 1899, the rules concerning public action by the AWG were altered and stiffened. At the same time

it was emphasised that publicity was foreign to the traditions of the Guild. This policy has, perhaps, been both a strength and weakness.

In his Master's address in 1962, **Gordon Russell** announced that 'My own feeling is that the Guild has been too sensitive about keeping itself to itself and that in its ivory tower it has done very little to prevent things from going from bad to worse outside. I think it does little good to hold hands and tearfully tell one another what good chaps we are...'

The Guild held a few exhibitions in the first two decades of its existence for members to show off their work, but these were not well-supported events. Because of lack of suitable premises, a separate organization grew out of the Guild expressly designed to organize the public exhibition of fine craftsmanship. This was the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, created by **Crane, Sumner, Benson, Cobden-Sanderson, De Morgan, Day and Lethaby**, which held its first exhibition in 1888.

With members like **Morris, Crane** and **Ashbee**, who all believed that political action was inseparable from the reformation of the arts, it was also evidently necessary to avoid politics in the Guild. Many members were far from being socialists. Indicative of this is the curious postscript attached to the printed version of the lecture on London given in 1891 by the printer and bookbinder, **T.J. Cobden-Sanderson**: 'In the discussion which followed the reading of the paper, a disposition was shown on the part of members not to interfere with the rights of landlordism as outside the scope of the Art Workers' Guild and to dissociate art from social conditions as the Art Workers' Guild has a purely 'artist' function.' That art cannot be disassociated from social conditions, least of all in the Guild, was shown by the strange and poignant story of the Masque.

The Masque, performed in 1899, sums up the romanticism, the nostalgia and the patriotism not just of the Guild but of late Victorian England. It was both noble and absurd. The Masque was thought sufficiently significant for the summer number of *The Studio* to be devoted to both its text and costumes and sets in 1899; it was a product of the same Arts and Crafts nostalgia which inspired the contemporary revival of the English folk song; it was also the forerunner of countless pageants and masques performed in the 20th Century. Significantly much of the music was arranged and performed by **Arnold Dometsch**, the craftsman and pioneer in the use of old musical instruments, who had been summoned to play to **William Morris** as he lay dying.

Not least of the Guild's achievements has been its connection with the revival of Early Music. The idea of the Masque had arisen after papers on 'Masques and Pageants' had given at the Guild in 1897. **Walter Crane** recorded that the idea was 'in emulation

of the old crafts guilds of the Middle Ages.’ The other prime movers were **Ashbee**, **Image**, **Harrison Townsend**, **Christopher Whall** and **Henry Wilson**. The title was ‘Beauty’s Awakening, A Masque of Winter and Spring’. It was performed in the Guildhall on a stage designed by **Henry Wilson**; a clever structure in his characteristic Byzantine style. The subject was London and the message was serious. London was compared with Thebes, Athens, Rome, Byzantium, Florence, Venice, Nuremburg, Paris and Oxford and the flowery text was essentially an Arts and Crafts lament for the pre-industrial city. The villains were clear, and the Lord Mayor and Corporation, who attended the first of three performances in state, cannot have been amused by some of the ‘Demons like Bumblebeadalus’ who, clearly dressed as an Alderman, ‘...grows bigger, his heart merely hardens as he crawls from the Mansion House into Spring Gardens’ or Cupiditas, Slumdum or ‘Jerry’. As for Bogus, he was an R.I.B.A.S. Ruskin would have enjoyed it all. The Guild certainly enjoyed itself, with everybody making costumes and props and even Guildsmen’s wives and children taking part. The Masque lost a great deal of money but everyone agreed that it looked beautiful.

The Masque was never repeated, but out of the events arose the Revels, the idea of the architect **Harrison Townsend**. Their character is all too well conveyed by **Masse** in his half-centenary book: ‘The early revels were simple and clean. There was good natured banter and chaff in plenty and burlesque too...In 1912 the Revels took the form of a tournament in which members of the senior and junior Guilds competed with amazing energy...in 1932 the revels took the form of cabaret entertainment. There was an amusing jazz band, and **Leonard Walkers**’ impersonations of prominent brethren were particularly well received...’

By this last date, the Guild had existed for almost half a century and a second generation of Guildsmen had replaced the first. The Guild had managed to survive the worst crisis yet encountered: the Great War. To the older members of the Guild, with their humane vision of the brotherhood of man achieved through the common aims in craftsmanship, the ruthless militarism and organised patriotism of the war effort was profound shock. It is clear that the Guild was much divided. **Ashbee**, in his unpublished memoir of the ‘Masters of the Art Workers’ Guild’, wrote about **George Frampton** that ‘There are some things better forgotten; he nearly broke the Guild. But that was during the unhappy war years 1916-1917 when we were all on edge and ashamed of ourselves. Let us add rather – some things are better remembered - the Guild spirit prevailed’.

The Guild was determined to survive, however, and many more members joined in the 1920s. Many of the more famous names were elected under rule 6, which

allowed the Guild to elect established artists without their work being considered for eligibility. The Guild still wished to be representative of artistic developments. By the end of the 1930s, however, this was no longer true.

The Guild celebrated its 50th birthday in 1934 at a time of crisis. The crisis is clear from the abnormal number of resignations in the late 1920s and early 1930s, undoubtedly caused by the refusal of many Guildsmen to come to terms with modern developments in the arts and, in particular, with the machine aesthetic of the Modern Movement. This is not surprising since that aesthetic was so intrinsically hostile to the Guild's belief in the value of craftsmanship and the interdependence of all the arts. Young architects now had no use for sculpture or ornament, painter none for representation. In 1933 the Guild was broadminded enough to listen, at the invitation of Honorary Brother **George Bernard Shaw**, to the fashionable young Russian modernist, Berthold Lubetkin, talking about 'Art under changed conditions'. More revealing is the story that two of the Brethren were responsible for vandalising Epstein's controversial Rima sculpture in Hyde Park. 'The image which AWG of the 30s, and for some time after, presents in memory', writes **Frederick Bentham**, 'is of great and diverse characters in a smoke-filled hall united in their intolerance of the 'new'. Howard Robertson was about as 'modern' as they would allow architecture to go!!' The general impression must have been that of a lot of distinguished has-beens living in the past unable to tolerate – quite rightly as it was to turn out – a brave new world.

It would take some time for the Guild to come into its own again. Fortunately there were enough architects and artists who valued the Guild, and who continued to believe that there was value in a traditional approach to design and craftsmanship, to keep the organisation going. Unfortunately, as **Richard Murry** remembers, the problem of 'tradition' versus 'modernity' was exacerbated, however irrelevantly, by the presence of avant garde refugees in Britain and the endorsement by the government of Nazi Germany of a modern traditionalism in design: Kraft duchr freude. Perhaps the refugees in England saw our crafts as needlessly Nazi. It required courage as well as obstinacy to be reactionary in the 1930s and 1940s. Fortunately there were members like **Gordon Russell** who continued to build a bridge between the two extremes and, while **E. McKnight Kauffer** only remained a member for three years in the 1920s, it is to the credit of the Guild that **Frank Pick** was elected an Honorary member in 1932.

The Art Workers' Guild survived the second world war much more easily than the first and continued, in much the same spirit, through the 1950s. It cannot be maintained that the names painted on the walls in these years are as famous as those of earlier in the century, but this is scarcely the point. The Guild was no longer in the mainstream of artistic thinking, and development; rather it was preserving values and attitudes which were, temporarily, unfashionable. At a time when the architectural profession was

totally dominated by an often destructive and inhuman modernism, it is reassuring to find that intelligent traditionalists such as **Donald McMorran** were in the Guild. Perhaps it is surprising that **Basil Spence** joined the Guild in 1953, but it is surely significant that industrial designers **Milner Gray** and **James Gardner** were also members. **Milner Gray** was Master in 1963. The previous year the Master was Sir **Gordon Russell** who, although he himself had come to terms with the machine, was well aware of the value of craftsmanship in an increasingly mechanised world. Despite criticisms, **Russell** respected the Guild and its founders, and as he said 'I do feel very passionately about the great importance of hard work at this critical time when, to so many people, speed has become an end in itself and anything done slowly and well is called old fashioned', which quite wrongly has a somewhat derogatory implication in these days.

Russell recommended certain reforms. One was long overdue: the admission of women as full members. 'What,' asked **Russell**, 'can the young think of a body which invites a distinguished artist like **Joan Hassall** to describe her craft of wood engraving... and yet refuses to accept her as a member? Can such a body be called representatives of hand-workers as a whole?' **Joan Hassall** was finally elected in 1964 and became Master in 1972. Ten years later **Margaret Maxwell** was made Master. The problem in the 1960s, however, was how to change the Guild without losing its essence and spirit. An uncritical acceptance of fashion could lead to work which, while well made, was simply bland and dull, and it is shocking too that it was seriously proposed to sell No.6 Queen Square, for without a meeting place the Guild is nothing. **Bruce Allsopp**, Master for 1970, was anxious for new ideas and launched one brave venture. This was *Artifex*, a journal about the crafts edited by **Brian Thomas**, first published in 1968 and which ran for five issues.

After a hundred years and with well over thirteen hundred members, it is difficult to generalise about the Art Workers' Guild. Certain patterns emerge, however, from a study of the membership lists. Architects have almost always predominated, but certain crafts have been encouraged by particular Masters. When **Kenneth Bird** – better known as 'Fougasse' – was Master in 1951, several cartoonists and illustrators joined. A great range of crafts has always been represented in the Guild. In 1909 it was forty; today it is over fifty, including photography and architectural model-making.

How the Guild has influenced, if at all, certain areas of activity is more difficult to determine, but it is clear that Guildsmen have dominated particular fields. In jewellery, the Guild can boast **C.R Ashbee**, **Henry Wilson**, **Arthur Gaskin**, **John Paul Cooper** and **Alexander Fisher**. In the related fields of printing, bookbinding and lettering, the Guild has had a major role to play having as members **Emery Walker**, **Edward Johnston**, **T.J. Cobden-Sanderson**, **Graily Hewitt**, **Eric Gill**

and **David Kindersley**. With the **Dolmetsch** family, the Guild continues to have a close association with the revival and the performance of Early Music, while it is fair to claim most of the distinguished pattern designers of the last century have been Guildsmen, including **William Morris**, **Lewis F. Day** and **C.F.A. Voysey**.

The Guild can boast a close connection with the two great national churches. Over the last century, six out of seven surveyors to Westminster Abbey have been Guildsmen: for St Paul's the figure is five out of seven. These surveyors have commissioned furniture or monuments by other Guildsmen; in the Abbey the last surveyor, **Stephen Dykes Bower**, estimates that over a hundred works contribute to the beauty of the national shrine. This not only includes sculpture by stained glass by **Brain Thomas** and **Edward Woore**, and lettering by **Kruger Gray** and Reynolds Stone. In St Paul's, the unfortunate contribution of **William Richmond** has been redeemed by **Godfrey Allen**, **Dykes Bower** and, again, **Brain Thomas**, amongst others.

The field in which the Art Workers' Guild's belief in the merit of artistic collaboration has had its most prominent and successful expression is undoubtedly architecture. There are many examples of buildings in which architects have commissioned sculptors, muralists or mosaics to create a total work of art which is decorative, interesting and vital. Two key examples of such practical proofs that Art is Unity were created soon after the foundation of the Guild. One is the church of Holy Trinity, Sloane Street Chelsea, where **John Dando Sedding** and, after his death, **Henry Wilson**, employed an impressive variety of craftsman and artists in the belief that a living architecture is more than an affair of designs on paper. Almost exactly contemporary is a building which demonstrates how catholic was the Guild in regard to style. This is the pioneer of Edwardian Baroque, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in the City of London. Here **John Belcher** and his assistant, **Beresford Pite**, made a classical design richly sculptural and called upon the talents of **Hamo Thorneycroft** and **Harry Bates**. Despite an architectural aesthetic increasingly hostile to elaboration, **Charles Holden** insisted on using sculptors on his buildings between the wars and, more recently, architects like **John Brandon-Jones** have used fellow Guildsmen whenever possible. Fortunately, in the early days of the Guild there were many accomplished sculptors who were prepared to work on buildings and accept the constraint imposed by the architect, that is, to fill a frieze or a spandrel as directed. These included **Thorneycroft**, **Bates**, **Alfred Drury**, **George Frampton**, **F.W. Pomeroy**, and, more recently, **Eric Gill** and **Laurence Bradshaw**, best known as the designer of the Marx tomb in Highgate Cemetery. There were also many sculptors who seemed to have worked almost entirely on buildings such as **H.A. Pegram** and **Henry Poole**, while there was other, like **Laurence Turner**, **Joseph Armitage** and several **Aumoniers**, who were content to call themselves 'carvers' and yet contributed so much to the pleasures of architecture.

There was, however, a problem, as **Ashbee** recognised when writing about **Pomeroy**, Master in 1908. '**Pomeroy** was the fifth sculptor Master. I think what the Guild has done for the sculptors has been to help their chronic indecision. Can the art get free of the building? Should it? The sculptor hesitates; and so he has towards the architects an air now of deference, now of defiance, at times he has been architect himself.

Pomeroy, less mediaeval and more Renaissance on sentiment, was on the side of freedom and individualism in stone. Both are right. The trouble is that, in the last half century, sculptors and architects have been utterly divorced. If the Art Workers' Guild can do a little to bring them together again, and to show how architects need painters, mosaics and other decorative craftsmen, it will have justified its survival.

In the words of **Thomas Okey**, the Spitalfields basket-maker who became Master in 1914 and professor of Italian at Cambridge, 'The educational value of that intimate friendship with eminent artists and painters, sculptors, architects, and craftsmen which comes from association in foreign travel; the participation in the meetings, discussions, and practical demonstrations of a unique body such as the Art Workers' Guild, cannot be overestimated. In aesthetic education and general culture, I owe more than I have skill to express in words to my generous friends and fellow members of the Guild. Vivat!'

Today this Guild is such as it has always been. It is, of course, an anachronism which outsiders may find absurd, but artists and craftsmen continue to find the Guild to be congenial, useful, valuable and even inspiring. In the first half-century, the Art Workers' Guild was a significant aspect of a great flowering in the arts and crafts in Britain. The second half-century has been more difficult, with the Guild surviving despite a hostile and unsympathetic zeitgeist. But, fortunately, the 'Spirit' of the Age changes his mind and sometimes repents of his mistakes. In the Guild's Masque, *Beauty's Awakening*, the 'Spirit' of the Age appears more sympathetic, a cloaked figure with winged cap and wings on his feet, having a scroll and pen in one hand and holding aloft a search-light in the other. And, in that Masque, performed 85 years ago, he has the last word (written by **Harrison Townsend**): 'Our hopes are left; for Hope and Art are one;/ Young Hope, young Art, each holding hand of each,/ Our Pictured fancy fled, time's world begun, / Hope is the lesson that our dream shall teach'.