

Flow and Aura: Arts and Crafts philosophies made manifest in present-day, hands-on research.

Jon Alesch^[1]

¹ University of Wisconsin Stout, Menomonie, WI 54751, USA
jnalesch@gmail.com

Abstract. Recognizing the importance of flow and aura in the making experience has special pertinency within the context of real-world, hands-on studio work and learning. The history of social commentary and material culture of the 19th century Arts and Crafts movement reinforces this connection when tested against a modern day folk art school experience, strengthening the association between happiness in work and the meaning of crafted artifacts.

Keywords: Arts and Crafts, Aura, Flow.

1 Introduction

In the Fall 2021, I pursued a course of independent research in my MFA studies at the University of Wisconsin Stout to, in the words of my documentation, “Combine research and historical analysis of the early Arts and Crafts movement’s material culture design and fabrication techniques with contemporary studio design practices into material culture deliverables and an academic paper with conclusions.”

In the three years I’ve spent completing my graduate degree, I’d developed a particular interest in craft, as both an exercise in making, a description of skill sets and cultural storytelling. My independent study was an academic and creative journey into the world of the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th century to understand why that time period had such an impact on our understanding of material culture, craft and making.

To aid my understanding and apply what I’d learned, I attended a class at North House Folk School in Grand Marais, MN, taking the four-day Decorative Ironwork Intensive course. I was completely new to the craft, never having trained in blacksmithing or ironwork, but would come to experience a master class in constructivist, unstructured learning where space and time disappeared into the blazing embers of a coal forge.

The experience at the forge, melding creativity with physical effort into a true artifact of material culture, only heightened my awareness of the impact of mass industrialization I’d been researching. Clearly, something valuable had been taken from the 19th century working class, and the social and labor related challenges it created fed the critiques of reformist thinkers, who correlated this “progress” with the

degradation of happiness and moral decay. An assessment of industrialization and capitalism's impact on society, architecture and material culture of the period became the seed of the Arts and Crafts movement. To examine the movement's contemporary legacy and its relevance to our present approaches to polytechnic learning, work, and material culture I would have to experience its philosophies first-hand.

2 Arts and Crafts a Brief History

Having already invested six weeks of research on the Arts and Crafts movement prior to arriving on October 14 2021 for my class in decorative ironwork at the North House Folk School in Grand Marais, MN., I wanted to apply my humble understanding of the movement to my crafting experience at the school. I thought I would learn about the skill of blacksmithing and the arts and crafts style, but discovered a connection between the experience of craft and making and my own sense of self-actualization.

Social change in early 19th century Great Britain happened at a withering pace, disrupting social strata and labor while the industrial revolution mechanized work, automated people's livelihoods and redistributed wealth. But with any change comes disruption and uncertainty, and the social and political commentary of the times weighed heavily on the minds of early dissenters. From this upheaval came the Arts and Crafts movement which evolved not to "...promote a particular style, but (to) advocate reform as part of its philosophy and initiated a critique of the social and artistic costs of industrial labor"(Obniski 2008). During the Victorian age "...modern machines replaced workers, [and] Arts and Crafts proponents called for an end to the division of labor and advanced the designer as craftsman." (Obniski 2008)

Critics such as Augustus Pugin (1812–1852) and John Ruskin (1819-1900), questioned the morality of automation and its impact on the common man through the lens of architecture, design and craft. Other than their denominational differences, Ruskin (Protestant) and Pugin (Catholic) both "could be said to have linked style with society, but not in the same sense. For whereas Ruskin discerned various human traits in architecture, then attributes these to the society responsible, Pugin identified Gothic (architecture) purely with medieval Christianity, which he regarded as the essence of Catholicism." (Conner 1978).

Ruskin is often pointed to as a greater influencer for the Arts and Crafts movement. Building on Pugin's thoughts, Ruskin abhorred architectural "deceptions" (un-truths) and associated architectural integrity with the society from which it sprang and the human hands that made it. He asserted the truth and integrity of society at any given time in history was manifest through its architecture. Ornament should never be for the sake of ornament, but rather to convey beauty in truth. Mass production had made it all too easy to create ornament without function, beauty without meaning or

purpose. To Ruskin, then design “deceptions” were a leading indicator of the decline in design.

Ruskin’s entry into critiquing material culture and industrialization, other than architecture, occurred after he attended the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London, from May 1st to October 15th 1851. His review of the exhibition provided a hard look at industrialization’s impact on society, evidenced by the industrialized, over ornamented material culture represented at the exhibition. The writings became a scathing review and rebuke industrialization’s influence on the 19th century’s material culture and how it reflected the decline of honest truth and work in craft. Quality, truth and meaning of craft (material culture) had been replaced by scale and automation, division of labor, and the widespread industrialized ornamentation of objects and architecture.

If Ruskin was the seed of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris (1834-1896) was the plant (Nau 2019). Although Morris was just 17 at the time of the Great Exhibition, its influence and the writings of Ruskin would shape his life into the Arts and Crafts movement’s other great proponent and influencer.

Ruskin was a thought leader in design and social issues of the industrial revolution. Morris had a more applied, hands-on approach built upon “. . . Ruskin’s main themes, his love of medieval-ism, his conviction in the social importance of art, and his desire for a renewed unity of arts and craft, finding pleasure in labor and simple beauty” (Nau, 2019)

In 1861 Morris and associates established Morris, Marshall, Falkner & Co. focusing on decorative art and furniture manufacturing. Morris actively participated and contributed to the workforce labor and fabrication processes, showing a keen interest in the skills needed and quality control of the company’s products. The firm’s methods were heralded by contemporaries as being “akin to the old-fashioned days, when the handicraftsman took pride in his work and was not hidden from the buyers, middlemen and commission agents” (Nau 2019).

During the 1880’s Morris’s politics took a turn towards socialism and his writings and lectures became more focused on labor and the worker. To survive in the industrialized world, the Arts and Crafts movement would need to not only embrace truth and beauty in material culture, but also the health, wellbeing and happiness of the worker.

The combination of Morris’ focus on craft AND the craftsman inspired by nature and social reform helped usher in the next generation of Arts and Crafts thinkers, many of whom were architects themselves. As the 19th century progressed, the movement’s new disciples and their practices “expressed much of the character of the Arts and Crafts Movement and, in particular, the focus to reunite design and handicraft, redefine the role of architecture within that cause, and improve(d) design

standards by promoting rational design principles with regard to function, use of material and method of manufacture.” (Gordon 2020)

The Arts and Crafts movement established its strongest social and design footholds in the late 19th century based on its sense of a holistic work/life balance that sought to both make functional, beautiful architecture and material culture while embracing happiness and work/life balance.

3 The Recognition of Aura

Stepping into the blacksmithing stable at the North House Folk School property, I was immediately struck by its simplicity. Lacking any computers and no digital footprint at all, I was immersed in an analog world of hammers, anvils, tongs, long wooden work tables and very few chairs. The corners and floorspace were dominated by six large bituminous coal forges with adjacent hand-cranked bellows. The small group of learners, seven of us, were about to do something with craft roots stretching back to 1200 BCE (Brittanica 2021) with the beginning of the iron age. The necessity of tool use that drove early humans to metal smithing was refined over time, evolving not just into a utilitarian craft, but an artistic form of expression. In a sense, by engaging with this practice, we were stepping into time, history, and lore.

When Ruskin examined the attributes of architecture in Gothic Venice and associated them with the period’s historical, moral, and cultural wellness, he was drawing a direct relationship between material culture and how its form and function manifested in the built environment. He recognized, through physical senses and experiences, the authenticity of workmanship and materials.

Hand forged iron and steel reflect this authenticity. As Mike Jones introduced the group to sample ironwork, there was no mistaking the nature and history of each artifact. Two examples might look identical in form and function, but at close inspection each hammer mark, twist, turn and profile retained the memory of its making.

In Walter Benjamin’s seminal 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he postulates about an object’s uniqueness or “aura” that “the most perfect reproduction of a work of art (design) is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.” Alyssa Frije’s 2017 thesis on material culture, “Aura of Authenticity: The impact of Original Objects in the Museum Guest Experience” states “The argument regarding authenticity suggests that only through the object itself can historical connotation, social context, or associated

meanings and value be conveyed.” Additionally, the “aura” reflects an intrinsic value of identity of the maker, the point in time it was created, tools, the materials and labor (embodied energy) used and the geographic location of the making.

Our class of blacksmithing apprentices only needed to hear Mike’s own reflections on the sample pieces to feel his personal attachment to their experience in making.

Mike’s assignment prompt tasked the apprentices to find design inspiration in the Sun. To introduce the assignment, Mike began blending demonstrations of blacksmithing techniques with quiet encouragement and advice as we began crafting. We used chalk on the tables or floor to draft our ideas, and I elected to design and smith a standard fire iron (poker). Making fires in a wood burning stove had become a ritual every morning of winter at my home in northern Wisconsin. Our wood stove was a primary source of heat during the cold northern Wisconsin winters and I had an intimate connection with the unique value of the tool. It had potential as an “authentic” work of art” with “its basis in ritual, (and) the location of its original use value.” (Benjamin - 1936).

The act of making itself has been tied, at times, to a specific set of beliefs, “The Shakers, the Roycrofters, the Amish, and the Mennonites all interwove doctrine, design and spiritual reward directly derived from handiwork and human connection to material, form, and resulting objects.” (Richter-O’Connell 2015). In the case of the manifest products of making, Benjamin applies the intrinsic value to the object itself, recognizing the history of cult, ritual and/or tradition with the associated material culture “We know that the earliest artworks originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function.”

The first fire iron design was untenable. Functional and refined in form, but beyond my ability to fabricate with so little experience. I spent the first day trying and failing to execute on that design and realized by early evening I needed to re-think the approach. In the morning, Mike and I reflected on my learnings, and a new design was born.

Although we may not see the trial and error leading up to a finished piece, when a thing is crafted and we study it through its material culture, it assumes a mantle, or aura, which observers and people interacting at any given time and place associate with:

- The signature and experience of the Maker in the form of effort, skills, knowledge and intent (virtues/vices)
- The time and place, when and where the object was created
- The materials, labor and tools requirement to fabricate
- The object’s intended ritual or application

Whether Ruskin, Morris or Pugin (for that matter) would describe the built environment in quite this way is arguable, but they established an affinity between the intention and making of a thing and a perceivable aura of the finished product which an observer can interpret as its purpose and meaning.

4 Happiness, Flow and Making

In the Arts and Crafts traditions of Ruskin and Morris the creative and maker processes best suited to producing truth and beauty in material culture can only be produced by honest work.

Blacksmithing is nothing, if not honest work. Each day of the blacksmithing class left me exhausted, mentally and physically. But as I grew more comfortable swinging the hammer and heating metal, I began to understand the color and plasticity of steel at high temperatures and how to literally bend the material to my will.

In Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, he asserts "If the man's mind as well as his heart went with his work, all this will be in the right places, and each part will set off the other; and the effect of the whole, as compared with the same design cut by a machine or a lifeless hand, will be like that of poetry well read and deeply felt to that of the same verses jangled by rote."

Ruskin considered the dehumanizing impact of separating creative work from manual labor, arguing a creatively fulfilling endeavor or job must marry the two. He called for "a right understanding . . . of what kinds of labor are good for men, raising them, and making them happy" and a "determined demand for the products and results of healthy and ennobling labor." His "right understanding" and "ennobling labor" states "the observance of three broad and simple rules" (Popova 2015):

- Never encourage the manufacture of any article not necessary, in the production of which Invention has no share.
- Never demand an exact finish for its own sake, but only for some practical or noble end.
- Never encourage imitation or copying of any kind, except for the sake of preserving records of great works.

It's the conceptualization and idea first, and then the skills and effort to deliver the invention. Avoid separating the head and hand. These two things should always be coupled tightly together in the making process. It's the evaluation process and micro adjustments that happen in the crafting and making experience that separate it from mass production.

John Dewey (1859 - 1952) - an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform, led progressive discussions about categorizing craft and vocational education

as something he called “Experience” (Dewey 1938), an important aspect to human learning. This “experience” of materials produced a physical and mental readiness as an interaction between object and processes.

So, when the head and hand are allowed to focus singularly on an activity like blacksmithing in a constructivist learning environment like North House, the unstructured classroom spaces give would-be-designers (all of us) the opportunity to associate personal interests with lore and hands-on skill building in discreet, timeboxed encounters.

Ruskin also stated people should be happy in their work, and to do so they need three things: (Binyon 1920)

- They must be fit for it.
- They must not do too much of it.
- And they must have a sense of success in it.

Ruskin could be said to have weaved “hand, heart, intellect and design into a process of imagining and making and to the resulting fruits of labor- tangible and intangible.” (Richter-O’Connell 2015)

During my own blacksmithing crafting, I experienced periods of concentration that caused me to lose track of time and space, only interrupted by moments of reflection, adjustments to the design and fabrication, physical breaks to relieve fatigue, and demonstrations of techniques by the instructor. Counterintuitively, it was the constrained aspects of space(my corner of the blacksmithing stable) and time (the four days we had in class)(Cleese 1991) that allowed me to be fully immersed in the creative process of making.

Mike’s encouragement and small pointers kept me moving with the least number of barriers and friction in my work, and I was completely content in the effort. At that time and place, I was totally immersed and completely satisfied.

The early Arts and Crafts positions on work satisfaction from Ruskin (and Morris) may be mapped a modern model for personal contentment in work put forward by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (chik·sent·mee·hai·ee) in 1990, “Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience”

Contemporary writers have established a connection between 19th century Arts and Crafts sensibilities with this modern-day psychology. “...Just as William Morris, John Ruskin, Walter Crane, May Morris, Philip Webb, and all the craftsmen of the Arts and Crafts movement, some of us have felt the lack of connection. Some authors call this “flow,” (Chemin 2020)

In Csikszentmihalyi’s book he describes the flow state; a state of consciousness analogous to being in “the zone” in the popular culture vernacular. It is a mental state one enters while performing some activity (“making” in the context of crafting and material culture), fully immersed in a feeling of stimulated focus, complete

involvement, and enjoyment in the activities' process. It makes a person feel like we don't exist. The mind is unable to feel anything other than the focused "flow" activity. What we think of existence seems to disappear because our mind can only process so much data at one time. This is psychological science." (Csikszentmihalyi 2008)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, there are eight characteristics of being in a flow state:

- Complete concentration on the task.
- Clarity of goals and reward in mind and immediate feedback.
- Transformation of time (speeding up/slowing down).
- The experience is intrinsically rewarding.
- Effortlessness and ease.
- There is a balance between challenge and skills.
- Actions and awareness are merged, losing self-conscious rumination.
- There is a feeling of control over the task.

The correlation between humankind's instinctual desire to make things and be happy doing it (as described by Ruskin and Morris in 19th century thinking) and the findings of modern-day psychological study is arguable.

My personal journey as a blacksmith apprentice at the North House clearly included time in flow, as evidenced by multiple periods of timeless focus on crafting with manifest contentment. I felt very happy!

5 Conclusion

What early 19th century architects, writers, philosophers, architects and designers such as Ruskin and Morris tried to convey was how the industrial revolution, mechanization of craft, and its dependence on the working class dehumanized the experience of "making" as an act of personal satisfaction and happiness. This was evident in architecture and material culture of the 19th century industrial revolution, its ability to mechanize ornament, and produce low quality goods lacking the aura of handcrafted works.

If the Arts and Crafts movement was making a case that we society has an obligation to the happiness and integrity of its workers and material culture, this making "Experience"(in Dewey's own words) is key to cultural stewardship. Per the UNESCO findings from "Traditional Craftsmanship in 2003," "Traditional craftsmanship is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of intangible cultural heritage." Safeguarding the knowledge and enabling craftspeople to pass on their wisdom and techniques to others helps feed and sustain communities of practice, as well as each ennobling the labor in our community material cultures.

If the underlying premise of material culture is "... that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of

individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged.” (Prown 1982), then the industrial revolution undermined truth and beauty in Victorian society as evidenced by low quality work and unhappy workers.

As Makers, we cannot turn our back on the lessons and wisdom of history. The experience at the North House Folk School helped me connect my historical understanding of the Arts & Crafts philosophies as presented by Morris, Ruskin, and their contemporaries with modern observations on aura and flow. Although I have analyzed and discussed it here, my participation in the physical blacksmithing crafting process was something that requires the full experience of hands-on education to fully understand. The flow state that one enters serves as a moment of human self-actualization, resulting in the creation of artifacts with material culture “aura”. We perceive this “aura” as an association of maker, time and place, materials, labor, tools and ritual given to the crafted artifact and it serves as a set of unique markers for both makers and observers. As design curricula have been evolving to support online education and specialist credentialing, they would ultimately do well to embrace the full scope of hands-on, applied research, from theory and philosophy to the practicalities of making, building, and crafting.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 217–20. (2018).
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429498909-39>.
- Binyon, Laurence. *Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture & Painting*, &C. London, England: J.M. Dent & Sons, (1920).
- Blackett, Glyn. “Your Website Title.” *Flow States and How to Access Them - Part 1*, (2011).
<https://www.stressresilientmind.co.uk/articles/flow-states-and-how-to-access-them-part-1>, last accessed 1/13/2022.
- Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Iron Age." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Iron-Age>, last accessed May 6, 2021.
- Chemin, Ledys. “Arts and Crafts’ Principles in Interior Design: The Original Minimalists” *DailyArt Magazine*, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/arts-and-crafts-interior-design/>, last accessed October 19, 2021.
- John Cleese on Creativity In Management. YouTube, 1991. <https://youtu.be/Pb5oIIP062g>, last accessed 4/1/2022.
- Conner, Patrick R.M. “Pugin and Ruskin.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41. : pp. 344–50. (1978)
- Dewey, J. *Experience and Education*. New York, NY: Free Press. (1938).

Gordon, Catherine. "Chapter I-III." Essay. In *Cotswold Arts and Crafts Architecture*, 3–38. 97 St. George's Place, Cheltenham: The History Press, (2020).

Frijey, Alyssa. "Aura of Authenticity: The Impact of Original Objects in the Museum Guest Experience." Digital Commons at Buffalo State. http://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/museumstudies_theses/10, last accessed May 2017.

Nau, Anna. "Chapter 1." Essay. In *The Rise of Everyday Design: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain and America*, 37–51. Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center. The University of Texas, (2019).

Obniski, Monica. "The Arts and Crafts Movement in America." *Metmuseum.org*, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/acam/hd_acam.htm, last accessed November 2021.

Penick, Monica, and Christopher Long. "Chapter 1." Essay. In *The Rise of EVERYDAY Design: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain and America*, 1–34. Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center. The University of Texas, (2019).

Popova, M. (2015, September 18). *Legendary Victorian art Critic John Ruskin on the value of imperfection and how manual Labor CONFERS Dignity Upon creative work*. Retrieved April 19, 2021, from <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/07/01/john-ruskin-imperfection-creativity-labor/>, last accessed January, 2022.

Ruskin, John, and Bruce Rogers. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. London, England: Smith, Elder, and Co., 65 Cornhill, (1849).

Richter-O'Connell, David. "The Exchange Between the 'Maker' and the 'Made.'" <http://isda.org>, 2015. <https://www.isda.org/content/exchange-between-maker-and-made>, last accessed 4/20/2022.

Ted talks: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi--Creativity, Fulfillment, and Flow, 2008. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Flow, the secret to happiness, <https://youtu.be/fXIeFJCqsPs>, last accessed 4/10/2022.

Website, A. "The University of Chicago Library." *Firmness, Commodity, and Delight - The University of Chicago Library*, 2011. <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/firmness-commodity-and-delight/>, last accessed 11/20/2022.

Morris, William "The Lesser Arts: Delivered Before the Trades" Guild of Learning, December 1877" in "The Collected Works of William Morris, vol. 22; Hope and Fears for Art: Lectures on Art and Industry, Ed. May Morris. p 3. (London: Longmans, Green 1910).

Prown, Jules David. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method." *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): pp. 1–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180761>, last accessed 12/1/2022.

Website, A. "The University of Chicago Library." *Firmness, Commodity, and Delight - The University of Chicago Library*, 2011. <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/firmness-commodity-and-delight/>, last accessed 12/10/2022.

Website, A. (2003). Traditional Craftsmanship. Retrieved April 18, 2021, from <https://ich.unesco.org/en/traditional-craftsmanship-00057>, last accessed 3/20/2022.

Singh, S. (2018, March 27). Lessons from the maker movement. Retrieved April 18, 2021, from <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/lessons-from-the-maker-movement/>, last accessed 12/14/2021.