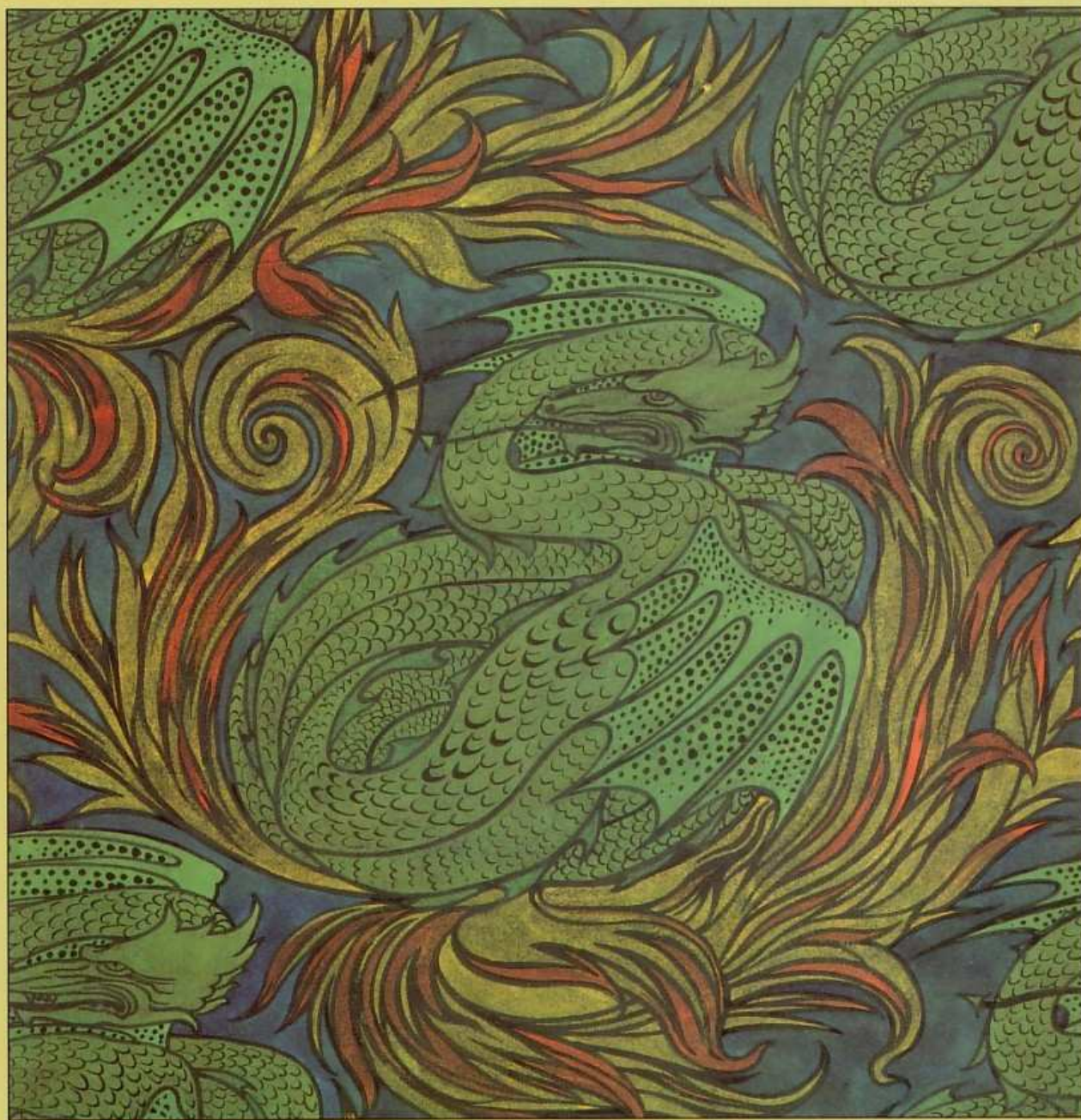


—The Decorative Designs of—
C.F.A. VOYSEY



Stuart Durant



Voysey (1857-1941) is chiefly remembered today as one of the leading domestic architects of the early twentieth century. Before his career was established, however, to supplement his income he started to design fabrics and wallpapers, and became as successful a designer as he was an architect. Although the themes and components of his decoration are typical of his time, Voysey's designs remain as distinctive as his houses. They are clear and authoritative, and show a sense of colour that was exceptional in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras.

The Royal Institute of British Architects drawings collection includes a large number of Voysey's designs, making it one of the most extensive archives for a designer of the time. The collection covers a period of over forty years, starting in 1887, and includes both commercial designs and others, more revealing about the designer himself. Stuart Durant's study of Voysey's work and selection of over sixty of his designs makes the gems of this collection available in print for the first time and presents an absorbing study of Voysey's work, placing it within its historical context. The extensive captions illuminate Voysey's working methods and artistic theories. Voysey can now be seen as one of the major figures in British design history.

The Author: Stuart Durant was educated at the Architectural Association and at the Royal College of Art. He began his career as a designer for television and now lectures at Kingston Polytechnic in the history of design. Among his published work is a major study on ornament. He was also the first general editor of the *International Design Year Book*.

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Voysey in his study at The Orchard, Chorley Wood, Hertfordshire, c.1900.

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From The Drawings Collection,
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Stuart Durant



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For Ruth, Miriam, Owen and Galia

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—Introduction—

Voysey excelled at decorative design. During the closing years of the last century, and the early ones of the present - when he was among the busiest of architects - Voysey sold many decorative designs to leading manufacturers. After the end of the First World War, when he could find no clients for his buildings, Voysey continued to produce decorative designs. Desperately poor, he tried to sell these to maintain a modest standard of living.

The Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects has a remarkable collection of drawings by C.F.A. Voysey in its impressive holdings. It is the most complete record of the work of any architect from the period of the Arts and Crafts ascendancy. There are 931 entries in Joanna Symonds's invaluable 1975 catalogue of the Voysey drawings. Almost a quarter of these relate to designs for wallpapers, carpets or textiles.

Only a few architects - like Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Henry van de Velde, Josef Hoffmann or Hector Guimard - shared with Voysey the same degree of versatility - the ability to design furniture, metalwork, fabrics, wallpapers, carpets - the whole - which eluded architects as accomplished as Lutyens. Baillie Scott, perhaps Voysey's principal rival - was also an excellent decorative designer. But unlike Voysey, he appears to have sold few of his designs to manufacturers. It is true that Frank Lloyd Wright was also a versatile designer, with an original decorative sense - but Wright's output as a designer of decoration was limited. The Voysey designs for decoration in the RIBA collection span a period of some forty-three years - the date 1887 is attributed to the earliest design.

There is another collection of Voysey decorative designs. This is in the Print Room of the Victoria and Albert Museum. But this is an 'edited' collection - the selection was made by Voysey. The RIBA decorative designs are those which were found among Voysey's other drawings.

The fact that the designs in the RIBA collection were not necessarily intended by Voysey for posterity makes them of especial interest. What has been rejected for artistic or even commercial reasons is invariably revealing. It is possible that some designs were never really intended for sale. Did Voysey seriously imagine that an early wallpaper covered with fearsome, fire-breathing devils would be saleable to any but the most eccentric of manufacturers? Or another early wallpaper showing angels with their feet and wings being tickled by small devils?

Might these curious designs be psychologically revealing? Such oddities are often accorded special significance by historians. A plausible explanation for such designs

is that they were mere exercises in design - intended only to amuse friends or clients. Or perhaps to display virtuosity in transforming unpromising material into decoration. (Ruskin once illustrated an example of how blots and squiggles could be transformed into decoration - in *The Two Paths*, 1859. Without enthusiasm, it ought to be said.) Besides, it is unlikely that Voysey, the loyal son of a clergyman dismissed for preaching that there was no Hell, would have taken the idea of the Devil at all seriously.

Having said this, a few of Voysey's early designs do nevertheless evoke some slight feelings of unease. Obviously, to attempt precise iconographical readings in such cases would be hazardous. But it is worth bearing in mind that, while the imagery favoured by Arts and Crafts designers was almost invariably pastoral and reassuringly benign, there was a darker side even to the mind of the central figure of the movement - William Morris. This is certainly manifested in some of his fanciful tales, if not in his designs. The same might be said of the work of a painter who was intimately bound up with Morris and the Arts and Crafts - Edward Burne Jones. One could well speak of their unconscious, as well as conscious, evocations of evil, or despair. Ruskin - whose ideas permeated the thinking of all concerned with the Arts and Crafts - was perturbed by thoughts that his age was inherently evil and that cosmic retribution was near at hand. This is exemplified in 'The Storm Clouds of the Nineteenth Century' - his two disturbing, even prophetic, lectures delivered at the Royal Institution in 1884. Oscar Wilde and Robert Louis Stevenson also attempted to represent, by symbol and allegory, the sicknesses of their society. Voysey, who had a high degree of sensibility, would have been aware of the unhappiness and alienation of his times. Friends, like A.H. Mackmurdo, in the Century Guild - with which he was closely associated at the beginning of his career in the early 1880s - certainly were.

Voysey's attitudes were affected by the cultural climate of his youth. His father's unorthodox religion seems to have stood somewhere between a muted Anglicanism and fully fledged scientific humanism. Such compromises are inevitable in times of change. Voysey grew up when scientific materialism was advancing inexorably - his love of pastoral imagery can be seen as typical of the late-nineteenth-century retreat from materialism.

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Chronological Outline of Voysey's Life

- 1857 28 May, born at Hessle, near Hull, the son of Rev Charles Voysey, 1828-1912 and Frances (Edlin).
- 1864 Rev C. Voysey appointed Vicar of Healaugh, near York. Publishes unorthodox sermon.
- 1869-71 Rev C. Voysey deprived of his living by the Chancellor's Court of the Diocese of York because of his unorthodox preaching. Sentence upheld by Judicial Committee of Privy Council. He refuses to retract, and the family move to London, where he starts preaching at St George's Hall, Langham Place
- 1872 C.F.A. Voysey enters Dulwich College as a day boy. Withdrawn after 18 months and taught thereafter by a private tutor
- 1874 11 May, Voysey articled to John Pollard Seddon (1827-1906), an architect with a successful mainly ecclesiastical practice
- 1877 Begins taking minor commissions of his own
- 1879 Assistant to Henry Saxon Snell (1830-1904), specialist in the design of institutions
- 1880-81 Improver (unpaid assistant) to George Devey, the country house architect
- 1881 (or early 1882) sets up his own practice in Westminster
- 1882-84 Worked on project for sanatorium in Teignmouth (illustrated in *Dekorative Kunst*, I, 1897, 249)
- 1883 Under the influence of A.H. Mackmurdo (1851-1942) began producing decorative designs (earliest design sold to Jeffrey & Co, leading wallpaper manufacturer)
- 1885 Married Mary Maria Evans. First home in Blandford Rd, Bedford Park. Later moved to Streatham Hill. Designs for his cottage-studio probably date from this year (*The Studio*, IV, 1894, 34)
- 1890-91 Moved to Melina Place, St John's Wood
- 1891 Designs house for J.W. Forster in Bedford Park
- 1891-92 Designs pair of houses in Hans Rd, Knightsbridge, his only town houses
- 1893 Designs covers for *The Studio* - which is to publicise Voysey's work for over a decade. Designs Perrycroft, Colwall, Malvern, for J.W. Wilson, MP. This costs £4,900, his first large commission
- 1895 Designs Annesley Lodge, Platt's Lane, Hampstead, for his father
- 1896 Designs large house (known variously as Merlshanger, Wancote and Grey Friars) for Julian Sturgis, the writer, on the Hog's Back near Guildford. Numerous illustrations of this house were to be published
- 1897 Extensive and profusely illustrated article published on Voysey in *Dekorative Kunst* (Munich). Designs New Place, Haslemere, for A.M. Stedman
- 1898 Designs Broadleys (used in the film of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a symbol of 19th-century enlightenment) Lake Windermere, for A. Currer Briggs
- 1899 Designs Spade House, Sandgate for H.G. Wells, and The Orchard, Chorley Wood, Hertfordshire, for himself and his family
- 1902 Designs factory for Sandersons, wallpaper manufacturers, at Chiswick. This is his largest building
- 1903-14 Designs a number of houses, enters competition for Government Buildings in Ottawa (1913)
- 1914 Outbreak of First World War. This marks the virtual end of Voysey's architectural practice
- 1915 *Individuality* published
- 1918 Writes to Alistair Morton of his 'terrible plight' financially
- 1923-36 Designs textiles and furniture as well as alterations to his buildings
- 1924 Elected Master of the Art Workers' Guild
- 1929 Writes to Morton that he had sold £50 of designs in the previous year. 'The Council of the RIBA have elected me a full fellow - a compliment which will not save me from starving'
- 1931 Exhibition of work at the Batsford Gallery under the auspices of the *Architectural Review*. The revival of interest in Voysey appears to have begun at about this time
- 1936 Awarded the distinction of Designer for Industry by the Royal Society for the Arts
- 1940 Awarded the Royal Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects
- 1941 12 February, dies in Winchester