

The wallpaper designs of C. F. A. Voysey

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The centenary last year of the birth of C. F. A. Voysey provides a convenient occasion for considering his achievement and influence as a wallpaper designer. Both were very substantial; indeed there can be little doubt that in terms of his own individual output and of his effect on design generally he stands second only to William Morris in the whole history of English pattern-designing.

He began designing wallpapers in about 1884. By 1885 his designs were already exciting comment in trade papers. By 1888 he was established as one of the leading designers, and by 1890 was turning out papers for Jeffreys, Wool-lams, Scott-Cuthbertsons, Sandersons, Knowles, John Line, Wylie and Loch-head, and Anaglypta. During the decade 1890-1900 he continued to design with amazing fluency, mainly for the newly-established firm of Essex and Co. After 1900 his output dropped substantially, but he in fact continued to sell designs regularly right up to the 1930's.

The study of his designs today is not easy. Over 100 were illustrated at the time of production, but all in black-and-white, many in foreign journals such as *Art et Décoration*, *Der Moderne Stil*, and *Dekorative Kunst*, often with acknowledgements to the producing firm but not to Voysey himself. A considerable number of original designs are to be found, it is true, in the Victoria and Albert Museum (given by Voysey himself) and in the Library of the Royal Institute of British Architects (lent by his son). These are, however, misleading as a guide to his total output for they consist mainly of designs never put into production.

Indeed a serious examination of his designs would be impossible were it not that Messrs Morton Sundour of Carlisle kept over fifty examples of his papers, which had been collected at the time when Alexander Morton was producing textiles to the same designs. Fortunately almost all of these (the majority of which have been presented to the Victoria and Albert Museum) date from the decisive years before 1900. It is these which have been used for the coloured illustrations.

Unfortunately it is difficult to say very much about the earliest designs dating from between 1884 and 1890 which first established Voysey's position with the public. Less than a dozen can now be traced either in illustrations or in actual pieces and they certainly do little to explain the constant contemporary references to Voysey's 'originality' and 'individual style'. One or two, such as the 'Cereus' (Fig.5) dating from 1886, are certainly unusual but most of the others are hardly distinguishable from the work of contemporary designers such as J. D. Sedding or Lewis F. Day.

The influence of A. H. Mackmurdo, who first suggested pattern-designing to Voysey, is clearly seen in one or two designs such as the 'Pentacrinus' (Fig.6). Its seaweed-like forms (said to have been inspired by a fossil marine plant) are plainly reminiscent of those characteristic swirling movements which gained Mackmurdo the reputation of having been an unconscious precursor of *art nouveau*. By contrast the impact of Morris, whom Voysey always coupled with Mackmurdo as a formative influence on his style, is much slighter.

We can infer from contemporary references that these pre-1890 designs were in a very different colour-range from the greens, yellows, oranges, and indigos which Voysey preferred for his later designs. The evidence seems to indicate that they were mostly printed in that sombre palette of nigger-brown and purple enriched with embossing and silvering which was fashionable in the 1880's.

Voysey's output between 1890 and 1900 was so large and varied that some criterion must be adopted in selecting those designs most worth consideration today. Little help can be gained from their relative popularity, for very few of them remained in production for more than a few years. Nor do Voysey's own comments provide any assistance, for the views expressed in his published lectures are far too generalized and wayward to be interpreted as favouring any particular style of design.

The best procedure would seem to be to pick out those designs which are most characteristic of Voysey in the sense that they show the least influence of other designers and to leave aside the many papers which are not so very different from the main run of artist-designed papers of the 1890's. In doing this we must, however, avoid the temptation of giving undue attention to certain personal mannerisms of Voysey, such as his well-known liking for formalized birds, for they occur in every type of design both good and bad. The same applies to his frequent inclusion of unexpected and uninterpretable figures (such as the men in the design illustrated in Fig.11) for although they give a personal flavour to the design they throw very little light on Voysey's stylistic innovations.

One other stylistic mannerism which is sometimes thought of as characteristic of Voysey must also be mentioned, namely the use of huge flowers of the poppy type drawn with deeply serrated and drooping petals giving the effect of having been cut out of paper or cloth. It is true that these occur in some of Voysey's best, and best-known, designs, such as the 'Tokyo' (Fig.7), and were particularly in favour around 1890. A careful examination of other designs of this date proves that this style was not originated by Voysey but was already well established in the work of designers such as T. R. Spence before Voysey took it over.

The characteristic which decisively sets Voysey apart from all his contemporaries, and justifies our regarding him as one of the most original of all pattern-designers, is the way in which he manages to use natural objects as a basis for repeating patterns formed from the juxtaposition of rhythmically contrasted flat shapes. On looking at these designs from a distance one is first aware of a bold mosaic of varied shapes usually bounded by thick dark outlines. It is only

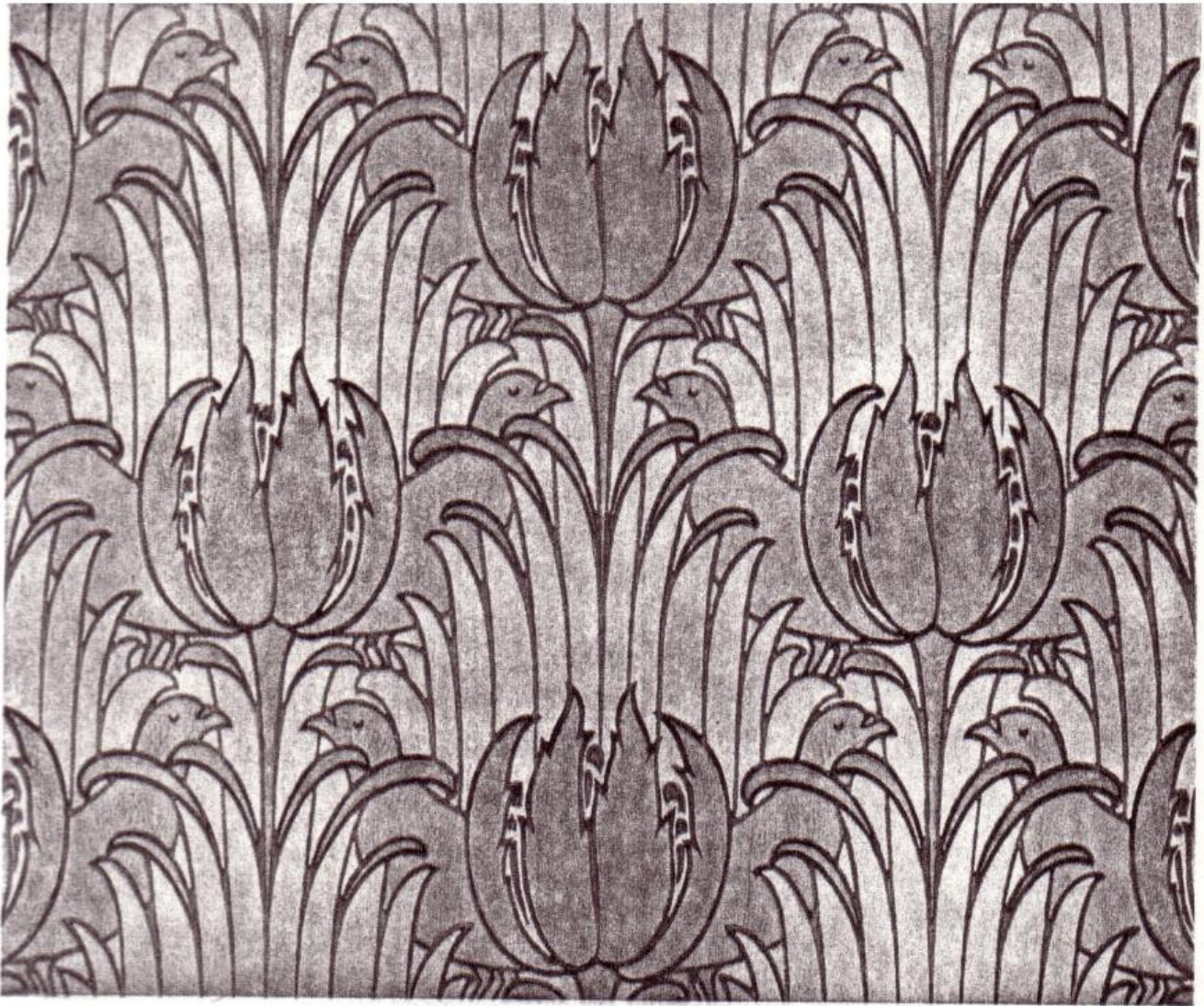
on a closer inspection that one becomes conscious that some of the shapes represent parts of leaves, stems, buds, or birds.

Among the illustrations are several designs which demonstrate different interpretations of this basic treatment. The 'Spring Flower' paper (Fig.14) is a brilliant example but a type which is admittedly rare in Voysey's wallpapers although several of his carpet designs show the same extreme simplification of natural objects. The 'Tulip and Bird' (Fig.1) is more typical; it shows a lesser degree of conventionalization but still one in which it is difficult to relate all the shapes to precise parts of the bird or flower. More typical still are the 'Isis' and 'Iolanthe' designs (Figs.8 and 10), especially in the use not only of the heavy dark outline round the positive shapes but also of the counter-balancing white line round the negative ones. This was a device which Voysey frequently used and which serves to emphasize the spatial as against the linear element.

This building up of patterns through the juxtaposition of varying shapes is, of course, in the best tradition of much oriental design as praised by Victorian reformers such as Owen Jones and Digby Wyatt in their battle against crude naturalism and three-dimensional illusionism in wallpaper design. What is so striking is Voysey's ability to couple it with the use of natural objects. Owen Jones himself designed some admirable wallpapers and textiles on these principles but they were almost all based either on purely geometrical arabesques or at most on conventionalized forms such as the acanthus or fleur-de-lis. Morris and his followers, on the other hand, made very little use of flat shapes in the construction of their patterns but relied instead on the linear interplay of twisting stems. Indeed Voysey is almost the only English pattern-designer who has successfully transformed natural objects into abstract repeating shapes.

A corollary to this emphasis on flat shapes is the strict elimination of detail in the natural objects depicted. One of the most striking characteristics of Voysey's more personal designs is the daring way in which he is prepared to leave large leaf-shapes (for example in the 'Wykehamist' (Fig.2) or the 'Gordon' (Fig.3)) quite undifferentiated by veining or other detail – a style which confutes all the maxims of books on pattern-designing. The resulting directness and simplicity is often emphasized by Voysey's preference for simple and straightforward basic structures to his designs. Few of them have the elaborate and deliberately involved superimposed structures of which Morris was such a master and which Mackmurdo also used. The majority are based either on a straightforward turn-over net structure of the standard Italian Renaissance type or on an even simpler arrangement of horizontal rows (Fig.15). Moreover the structure is always quite apparent and no attempt is made to conceal the repeats.

At his best Voysey used these self-imposed limitations to produce designs of quite exceptional skill which must excite the admiration of all students of pattern-design. Often, however, they involved sacrifices which substantially reduced the beauty of the designs. The need to give almost as much importance to the negative shapes of the gaps between the objects as to the positive shapes of the objects themselves often led, as in the 'Aidan' (Fig.9), to ugly distortions of leaves and flowers and to lumpy bean-shaped forms bounded by unnatural



1. 'Tulip and Bird,' 1896. Essex and Co. A typical example of Voysey's extreme simplification of natural objects.
2. 'Wykehamist,' 1897. Essex and Co. The large areas without detail are very characteristic.
3. 'Gordon,' c.1895. Essex and Co. Illustrating Voysey's use of a white outline to emphasize the negative spaces in his patterns.
4. 'Cestrefeld,' 1895. Essex and Co. An example of Voysey's more naturalistic style, owing something to William Morris.