

## 6 · England, Eighteen-ninety to Nineteen-fourteen

WE must first return to English architecture and design. At the end of the eighties, as was shown, Morris was the leader in design, Norman Shaw in architecture. The deliberate break with tradition, which characterized the style of Europe's greatest painters about 1890 and the style of the initiators of Art Nouveau, was not made and not desired in England. So it seemed appropriate to leave until now the discussion of the English development from 1890 onwards, though at least one English architect had ventured on a new style of an original and highly stimulating nature, before Art Nouveau had begun. This was C.F. Annesley Voysey (1857–1941).<sup>1</sup> It has already been said that his designs were a source of inspiration of Art Nouveau. Van de Velde told the author of the revolutionizing effect of Voysey's wallpapers on him and his friends.<sup>2</sup> His words were: 'It was as if Spring had come all of a sudden.' And indeed we have only to look at one of Voysey's wallpapers printed in the nineties (Pl. 78) and one of his somewhat later printed linens (Pl. 79), to see the great difference between him and Morris. Not that he aimed at novelty; his modifications and progressiveness, it would seem, were almost unconscious. Doctrines and hard-and-fast rules were not his way. In the controversy between supporters of stylized and of naturalistic ornament, he did not take sides. For although, in an interview in 1893, he declared realism to be unsuitable for decoration, he was inclined to admit plants and beasts in patterns on condition that they be 'reduced to mere symbols'. This may seem in accord with Morris, but there is a distinctly new note in Voysey's urgent desire to 'live and work in the present'.<sup>3</sup>

So he arrives at patterns which are happily near to nature, and at the



78. Voysey: Design for a wallpaper, c. 1895.



79. Voysey: *Stags and Trees*, printed linen, 1908.

same time full of decorative charm. The graceful shapes of birds flying, drifting, or resting, and of tree-tops, with or without leaves, are favourite motifs of Voysey's, and there is an unmistakable kindness in his child-like stylized trees and affectionately portrayed birds and beasts. A comparison between these wallpapers or linens and Morris's *Honeysuckle* (Pl. 8) shows what a decisive step has been taken away from nineteenth-century Historicism into a new world of light and youth.

It is known that everywhere in English cultural life a longing for fresh air and gaiety expressed itself at the end of Queen Victoria's reign. The success of Liberty's about 1890 depended largely on their Eastern silks in delicate shades and their other Chinese imports. The history of the part played by China and Japan in European art since 1860 has not yet been written. It would be very interesting to show the influence of the East appearing here in a loose technique of painting, there in the greatest finesse of line and contours, there again in clear, soft, and pure colour, and in yet other works in flat pattern effects. Owing to the unique synthesis of ornamental and 'Impressionist' qualities in Eastern art, both the Impressionists and, at the opposite pole, the originators of Art Nouveau, could use what Japanese woodcuts and Chinese pottery had to teach them. The Impressionist went to Japan for a lightness that he took for *plein air*, for a sketchy handling of the brush, and a flatness of surfaces, which he wrongly interpreted as meaning the shadelessness of strong sunlight. His adversary, more justly, stressed the high degree of stylization in every line drawn and every surface decorated by an Eastern artist. That is why Japanese woodcuts can appear in the backgrounds of Manet's *Zola* and Degas's *Tissot* as well as van Gogh's *Père Tanguy* and Ensor's *Skeleton Studying Eastern Paintings*.<sup>5</sup> The case of Whistler is especially instructive; for it proves that in the same painter at the same time both aspects of the Eastern style might be reflected. The influence of Eastern colour, Eastern delicacy, and Eastern composition on his yet so clearly Impressionist portraits is evident and has no need of the Chinese costume in the *Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* to stress it. At the same time, however, Whistler could make this same picture the chief accent of a room decorated in a style which, although not free from traces of Historicism obviously pointed forward to Art

Nouveau.<sup>6</sup> Moreover Whistler pleaded for rooms with completely plain walls in light colours. In this he followed a lead given by his friend Edward Godwin whose house at Bristol has been mentioned in a previous chapter because of the plain walls and bare floors of its rooms and because of its Japanese prints. The date of these interiors, 1862, is remarkably early. Whistler's house in Tite Street, Chelsea, built for him by Godwin, had white and rich yellow walls, Japanese matting on the floors, plain curtains in straight folds, some pieces of Chinese porcelain, and a few simply framed pictures and etchings.<sup>6</sup> In trying to imagine such rooms, we feel ourselves at once in the early years of the twentieth century, no longer in the days of Morris and Ruskin. And yet, in theory (if that is not too heavy an expression for his casual *aperçus*) and in technique, Whistler was as complete an Impressionist as anybody, and therefore an object of passionate hatred to those who worked for a new outlook on life and art.<sup>7</sup> There is no need to go again into that unpleasant case, Whistler versus Ruskin. Morris was bound to follow Ruskin.<sup>8</sup> This was a matter of principle primarily, but also a matter of taste. The man who regarded Burne-Jones as the great living painter of the Late Victorian era could certainly not appreciate Whistler's superficial (truly superficial) pictorial impressions.

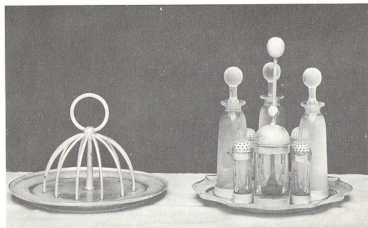
One would expect to find the same contrast between the disciples of the Arts and Crafts and the Impressionists as between Morris and Whistler. However, it is a fact which has already been mentioned in connexion with the exhibitions of Les Vingt, that on the Continent the introduction of Impressionism, and of the new decorative style in both its forms, as Art and Crafts and as Art Nouveau, took place concurrently and were both due to the same persons. Meier-Graefé, who was one of the first to discover van de Velde, wrote books on Renoir and Degas, and also on van Gogh and Gauguin. And even today most people interested in art are unaware of the irreconcilable difference between Impressionism as a doctrine and the doctrine of Morris and all his followers. Yet, it is obvious that the antithesis, Impressionism versus Arts and Crafts, is but the artistic expression of a far more comprehensive cultural antithesis between two generations. On the one side there is a conception of art as a rapid rendering of momentary surface

effects, on the other as an expression of what is final and essential; on the one side there is the philosophy of Art for Art's sake, on the other a renewed faith in a social message of art. The Impressionists stand for the exquisite luxuries of late-nineteenth-century Paris, the Arts and Crafts for 'roughing it' in the spirit of that Youth Movement which is so significant of the years around 1900 and after, and can be traced in Bergson as much as in the foundation of the first 'modern' public schools in England: Abbotsholme (1889) and Bedales (1892).

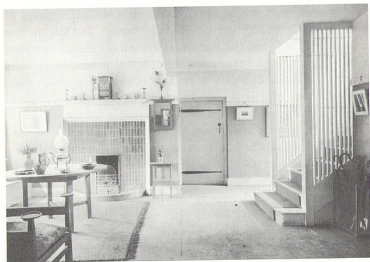
In design, Voysey is the outstanding but by no means the only representative of this new *joie de vivre*. Some of Crane's late wallpapers also depart from Morris's heaviness. Frank Brangwyn's designs for textiles are another example. As long as Continental architects believed in Art Nouveau, it was chiefly English designs for wallpapers, printed linens, chintzes, and so on which appealed to them. As soon as the new desire for *Sachlichkeit* spread, all the pioneer work done by the English architects and artists in the shaping (not the decoration) of objects became topical. It must have been a delightful surprise to those who – like Muthesius – came to England, weary not only of Victorian stuffiness but also of the licence of Art Nouveau, to see a toast rack or a cruet set designed by Voysey (Pl. 80). The refreshing simplicity of his wallpapers is also the keynote of these small things of everyday use. Their charm lies solely in the cleanness and gracefulness of their shapes.

Of particular importance for the coming Modern Movement was the expression of this new spirit in furnishing. The entrance hall of Voysey's house, The Orchard, Chorleywood, Hertfordshire, of 1900 can serve as an example (Pl. 81), with its lightness; the woodwork painted white, a pure intense blue for the tiles, unmitigated contrasts of uprights and horizontals, especially in the screen to the staircase (a motif which was for a time to become eminently popular), and furniture of bold, direct, if a little *outré* forms.

There is one more thing which must be said about Voysey and which places him further from Morris and close to us. He was a designer, not a craftsman. He could not in fact, so he told the author, work in any craft. Ernest Gimson (1854–1920),<sup>9</sup> the greatest of the English artist-craftsmen, was, as a matter of fact, in not too different a position,



80. Voysey: Toast rack and cruet set.



81. Voysey: The Orchard, Chorleywood, Hertfordshire, 1900.

although not many people realize it. He had been trained, it is true, in craftsmanship, but his famous works of cabinetmaking, metal-work, and so on are only designed and not made by him. The chairs shown here (Pl.82) give an impression of his honesty, his feeling for the nature of wood, and his unrevolutionary spirit. Few of his works have this superb simplicity. As a rule, Gimson was more responsive to English tradition and did not despise the use of forms invented in the past.

On a really commercial basis good progressive furniture was at the same time made by Sir Ambrose Heal (1872-1959). The firm of Heal & Son had been producing Victorian furniture, until Ambrose Heal changed its course. A wardrobe which Heal's showed at the Paris Exhibition of 1900 (Pl.83) has the same brightness which we found in Voysey's wallpapers. Plain surfaces of slightly fumed and waxed oak contrast with small panels decorated in pewter and ebony. There are no long curves; the patterns are composed of rectangles and gracefully-drawn little flowers. The close atmosphere of medievalism has vanished. Living amongst such objects, we breathe a fresher air.

Even more important historically than such exhibition pieces of Heal's was their production for the ordinary market. In 1898, the first catalogue of Heal's Plain Oak Furniture came out and started the revival of the simple wooden bedstead in England.<sup>10</sup> For more than twenty years these pleasant bedsteads were popular in the English furniture trade, until they were swept away by misguided supporters of modernistic forms.

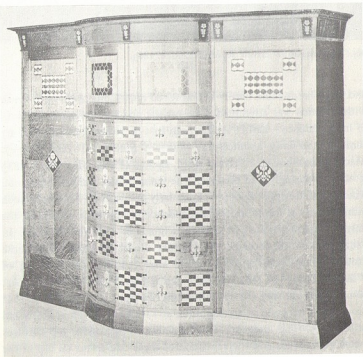
Exactly the same contrast between 1890 and 1900 as in cabinet-making is to be found in English printing. Morris's Kelmscott Press – founded in 1890 – produced pages the effect of which depends largely on their exquisite medievalist decoration. Cobden-Sanderson's and Emery Walker's Doves Press – founded in 1900 and mentioned in this book on page 35 – secured for the plain unadorned type face its place in modern book production.

As far as English architecture is concerned, the historical position is not quite so simple as in applied art. It has been pointed out that, by 1890, Norman Shaw had attained a style which, based on Queen Anne, was so 'modern' in character and so perfectly suited to English needs

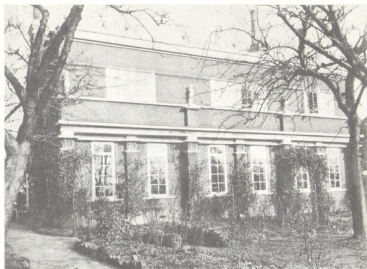
82. Gimson: Chairs, 1901.



83. Heal: Wardrobe, 1900.







84. Mackmurdo: 8 Private Road, Enfield, c. 1883.

and taste that it could hardly be improved on, as long as no open break with tradition was attempted. The earliest and most remarkable cases of independence – earlier in fact than that of Horta – are afforded by some of the early architectural works of Mackmurdo and Voysey. Mackmurdo's house, 8 Private Road, Enfield (Pl. 84) built about 1883 is of a surprisingly free carriage. The flat roof and the few horizontal windows of the upper floor are particularly noteworthy. Although much more orderly it forms in its independence of approach a parallel, the only European parallel, to Godwin's house of 1878 for Whistler. In 1882 Mackmurdo founded the Century Guild, the first of all those groups of artist-craftsmen-designers who followed the teaching of William Morris. Of 1883 was his amazing title page which started Art Nouveau on its way. In 1886 Mackmurdo put up the stand, for the products of his guild at an exhibition at Liverpool, which is illustrated in Plate 85. The attenuated shafts with their excessive top cornices instead of capitals and the repetition of these odd forms on top of the



85. Mackmurdo: Exhibition stand, Liverpool, 1886.

fascia board are even more original, and started a fashion, when Voysey and then several others took them up. Of Mackmurdo's strong influence on Voysey there can be no doubt. He himself said to the author that when he was very young Mackmurdo had impressed him even more than Morris. Yet the first house which Voysey built, the one in The Parade at Norman Shaw's garden suburb, Bedford Park near London (Pl. 86), is amazingly independent, considering the date, 1891. The arrangement of the windows is particularly striking. But whereas this kind of free grouping also prevails in the works of Norman Shaw and his school, the whiteness of the walls was an open protest against the surrounding red brick of Shaw's garden suburb. The tower-like tallness of the house also and the skipping rhythm of bare walls and horizontal window openings were innovations introduced deliberately and not without a youthful sense of mischief.

However, Voysey did not go on in that direction, or else he would have developed into an architect of Art Nouveau. Already in the tiny studio



86. Voysey: House in Bedford Park, near London, 1891.

built in St Dunstan's Road, West Kensington, London, in the same year 1891 (Pl.87), the general proportions are closer to English traditions, cottage traditions, than anything in the house in Bedford Park, although the detail is again remarkably novel, above all the massive chimney, the batter of the buttresses on the right and also the ironwork in front (obviously inspired by Mackmurdo's woodwork of 1886).

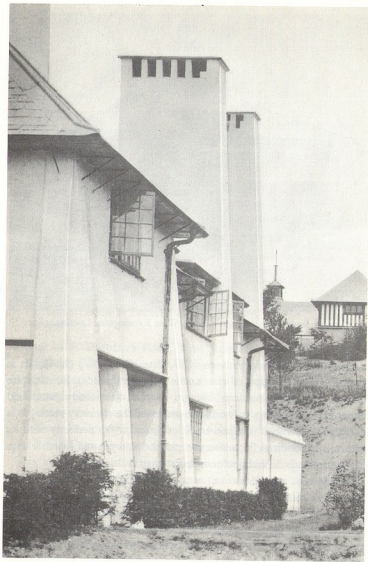
When Voysey began to get commissions for houses in the country, his appreciation of English traditions was decisively strengthened.<sup>11</sup> A man of intense feeling for nature, as his designs prove him to have been, he could not but think of his houses in conjunction with the surrounding countryside, and so shapes offered themselves which were more akin to the English manor house and cottage of the past than to those he had evolved in London. His country-house practice began in the early nineties and by 1900 had assumed very large dimensions. He never built a church, never a public building, and only once a small warehouse.



87. Voysey: Studio, St Dunstan's Road, West Kensington, London, 1891.

Perrycroft, Colwall, Malvern Hills, dates from 1893 (Pl.88). It is typical of Voysey's ideas of what a country house should be like. In spite of such strikingly modern features as the consistently horizontal fenestration and the massive block shapes of the chimney-stacks, it is nowhere demonstratively anti-traditional, and it fits perfectly with its natural surroundings (a garden was planned and planted together with the house) and the architectural character of the country.

This is even more evident in another building, the house erected for Canon L. Grane at Shackleford in Surrey, in 1897 (Pl.89). Today it is not easy to appreciate the candour and simplicity of its façade. For, in Britain at least, it has become too much of a standard example ineptly imitated by hundreds of speculative builders all along the arterial roads and all over the suburbs. However, from the historian's point of view, it remains no small feat to have created the pattern for the vast majority



88. Voysey: Perrycroft, Colwall, Malvern Hills, 1893.



89. Voysey: House at Shackleford, Surrey, 1897.

of buildings carried out over a period of thirty years and more. What was not copied from Voysey, needless to say, was what impresses us today as his most progressive motifs – the long-drawn-out window strips and the completely bare triangles of the gables, broken only in one place by a charmingly tiny and just a trifle precious window.

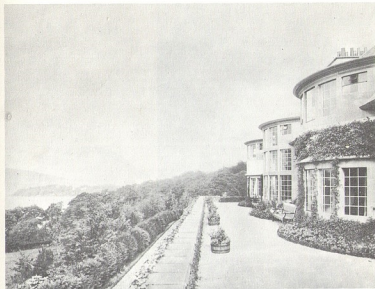
This introduction of an occasional effect of Art Nouveau piquancy helps a great deal to lighten the otherwise puritan honesty of many of Voysey's houses. Thus for instance in the lodge of Merlshanger on the Hog's Back near Guildford, Surrey, designed in 1896 (Pl.90), the typical Voysey buttresses and far projecting eaves carry a very flat curved cupola with a spirelet, needle-thin and ending in a weather-vane. In the same way in one of his most successful country houses, Broadleys on Lake Windermere (Pl.91) of 1898 the eaves cornice is supported once again by thin iron brackets and their delicacy adds a touch of lightness to the whole front.

But such effects are only a little light relief in what is otherwise sound, balanced, vigorous design without any tendency to demonstrative novelty. That is what makes the water front of Broadleys so impressive. Here, one sees clearly, was a mind equally averse to the picturesque



90. Voysey: Lodge and stables, Merlshanger, near Guildford, Surrey, 1896.

tricks of the Shaw school and the preciousness of Art Nouveau. From this centre bay with its completely unmoulded mullions and transoms, from these windows cut clean and sheer into the wall, access to the architectural style of today could have been direct, more direct probably than from the designs of those few in England who in the late nineties appeared more revolutionary than Voysey. Whom should one count amongst them? Maybe Baillic Scott (1865-1945) who started a little later than Voysey and very much under his influence,<sup>12</sup> and C. R. Ashbee, whose writings and social activities have been mentioned before and whose most original houses, in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, London were designed as early as 1899.<sup>13</sup> Even more remarkable historically is the Mary Ward Settlement in Tavistock Place, London (Pl. 92), built in 1895 by Dunbar Smith (1866-1933) and Cecil Brewer (1871-1918). Its relation to Norman Shaw (Venetian window) as well as to Voysey (top parts of the projecting wings) is evident. The rhythm of the blocks on the other hand, the proportions of the recessed centre part with its



91. Voysey: Broadleys on Lake Windermere, 1898



92. Smith and Brewer: Mary Ward Settlement, Tavistock Place, London, 1895.