The Pursuit of Beauty in Late-Victorian Illustration

MARIANA OLIVEIRA PIRES

University of Lisbon

Abstract. In late-nineteenth-century Britain, the Arts and Crafts Movement’s aspiration to the symbolic, often spiritual potential more traditionally associated with the finer arts of painting and sculpture blossomed in a vibrant and fruitful praise of ornament, technique, and design. In the context of a fast-developing material culture, the aesthete’s worship of beauty and cult of form reverberated through a perplexing world of urban modernity obsessed with surface decoration, images of floral-carpeted rooms, and highly ornate, heavily gilt publishers’ bindings. The leading artistic principle of the time was a prime commitment to the ‘sense of the beautiful’, and the motivation to produce both useful and visually appealing objects lay at the heart of one commercially and artistically thriving enterprise: book illustration. From William Morris and Walter Crane, to Walter Pater and Aubrey Beardsley, this paper considers the place of book illustration in the broader context of the artistic revival of fin-de-siècle surface decoration practices and the aesthetic and design theories that fuelled them.

* * * * *

It was one of Walter Crane’s long-standing arguments as an artist and an educator that decorative art possessed something of a linguistic nature, which he termed ‘picture-writing’.1 In Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New (1896), Crane finds in the ‘imaginative beauty, and systematic, organic ornament, [...] ultimately bursting into a free foliation and flamboyant blossom’ of early manuscript illumination a subtlety of expression paralleled only by the ‘purely ornamental’ art of Eastern carpets and tiles.2 This power of communication, he argues, built upon a solid geometrical basis and rule of design, was overshadowed by proto-modern, exclusively pictorial illustration, and was only set free through a renewed interest in typography, printing, and the work of the decorative illustrator: in short, ‘all the crafts connected with the production of tasteful and ornate books’.3

2 Walter Crane, Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), pp. 9–10; Crane, The Claims of Decorative Arts, p. 28.
3 Crane, Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New, p. 185.
Especially responsive to exponents of late-romantic art such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Morris, fin-de-siècle book designers and illustrators like Crane shared the belief that beauty and form were interrelated. My first aim in this essay is to understand how this fundamental ideal is intimately linked with a flourishing theory of ornament and the formative values of the new Aesthetic Movement, drawing on theoretical arguments and creative examples from turn of the century Britain. Secondly, by focusing on artistic components such as form, layout, language, and style, I demonstrate how late-nineteenth-century illustrators directly contributed to the debate, championing the applied arts in advancing the claim for a deliberately crafted beauty.

Crane's 1896 analysis of Rossetti's pen and pencil contributions to the acclaimed Moxon edition of Tennyson's Poems (1857) suggests that a new sense of the decorative emerged when a 'real constructive power of design' met the 'poetic imagination, [...] richness of detail, [...] and romantic feeling [...] akin to the work of the Medieval miniaturist'. By the early 1880s, as artists began to focus on the ornamental function of pictures displayed upon the double page, their applied nature and sensuous effect, the 'revival in England of decorative arts of all kinds' appeared to be 'culminating [...] in book design'.

Illustrators grew fascinated by the possibilities of their materials, artisans and designers in full force, no longer mere interpreters of tales. A 'double resistance, or a struggle for autonomy', Linda Dowling suggests, characterizes the relationship that pictures established with the texts of which they were supposed to be an integral part, as the 'decorative motives [...] originated by fin-de-siècle graphic artists became the basis for [a text's] arresting and appealing typographical effects'. The very term 'illustration', nominally conceived as the visual explanation or interpretation of a written text, seemed rather at odds with the exercise of embellishment expected, at least to some extent, from the decorative arts. The practice therefore sought a continuous linguistic readjustment. A lavish George Allen edition of Edmund Spenser's magnum opus The Faerie Queene, published between 1895 and 1897, became both 'pictured' and 'portrayed in a series of designs by Walter Crane' (fig. 1), who in 1898 'adorned with twelve pictures and other devices' Spenser's The Shepheard's Calender; Oscar Wilde's Salome was likewise infamously 'pictured by Aubrey Beardsley', who also 'embroidered with nine drawings' Leonard Smithers's 1896 edition of Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock.

Following the rise of fine private printing in the mid-1880s, artists of the page found in their tools the potential to match the poet's creative arrangement of language, imaginative substance and material beauty, joining banners with a

4 Crane, Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New, pp. 152, 162.
5 Ibid., p. 228.
7 I borrow these terms and passages directly from the cover and title-page of each named edition.
Fig. 1. From Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen, 1895). Designed and engraved by Walter Crane. Public domain. Source: <https://archive.org/details/spensersfaeriequo2spenuoft>.
The Pursuit of Beauty in Late-Victorian Illustration

vibrant turn-of-the-century concern with crafting, technique, and design. They adopted the terminology of the applied arts and imbued the raw materials of their art with symbolic force. The line became all-embracing: ‘Let the designer [...] in the adaptation of his art, lean upon the staff of line, — line determinative, line emphatic, line delicate, line expressive, line controlling and uniting.’

In Britain, la belle époque found its fullest expression both in the artists and critics involved in the advance of a new school of aesthetics for the end of the century and the agitated, militant spirit of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 1870s. The former the bohemian, city-bred sibling of the latter, in every stroke of the paintbrush and musical variation it produced, in its predilection for the tragicomic, dressed in yellow ennui, in a renewed enthusiasm for the exotic and esoteric, its inspiration was the material variety of beauty. This was the Aesthetic Movement.

A call to the senses, to the impression of form and composition moved the new aesthetes into creation and in search of the elements that ought to provide ‘that special phase or quality of beauty’ untranslatable into any other. Their impulse was always contradictory. On the one hand, an artist sought the ultimate form of detachment in their art, a means to eclipse oneself entirely; on the other, their quest became of the perceptual world, that of raw and sweeping emotion, the locus par excellence of human experience. An aesthete’s unbound concern was with that mysterious compound of objects and their inherent, perceivable characteristics of ‘colour, odour, texture [...] in the mind of the observer.’ The social and moral realm of men, in comparison, ‘calling [one] out of [oneself] in a thousand forms of action’, became merely secondary. In England specifically, this Epicurean ideal of a life of fleeting sensations was most notably popularized in Walter Pater’s famous 1873 ‘Conclusion’ to Studies in the history of the Renaissance, which defied conventional notions of — and the very rift between — life, art, and criticism. Conceived in ardent moments of reflection and swift, consuming instances of adoration, wrote the master aesthete, ‘[e]very moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills [...] is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, — for that moment only’.

In opposition to the deeply-ingrained utilitarian expectations of the art and literature of his time, Pater removed the absolute, the moralistic, and the abstract from his aesthetic equation and campaigned for the belief that only

---

8 Crane, The Claims of Decorative Arts, p. 93.
10 Walter Pater, ‘Conclusion to the Renaissance’, in Strangeness and Beauty, ii, pp. 30–33 (p. 31).
11 Ibid.
12 A second edition published in 1877 was renamed The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. All subsequent editions maintain this second title.
13 Pater, ‘Conclusion to the Renaissance’, pp. 31–32.
through sheer sensory engagement with beautiful forms and objects could an individual rise above the constraints of objective reality, allowing themselves the journey of subjective experience:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp importunate reality [...]. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force is suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions.14

For the aesthete, art’s finest form was brought about in unique, ephemeral moments of feeling. In beautiful craftsmanship, possible only in the perfect union of form and subject-matter, Pater found the ultimate outward expression of an artist’s inner vision, a realization in its merit rather than a picture of truth.15 Thus he ends as he begins:

What is important [...] is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms.16

The late-Victorian renaissance of handicraft, on the other hand, saw its impetus for creation wrought out of proper despair, its canvas and surfaces an extension of the Pre-Raphaelite palette, bound to nature, cloaked in medieval dress. More than simply an artistic school for the reunion of poets, painters, and craft practitioners distraught with the effects of industrial commercialism, the Arts and Crafts reform passionately proposed an ideological structure that was to actively renounce the myth of progress and positivism grounded on the ‘stimulus of competition’ and that ‘great principle’ of labour division, which they believed had engendered the fallacy of the modern.17 As artists in revolt against the art establishment, their attention was turned almost exclusively towards the ornaments of ordinary life, ‘the things [people] must perforce use [...]’, the things they must perforce make’.18

14 Ibid., p. 31.
15 One fundamental condition in Pater’s thesis is that a perfect artistic form should entirely overcome the distinction between subject-matter and mode of presentation, as in poetry or music. This idea pervades Pater’s critical approach to Leonardo da Vinci’s work in the article entitled ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ and is subject to the most intricate analysis in ‘Style’ and ‘The School of Giorgione’. The three articles can be found in the second edition of The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (London: Macmillan and Co., 1877).
Nonetheless, the link binding these two important currents of creative and critical practice was never entirely severed, as the applied arts offered unexplored and fertile soil for artistic, technical, and social experimentation, and laid claim to purely aesthetic beliefs traditionally reserved for the finer arts. In both movements, a declaration for artistic freedom, for a *praxis* of art-making removed from moral and utilitarian constraints, their emphasis on contemplation and aesthetic pleasure for its own sake, rivals that of the high romantics, early in the century, who had firmly secured the role of the artist as critical commentator. In both, the mark of unrest and of conflicting, overbearing energies became something of a personalized, unifying stamp, vividly printed on that which they so fervently produced: images.

Standing at the head of the Arts and Crafts reform, in his lectures on textile and wallpaper design, in his decorative enterprise at Morris & Co., and, later, in his political commitment to the Socialist League, Pre-Raphaelite poet-artisan and founder of the Kelmscott Press William Morris sought to devise a politics of ornament that would directly address the divergent conditions of contemporary life, art, and labour as he perceived them. 19 He described art simply as ‘man’s expression of his joy in labour’, and in this revolutionary symbiosis — art as the product of men and women’s pleasure in compulsion-free, thus useful work — he defined the most complete human experience. 20 That the artist-like labourer should derive a conscious, sensual, and inherent pleasure from their daily effort and occupation becomes an imperative for any free and democratic society. Therein lies the crux of his materialist philosophy. Morris’s conclusion is that people’s social and aesthetic commitment to the society of which they are necessarily a part is entirely dependent upon the material and sensuous relationship they establish with the artefacts of daily, ordinary life, objects in the purest sense, rather than commodities. 21

As part of that ‘great system invented for the expression of a man’s delight in beauty’, simple and harmonious ornamentation should be an essential, even if minor, part of the art-object, its application a visible sign of social engagement, of a new poetics of representation as well as validation of the worker’s creativity. 22 Surely, Morris’s bold statement that ‘those who are to make beautiful things must live in a beautiful place’ sets an impossibly idealistic standard even for his

---

19 It is well known that Morris’s experiments in the manifold domain of the ‘lesser’ arts of decoration and design resonate within a violent judgment of the industrial mode of production and the manufacturer’s pledge for profit, which he understood as the common capitalistic practice of jeopardizing quality over number, productive human labour over futile exertion. See Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, pp. 287–306.
own time. The belief remains, however, as a guiding principle to the artistic and aesthetic project he proposed: beautiful objects, like beautiful forms, are in themselves of transformative value, mediating the effects of a complex and consuming environment upon one’s body, soul, and intellect alike.

By the 1860s, Morris’s impulsive turn to book design as an addition to his commitment to the decorative arts denotes an early, though unseasoned, perception of the social and political role of the industrial arts. Books were an increasingly prominent and significant feature of the English middle- and upper-middle class parlour, a privileged, comfortable and self-enclosed space in which ‘material things simultaneously asserted and concealed a relation to the marketplace’. Nevertheless, to speak of a full-fledged Morrisian understanding of market and labour relations at this stage is premature. It was only later, at the apex of his political maturity, that similar notions to Pater’s theory of sense-perception and the agency of things, mingled with a Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on sensual and physical beauty, urged him into publishing as an extension of a political strife in the name of art.

On setting up the Kelmscott Press in 1891, Morris’s articulate vision of the model handmade book, built according to traditional methods of binding and printing, embodied an almost visceral aversion to the perishable quality of the modern, hot-pressed, and mass-produced book. These were, as he understood them, the symptoms of technological innovation placed at the service of commercialism, reducing books to replaceable, and disposable articles of trade, mere by-products of a market-based strategy that both explored and debased the workers to the level of machines. Inspired in medieval incunabula, the books produced at the Kelmscott Press were of a different nature. Indeed, they were the result of a collaborative and artistic effort impossible to replicate in an industrial environment. Their use of fine linen paper, bold and close-spaced type, wide margins and a balance of text, illustration, and other ornamentation aligned upon the page, rendered them irreproducible by modern industrial means. Their very physical existence, Morris believed, exposed the artistic void of the machine-made, denounced the falsehood of modern ideas of technological progress, and set a standard for quality in objects of ordinary use. Kelmscott editions were meant to be read as well as seen. Their imaginative substance and formal characteristics were to be regarded as material articles of beauty in themselves. An individual’s experience of a book should not be of the intellectual or utilitarian sphere alone: it should pose an experience of the senses also.

Morris’s emphasis on ‘the sensuous pleasure of the eye’ derived from harmony became instrumental to a growing perception of the book as a harmonious unit of conscious design. His demand was that illustrations, when in use, ‘be

---

designed as a part of the whole, so that they would seem obviously imperfect without their surroundings.\textsuperscript{25} Elsewhere he conceded that an illustration, ‘in order to succeed, and to be ornament, [...] must submit to certain limitations, & become architectural’; he achieved this by emphasizing the structural form and decorative features of the page, as in the horizontal juxtaposition of engravings and columns of type in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (1896) (fig. 2), or the lavish vertical borders of the Kelmscott Press editions.\textsuperscript{26} Applied to all aspects of ornamental design, a quest for harmony in material form and substance becomes one of those ‘special limitations within which the craftsman must work [...]’, the wall of order against vagueness, and the door of order for imagination.\textsuperscript{27}

Taking its cue from Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, mid-1890s decorative illustrators drew their cards from an en vogue repertoire of flat and patterned surfaces, chiselled line-work, and stylized treatment of natural forms, weaving these elements into a universal language of ornament. As observed

\textsuperscript{25} William Morris, Some Notes on Early Woodcut Books, with a Chapter on Illuminated Manuscripts (London: H. M. O’ Kane, 1902), p. 16.


\textsuperscript{27} Morris, News from Nowhere and Other Writings, p. 262.
by Crane, modern design ties to the aesthete’s pledge to sensuous experience in the sense that its aim remains ‘rather ideal beauty than literal fact’. Crane goes on to explore the many ways design as a system — a language of selection, arrangement, and adaptation, ‘governed by geometric plan’ — can be made use of to consciously assimilate the pictorial requests of the subject-matter and the effect of decoration through the technical means of line and form. Beauty, he maintained, while ‘the purely inspiring artistic purpose’, should nonetheless be ‘perfectly reconciled and united with [the technical and useful one]’ in determining the form and character of one’s work.

Crane’s aesthetic is thoroughly Morrisian. According to him, in much the same way as anything in the nature of decorative design must adhere to the principles of all organic art, that is, ‘art that is genuinely growing’, book illustration must also be considered with a sense of rational growth. In pattern design, for instance, where, as Morris put it, ‘one thing grows visibly from another’, a sense of rhythm is established by means of elaborate layering and vertical planning. Similarly, in the arrangement of visual motifs upon the wall-like page, careful selection and repetition must be exercised to produce certain rhythmical shapes that will logically result in a harmonious whole. ‘[C]onstructed upon the rhythmic recurrence of pure line’, Crane finds in harmony ‘the basis of the beauty’ in all design. ‘The result may be a picture’, he concedes, ‘but it must also be a pattern’.

Besides the British Arts and Crafts revival, Crane also borrowed the formal, artistic, and cultural elements we associate with his fairy-tale creations today from Japanese woodblock prints, namely their peculiar vibrancy of colour, elongated silhouettes, and a flair for the absurd and anthropomorphic. Yet, as illustrations, his designs stand out for their solidity and compactness, a feeling, as he himself put it, ‘of rectangular control’ not entirely congenial or integral to the spontaneous, flowing line expression held in the art of Japan. For that, one ought to turn to Beardsley, whose delicate, yet incisive lines across balancing masses of solid black, sinuous arabesques and contrasting planes of nude whites and intricate patterns represent an important shift in illustration towards a modern idea of Art Nouveau vested with symbolist potential. Gone was ‘the old interest in life’, and a ‘rich vocabulary of dreamed images, deliberately ambiguous, enigmatic, fatalistic, sensual or erotic, escapist or

28 Walter Crane, ‘Design In Two Parts’, *The Magazine of Art*, 16 (1893), 79–83, 131–36 (p. 79).
29 Ibid.
33 Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, p. 278.
34 Crane, *Line and Form*.
35 Crane, ‘Design In Two Parts’, p. 79.
obscure and interpreted in what became recognizable forms was established.\textsuperscript{37} Beauty, which Beardsley would once name ‘the most difficult of things’, became increasingly associated with the way these forms were perceived to embody an ideal of felt reality, which the artist himself seems to have realized evermore fully where his creative energies met with an instinct towards the technical and material.\textsuperscript{38}

In a thorough description of Beardsley’s process, Robert Ross remembers how the young artist always worked with the end of reproduction in view.\textsuperscript{39} His indifference towards the handmade, however, as well as more traditional methods of production, set him a world apart from the very decorative artists whose determining influence he acknowledged in his early style and experiments in book design. Contrary to the standards of reference of the Kelmscott Press — the pinnacle of beauty in fine printing and contemporary book manufacture — Beardsley embraced modern technology aimed at mass production and readapted his work method to suit the requirements of his medium. A flagrant example appears early on in Beardsley’s short artistic career, in his emulation of Edward Burne-Jones’s work on wood-engraving for Dent’s 1893 edition of Malory’s \textit{Le Morte d’Arthur} (fig. 3). Reflective of the intricate woodcut ornaments and illustrations of the Kelmscott books, this black-and-white rendition of the famous chivalric romance was from the start conceived to attract the attention of a much more varied, middle-class audience than that of its exquisite predecessor. It mostly relied on new line-block techniques of reproduction, which resulted in a higher number of copies at a much smaller price for the consumer. The extent to which Beardsley made use of this commercial vantage is relatively unknown, but he was certainly one of the very earliest to see the artistic value in mechanical reproduction, as he used it frequently, and no doubt self-consciously, in many subsequent commissions.\textsuperscript{40}

In his early work specifically, the time of \textit{Salome} (1894) and \textit{The Yellow Book}, his handling of flat composition, patterned surfaces, and asymmetries add to an interpretative element of artifice a disconcerting sense of vertigo that both highlights the use of mechanical line-blocking techniques and enhances it with artistic and imaginative authority. Stippling and hatching techniques are later used to create intermediate tones suggestive of eighteenth-century engraving, largely overcoming the limitations of grey ink on print.

Beardsley’s challenge entails a direct and responsive dialogue with the quick

\textsuperscript{38} Yeats, ‘A Symbolist Artist and the Coming of Symbolic Art’, p. 234.
technological advancements in picture-making and reproduction of his time. Meanwhile, a predilection for small, though penetrating patches of ornament infuses his designs with an enriching decorative consciousness in a thoroughly Arts and Crafts manner.

In an article for *The Dome*, dated 1898, W. B. Yeats offers an incisive statement on what has become the most recent and lasting artistic tendency of the *fin de siècle* in picture-making. ‘Subject pictures’ he writes, ‘no longer interest us, while pictures with patterns and rhythms of colour, [...] drawings with patterns and rhythms of line, [...] interest us extremely’.41 His argument nurtured by the ideological tenets of the emerging Symbolists, his defence is of ‘a new manner in the arts of the modern world’, one in which ‘the images of human life have faded almost perfectly’.42 Pattern and rhythm, he wrote elsewhere, form ‘an alluring monotony, [...] woven to take the eyes in a subtler enchantment’;43 they encapsulate both the experience of disinterested contemplation, the lulling of line and form on the loom, intertwining threads upon which the pulse of an emotion is sure to resurface.

Artists in pen and ink, late-Victorian decorative illustrators stood at the threshold of impending change. Quick technological developments and increasing exposure to visual stimuli in print and press both cultivated and exploited a new and exciting desire for images. In many respects, the fantastical imagery of late-century book illustration offered a refuge from the exhausting, lacklustre world of realism and factuality. Yet, in a close examination of the artistic movements that undoubtedly inspired a turn to book design and illustration, I find that it is not truly a removal from the real world that most essentially sustains creations such as Crane’s enchanted nooks or Beardsley’s uncanny powder-rooms. Rather, in typical and ornamental forms, this was the world these artists struggled to make sense of. Often detailed and elaborate, seldom discreet in its bold assumptions of colour and layers of texture, late-Victorian decorative illustration realized its search for ideal and artistic beauty in an aesthetic compromise between the real outline of visible objects and pleasurable impressions derived from line movement, suggestive form, and rhythms of pattern. Its goal was to heighten, recollect, and participate in the beautiful forms and shapes of the world.

41 Ibid., p. 234.
42 Ibid., pp. 233–34.