

Philip Speakman Webb

1831-1915

-Peter Conroy-

Table of contents

Biography

Works

Opinion

- St George cabinet
 - Sussex chair
 - Morris chair
 - Round table

References

bibliography

Philip Speakman Webb was an English architect and designer. He was sometimes known as the father of the arts and crafts movement although this can be attributed to his friend William Morris. Webb was born in Oxford, England on the 12th of January 1891 after some unsuccessful years at school, Webb started as an apprentice to the architect firm Birdlake and Lovat in Wolverhampton. But because of a conflict in style, he left his position only after four weeks. He moved back to Oxford before moving to London. Here he became a junior assistant to George Edmund Street, a Gothic revivalist architect. It was here that he formed a close friendship with William Morris. After leaving the street office, Webb set up his own business, with his first commission being the historic red house in Bexley, Heath. This was built for Morris and his bride. Because of its successful planning and designed furnishing, it led to the establishment of Morris and Co. Webb was one of six members of the firm and for it he designed furniture, tiles and stained glass(W. R. Lethaby (1935).

Since working with G.E. Street, Webb style was very much Gothic. The street office was very much involved with restoring cathedrals and churches, but also built buildings in the Gothic style. With Morris, Webb was introduced to the pre-Raphaelite circle. Here he met painters Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones. The philosophies of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and the writings of John Ruskin, who became friends with Webb, were the inspirations for Webb and the arts and crafts movement. Ruskin and Webb shared the same sensibilities and believed that there was an ugliness to modern life that they felt compelled to combat. Preservation of the old skills of hand crafting and attention to detail was key to their beliefs (The Webb Bulletin, volume 2, issue 8, August 2011).

Webb became very interested in vernacular architecture and travelled around England, Scotland and Northern France. From this, Webb became one of the leaders of the English domestic revival. His style was eclectic, drawing from influence such as Gothic, Queen Anne and vernacular Architecture.

In a letter, Webb expressed his design inspiration,

“I was born and bred in Oxford and no other teacher in art than the impressive objects of the old buildings there the effect of which on my natural bent has never left me. All my life since leaving the then more beautiful place than now it is, has been coloured and even trained by its fashion.”(Lang, 2003)

As well as an architect, Webb was also a very good designer of small things. He worked with timbers such as mahogany, oak, beech and pine to produce furniture that showcased his abilities. Japanese influence was evident in his work, with such techniques as ebonised wood and painted and tinted finishes. He designed candle sticks, glasses, goblets, embroidered wall hangings. The use of material such as copper was considered an inferior metal until it was used by the arts and crafts designers. Webb was the pioneer who began using copper to create the commonplace effect he sought.

Webb wrote few books and had little publications. Some of these include;

'Ashburnham House', *Builder* (2 July 1881), 'Street, George Edmund (1824-81)'.

Dictionary of National Biography, 'Town and Gown', *The Common-weal*, 2, no. 47, 4 December 1886,

Thirteenth Annual Report of the Society, Report of the Committee and Paper read there by Revd. W. Cunningham DD. June 1890. London: The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 1890.

Opinion

From what I've seen of Philip Webb designs and work, I have slowly grown to like them and his ideas from personal point of view and the way he lived his life, he was not afraid to stick to his ideas and was not fame hungry. He worked as he did because he felt strongly against a modernist movement which devalued the English heritage, which he wanted to uphold. He was also open to other outside influences which are clear to see on many of his designs, including French and Japanese techniques. On pieces like the St George cabinet, the detail in its function is clearly outlaid with shelves and draws hidden behind panel doors. I think I would always try to allow the furniture to be functional before being aesthetically pleasing. Again with the round table, its design consists of a simple round table-top allowing it to perform its functionality, while underneath, the complex turned stretchers shows the designers abilities. His sensibilities are correct in preserving English design, but I think I would not like the vernacular architecture demanded. The sideboard that he designed for Morris & co. seemed very old fashioned and would look out of place in modern times. It was a simple design with most of the details done with paints and finishes. I would like to see more moulding and detailed panel for the doors. I like to see open joints where possible, like end of tenons and dovetails. I did like the Asian aspect to the round oak table, where he mimicked bamboo for the stretchers and legs and the ebonised wood on other furniture.

St George Cabinet



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This cabinet was made between 1861 to 1862. like most of Webb work, this was designed by Webb himself and built by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & co. The material used to make this cabinet are painter and gilded mahogany, pine and oak with copper mounts. The cabinet is formed of a rectangular cupboard on a stand. The cupboard consists of three doors, each with copper handle and lock plate. The panels are painted with 5 scenes of the legend of St George. The interior of the cabinet is fitted with shelves and drawers with copper handles. The drawer front is decorated with layers of tinted varnishes on silver leaf, influenced from medical techniques.

There may have been a polished mahogany board fixed on top of the stand with the cupboard section placed on top of that. This arrangement was recorded in a photography, neg. no. 32418. it is unclear if this was the original design intended by Webb. The stand is made from turned oak and pine wood. The dimensions are height 1110mm, width 1780mm and depth 430mm. The cabinet can be found in the VAM British Galleries, room 125f, case 2.

Sussex chair

The chair was named after a country chair found in Sussex, which inspired the design with the turned frame and rush rest. Again designed by Webb and made by Morris & co., it was made between 1870 and 1890. It was made from ebonised beech with a rush woven seat. It measured 850mm in height, with the width and depth, 520mm and 440mm respectively. The chair was initially built as a standalone piece, but due to its popularity, it later formed part of a range of designs, including settees, children's chairs and corner chairs. A whole page was devoted to the Sussex range in the firm's catalogue, about 1912, where the armchair was priced at 9s 9d (49p). This can be found in the VAM, British Galleries, room 125f, case bay 2.

Morris chair

.vam.ac.uk

This is an adjustable-back chair, dated around 1870-1890. designed by Webb and built by Morris and co., it's made from ebonised mahogany wood and upholstered loose cushions, brass subot and casters. Its dimensions are height, 36" width 27" and depth 31". the inspiration for this chair came from a reclining chair found in a carpenters shop in Sussex. Found by Warrington Taylor, who was business manger to Morris, its design was based on a vernacular version of a late Georgian armchair. Taylor sent Webb a sketch of the chair. Webb altered the design of the chair adding a bobbin turned detail on the legs, more elaborate upholstery and castors. It is the first widely known reclining chair.

Round Oak Table.

This round table was designed for the Red house in 1860. it is typical of the solid Gothic style which dominated the medieval court at the 1862 exhibition. Webb created this interesting table, playing with intricate geometric interplay with the stretchers and introduced a hint of the exotic with faux bamboo turning (Rodin, Binzen, 2003). it can be found in either oak or walnut wood, with dimensions, height 740mm, 1280mm in diameter.



http://www.robertkime.com/product/item/table_philip_webb

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