

Emmanuel Cooper, *Bernard Leach: His Life and Work* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre, 2003), 419 pp., £29.95 hbk, illustrated, ISBN 03000 99290.

Brian Keeble, *On the Nature and Significance of the Crafts* (Temenos Academy, 2005), 59 pp., £6.00 inc. postage pbk, obtainable from PO Box 203, Ashford, Kent.

Mary Greenstead, ed., *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Aldershot: Lund Humphreys 2005), 128pp., £45.00 hbk, £16.99 pbk, 16 b&w illustrations, ISBN 08533 19200 (hbk) and 08533 19235 (pbk).

EMMANUEL COOPER IS A DISTINGUISHED POTTER and writer on the crafts, and his biography of the great potter Bernard Leach is an impressive piece of work, well-informed, thoughtful and clearly written. The list of Acknowledgements to people and organisations in Britain and Japan suggests the thoroughness with which Cooper has conducted his research, and the 46 pages of illustrations show the man and some of his works in appropriate detail. This is a humane and balanced account, making use of a wide range of materials including Leach's letters and poems to give a full and convincing account of a man who, as Cooper remarks in his Introduction, 'was neither saintly nor bloodless, and could be arrogant, charming, insightful, astute, selfish and charismatic' (p. xvi).

Cooper's account makes it clear that Leach, who was born in 1887, was, and saw himself to be, in the tradition of Ruskin and Morris. Early in the Introduction Cooper remarks: 'As an advocate of the humanistic qualities of handwork he was suspicious of what he saw as the dehumanising qualities of machine production, identifying himself with the ideas of William Morris "against the materialism of industry and insensitivity to beauty"' (p. xii). The quotation is from the first page of Leach's *A Potter's Book*, first published in 1940 and Leach's most considered account of his approach to his craft. In 1908, Leach came of age and inherited a modest personal income; he used it to take up a place at the recently established London School of Art in Kensington, run by the flamboyant Frank Brangwyn. Brangwyn had served an apprenticeship to Morris and Co. in the 1880s, and later developed an enthusiasm for the arts and crafts of Japan, which may well have influenced the young Leach. A number of Japanese students attended the London School, and Leach became friendly with one of them; at the same time, Leach's grandparents returned from twenty years in Japan. Leach found the idea of Japan deeply appealing, and left

England for Japan in the spring of 1909; it was there he was to discover his vocation as a potter. Interestingly, the parts of Japanese culture that Leach came to know and participate in were already imbued with the ideas of Ruskin and Morris. Tomimoto Kenkichi, who had been to England and been greatly influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, became a great friend, as did the writer and critic Yanagi Soetsu. Tomimoto ran an architectural and interior design practice, and wrote 'the first extensive biographical account of Morris in Japanese' (p. 74). He and Leach sought to create a new Japanese art that would avoid both crude traditionalism and crude Westernism, and Leach hoped that they would be able to establish a shop-gallery along the lines of Morris and Co., though this proved beyond their resources.

At this point Yanagi Soetsu was unhelpful, ignoring Tomimoto's work in the art journal that he published; Cooper suggests that he 'may have been envious of Tomimoto's first-hand experience of England, in particular his knowledge of the work of Morris' (p. 76), as well as of his close friendship with Leach. Nevertheless, Yanagi and Leach also became close friends, and Yanagi was to be the expositor of progressive ideas about Japanese folk art and Mingei theory. From his nearby studio Leach could visit Yanagi at his picturesque thatched house in the idyllic hamlet of Abiko, near where lived a number of writers and artists known as the Shirakaba group. Cooper suggests that discussions at this time would have concerned ideas close to Morris; it is striking that he records that Yanagi wanted to know 'the equivalent English terms for peasant or folk art, or "the art of the people", as no precise Japanese term existed for them then or now' (p. 120). Perhaps under Yanagi's influence, Leach's pottery came at this time to emphasise form rather than decoration, and to exhibit an impressive austerity.

The lives and activities of Tomimoto and Yanagi, as recounted here alongside those of the energetic and determined Leach, are full of interest. References to Ruskin and Morris recur at intervals. We learn that in 1927 Yanagi published *The Way of Crafts*, setting out his aesthetic ideals of skill, simplicity and harmony, which 'came to be regarded as the bible of Mingei thought' (p. 172). Those who have seen the recent International Arts and Crafts exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum will be well aware of the fusion of Western and

Japanese ideas that the style embodied. We are also told that Leach followed Morris's idea that any ordinarily practical person could be trained to become an efficient and productive worker in his choice of local apprentices for his pottery in St. Ives. Cooper also sees the influence of 'the flowing qualities of William Morris's plant designs' in some of Leach's later motifs like the Tree of Life (p. 297). Similarly, it is pleasing to learn that when Leach was in France for a joint exhibition of his work in 1964 and gave a lecture to UNESCO on the history of the pottery movement, he began by 'acknowledging the work of Morris and his followers who gave birth to the concept of "the artist-craftsman"' (p. 314). Leach certainly became one of the great figures in the movement, as Cooper's book admirably shows.

Brian Keeble's *On the Nature and Significance of the Crafts* consists of the text of three lectures on distinguished members or associates of the Arts and Crafts movement, the architect and teacher W. R. Lethaby, the letterer Edward Johnston, and the scholar and critic Ananda Coomaraswamy. It is a very attractively printed booklet, worthy of its subject. Keeble explains in his Preface that his concern is with the general question of whether the crafts have a particular value for the modern world in which, he argues, there is 'an instinctive sense – widely felt – that something essential is left out of account whenever life is conceived and conducted along purely practical and material lines' (p. 15). For Keeble here, Lethaby, Johnston and Coomaraswamy all faced this question and responded constructively. Lethaby is praised for his sensitivity to the problems of industrial civilisation and his attempt to move the Arts and Crafts beyond antiquarianism in his insistence in 'Art and Workmanship' in 1913 that 'art may be thought of as the *well-doing of what needs doing*' (p. 20). But Lethaby is criticised for having failed to relate his ideals to what Keeble describes as 'man's spiritual needs' (p. 24). It becomes clear that Keeble's approach is religious, and for him Lethaby's 'species of practical humanism' (p. 25) is necessarily inadequate. Thus Keeble finds himself more in sympathy with the other two figures he discusses. Johnston, we are shown, was a kind of Christian Platonist, happy to express his ambition for his craft in terms that owe much to religion: 'Our aim should be ... to make letters live... that men themselves may have more life' (p. 33). The third figure considered is Coomaraswamy, who was born in Colombo in 1877, but was

educated in England and lived for a time in Broad Campden, in the Norman chapel restored for him by C. R. Ashbee. Coomaraswamy published extensively on the role of art and handicraft in India and the West; in *Medieval Sinhalese Art* in 1908 he raised the question that ran through much of his subsequent writing: how was the modern world to compensate the worker for his loss of the situation in which exercising his craft had served as 'a means of culture' (p. 46)? Coomaraswamy is particularly sympathetic to Keeble because he held an explicitly religious outlook on life, accepting all the world religions as being, in Keeble's words, 'the various dialects of a universal language of the Spirit' (p. 47).

Keeble's book is not simply a work of scholarship; it conveys his deep concern about the problems of our civilisation. He suggests that we live in a world in which 'economic growth devoid of moral direction' has become accepted as the norm, despite the evidence all around us of 'social injustice and material unsustainability'. The audience is exhorted to take on conscientious responsibility for the situation and to tackle 'the question of greed' (p. 31). Keeble evidently believes that a solution to our problems can be brought about by a renewal of spirituality – unlike Morris, for whom the new and better society would be brought about by political revolution. But in a world that has not changed as radically as Morris hoped, it is good to be reminded of those like Keeble's trio who consistently and courageously challenged its values. The book concludes with a useful bibliography of writings of and about its three protagonists.

Mary Greenstead's *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement* offers a wide range of writings by the main figures of the movement, including the three discussed by Keeble. The title-page gives prominence to Ashbee, Lethaby and Gimson, but well over forty writers are represented. Material is arranged chronologically, in decades, beginning with the 1880s – 'The Development of the Movement' – with Lewis F. Day, the Century Guild, the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society, and the National Association for the Advancement of Art and Its Application to Industry, represented by Crane, Morris, W. E. Willink, Patrick Geddes and John Sedding. The 1890s – 'The Movement Takes Shape' – offer Sedding, Ashbee, Lethaby, Macmurdo, Selwyn Image, May

Morris, Baillie Scott, Cobden-Sanderson, Blomfield and Ernest Gimson; the 1900s – ‘Arts and Crafts Practice and Education’ – Lethaby, Henry Wilson, Johnston, Maria Reeks (one of the few women represented), Sidney Barnsley, Gimson, Ashbee, Cobden-Sanderson, Troup, Romney Green and Voysey; the 1910s – ‘The Decline of the Movement in England’ – Coomaraswamy, Ashbee, Gimson, Wilson, the Design and Industries Association, and Peter Waals. Finally, after 1920 – ‘The Legacy’ – we have Roger Fry, Percy Wells, Gordon Russell, Voysey, Romney Green, Herbert Read, Eric Gill and John Gloag (in 1946). I have given all this detail to indicate the kind of anthology that Mary Greenstead has chosen to offer: one in which variety and coverage have been preferred to expansion of argument. The editorial matter is clearly presented and provides the necessary contexts. Most of the passages selected are worth reading, and some outstandingly so – though Cobden-Sanderson seems to have more words than thoughts to offer. I particularly enjoyed the conclusion of the passage from Lethaby’s *Plain Handicrafts* in which he mentions the simple items of furniture needed for a room, and ends: ‘Should you make all these, with a bookcase which you yourself must design – I think you might buy a nice clock, – then with some flowers in the window, a cat, and good plain things to eat, I am sure you ought to be happy’ (p. 37), and Ernest Gimson’s letters of 1916 to Lethaby about the important topic of the crafts and machinery. I was also glad to read the passage from Eric Gill (a kind of admired background figure in Keeble’s book), who is always vigorous and direct: ‘The beehive with its communal ownership and control and its destruction of operative freedom is directed towards “the leisure state” and the life of pleasure; but “the free man has joy in his labour and this is his portion”’ (p. 89).

There is therefore a good deal to recommend about this anthology, which is produced in a large format with an interesting typographical cover. But it suffers from one most unfortunate decision: all the quoted passages are in italics and so much more difficult to read than the editorial material surrounding them. (The italics give the impression of actually being smaller than the surrounding text, although that is an optical illusion). It is difficult to explain this decision, except in terms of some exaggerated preference for variety – manifest also in the

unnecessary use of three colours in the printing of the cover, where the black and brown would have been quite adequate. Italics are appropriately employed to draw attention to specific points of emphasis, or by conventions about titles; but to employ them on this scale simply makes reading more difficult than it ought to be. It is highly ironic in the context to read in the Johnston extract, ‘we may [implying ‘should’] put readability before “looks”’ (p. 50). What a pity that this principle has not been observed in what is otherwise a useful and timely publication.

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