

A Response to Godfrey Rubens

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Maybe to describe Gimson as “totally committed to the ideals of Morris” was rather sweeping of me, and it is possible to suppose the influence of Morris’s political philosophy was small. However, Gimson had very little interest in any politics, “as he felt the whole business of it as a kind of game at blind mans buff”¹. It was in aspects of Morris’s philosophy other than political that Gimson was influenced at an early stage in his career.

It is true that he was totally opposed to the use of machinery in the production of his furniture: “It has faced me often – sometimes seemed to be a question of machinery or no shop at all and I have wavered about it but always ended by knowing that of the two alternatives I would rather have no shop at all”.² However, with Gimson’s architecture, my main concern, things were not quite so precise. Building economics, structural necessity or a client’s wishes could sometimes force Gimson to adopt building materials not always hand-produced, especially on some of his low-cost cottages. Also, if he had been successful in his two competition entries for the Port of London Authority headquarters and the major buildings and masterplan of Canberra, these would have required the use of substantial amounts of concrete, steel and tarmacadam. Surely he would have compromised his principles sufficiently for production to commence, with erection also using machinery? His clients would no doubt have expected this.

This constructional dilemma was avoided by Gimson with his successful furniture production methods, and was rarely challenged within his built works. Had he lived beyond the Great War, his philosophical position would either have become more remote or changed with the increasing industrialisation of the production processes. Either way, the realities of the world would be different from both his and Morris’s philosophies, political or otherwise.

NOTES

¹ Alf Powell writing about Gimson in Lethaby, *Ernest Gimson*, 1924, p.11.

² Letter from Gimson to Lethaby, 18th April, 1916, in Burroughs Collection, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum.