

# A Note on Gimson and Morris

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The notion expressed in David Pendery's article in the *Journal* for Autumn 1993, that Gimson became 'totally committed to the ideals of Morris' is inaccurate, for Gimson disagreed fundamentally both with Morris's politics and with his attitude to machine-production. William Lethaby, who knew Gimson as well as any man, wrote:

[Gimson's] chief teachers up to this time [when he first came to London in 1886] . . . were Ruskin and Morris, Auberon Herbert and Herbert Spencer. What he then was he remained, an idealist individualist . . . Morris, *as artist*, made a profound impression on Gimson. [my italics].<sup>1</sup>

Two years after coming to London and while a clerk in John Sedding's office, Gimson wrote to Ernest Barnsley:

[Robert Weir] Schultz and I went to [Walter] Butler's the other evening. They did their best to make a [socialist] proselyte of me. For 3 or 4 hours. It was interesting but not profitable.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously the influence of Morris's political philosophy on Gimson was nil.

Gimson's teacher Auberon Herbert was an ardent but independent disciple of Spencer, and developed a creed – a variant of Spencerian individualism – which Herbert called Voluntaryism. As W.H. Mallock wrote in 1920, he

was certainly no socialist. On the contrary he was an ardent champion of individual freedom as opposed to the tyranny of the State . . . he was . . . yet more pertinacious

as advocate of what is now called 'the simple life' . . . His dwelling [Ashley Arnewood] was of very simple construction . . . the dining room was so small that one end of the table abutted on a whitewashed wall . . . the carpets consisted of rough coconut matting.<sup>3</sup>

We may note, in passing, that T.H. Huxley was "unable to discern any logical boundary between Mr. Herbert's position and that of Bakounine". To what degree Gimson, an enthusiastic devotee of the Simple Life, was influenced by Herbert's 'anarchism' is uncertain, but Huxley's comment serves to underline the hiatus between the views of Herbert and those of Morris, who was entirely opposed to anarchism.

It is probably in Ruskin's attack on the division of labour in contemporary society, expressed in the famous chapter 'On the Nature of Gothic' from *The Stones of Venice*, that we may find a starting point for both Morris's and Gimson's critiques of modern society. But their responses to it were utterly different. Gimson was to retire to a remote part of the country and open a furniture workshop where everything was made by hand. Morris, on the other hand, made considerable use of the machine, but clearly understood its limitations, as Harvey and Press have pointed out in their recent study. Morris did not fail

to recognise that machinery might be of value or that a factory might be a pleasant place to work. But he did make important distinctions between types of machinery and types of factory. Machinery could be divided into modern "to which man is an auxiliary" and "the old machine, the improved tool, which is auxiliary to the man, and only works as long as his hand is thinking."<sup>4</sup>

To compare Gimson's Sapperton workshop and Morris's works at Merton Abbey is to compare two different worlds and two different ways of thinking about the modern world. Gimson's detestation of machinery extended even to *designing* for industry, and he refused Lethaby's request that he should produce some designs for machine production. It is ironic that some of our best designers of furniture for industrial production found both inspiration and forms to emulate in the work of these Cotswold craftsmen.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> W.R. Lethaby, *Ernest Gimson, His Life and Work*, Stratford-on-Avon, 1924, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Gimson to Butler, 18th Feb., 1888. Leicestershire County Record Office.

<sup>3</sup> W.H. Mallock, *Memoirs of Life and Literature*. London, 1920, pp.92-3.

<sup>4</sup> C. Harvey and J. Press, *William Morris. Design and Enterprise in Victorian England*, London, 1991, p.152.

<sup>5</sup> See R.D. Russell, 'Furniture Today' in *Anatomy of Design*, London, RCA, 1951.