

Inspired Living for the Bungalow & Beyond

STYLE

ANTIQUES &
INTERIORS

1900

Saving a Landmark An Iconic Greene & Greene Home

Meet George Ohr: Mad Potter, Marketing Genius

Frank Lloyd Wright Landmarks in Peril

Poetic Spaces: Designing a Total Work of Art

Collecting Arts & Crafts Bookends

POETIC SPACES

Designing *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the “Total Work of Art”

By C.J. Hurley



© Lakeland Arts Trust. Courtesy Lakeland Arts Trust.

Above The decorative elements of a gesamtkunstwerk often draw meaning from poetry or legend. Rowan flowers are printed on this fabric wallcovering in the dining room at Blackwell (see page 59). The five-petal flower is considered a symbol of protection because of its similarity to the five-pointed stars worn as protection by mythic heroes like Sir Gawain of Arthurian legend.

Opposite This 1901 design by Hugh Mackay Baillie Scott, part of his entry to a competition to design a “House for an Art Lover,” demonstrates how intricate, and thus costly, gesamtkunstwerk could be. Motifs and even colors were carefully chosen for their symbolic value, and every piece of fabric or furniture was designed for its specific place, to contribute to the overall theme.

Gesamtkunstwerk (geh-ZAHMPT-koonst-verk) is likely not the first word you think of when you think Arts and Crafts, but perhaps it should be, for it may be the most important idea to spring from the rich fountain of the Arts and Crafts movement. German for “the total work of art,” gesamtkunstwerk refers to a comprehensive architectural work encompassing the whole spectrum of the arts—from painting and sculpture to ceramics, metalwork, textiles, even poetry and music. The aim was to create an Architecture that was seamless with its ornament, that was imbued with deep symbolic meaning, and that would uplift those who dwelt in it to a more satisfying, healthful and contented way of life. A successful gesamtkunstwerk could be a single home, like Hugh Mackay Baillie Scott’s Blackwell, but it could also be a planned community like Walter Burley Griffin’s Rock Crest Rock Glen, or an art exhibition like the Vienna Secession’s Beethoven show of 1902.

Operatic Origins

The term gesamtkunstwerk was coined by composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) in his 1849 essay *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*). Wagner described the ideal opera as the union of instrumental and vocal music, poetry, dance, the visual arts, and stagecraft into a single ultimate artistic experience. Before long, this idea had shifted from the theater to the realm of architecture and the drama of domestic living.

Meanwhile, as the 19th century moved toward its close, many artists and thinkers across Europe shared increasing concerns over the degenerate state of the arts and society. What art was and should be, and how it could lead the way toward healing social ills, were vital questions, eagerly debated in international artistic circles. Many reformers embraced the writings of Britain’s William Morris (1834-1896), one of the founders



of what became known as the Arts and Crafts movement, who campaigned to elevate the reputation of the “lesser” or applied arts (such as furnituremaking, ceramics, book-printing, or embroidery) to the same importance as painting, sculpture and architecture. Furthermore, Morris and other influential writers such as the English critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Vienna’s Hermann Bahr (1863-1934), all shared the notion that the individual arts could contribute toward a greater, harmonious whole. In Morris’s words, “The humblest object perfectly made

contributes to the beauty of this earth, and the progress of civilization is grounded in the permeation of the whole life with artistic purpose.”

It took a second generation of Arts and Crafts innovators to take these ideas to the next level—the fully-realized *gesamtkunstwerk*. These architects were primarily continental Europeans or those with continental connections, such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), Koloman Moser (1868-1918), Hugh Mackay Baillie Scott (1865-1945), and Josef Hoffmann (1870-1956), and, though



Above As Wendy Hitchmough points out in *The Arts and Crafts Lifestyle and Design*, Baillie Scott utilized color symbolism at Blackwell. Yellow, orange and red represent animal instincts, and are counterbalanced by green, considered a neutral, calming color. Blue passages representing *spiritual superiority*, were incorporated in the stained-glass, and in the peacock-themed wallpaper.

philosophically indebted to Morris and Ruskin, they largely worked beyond England's borders. In a letter to Josef Hoffmann concerning the directives of the new art, Mackintosh stated that "every object which you pass from your hand must carry an outspoken mark of individuality, beauty and the most exact execution. From the outset, your aim must be that every object you produce is made for a specific purpose and a specific place."¹ Armed with ideals such as these gleaned from

the writings of Morris and Ruskin, and with the revolutionary inspiration of Wagner, these artists were driven to create the most comprehensive works of architecture to come out of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Examples of Gesamtkunstwerk

Before illustrating specific examples, it is important to note that a gesamtkunstwerk is much more than an interior where "everything matches" or where certain



Above H. M. Baillie Scott's Blackwell (1898), in its setting overlooking Lake Windermere.

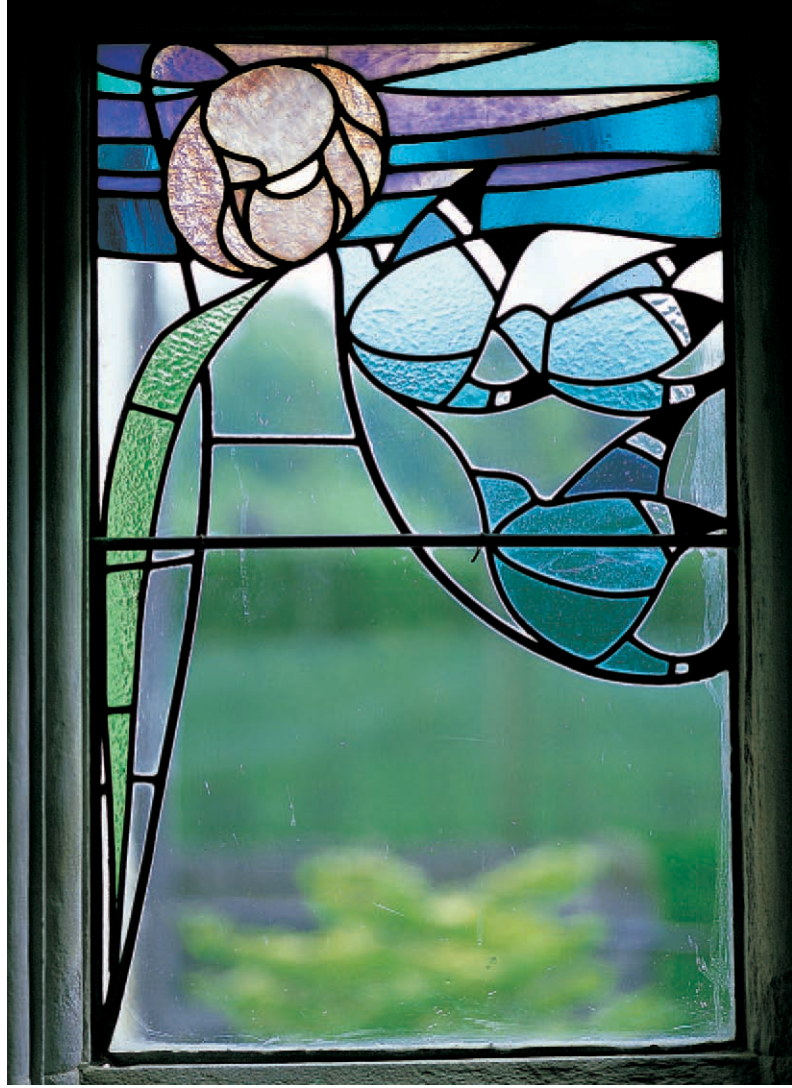
Right, top and bottom The rowan's berries attract a variety of songbirds, an omen of good fortune in Celtic tradition. The birds flit about the home's stained glass windows.

motifs are repeated in different media. Rather, the gesamtkunstwerk idea grew out of the Romantic spirit of the Arts and Crafts age, and these artists and architects were inspired by the Symbolist poets, the epics of the medieval age, ancient folklore, and the mystic origins of the world. A gesamtkunstwerk takes on underlying meaning through a vocabulary of symbols drawn from such sources, chosen because they expressed timeless and universal themes. The intention was not to create something "fashionable," but to create art and architecture for all time.

Blackwell: Architecture Sensitive to Setting

Hugh Mackay Baillie Scott (1865-1945) was one of the more prolific and successful gesamtkunstwerk architects. Sensitive to setting, history of place, and how a home should function, Baillie Scott was an expert at marrying poetic symbolism with site-specific architecture that functioned as a practical living space.

A superb surviving example is Blackwell (1898), a holiday home for Sir Edward Holt overlooking Lake Windermere in northern England. Looking to the setting for his initial inspiration, Baillie Scott chose the rowan (mountain ash) tree as the home's central theme. The rowan is a tenacious breed that thrives in inhospitable locales like craggy riverbeds, and is





Courtesy, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

Above Marion Mahony Griffin's circa-1912 perspective drawing for Rock Crest Rock Glen shows the houses integrated with the site.

Left, both Joshua Melson's house is more formal on the entry side (bottom photo), less so at the back. Note how the back appears to be an organic part of the cliff-side of the creek.



Photograph by Matt Mladre

known to sprout inside the hollows of other trees, effectively overwhelming them. Thus, in Celtic folklore, the rowan traditionally stands for perseverance and hardiness—characteristics Baillie Scott likely wished to invoke in reference to the Holt family. As secondary motifs throughout the house, Baillie Scott aptly chose regional flowers and birds that not only reflect the setting, but also have their own Celtic symbolism.

The German architect Hermann Muthesius paid tribute to Baillie Scott's Romantic impulses, Symbolist poetic sensibilities, and deep understanding of English mythos. In *Das englische Haus* (1904), Muthesius notes that, through Baillie Scott's work, "we seem to already to have stepped into the world of fantasy, and romance of the ancient Bardic poetry that was once supposed to have been the legacy of the misty figure of Ossian [the mythic Gaelic poet] and gave the world a new thrill of emotion from the heart of Scotland. With Baillie Scott, we are among the purely northern poets among British architects."²²

Rock Crest Rock Glen: Walter Burley Griffin's Gesamtkunstwerk Community

The germ of the idea of a gesamtkunstwerk community appears in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), which reimagined London as



Photograph by Matt Mladre



Photograph by Matti Mäldre



Photograph by Matti Mäldre

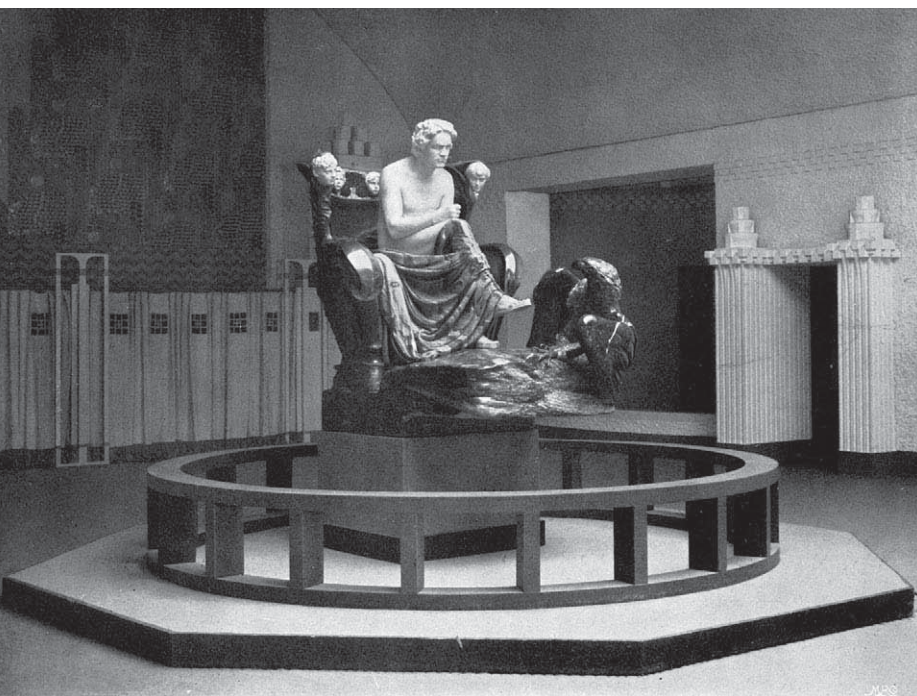
This page The keystone crowns that crest the Melson house façade (right) look like clusters of leaves at the end of a branch. The keystone/leaf motif is repeated in a more pure geometric form on the entry lantern (above) and mullions of the door (lower right).

a town in harmony with nature, generously interrupted by green spaces. Unity with nature became an ideal of the Arts and Crafts movement as industrial development increasingly threatened the countryside. In both Europe and America, planned communities explored the ideal of the built environment working in harmony with the natural one. A shining example is Walter Burley Griffin's Rock Crest Rock Glen in Mason City, Iowa.

Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) went to Iowa in 1911 to discuss plans for a housing development with developer Joshua Melson. Griffin proposed a collection of 19 houses sensitively set on 18 beautiful acres along Willow Creek, with a central green space left for the residents. Each home was different, its design dictated by its location and views of the creek.³ Walter Burley Griffin designed a gesamtkunstwerk enclave, harmonious in its relationship to the site and in the congruous use of organic building materials.



Photograph by Matti Mäldre



Above and below Period photos of the 1902 Vienna Secessionist exhibition give a real sense for how the art related to the architecture. Max Klinger's *Beethoven* statue, made of bronze, marble, alabaster, ivory, glass, gold and mother of pearl, turns its back to Roller's fresco, *Night Falling* (above) and faces Bohm's fresco, *Day Breaking* (below).

Of particular note is the home Griffin designed for Melson. Its three stories are so well integrated with its site, that one observer has said, "Stand down there at the creek and you look up and you wonder, 'Where does the house start?'"⁴ Yet although the almost fortress-like structure appears to be part of the cliff face, the interior is open and spacious, human in its scale, proportions, and livability.

Griffin employed a decorative scheme repeating an abstract motif that has been described as "sunrays,"⁵ but which could equally well be interpreted as abstract clusters of leaves found on the end of a branch—an apt evocation of the treetops that surround the site. The motif recurs on concrete entry lanterns, on window mullions, and above the living room fireplace, as well as in the form of keystones that crown the exterior. There is an exciting interplay between the traditional architectural form—the keystone—and its treatment as abstracted nature.





Above left Many images from the Beethoven exhibition explore the theme of the “yearning for happiness” found in *Ode to Joy*. This scene from Koloman Moser’s mosaic recalls the lines, “Can you sense the Creator, world? Seek him above the starry canopy. Above the stars He must dwell. Joy is called the strong motivation in eternal nature.”

Above right Sorrow and death are also featured throughout the exhibition, as in this mixed-media panel by Elena Luksch-Makowsky (1878-1967).



The Beethoven Exhibition: An Art Exhibition as Gesamtkunstwerk

Convinced “that the arts should permeate all of life, enhancing it with a transcendental quality and improving mankind,”⁶ the artists of the Vienna Secession created a gesamtkunstwerk on the theme of Beethoven and his 9th Symphony for their 1902 exhibition. Wagner’s writings on Beethoven informed the exhibition, along with Friedrich Schiller’s 1795 poem, *Ode to Joy*, whose lines Beethoven used in the symphony.

Unlike a conventional display of independent works of art, the Secessionist exhibition was itself an artwork, an interdependent combination of the architectonic, the musical, the poetic, and the visual. The catalogue described the intention: “First of all there must be unity of space, and this space must be enriched by paintings and sculpture which conform and contribute to the overall idea.”⁷ Josef Hoffmann (1870-1956) designed the architectural envelope; participating artists included Max Klinger (1857-1920), Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), Koloman Moser (1868-1918) Adolf Bohm (1861-1927), and Alfred Roller (1864-1935).

Appropriately, given Beethoven’s near-deified status in the literary and artistic circles of the time, the exhibition hall was much like

To Learn More

Das englische Haus [The English House], by Hermann Muthesius (reprinted by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1979).

The Arts & Crafts Lifestyle and Design, by Wendy Hitchmough (Watson-Guption Publications/New York, 2000).

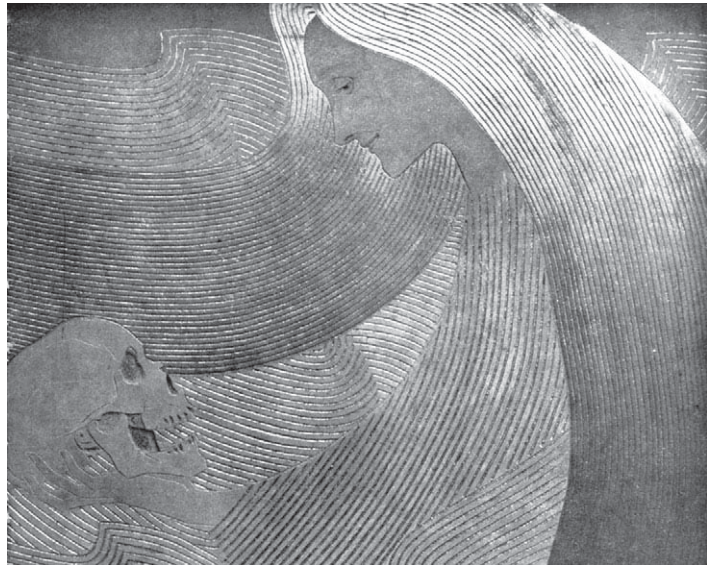
Houses & Gardens, by M.H. Baillie Scott (reprinted by Antique Collector’s Club, 1995).

Klimt: Life and Work, by Susanna Partsch (Barnes & Noble, Inc., by arrangement with I.P. International Publishing, Germering, Germany, 1999).

Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration, Vol. 10 (April 1902 – Sept. 1902).

Blackwell

The Arts & Crafts House
Bowness-on-Windermere
Cumbria LA23 3JT
015394 46139
www.lakelandartstrust.org.uk



Above In the relief panel by Ernst Stohr (1865-1917), a woman finds she can look into the face of death with a smile.

Left, top and bottom *Ode to Joy* refers to the form of the circle as “the wheel of the eternal time machine,” “the great circle,” and “the holy circle.” Figures holding this circle are found in Klimt’s frieze (top) and throughout the structure (bottom).



a temple, with rooms constructed like mini-chapels. Imagery was derived from Schiller’s *Ode*, and the exhibition carried the viewer through a three-dimensional allegory of human suffering, triumph, and salvation through love. Klinger’s superb *Beethoven* statue faced Bohm’s fresco *Day Breaking*—symbolic of hope for the future—and turned its back to Roller’s fresco *Night Falling*—symbolizing the leaving behind of the past and outmoded tradition. Throughout the exhibit were images of nymphs, fauns, and mermaids, classical symbols of the joys of being human.⁸ In stark contrast were more sinister representations of sorrow, disease, and death—obstacles to overcome in the quest for joy. By uniting their diverse talents, the artists of the Vienna Secession gave visual form to the themes most important to the great composer.

The Demise of Gesamtkunstwerk

World War I dealt the most devastating blow to the practice of gesamtkunstwerk by destroying the international exchange of ideas fostered by the Arts and Crafts movement. The brutality of war damaged the former idealistic spirit, and many artists shifted their focus to explorations of the dark side of the machine age. With economies in collapse, the high costs of producing a gesamtkunstwerk became identified with the decadence of the former age. Words penned by Adolf Loos (1870-1933) in 1908 became the mantra: “ornament is...generated by criminals, it commits a crime...by damaging the people’s health, the nation’s wealth, and its cultural development... ornament is a waste of work, power and therefore health...”



Left Ultimate Joy is found in Klimt's frieze, illustrating the line, "This kiss to the entire world!"

Absence of ornament is a sign of strength."⁹ Modern art said good riddance to the Romantics, and gesamtkunstwerk, the ultimate expression of the Arts and Crafts movement, was left behind.

With his wife Barbara Pierce, Roycroft Renaissance Master Artisan C.J. Hurley operates CJ Hurley Century Arts (www.cjhurley.com), a small studio specializing in commissioned artwork, hand-crafted interiors, color and design consultation for the restoration of historic homes, and the design of furniture, accessories, and stained glass. C.J. gratefully acknowledges Lawrence Kreisman and the Lakeland Arts Trust for contributing materials for this article.

1 John Cairney, *The Quest for Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (Luath Press Limited, 2004), p.122. **2** Hermann Muthesius, *Das englische Haus [The English House]* (reprinted by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 47. **3** "Mason City," Walter Burley Griffin: *In His Own Right*, www.pbs.org/wbgriffin/mason.htm. **4** Paul Sprague, quoted in "Joshua Melson House," Walter Burley Griffin: *In His Own Right*, www.pbs.org/wbgriffin/melrear.htm. **5** "Joshua Melson House," Walter Burley Griffin: *In His Own Right*, www.pbs.org/wbgriffin/melson.htm. **6** Susanna Partsch, *Klimt: Life and Work* (Barnes & Noble, Inc., by arrangement with I.P. International Publishing, 1999), p. 142. **7** *Acht Jahre Secession, Vienna 1906*, by L. Hevesi (reprinted Klagenfurt, 1984), p. 14. Quoted in Partsch, p. 142. **8** Partsch, p. 146. **9** Quoted in Partsch, p. 21.