

Introduction

‘I make no claim to anything new’ wrote Voysey in a letter to the *Architects’ Journal* in 1935.
‘Like many others, I followed some old traditions and avoided others.’

Voysey’s contemporaries foresaw the dawning of a new Renaissance. His clients were cultivated members of the prosperous middle class. Among them were: the parents of Aldous Huxley, Algernon Methuen, the publisher, E.J. Horniman, anthropologist and philanthropist and Julian Russell Sturgis, the writer who succeeded W.S. Gilbert as Arthur Sullivan’s librettist. Voysey even designed a house for H.G. Wells, the early writer of science fiction.

Voysey captured the imaginations of a wide public. In September 1893, he gave a lengthy interview in *The Studio – An Illustrated Magazine of Fine and Applied Art*. He declared: ‘To produce healthy art one must have healthy surroundings; the first effort of the artist should be to sweep ugliness away . . . **we should go to Nature direct for inspiration and guidance**’. *The Studio* had begun publication in April 1893. It was the first popular art magazine and it made extensive use of the new means of publishing photographs. Gone were the days of the harsh steel-engraving. *The Studio* acquired an international circulation. The March 1898 issue of the influential German art magazine *Dekorative Kunst* – which was modelled closely on *The Studio* – was devoted entirely to Voysey. No contemporary architect or designer received such publicity as Voysey.

After eighteen months at Dulwich College, where he showed no aptitude for academic studies, Voysey was educated at home – perhaps by his father, an Anglican priest who was dismissed from the church for heresy. He founded a moderate, rather nebulous, new religion – Theism.

Voysey’s architectural education began in the office of John Pollard Seddon, when he was a fortnight away from his seventeenth birthday. Seddon was a successful exponent of Gothic for the industrial age – a rational, sober, style. The atmosphere of Pre-Raphaelitism prevailed in Seddon’s office. Seddon was the brother of Thomas Seddon, a Pre-Raphaelite and a close friend of Holman Hunt, the painter of *Light of the World* (1851-3) and *The Awakening Conscience* (1853). Seddon was one of the finest designers of stained glass in the Pre-Raphaelite manner. His designing desk was decorated with panels by Rossetti and Burne-Jones. It was in Seddon’s office that Voysey learned the principles of decorative design.

After he had completed his five year articles, Voysey left Seddon’s office. Seddon would have had no work for him because of the depressed economical situation. He found work in the office of Henry Saxon Snell, who was an admirer

of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). Snell was the leading designer of hospitals. His practice was rigidly governed by scientific and economic factors. While Seddon had encouraged Voysey's creativity, there would have been no call for his artistry in the designing of Snell's hospitals. What Voysey derived from his short time with Snell cannot be known, but his enthusiasm for fresh air, light and uncluttered surfaces must come from Snell.

After Snell, Voysey worked for George Devey, the leading designer of country houses. Like Seddon, Devey was an artist who was admired for his sketches. His clients were rich – among them were the Rothschilds. Devey, who was a member of Reverend Voysey's congregation and a committed Theist, may have taken on Voysey as an act of kindness. Devey, like Seddon, had little work in hand. Beside his grand houses, Devey also designed small estate buildings, houses for estate workers and the minor gentry. These show his affection for ordinary rural buildings. Voysey's earliest buildings, which are decidedly countrified, show that Devey was of importance in his development.

Voysey was first and foremost an architect. Nevertheless, over a quarter of the 790 Voysey drawings in the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects, relate to fabrics and wallpapers. The Voysey drawings collection is among the most complete assemblages of work by a major *fin-de-siècle* designer.

Like many architects from the past, Voysey was skilled in decoration. Competence in decoration, or 'ornament' as it was called, was a pre-requisite for any architect with ambition. Le Corbusier was fascinated by ornament in his youth and owned a copy of Owen Jones' magnificent 1856 *Grammar of Ornament*. Voysey's first decorative influence was Seddon. Seddon himself had been influenced by John Ruskin and A.W.N. Pugin – it was from Pugin that he acquired an understanding of the need for clarity

and simplicity in ornamentation; this he passed on to Voysey. Although Voysey came to maturity during a time of prominent virtuoso decorative designers – like H.W. Batley, Christopher Dresser, E.W. Godwin, and Bruce Talbert – he appears to have been unimpressed by their work.

Although the same components of a William Morris design – typically birds and foliage – appear in Voysey's decorative designs, he was not inspired by Morris' solemnity and lack of spontaneity. However, Voysey, 'a creator of beautiful patterns' – as *The Studio* described him in 1893 – did take note of the textiles of the architect Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo. Mackmurdo belonged equally to the Aesthetic 1880s as he did to the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The selection of Voysey's work in this book include entirely from the two plan chests he had designed for himself in his small flat at 73 St James's Street, off Piccadilly. This work was presented to the Royal Institute of British Architects by Voysey's son Cowles Voysey in 1943, two years after his father's death – according to Voysey's wishes.

As if looking through a portfolio, we can here pore through an extensive selection of Voysey's designs. We can admire at the inventiveness and playfulness of the first architect to gain international popularity. And we can ponder on the fact that, though the champions of the Modern Movement claimed Voysey as a forerunner, he matured during the latter years of Pre-Raphaelitism. He retained a singularly nineteenth century idealistic way of thinking throughout his life. Voysey firmly and publicly dissociated himself from Modernism. His last buildings were unashamedly Gothic. None were built.

Voysey's career effectively ended with the outbreak of the 1914-18 War. He died when London was being bombed. He was among the last representatives of an idealistic era. The optimism and innocence of his work can delight us still.