

THE ENGLISH ARTS AND CRAFTS EXHIBITION AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY

AN OPEN LETTER FROM C. R. ASHBEE, F.R.I.B.A.

December, 1916.

TO THE EDITOR

THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE OF ART:

You ask me for my impressions of the great exhibition of English Arts and Crafts at the Royal Academy. I think it gives ground for much hope, and at the same time no little uneasiness. Both these are due not merely to the war, but to that breakdown of industrial society of which the war is the final expression. The same imponderable power has unsettled the artists, altered all our values, made us doubt our gods. For after all the artists are the antennae of society, and before the war they were already busy with the writing on the wall, creating a symbolism to interpret it. The war was prefigured in the post-impressionist pictures and the Marinetti poems.

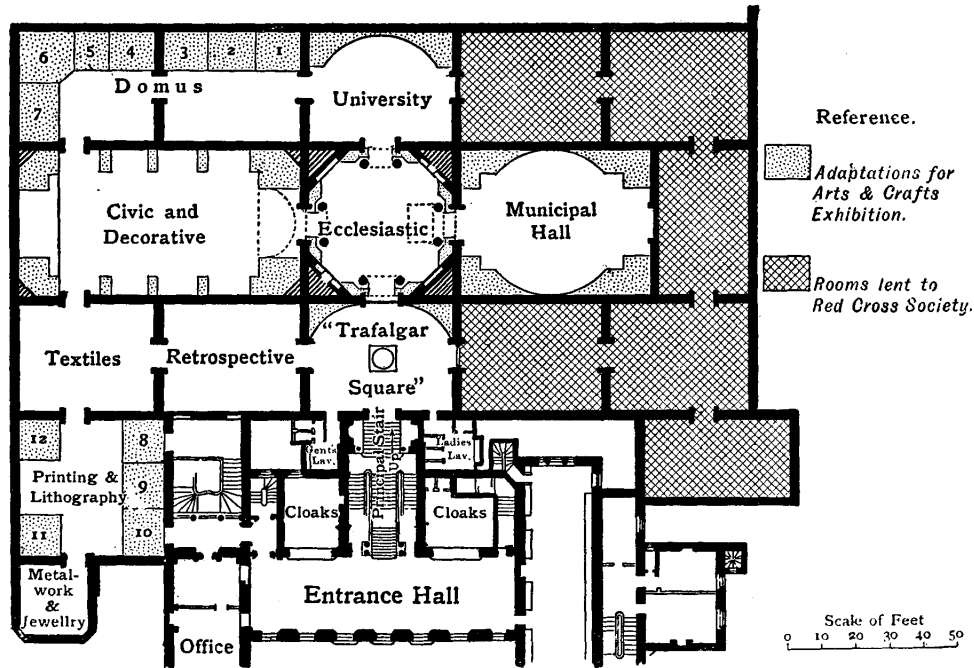
I recall how some twenty-five years ago at Holman Hunt's house I bearded a venerable Royal Academician on behalf of the youthful Arts and Crafts Society. "The Academy ought to let us have Burlington House for our exhibitions! Why don't you?" And I got the reply, "My dear young man, you surely don't expect us artists to allow our galleries to be turned into a furniture shop?"

And now there is not alone furniture, but household jams, and jars of mustard—or is it boot-blackening?—anyway they are bright and yellow, on a pleasant blue ground. And somehow all this is right, and one has a feeling that this real effort that is being made to determine the proper limitations of mechanism in modern life is rightly made in the sacred precincts of the Royal Academy. This particular exhibit of jars and jampots is a roomful of well designed "commercial articles" made by machinery and selected with consummate taste by the Design and Industries Association, a new society with a sterling motive, modelled—rather pluckily it must be allowed—on the German "Werkbund" and inspired by the method of the Austrian

and South German Art and Trade organizations.

But let us try and understand the principle of the exhibition as a whole before we go into details. The soul of it is in Henry Wilson's architectural reconstruction of Burlington House. I give a plan of how this has been done. From it will be seen how those old conventional galleries, with their gilded frames, have been rearranged into some twenty rooms, civic, ecclesiastical, "domus" with seven delightful interiors, a hall of heroes, a retrospective room, a municipal hall, a "University" room, a treasury for jewels and silver work, a weaving room, and at the entrance, a painted screenwork showing a reconstruction of Trafalgar Square. The exhibition was grouped roughly according to this classification, and there is a great idea behind it all. These Arts and Crafts are no longer to be frill work, and pastime for rich men and dilettantes, but a part of the structure of society. They are to be "hung up" no longer in gilded frames, or stuck into niches on buildings built by mechanical power. They are to be part of life. That is the theory—the dream of the promoters. The question is, are we anywhere near it? Can an "Exhibition" bring us nearer? There is no doubt that the show at Burlington House carries within itself the protest of the artists against exhibition as a method of meeting the æsthetic need. However skillful the arrangement, however devoted the enthusiasm that has called all these things together, we are all of us saying, "This is not enough."

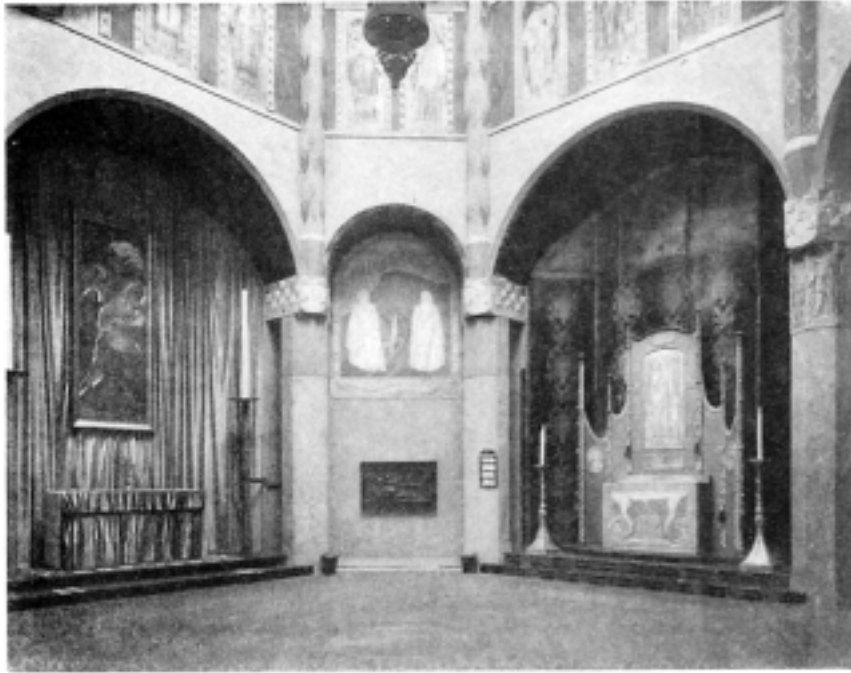
There are many beautiful things, and in all the Arts the standard of technique is high. In the short space at my disposal I can only give the briefest mention, and such mention as I make has value only in so far as the objects have appealed to me personally. I enjoyed the friezes for weaving—Randolph Schwaber's "Three Fates" and Mary McDowall's "Textile Shop."



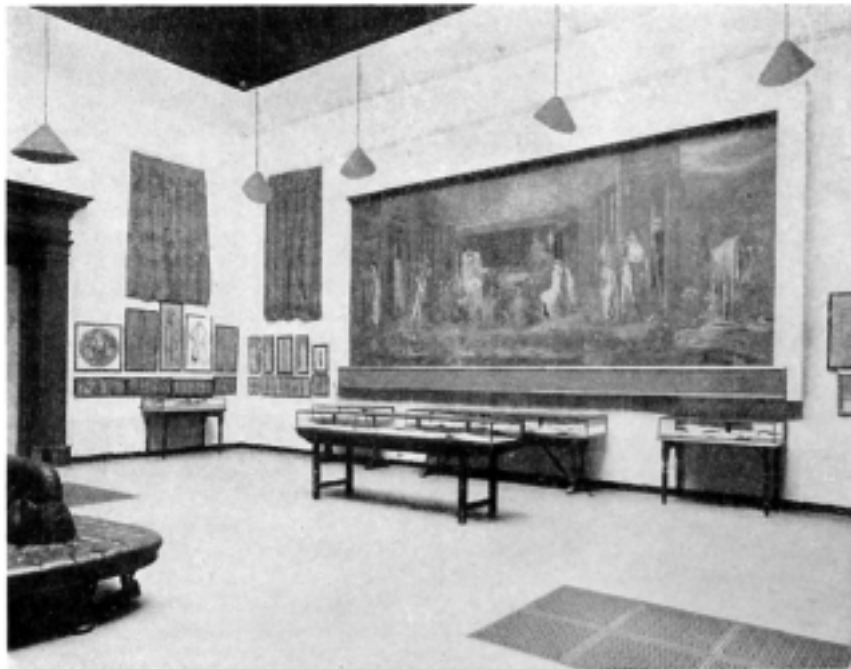
PLAN OF THE ARTS AND CRAFTS EXHIBITION. BURLINGTON HOUSE

Louis Davis' and Christopher Wall's studies for glass are always a delight, though I hate looking at stained glass itself in an exhibition—I always want to poke my finger through the hole in the wall. Gregory Brown's and McDonald Gill's posters for the "Underground," and Davis Richter's cartoon for "Labor" were good. Why cannot we have more of these things in our streets? One of the most enjoyable exhibits was Paul Cooper's "Nursery," a room full of children's toys. A number of clever men and women, whose names I cannot record, had combined in making this room the jolly place it was. Then there was a nice grandmotherly room full of samplers, clean and prim, and tidy, with a sentiment of good manners. Not far from it was the "Treasury" where the principal exhibits were Henry Wilson's jewelry, and Harold Stabler's enamels; I cannot describe them, they must be loved and fingered. There was a wealth of other beautiful stuff in this room, and the craft of jewelry, owing to the fine skill of the women, now stands high in England.

In shows of this kind some crafts get less than others. Jewelry and silver work always tell, blacksmithing and carving do not. I would like to have seen more of the works of those pleasant wood-carvers, Joseph Armitage and Alec Miller, but you cannot rend carving out of its structure. I enjoyed Louise Powell's room with Ernest Gimson's work, and Sidney Barnsley's sideboard—the work from Daneway House is always good. I enjoyed Alan Vigers' Music Room with the painted instruments, but there again, one wants to be in a music room in a music mood—it is not the exhibition meed. My children once made a grass nest for the thrushes, and then were disappointed that the birds declined to come and sing in it. I was glad to see F. W. Troup's photograph of steel construction hanging in the octagonal vestibule he had designed, but it gave me a shock, not because it was out of place, but because of its reminder that the place of the Arts and Crafts has not yet been determined in life. Without Troup's quiet and persistent energy I believe the exhibition



THE ECCLESIASTICAL ROOM



THE RETROSPECTIVE ROOM WITH BURNE JONES AND MORRIS TAPESTRY



THE HALL OF HEROES



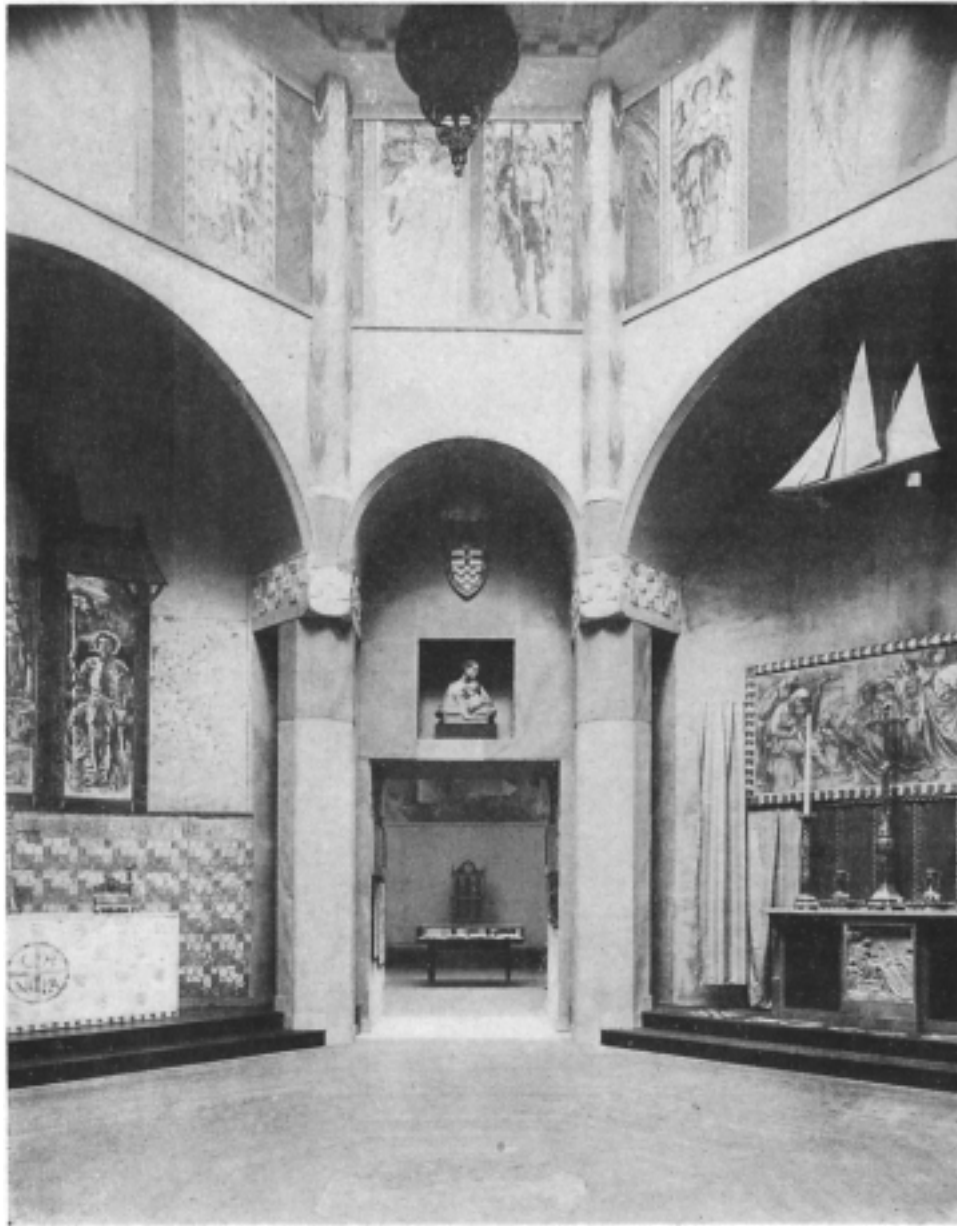
THE WEAVING ROOM

itself could never have been brought about, and our society, which has shown throughout its life a singular incapacity for organization, owes more to him than any of its members. He is not unlike the steel framework upon which all depends. There was a beautiful room furnished by May Morris, another by the Women's Guild of Arts, another by the Christies. In the adjoining gallery were many fine illuminated books from some of the well known private presses, mostly "Doves," "Ashdene," and "Chiswick." There were fine cases full of Martin salt-glaze stoneware—products from a workshop with traditions that go back long before the foundation of our Society; also there was Powell glass from Whitefriars. In the room devoted to "The University" (see plan) the two distinguishing features were the portrait frieze by William Rothenstein, and the other frieze by Augustus John. I liked them both, but they fought. The show has been called a "painters' show", unfairly I think, and they were for once mercifully freed of their gold frames. I prefer George Clausen in the simple nobility of a lunette, as I saw him here, but I felt that the great decorations of Sims and Greiffenhagen were out of scale. The "Hall of Heroes" moved me less, but I like Gerald Moira's bay, and C. M. Gere's "Cotswold's in War Time." Here, however, the painters had not been given time enough, and for all Henry Wilson's architectural limitations the decorative panels did not "come together," and to that extent the scheme was a failure. The names I give are but a few among the many I saw and noted in the Exhibition. With all its wealth much work by living men and women was missing, and should, in so representative a show, have been exhibited. Thus I missed De Morgan's pottery, and Mrs. Sargent Florence's frescoe work, and Strachan's glass, and Fred Partridge's jewelry, and Thornton and Downer's blacksmithing, and Douglas Pepler's printing; there were no exhibits from the "Vale," or from the "Essex House" presses; and exhibits from the workshops of the Celtic revival ought certainly to have been there—the Dun Emer carpets and books, and Miss Purser's glass.

The Exhibition was a success, and yet

there is another side to it all. In a rather brilliantly written satire in the *Cambridge Magazine* inspired clearly by one distinguished artist, himself an exhibitor, but whose anonymity it would be unchivalrous to reveal, "Althea" writes to "Lucy" of the "talk of London." She is bored with everything, "I can only give you the vaguest impression of the Exhibition. . . . It seemed to me as though all these people had at last fairly let themselves go, and plunged into a regular orgy of moral and religious sentimentality. I have a muddled recollection of vast walls covered with sprawling allegories, of painted scrolls proclaiming that *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, of sculptured figures of respectably undressed young men, of vistas of mortuary chapels completely fitted out with altar candles, Madonna-lillies, communion rails, and hymn-number indicators. Another horror is that you can never forget for a moment that all these grandeurs and solemnities, all these *épanchements* of England's heart, are only skin deep, and that some brown paper here, and a drawing pin there, are all that stand between you and the eternal verities of the walls of Burlington House. And if you turn to the smaller objects—the fire-irons and embroideries, the illuminated manuscripts—its hardly less depressing. I really hoped that we had heard the last of the late Mr. Morris; but, except for a wretched little corner devoted to Omega, and for some of the crockery and stuffs in the small room next to it, there's scarcely a thing that isn't an echo of the affectations of the eighties." It is not because of its spite, or bitterness that I quote this judgment of the young. It contains fundamental truth.

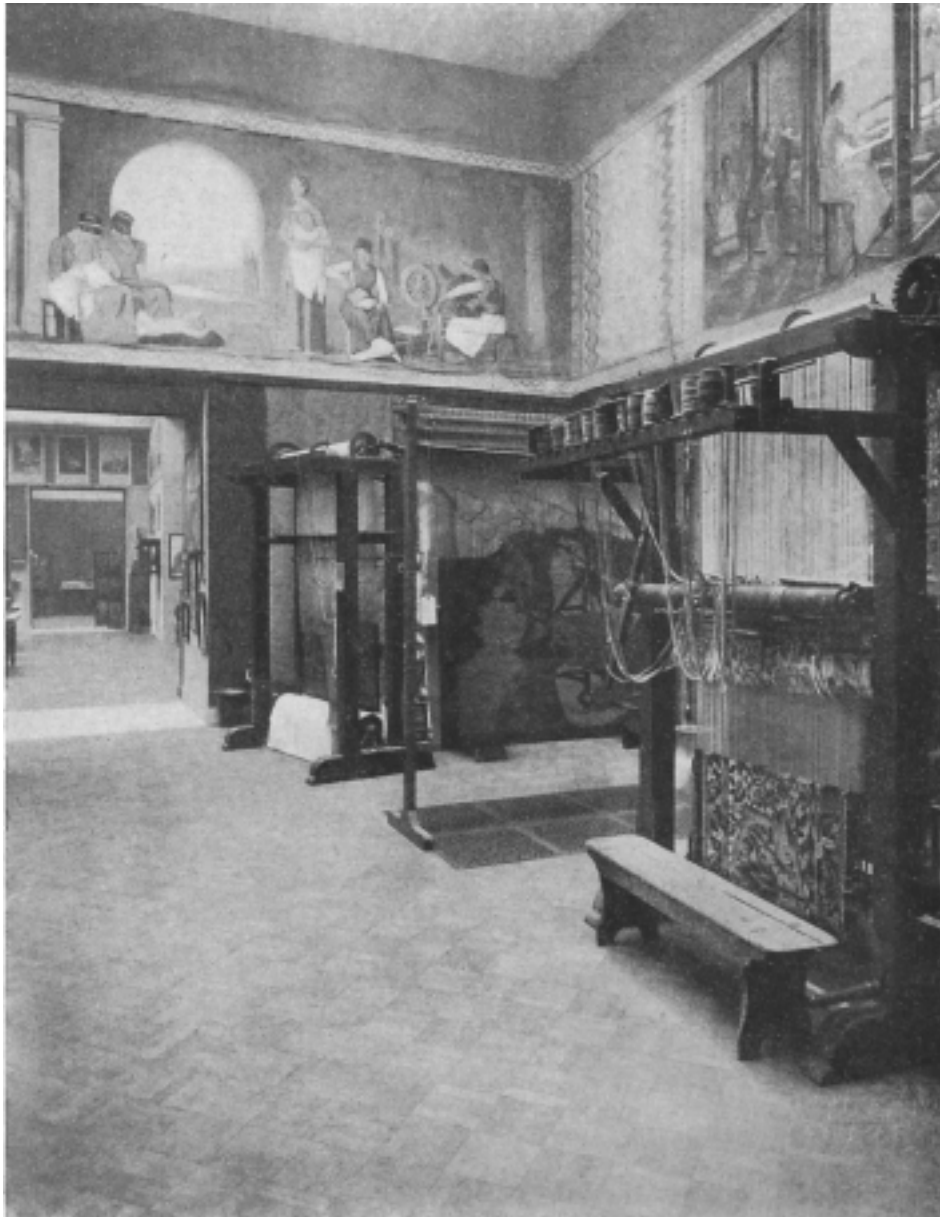
We are living too much in the past. We owe a duty to the young, however much we may object to the way in which they are knocking at the door. The Exhibition shows clearly enough how these rooms of ours have to be swept out, the unrealities and the fluff cleared away. As for us artists, what we ourselves fail to see—and it is the reason of our spite and bitterness—is that we have not enough work to do, and not enough work of the right sort. We are unemployed, and misemployed. We are unorganized. Hence the mood. The war has only accentuated the mood, we



THE ECCLESIASTICAL ROOM LEADING INTO THE UNIVERSITY ROOM

had Cubists, Futurists, Omega and iconoclasm before any of us thought of the war. We should be rending the devil, not each other. Our problem now is a new problem. It is not any longer a question of how we can best exhibit and "get before the public"

in galleries and shows, our problem now is coordination and continuity within the industrial life that is crumbling to pieces all around us. We cannot go on in the old way. The very existence of our work—shops within this crumbling Society de-



THE WEAVING ROOMS SHOWING THE LOOMS

mands some new way. How ought we to find it? Some of us like "Althea" think the "Art Exhibition" is a worn out way.

And yet the Exhibition was right, and meant a revelation to thousands. Henry Wilson in his introduction to the catalogue

says of it, "Now that the Western world is one vast wound, which the forces of destruction are daily enlarging, the least sign of reconstruction comes like a benediction to those who have been in the conflict." And he quotes the words of a



THE CIVICS ROOM WITH CASES OF "MARTINWARE" AND WHITEPRIARS GLASS



THE CIVICS ROOM WITH GEORGE CLAUSEN'S LUNETTE

young soldier returning from the trenches,
"Thank God there are people in England
who care for these things. After the war
it will be too late. It must be done now."

The words came as a complete vindication
of our enterprise, and a blessing on our
labors. Let doubters take courage.

C. R. ASHBEE.