



## The Furniture Design of Edgar Wood (1860-1935)

Jill Seddon

*The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 117, No. 873, Special Issue Devoted to French Neo-Classicism. (Dec., 1975), pp. 857-861+863-864+867.

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'Beyond all others the spirits of Novelty and Variety are objects of the upholsterer's worship. He possesses infinite reverence for Fashion. But his loyalty is for the fashion that may happen to reign for the day: nor is it, like the vicar of Bray's, an ever acquiescing loyalty; on the contrary he is ever aiming at revolution. The lady is aware of the unsteadiness of the reign of Fashion; and not less prepared than the upholsterer to be prepared to adore the rising sun: but with this difference; he is always ready for revolution; she devotes herself more to the present power, and dreads changes, in which others may be before her. Not wholly unaware then of hazard in committing herself to his advice, having made her enquiries, and gained all attainable information, her purpose is to direct him; but he is versed in the ways of leading her'.<sup>87</sup>

In sum 'the upholsterer's interest . . . is in direct opposition to the architect's credit'.<sup>88</sup> But in 1827 Meason, although he refers to 'our rooms' with 'their gaudy carpets . . . tables and chairs, and sofas, crowded together like an upholsterer's shop' saw signs of hope:

'In several houses recently built, both in town and in the country, the taste of the architect has been called in, to give designs for the arrangement of curtains, for grates, pier-tables, chairs and sofas.'<sup>89</sup>

It is evident that the problems and preoccupations which exercised Loudon in relation to furniture, and indeed his solutions, were anticipated in the early nineteenth century.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.253.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.254.

<sup>89</sup> G. L. MEASON, *op. cit.*, p.87.

A multiplicity of styles, the problem of archaeology, the breakdown of eighteenth-century 'order and neatness',<sup>90</sup> and the conflict between architect-designed and commercial furniture, were all permanent subjects of debate in the nineteenth century. That all these problems had an especial relevance in the villa and cottage context is no accident. The villa and cottage were then, as to a large extent they are now, the dominant form of domestic architectural expression. Pugin's St Marie's Grange, Butterfield's vicarage at Coalpitheath, Webb's Red House, and Burges's Tower House were all products of this tradition, which carried on to Voysey and Mackintosh. Nineteenth-century commercial manufacturers of furniture, whether in 1810 or in 1890, had to produce for this market in order to survive. Even great houses adopted the accommodation and planning of villas and were arranged, with considerable difficulty and ingenuity, to provide a cottagey privacy and informality inconceivable in an eighteenth-century mansion. The villa not the palace provided the pattern for furniture and decoration. The case had altered since Repton's complaint in 1808:

'in Architecture, the first question concerning a house is, WHAT ARE THE DIMENSIONS OF THE ROOMS? . . . Indeed every thing is swelled out in the same proportion. Thus we continually see, in modern houses, Windows too large to be glazed . . . Doors too large to be opened . . . Furniture too large to be moved . . . and even Beds too lofty to be reached without a ladder!!!'<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup> LORD GERALD WELLESLEY: 'Regency Furniture', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE [1937], p.234, quoting JANE AUSTEN: *Persuasion* [1815].

<sup>91</sup> H. REPTON: *Designs for the Pavilion at Brighton*, London [1808], p.ii.

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## The Furniture Design of Edgar Wood (1860-1935)

AN anonymous critic, reviewing the Northern Arts and Crafts Exhibition of 1903, wrote, with reference to a group of furniture designed by the Manchester architect Edgar Wood,

'There are not a few who entertain the opinion that the architect is the only fit and proper person to dictate the form of our household gods.'<sup>1</sup>

The idea that an architect should take complete responsibility for every aspect of a house which he designed, from the laying of the foundations to the choosing of furnishing fabrics, still had about it a novelty which this conservative writer found rather suspect. No doubt the readers of the commercially-biased *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, the paper for which he wrote, would have been in complete

agreement with him. And yet the treatment of the whole house as a single unit in which every detail of design must be made to harmonise, had been one of the most cherished principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement right from its beginnings in the 1860's; and the idea was firmly established in certain spheres long before 1903.

Edgar Wood, although his name may mean little to most people now, was a prominent member of the Arts and Crafts Movement. He exhibited occasionally in Arts and Crafts Exhibitions at the New Gallery in London but his main involvement lay with the Northern Art Workers' Guild established in Manchester by Walter Crane in 1896. Wood was a founder member and became Master of the guild in 1897. Major exhibitions were organised in 1898 and 1903. In the first, Wood's thirty-eight exhibits included furniture, metalwork and jewellery. Fewer examples of his work appeared in 1903 but the catalogue cover was his design. During his lifetime Wood's work in architecture and applied art was well known both in this country and abroad, through widespread illustration in *The British Architect*, *The*

<sup>1</sup> 'Sketches from the Manchester Arts and Crafts Exhibition', *The Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, volume 15, No.180 [June 1895], pp.324-33.



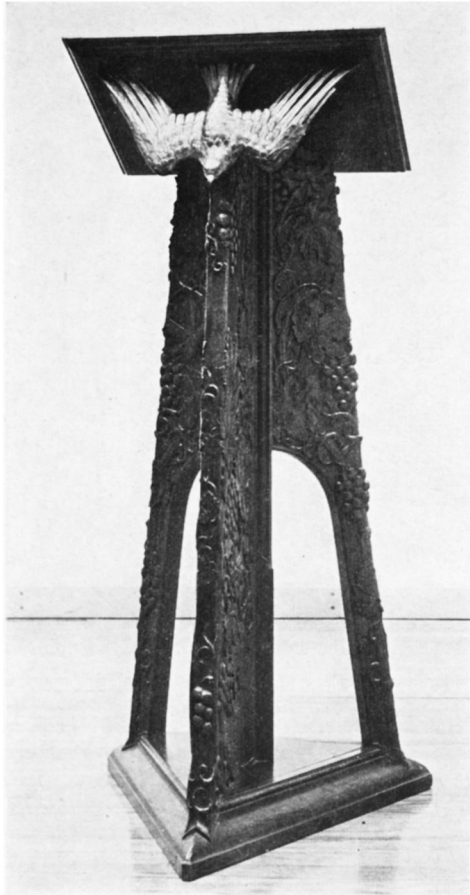
106. 'Upmeads', Stafford. 1908.



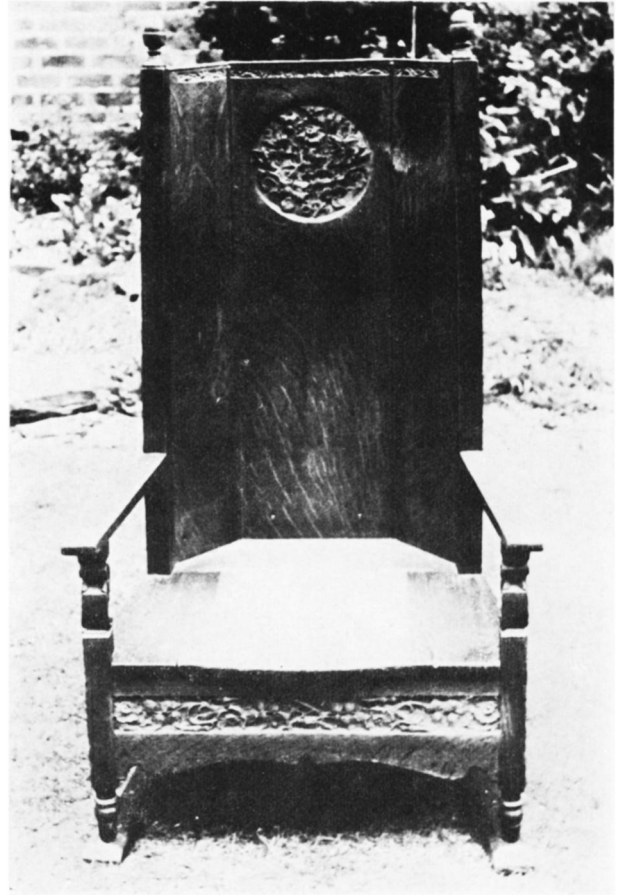
107. *Readers' Chair*. 1903. Mahogany. (Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester).



108. *Readers' Chair*. 1903. Mahogany. (Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester).



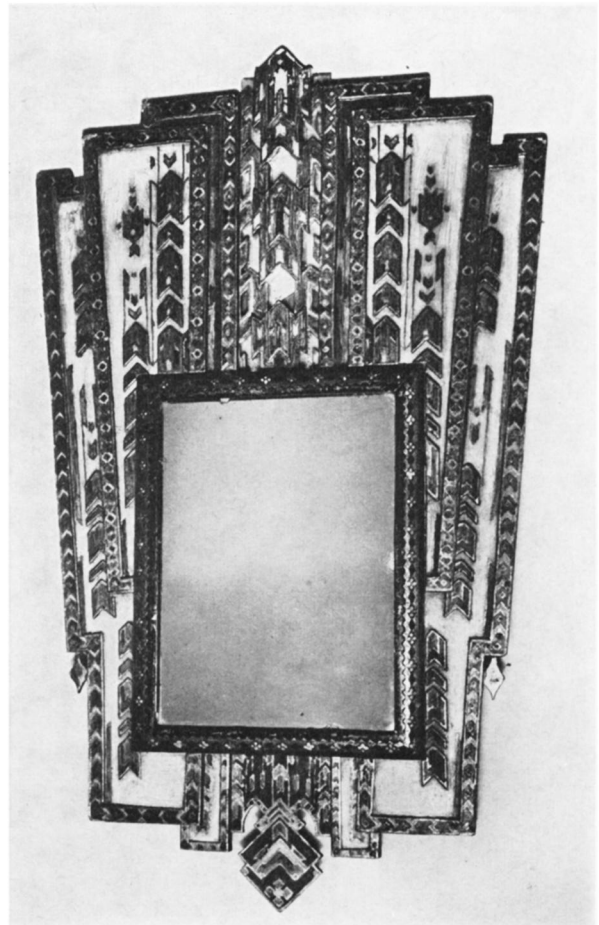
109. *Lectern*. 1903. Mahogany, partly gilt. (Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester).



110. *Sewing chair*. 1894. Oak. (Collection Miss M. D. Paton, Manchester).



111. *Sewing Chair, seen from the back*. 1894. Oak. (Collection Miss M. D. Paton, Manchester).



112. *Mirror*. c. 1928. Painted and gilded wood. (Cecil Higgins Museum, Bedford).

*Studio*, the German publication *Moderne Bauformen* and many others. Hermann Muthesius included seven illustrations of Wood's work in *Das Englische Haus*,<sup>2</sup> his survey of advanced British design carried out for the German government. The reason for present-day neglect of Wood's achievements at a time when other Arts and Crafts designers are receiving much attention and acclaim, is clear.<sup>3</sup> His practice was deliberately kept small, Wood himself performing the twin functions of designer and administrator. He employed only one assistant, G. A. E. Schwabe, taken on in 1893 and from 1903 onwards often participated in joint projects with a fellow-architect, James Henry Sellers. All his commissions were for domestic or small-scale ecclesiastical building, most of which may be found in suburban Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire. Wood's most progressive building, 'Upmeads' (Fig. 106), a house built in 1908, is located on the outskirts of Stafford. Thus his work is well off the beaten track of many architectural historians.

Wood was born on 17th May 1860 into a large strictly Unitarian family who owned a cotton mill in Middleton, Lancashire. It was his father's intention that Edgar should enter the family business but his son was interested only in becoming a painter. Eventually both compromised and, in 1877, Edgar was articled to a prominent firm of Manchester architects, Mills and Murgatroyd. To Wood Senior the profession of architect possessed a respectability which that of a painter most definitely lacked; he was already familiar with the work of Mills and Murgatroyd, having commissioned them to build him a house in Archer Park, Middleton in 1864. Oppressive office routine left Edgar Wood firmly convinced that 'real architectural education only begins with the advent of responsibility after the years of pupilage have been passed or been survived.'<sup>4</sup> It must therefore have been a liberating experience to set up his own practice in Middleton in 1885. By 1892 Wood had sufficient commissions to move to offices in the centre of Manchester. He was obviously a respected member of the architectural profession; he had become an associate member of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1885 and was elected President of the Manchester Society of Architects in 1910. Wood did not adhere, however, to all the conventions of his associates and must have appeared a flamboyant figure in his customary outfit of a long black cloak lined with red silk, flat broad-brimmed hat and silver-topped cane. In 1921, a legacy enabled him to retire to Italy to paint. The R.I.B.A. Drawings Collection possesses a number of his

water-colours and pastel drawings executed in Venice, Florence, Naples and Pisa. Wood later settled at Monte Calvario on the Italian Riviera, where he died on 12th October 1935.

Wood appears to have designed a large amount of furniture, both ecclesiastical and domestic. Much of it was widely illustrated in contemporary journals but unfortunately lamentably few pieces have been traced. The ecclesiastical work so far discovered includes furniture and fittings for Long Street Wesleyan Chapel, Middleton, designed in 1899,<sup>5</sup> a communion table designed for the Methodist Church at Lindley, Huddersfield in 1895 and three Readers' chairs and two lecterns (Figs. 107-109) made for the First Church of Christ Scientist, Manchester in 1903. Five domestic pieces have been identified: a sewing-chair made for the wife of H. C. D. Chorlton, a fellow member of the Northern Art Workers' Guild (Figs. 110-111), a chest in which Wood stored his drawings, a mirror (Fig. 112) and the painted top of a stool (Fig. 113) both formerly in the collection of Charles Handley-Read, and a lectern for the Manchester Society of Architects (Fig. 114). Signed drawings survive for the three Christian Scientist Church chairs and the Lindley communion table.<sup>6</sup> The sewing-chair has the date 1894 incorporated into a carved motif on the back and a fine drawing of it by T. Raffles Davison was published in *Architecture*, volume 11, 1897.

Wood's development as a designer falls into two distinct phases. During the first, from about 1887 to 1903, his work was very much part of the Arts and Crafts Movement, whereas the productions of 1903 until his death reflect the influence of the Modern Movement together with increasing idiosyncracies in design. The background of furniture designers, Edgar Wood among them, who were associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement had certain features in common. The majority of them trained as architects. Some set up in architectural practice only designing furniture for themselves and their friends or when the decoration of the interior as well as the design of the exterior of a house was entrusted to them by a client. Others used their architectural training as the basis of their approach to design in many different areas of decorative art. The interdiscipline of the arts, more characteristic of the nineteenth century than our own, was evident in the attitudes of many of the Arts and Crafts designers. The furniture design of Edgar Wood, as will be seen later, was strongly influenced both by his work as an architect and by his desire to be a painter. Partly as a result of their architectural training, and partly through the observation of the construction of the medieval furniture which they so much admired, the furniture designers of the Arts and Crafts Movement became unanimous in their desire to provide functional furniture. They were severely critical of the design of commercial furniture. The architect Halsey Ricardo, describing a commercially produced chest of drawers, demanded to know:

<sup>2</sup> HERMANN MUTHESIUS: *Das Englische Haus*, Berlin, volume 1 [1904], pp. 175-80; volume 3 [1905], p. 156.

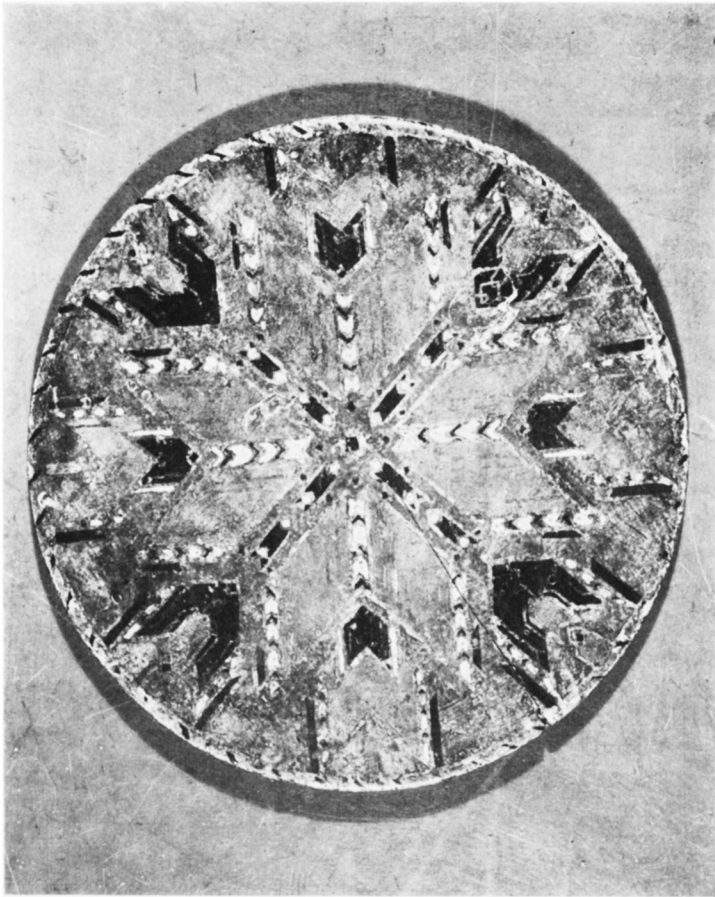
<sup>3</sup> The present revival of interest in Edgar Wood is almost entirely due to the work of Mr John Archer of the department of Architecture, Manchester University. This work includes: 'An introduction to two Manchester Architects; Edgar Wood and James Henry Sellers', *R.I.B.A. Journal*, volume 62 [1954], pp. 50-53. 'Edgar Wood: A Notable Manchester Architect', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, volumes 73-74 [1963-64], pp. 153-87. An unpublished M.Phil. Thesis for Manchester University, *Edgar Wood and the Architecture of the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau Movements in Britain*, 2 volumes [1968]. Mr Archer has just finished a paper, soon to be published, dealing particularly with the relationship between Wood and Sellers. Biographical details discussed in this article are based on Mr Archer's research.

<sup>4</sup> 'An Architect's Experience in the Development of Design', a paper read before the Birmingham Architectural Association in February, 1900. Published in *The Builders' Journal, and Architectural Record*, volume 11 [1900].

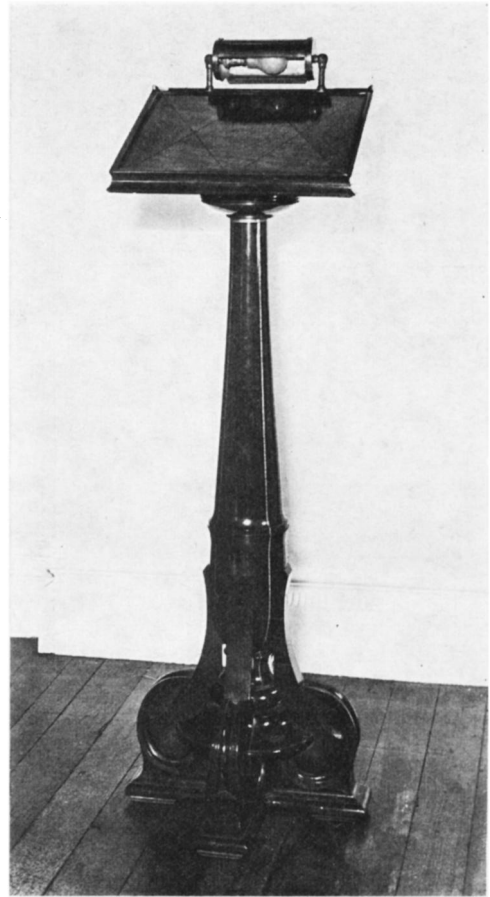
<sup>5</sup> Illustrated in J. H. G. ARCHER: 'Edgar Wood: a Notable Manchester Architect', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, volumes 73-74 [1963-64], fig. 34.

<sup>6</sup> The design was exhibited at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition, Manchester in 1895 and published in *The British Architect*, volume xlv [1895], pp. 44-45.

113.



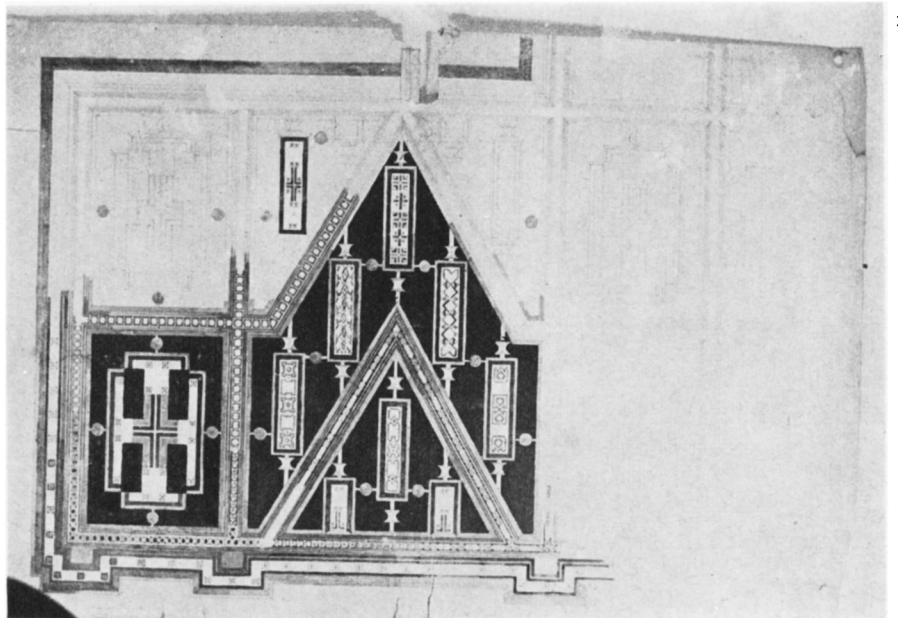
114.



115.



116.



113. *Painted stool top.* (Royal Institute of British Architects, London).

114. *Lectern.* Mahogany, inlaid with boxwood and ebony. (Manchester City Art Gallery).

115. *Clock Tower,* Lindley, Huddersfield. 1907.

116. *Design for an organ screen.* 1903. (Collection Stuart Evans).

Why are the drawers not made proportionate for their duty? Why are they so few and so deep that when filled – as they needs must be – they are uneasy to draw out and to obtain the particular article of which we are in quest and which of course is at the bottom, we must burrow into the heavy superincumbent mass of clothes in our search and – that successful – spend a weary while in contriving to repack the ill-disposed space.<sup>7</sup>

Other designers were concerned to produce furniture that was easy to keep free from dust and accumulated household rubbish. The concept of functional design also embodied a desire to employ appropriate materials: hence the use of unstained wood and exposed joints. C. F. A. Voysey wrote the following instructions to the maker of some of his furniture designs: 'to be made in English oak and not stained or polished in any way whatever.' This type of furniture was ideally suited to form part of a complete interior scheme often for a house of the architect's own design but the actual making of the pieces was delegated to other craftsmen. This represented a breaking away, for practical reasons, from the theories of William Morris. Morris emphasised the importance of uniting the designing and making of a piece of furniture in a single creative act carried out by one craftsman whose intimate knowledge of the properties of his materials would dictate its form. However, very few architects constructed their own furniture and the men who executed architects' designs often remain at best only names. It has, for example, so far proved impossible to find out any further details of the makers of the furniture exhibited by Wood in the Northern Arts and Crafts Exhibitions, other than that their names were T. H. Rothwell and Pearson and Brown.

Wood's furniture of his first period shows characteristics directly derived from the work of Philip Webb and William Morris. It is heavy and massive, constructed of solid planks of unstained wood (oak, mahogany or walnut). Its aesthetic qualities lie in the basic form of the furniture, which is usually embellished with small areas of carving or inlay. As the critic J. W. Gleeson White observed:

'Mr. Wood has learnt the true power of a spot of rich decoration carefully placed and rightly proportioned to the undecorated work of the structure.'<sup>8</sup>

As in his architecture of the same period, notably 'Briar-court', a house built in Huddersfield in 1895, Wood showed great interest in reviving traditional sixteenth and seventeenth-century forms. This is best illustrated by the three chairs from the Christian Scientist Church, itself a building in which Wood made extraordinarily inventive use of the Arts and Crafts architectural vocabulary (Figs. 107 and 108). The basic shape of the chairs is typical of early sixteenth-century pieces, while the motif of a round-headed arch flanked by pilasters decorated with intertwining stems is more commonly found on chairs made in the seventeenth century where it usually encloses a panel of inlay rather than being

left blank as in this case. The tangled briar roses decorating the main Reader's chair are used repeatedly by Wood. They occur not only on furniture but also in plasterwork and leaded window lights. Intricately carved rose petals and stems are also seen in the elaborate roundel, incorporating two sets of initials and the date, on the back of Mrs Chorlton's sewing chair (Fig. 110) and on a simple band of carving running round its deep bottom rail. An exception to this sparse placing of ornament is found in the Lindley communion table. The front stretcher carved with delicate flowers is connected to the deep rail by the figure of an angel bearing a scroll. The rail is decorated with interlaced rose trees enclosing four reliefs depicting female figures succouring the homeless, the sick, the ignorant and the poor, with the carved inscription: 'This do in remembrance of me'.

Inscriptions are also included in the decoration of some of Wood's domestic furniture. For example, on the back of the sewing-chair is carved an exhortation to 'use time wisely'. This practice, often employed on Arts and Crafts furniture, was not welcomed by the critics. Esther Wood, reviewing the first Northern Art Workers' Guild Exhibition complained that it was becoming an irritating mannerism:

'Even so true an artist as Mr. Edgar Wood has not quite escaped the inscription mania characteristic of the school but breaks out now and again into such pretty platitudes as threaten to make our arts and crafts exhibitions a compendium of proverbial philosophy.'<sup>9</sup>

Wood's sympathy towards other architects working in the Arts and Crafts Movement was illustrated in a very practical way when he installed in the living-room of a house which he designed a fire surround of a proprietary make, originally designed by Voysey. It was of oak stained 'Brunswick Green' (a yellowish green) with hand-carved decoration. In two other houses Wood used tiled fireplaces with grates designed by W. R. Lethaby.

During the last five or six years (1897–1903) of this first period a slight 'art nouveau' influence may be discerned in Wood's work. A striking example is a settle exhibited in 1898.<sup>10</sup> The extremely tall back decorated with two tall thin panels depicting gaunt tree shapes and the deep elegant curves of the arms suggest the influence of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Mackintosh exhibited a settle in the London Arts and Crafts Exhibition of 1896, one of the few London exhibitions in which Wood participated. It seems highly likely that Wood saw Mackintosh's piece and it made a lasting impression upon him. The influence of Mackintosh is also indicated in a chair with a tall narrow back tapering towards the top which was designed for the Wesleyan Chapel, Middleton in 1899. Wood's strongest interpretation of 'art nouveau' forms may be seen in the Clock Tower at Lindley (Fig. 115) with its elegantly elongated shape and Pre-Raphaelite-inspired carved stone figures. The Clock Tower was built in 1907, later than the examples mentioned above, which indicates that Wood retained an interest in

<sup>7</sup> *The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society Catalogue* [1890], p.34.

<sup>8</sup> J. W. GLEESON WHITE: 'The Manchester Arts and Crafts Second Exhibition', *The Studio*, volume 5 [1895], p.134.

<sup>9</sup> ESTHER WOOD: 'The Manchester Arts and Crafts Exhibition', *The Studio*, volume 15 [1898–99], p.125.

<sup>10</sup> Illustrated in W. E. SPROAT: 'Sketches at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition', *The Builder*, volume lxxv, No.2909 [5th November 1898], p.405.

'art nouveau' while moving on to experiment with new materials and forms now associated with the Modern Movement.

The beginning of the second phase of Wood's career, from 1903 onwards, coincides with his introduction to James Henry Sellers. The two architects decided to share an office and in this way established an informal partnership in which each was free either to concentrate on his own work or to collaborate on joint projects. Although Sellers had previously been designing in a restrained classical manner he was becoming extremely interested in a new building material – reinforced concrete – and his enthusiasm communicated itself to Wood. In 1906–07 Sellers designed a reinforced concrete flat-roofed office block for Dronsfeld Brothers Limited in King Street, Oldham. This was quickly succeeded by a series of buildings in the same material designed by Sellers with Wood's co-operation. Two notable examples are Elm Street and Durnford Street schools built in Middleton between 1908 and 1910.

The new awareness of the relationship between form and function inspired by these experiments with reinforced concrete was transferred by Wood to houses which he designed independently using more traditional materials. Nikolaus Pevsner wrote of 'Upmeads' (Fig. 106) designed in 1908:

'The only English private house of the early twentieth century which looks as if it might have been designed about 1935 with a view to expressing the structural characteristics of concrete, is a normal brick building.'<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately the beginning of the First World War brought an abrupt end to this outburst of creative originality. Before 1914 Sellers and Wood had encountered some constructional difficulties in their design of flat roofs and although Wood's last building, his own house in Italy, still had this type of roof, Sellers returned to designing houses in the neo-Georgian style until his retirement in 1948.

From the two architects' obvious enjoyment of experimentation with new materials one might expect that the furniture which they produced during the first two decades of the twentieth century would show a corresponding inventiveness in the use of tubular steel or laminated wood. However, in the furniture illustrated in contemporary journals and in the few pieces of this period which have been traced, wood is used in a traditional way, made up into simple shapes which serve as a background for highly individual painted patterns. It is not clear at present how far Sellers collaborated in the production of this furniture. The furniture which may be definitely attributed to Sellers is elegantly classical, influenced by the work of Sheraton and Hepplewhite.<sup>12</sup> However the chevron patterning so characteristic of the painted work was undoubtedly Wood's own creation. In some of his Arts and Crafts furniture he had already used bold stripes of contrasting inlay; but the

new geometric designs first appeared in green and white tiling on the facades of a row of three shops built in 1908, just after Wood had returned from a visit to Spain, which suggests that the zig-zag patterns were derived from Arabic ornament. Wood also travelled to Tunisia and Persia in 1914 and his own house contained exotic furniture collected on these visits.

Geometric motifs recur in many different media. For example, although the chairs for the Christian Scientist Church, designed in 1903 are unquestionably in the Arts and Crafts tradition, the organ screen (Fig. 116) which Wood designed for the church during the same period is boldly painted with a rich variety of chevron patterns. In Royd House, Cheshire, which Wood built for himself in 1914, this decorative scheme was carried throughout the house, including the paving in the drive, a tiled panel on the façade, the front and interior doors and the furniture. Wood enthusiastically continued these experiments in decoration when he moved to Italy. The beautiful mirror frame constructed of stepped geometric shapes painted white and decorated with arrow head patterns in gold and colours, formerly in the collection of Charles Handley-Read belongs to this period (Fig. 112). Handley-Read also had in his collection a number of Wood's water-colour designs for mirror frames or panels.<sup>13</sup> These consist of ornate geometric patterns painted in rich combinations of gold, blue, black, green, red and pink. In Wood's house at Monte Calvario (which he built in 1932) he obviously felt free to indulge to the full his love of the exotic. The interior walls were divided into tall narrow panels between the windows and they, and all the doors and the furniture, were decorated with intricate geometric designs in olive, violet and orange.

In all Wood's decorative schemes his main aim was to integrate the walls and the moveable furniture into one harmonious unit. This he achieved by means of colour. In his early Arts and Crafts period he often used painted friezes in his interiors. Wood believed that the decline in mural painting during the nineteenth century was the result of the breach between fine art and decorative art which he and other members of the Arts and Crafts Movement were trying to mend. A particularly fine design by Wood for a frieze may be seen in a water-colour dated 1901, now in the R.I.B.A. Drawings Collection. It represents scenes from medieval life, including a royal banquet and a jousting tournament and is painted on all four walls of the room. Wooden panelling and a sideboard in 'Jacobean' style complete the mood of the room. Also in this drawing there appears a decorative device often repeated in the designs which Wood published in *Moderne Bauformen*. The exposed ceiling beams are painted white and ornamented at regular intervals with small-scale abstract patterns in yellow. In other designs tiny rectangles of jewel-like colour glow on the openwork beams like the carved and gilded bosses decorating the intersecting vaults of Gothic architecture.

As Wood turned away from the lyrical scenes of bygone days, so popular with the Arts and Crafts Movement, to much more abstract designs, colour assumed an even greater

<sup>11</sup> NIKOLAUS PEVSNER: 'Nine Swallows – No Summer', *The Architectural Review*, volume 91, No. 545 [May 1942], p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> Mr Stuart Evans is preparing an M.Phil. thesis for Leeds University: *A Neo-Georgian Designer: James Henry Sellers*.

<sup>13</sup> Now in the R.I.B.A. Drawings Collection.

importance for him. He began to paint furniture with the same or similar motifs as those used in other parts of an interior. In this way he achieved an integrated whole. At about the same time as Wood began experimenting with this kind of decoration on a large scale, at Royd House, Mackintosh was creating similar effects in his last major commission, No. 78 Derngate, Northampton. The decorative scheme of the lounge hall indicates that Mackintosh was experimenting with pattern in a similar way to Wood. The panelling was painted black with stencilled zig-zag designs in brilliant colours. The chevron motif was repeated in the furnishings, most amusingly in a 'space age' conical lamp.

A most interesting insight into Wood's method of painting furniture is gained from a letter, describing tables for his villa at Monte Calvario, which he wrote to Sellers in 1926:

'The photos are the tops of tables only. Some are covered with a piece of a plate glass. They are not very good photos, not showing detail, gold lines are very important as dividing all colours, the colours are enamel, all are done on the flat, all in oil and varnished.

P.S. All ground colours are stippled with the big feather and varnished before any design is painted, this is important so as to get the quality, all furniture is painted two coats white before anything to add to the brilliancy of the ground colour.'

From the very beginning of his experiments in painted furniture and interiors, Wood regretted that so few of his fellow architects and furniture designers used colour in their work. He concluded that designers were inhibited by the traditional English reverence for wood, particularly oak, in its natural state. Morris and his friends had produced elaborately painted furniture for the house in Red Lion Square but they and the designers who followed them soon turned for inspiration to simple country-made furniture whose chief beauty lay in the use of wood in its natural state. In a paper which he read to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1912 Wood made a plea for a revival of the use of painted decoration on furniture. He was convinced that once designers accepted that hard woods could be used for their durability alone and were therefore particularly suitable for the skilled and careful application of painted decoration, they would soon begin to produce what Wood described as 'valuable additions to our colour possessions and our colour enjoyment'.<sup>14</sup>

Wood reacted to colour in a spiritual way. In exploring this aspect of design he felt:

'Unconsciously drawn towards the East where colour has received its greatest development as colour, where it has produced its most powerful appeals.'<sup>15</sup>

Wood's appreciation of the oriental attitude towards colour explains his sensitivity in his use of flat surface patterns derived from Eastern sources. He regarded colour, as used in oriental art and form, as exemplified by Greek and Gothic art, as:

'two opposing and antagonistic expressions. Colour, representing nothing in itself, appeals to emotional and sensuous faculties whilst form is intellectual and its appeal is the outcome of reason.'<sup>15</sup>

A comparison between Wood's painted mirror frame and any piece of William Burges's painted furniture illustrates the different priorities of the two architects. In Wood's piece the overlapping geometric forms add to the richness of the painted decoration, whereas in Burges's furniture the Gothic form is all important and the figurative painted decoration extra embellishment. Wood's approach to the decoration of furniture was essentially that of a painter producing abstract patterns on a three-dimensional shape, an attitude similar to that of the members of the Omega workshop set up by Roger Fry in 1913. Wood's expressive use of colour may account for the fact that his work was of more interest to German designers in the first decades of the twentieth century than to his English contemporaries.

Despite his, at one time, international reputation, it is impossible to name an architect or designer directly influenced by Edgar Wood's work. He was part of the European Movement to a far greater extent than most English architects, even though he worked only in the provinces. His work was widely known on the continent, especially in Germany, the country which had taken over the leadership in progressive design from Britain in the first decades of the twentieth century. Wood's most advanced architectural designs were twenty years ahead of their time. He was a pioneer, but there was no-one in England to follow him.

## Shorter Notices

### *William Kent and the Cabinet-Makers*

BY GEOFFREY BEARD

ON 3rd August 1734, fourteen years after he had returned from Italy with the third Earl of Burlington, William Kent wrote<sup>1</sup> to Theophilus, Earl of Huntingdon: 'Mr Wright mentioned to me, that my Lady Huntingdon writ something in relation to the furniture, in which, if I can be of any service, I shall always be ready to give my advice . . .' This article is concerned with Kent's 'advice' and his connections with cabinet-makers, and in particular with those who worked for the Crown, and for Frederick Prince of Wales. The liaisons and advice given took place between 1720 and Kent's death in 1748.

Kent (see Fig. 117), supported in particular by three patrons, had left England for Italy in 1708 at the age of 25. His correspondence with his friends<sup>2</sup> for the ensuing ten years or so is limited but enough survives to chart the formation of his baroque taste and varied abilities. He trained as a painter in the studio of Benedetto Luti, and, as his letter to Burrell Massingberd of 24th November 1714, makes clear, in that of another Maratti pupil, Giuseppe Chiari. He had travelled extensively, both with Thomas Coke, later 1st Earl of Leicester and by himself, had learned to paint in fresco, had met many Englishmen, including

<sup>1</sup> Henry E. Huntington Library, California, MS., HA 8042.

<sup>2</sup> Society of Genealogists Library, London; Lincoln County Record Office, Massingberd Mundy MSS., VII/1A.

<sup>14</sup> *Building News*, volume 102, No. 2977 [26th January 1912], p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> *Building News*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.