

Transcript of my interview with Dr Colin Trodd

R: I'm interested in that side of things (politics) because it does seem quite conflicting?

CT: Like all these terms, they're kind of inventions, aren't they? We talk about the Pre-Raphaelites as if they were a cohesive movement, but they're not really. You talk about Romanticism as if the people we would now call a Romantic went around saying "you know what, I'm a Romantic"- Blake never said he was a romantic. The term Romanticism, it's not invented in the 1870's and 80's, but becomes kind of codified then, in this country at least. And Wordsworth becomes kind of coded as the archetypal Romantic because he brings together an interest in the natural world, the world of vision and the world of ethics, and that chimes with late Victorian ideas of what culture should set out to do.

And again, the Arts and Crafts Movement was a spectrum; different people having different opinions as to what it is and what they think that the craft should achieve. So, on one part of the spectrum you have people like William Morris, perhaps Ford Maddox Brown and C.R Ashbee- all of whom believe in Socialism in one form or another, whether or not it's a reformist or revolutionary form of Socialism. Then you get other figures who are much more interested in the technical aspects of craft issues- they're not political, and if they are political, they're conservative, people like Voysey for instance. So I think it's difficult for those who are looking at the Arts and Crafts Movement from the outside to get a purchase on that particular moment, because there are those different opinions as to what it is that culture should do- perhaps related to the broader political world in which these characters operated.

So, Ruskin, for instance, could be taken up by Socialists or he could be seen as profoundly traditional; but this is where the Romanticism comes in. Because, essentially, all the arts and crafts people are all Romantics in one way or another because they believe in the autonomy of expressive labour- they believe in the integrity of the creator. Someone who is free from the constraints that's imposed upon them by the dictates of commercial society, and Ruskin is the person that codifies that position, very much in the Stones of Venice in the 1850's and the 1860's, and then develops it in *Unto this Last*, which is his essay on the interfaces between art and politics. And he's a profoundly traditional figure in the sense that he looks, not so much to the future, but he looks back to the Medieval age, an ideal moment when the artisan was able to express his or herself freely as a crafts person. And then he kind of becomes horrified by the division of labour, which he sees as being the great evil invention of the modern age, where the person is no longer responsible for everything in the creation of, say, a carving, but has to just work on a particular process; so art gets turned into manufacture, and that's the horror for Ruskin. So, he looks back to the golden Medieval period, but someone like Morris is always imagining a future, which is based on Gothic principals, that's for sure, but is really rooted in the transformation of the social world through Socialism.

R: Yeah, because with *News from Nowhere*, that's almost like his manifesto of what he believes the future could look like.

CT: Yes, that's right, but all of these people, whether they're conservative or Socialists, all of them generally respect Ruskin, they realised that he's the figure that brings into focus the kind of nihilism of capitalism, which reduces everything to a monetary value. So you can be a Romantic High Tory criticising capitalism or you can be a Socialist criticising capitalism- the arguments are often very similar. Ruskin can sound like Marx on occasion, particularly in the Nature of Gothic, which is his most brilliant chapter in the Stones of Venice. Most of the people involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement were interested in what they wanted to spotlight in the relationship between trade, art, work and the ethical world. C.R Ashbee's another figure who's worth looking at and you can the works by these people via their own writings on the internet archives.

R: We (the Whitworth- so big-headed, me) had an exhibition a year or so ago called Joy Forever which looked at Unto This Last and his sort of history and what he did in life. And I find it quite interesting, with this movement, which seems to not only be about enriching the lives of Middle-Class people, but also Working-Class people and looking at, you know, enriching their lives and making their work (i.e. in mills and factories) better.

CT: Yeah there's definitely that element to it, that kind of missionary Socialism, or missionary aestheticism it's called sometimes. A sense that you've got to create these institutions such as the Whitechapel art gallery, but also guilds. C.R Ashbee's guild in London, which goes down to Chipping, Camden which is really a kind of self-help organisation for Working Class people. But yeah, you're absolutely right there is that sense in which there was an interest in getting people to realise that they're creative- these people are not Fine Artists. So, again the wider thing here is a dislike or a distrust of culture of the oil painting, easel painting and therefor a distain for the Royal Academy, which is seen to be an elitist organisation that defines art through oil painting. So, this craft revival is an attempt to re-evaluate what it is to talk about art really.

R: I read your paper on the Royal Academy, which is very interesting, and-

CT: I'm trying to think which one that is-

R: It's from 2000 and it's about authority-

CT: Is it in a book called Governing Cultures? Is that the one you mean?

R: I think so, yeah. So, it was about the authority of the Royal Academy and as I was reading it, I felt like the Arts and Crafts Movement was almost like a protest against it?

CT: Against the Royal Academy? Definitely yeah, I mean if you look at Walter Crane's writings in particular, there's a long tradition of hostility to the Royal Academy that comes from, well really it starts from Blake- Blake's particularly hostile to Joshua Reynolds. But in the 1820's and the 1830's you get various figures, and this is well before the arts and crafts movement, although the arguments mobilised by some of these people are kind of proto arts and crafts, I'm thinking of the couple of very interesting characters called the Foggo brothers. They attacked the Royal Academy because they saw it as a bastion of elitism and privilege, this kind of extension of the Court and King, really. And they're Middle Class

reformers- they're certainly not on the side of the downtrodden Working Classes but they wanted to transform the nature of what we think art is and to include things like, well, prints and decorative arts, and the language they use in their various submissions to commissions on the art world, which was conducted by the state, at this stage, through parliament, really based on this sense that the artist is a worker essentially.

So that fusion of the worker and the artist predates the Arts and Crafts Movement, and that explains why Blake gets so much space in the Arts and Crafts Movement- it is quite extraordinary. But it's not just because he's seen to be a radical, politically, it's because he's seen to be a person, who in essence, creates his own guild- he became a sort of one-man workshop, so there's no division of labour with Blake- he does everything! He thinks of the artwork, he creates it and he sells it as well, that's the plan, and he also mixes his own colours, so he does absolutely everything. There's no division of labour in 'Blake Land' so they love him for that reason.

R: Yeah that's interesting that someone who wasn't really a part of the movement in a traditional sense (because this was after his time) was so instructive and inspirational to those artists.

CT: Yeah well, Blake didn't like oil painting- he doesn't do any of that kind of stuff. He regards it as an invention, bizarrely, of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, which is... 'Blake logic' is charming but it's not really logic, but he's convinced that it's some kind of set of machinations put together by academies to destroy the vision of true creatives. So he does not like oil painting, he's someone who, essentially, creates his own relief etchings and these extraordinary things called his 'Continental Prophecies' or his 'Prophetic Books' and they tend to be the things that people remember him for, rather than his exercises in watercolour painting which he does.

R: Yeah, we've got a few of his watercolours at the gallery.

CT: That's right, there's the Milton set but the most famous work is the Ancient of Days, and people think that's a gigantic painting but it isn't, it's just a relief etching that comes out of his Prophetic Books which he writes from the 1790's. But if you look at writings from just about any member of the so-called Arts and Crafts Movement, but particularly Ashbee, Blake is there, and Walter Crane as well. He's presented as this universal figure that represents the crafts ethos, but also the independence of vision as well, he's someone who is creative, he's not controlled by systems. And that notion of individuality is another aspect, I think, of the Arts and Crafts Movement that has to be recognised.

R: Something that I find interesting with Walter Crane, and comparing him to William Morris, is that Crane did a lot of propaganda work with the various Socialist leagues and Labour groups he was part of. And William Morris seemed to have a real disconnect between his art, in terms of the design element rather than the literary element, and his politics. It seems very removed.

CT: Yeah, he's sort of aloof, and again he's sort of suspicious of the notion of an arts and crafts movement because you know there's an arts and crafts society that's set up, and

initially he's not that interested and I think Crane persuades him to become involved. Yes, he is slightly more disconnected early on, I think, but he does try to produce images that generate a sort of sense of what his politics are later on in his life that's for sure. But Crane sees himself as someone who is furthering the cause, I mean Crane ends up in Manchester. He's an important figure in the regional history of the art world, that's for sure. But I think Ashbee's is also hugely important and is often overlooked- there's a very good book by Alan Crawford have you come across it?

R: I've heard of Alan Crawford, I actually don't know a whole lot about Ashbee so if you could tell me a little bit, a sort of soundbite, of how you'd describe his work?

CT: Ashbee is another sort of complex figure- he's not exactly like Morris or Crane, he's university educated and he's someone that sets up a Guild of the Handicrafts which is initially based in London but he moves it from the East End all the way down to Chipping Camden of all places, I don't know if you know that part of the world, but it's in the Cotswolds. And he's relatively well off, in fact, he's an architect and designer, as well as a writer, and he's very much someone who comes out of this Ruskinian tradition of the nobility of craft labour and this sense in which the craftsman has this mission to improve the lives of the working people that surround him. So, he recruits lots of working-class people to work in his workshop, which is operative for ten, fifteen years or so. He's the last of the Arts and Crafts people to die out, he lives on to 1939.

R: Really? Wow.

CT: Yeah, so he's an architect, designer and writer. And another figure who's interesting, and again who is overlooked, is McMurdo- have you come across him?

R: I've definitely heard the name...

CT: Right well McMurdo is on the other side of the Arts and Crafts Movement (politically), he's a liberal, which is the best way I can describe his politics, and always kind of marginalised in traditional accounts of the Arts and Crafts Movement, partly because again he kind of disappears from that world and in effect kind of stops seeing himself as a designer and an architect by about 1900 or so, but again he's well worth looking at because he's another one of those figures who's fascinated by Blake.

R: Yeah, I'll definitely look into that, that sounds really interesting.

CT: But as I say, Ashbee is more important figure because he sets up his guild and sees himself as a sort of player in the Arts and Crafts world, more so than McMurdo, who's clearly someone who's on some level some kind of fantasist because again at the end of his life when the Arts and Crafts revival by German writers, he decides that he actually invented it! And that Morris and the others were kind of secondary figures. Part of his own kind of megalomania, I guess.

R: Wow that's...wow.

CT: But look out for Ashbee's writings on the internet archives, they're fairly short and they give a really good vision of what he imagined the craft world can achieve and what workshop culture should set out to achieve as well. But he does believe in the notion of co-operation that's another important aspect of the arts and crafts movement isn't it? This notion that people co-operate together to work on a common project.

R: It's quite interesting, as I've read different writings on the Arts and Crafts Movement and a lot of it talks about how there was fairly little collaboration for a movement that was so much about community- or at least comparatively to some other movements. Artistically speaking, rather than socially, there seemed to be very little overlap. I mean I could be wrong and I probably am.

CT: I think a lot of groupings come out of Ruskin's writings because you know there are Ruskin societies set up in Manchester, and then there were various Arts and Crafts communities that spring up in places like Hazelmere, Peasants Association I think they called themselves and then there were various workshops that bubble up in places like Cheswick which they called an industrial design school. All these places are community-based and are seen as furthering the interests of local people and drawing upon local craft skills. There's a Compton guild isn't there that was set up by Mr and Mrs Watts, and that's a classic example of trying to embed craft into a local community. And there are also other organisations that aren't called 'Arts and Crafts' organisations, but none the less draw upon the Crafts Movement more broadly. I'm thinking of the, is it called the Home Crafts Association- something like that, running in parallel to the main organisations, there are other smaller associations that are worth looking at.

R: Yeah, I'll have to look into that. By 'Mr and Mrs Watts' do you mean G.F Watts?

CT: Yeah, George Frederic Watts and his wife Mary they set up, well she does really, they set up this pottery in Compton in Surrey, which I think was called the Home Arts Association and there's all these people that are trying to take part in this sort of missionary culture of craft and trying to improve the lives of ordinary people. Some of them are Socialist, some of them are Liberal, but they see art as having a humanising purpose.

R: That's quite interesting in terms of the Whitworth's because one of the first items that we collected was G.F Watts Love and Death, some of the first acquisitions that we had work related to the Arts and Crafts Movement, so tapestries and wallpapers by Morris and Co and obviously Love and Death. Why do you think that was? Was it that the purpose of the gallery kind of mirrored that idea of enriching the lives of working-class people so that they can produce better work?

CT: That's a really good area to discuss isn't it- because it's really complex and talking about it is going to complicate it because of its complexity. But perhaps is we can pull out one or two little strands, what you've got running alongside the Arts and Crafts Movement, or perhaps it's part of it, is something we haven't discussed so far, is this realisation that really kicks off in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that art might just be about motions of hospitality. And Ruskin is certainly someone who believes in that, believes in the notion that the perfect artform, whether it's a painting or collected object, is hospitable in some way. It

deals with human relationships- it deals with human exchange. And as part of this culture of hospitality, and certainly William Morris is someone who can be linked into that culture as well, I'm thinking of the importance of the porch as a space in Arts and Crafts architecture- that kind of homeliness. You've also got this culture of altruism, this notion that people have to serve others in order to be a fully-rounded human being, and that isn't invented by the Arts and Crafts Movement but they certainly draw upon that temperament, or whatever you want to call it, that critical idiom that is very strong, not just in Victorian Britain but also in France.

And a great figure of influence over here would be Augustus Comte, a great French political scientist or philosopher who influences all sorts of people in this country, particularly a man called Fredrick Harrison who was a man of letters and sets up this church of humanity in essence in London. And many of the figures that were involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement were either fellows or fellow travellers of this organisation. Walter Crane, for instance, had dealings with Comtians in London and refers to them in his writings, and Rosetti seems to have had connections [to the Comtians] and so did his followers as well.

So, there's all sorts of connections, really, between these movements and the Arts and Crafts Movement and Watts, and you mentioned that large painting earlier on, well that sits very neatly into this culture of altruism, this sense of there's this love greater than self-love and Capitalism is associated with this self-love by these figures, these Romantic, Ruskinian sort of figures, which Watts was in many ways, and in these revolutionary Socialists, there was a sense of service and duty. So, the Arts and Crafts Movement is linked into this very complex picture of anti-Capitalist activity. Now having said that, I'm going to have to produce a kind of caveat because not all of the Arts and Crafts Movement were anti-Capitalist- they clearly weren't. People like Voysey weren't, and I've already mentioned McMurdo who saw himself as part of a wholly commercial society in its endless forms. But most of the famous figures in the Arts and Crafts world were at least sceptical of the money-worshipping aspects of the modern age. Watts and his wife were examples of that particular trend.

R: I'm interested to know what William Morris would think of the fact that a lot of his artworks and designs are on make-up bags and armchair covers.

CT: Well he was very hostile towards what he called shoddy, which means basically anything kitsch, the world of mass-produced knick-knacks. A kind of biblio culture the French would call it. And yeah, he writes very forcibly in that very Ruskinian manner about what he's sees as being the meretricious nature of what constitutes art under the conditions of modern Capitalism.

R: Yeah, I've always found that an interesting one, because as I said earlier, I find a lot of his earlier work very separate from his politics- although not entirely.

CT: Yeah, that was from when he saw himself as a Liberal. He doesn't become a Marxist until quite late on. His conversion is probably sometime around the late 1870's. But it's like most of these figures, their positions adjusted over the course of time. Then again, you go back to someone like Blake and, whether or not we see him as when he was responding to

the French Revolution in the 1790's and perhaps he was a revolutionary, or perhaps later on where he becomes more conservative or mainstream in his views. Human beings are complex!

R: Yeah, I find the humanity behind the movement very interesting.

CT: There comes that broader trend of altruism that's very strong in Victorian thought, particularly in the second half of the 19th Century. And this is a response to the soullessness, or the materialism of the modern age- the kind of ballarised belief in the economy, particularly in terms of talking about human value. And Ruskin is the forceful figure that thrust that argument into the foreground, with Unto This Last most famously, where he's constantly arguing against Mills which he presents as a utilitarian, which probably misrepresents the Mills' position. But nonetheless he needs to find an enemy in his account of his vision of how human beings should operate.

R: I find that side of Ruskin quite amusing, because he always seems to be the antagonist.

CT: I think he needed to have an enemy really! To develop his vision, and in identifying his enemy he sometimes exaggerates. I think Mill gets attacked by him for reasons which were not entirely accurate, I have to say. But it doesn't matter. Ruskin clearly has a bigger argument there about what he sees as the horrors of Victorian living, and who can blame him!?

R: No not at all!

CT: Dreadful, living through those decades for most people.

R: It was very, very brutal. I have read that Ruskin and Morris had quite a big fall out.

CT: Well Ruskin falls out with just about everyone doesn't he? From his wife to, most famously I suppose, Ford Maddox Brown- another important figure in the Arts and Crafts who's often overlooked because he's a very brilliant painter, and a very important designer as well. And of course [Ruskin] falls out with Morris. Yeah, I mean these are complex people you know, who knows what really happened. Morris could be quite truculent as well, so it's difficult to know the full circumstances. Having said that, Morris of course regards Ruskin as the great social prophet of the age, and he was. He was someone that could write about every subject, from art to zoology; he was a human encyclopaedia but incredibly knowledgeable and brilliant in all sorts of different areas and an extraordinarily accomplished draftsman as well- his drawings are brilliant, so are his watercolours.

R: He's a very interesting man...I find his humanity really comes out of what he created. He's a very human being I would say.

CT: Yeah, I think so. Particularly when you read his writings on the grotesque, which is probably his most brilliant and you'll find them scattered across his various bodies of work. By the way, you probably already know about this, but the University of Lancaster has

digitalised [Ruskin's] collected works. So, if you put in Ruskin, Collected Works, you'll find them.

R: Oh wow, that's great.

CT: All 39 volumes. So, *Stones of Venice*, if you want to read *Nature of Gothic* you can do so quite easily. It's a wonderful website, because you know they've got the Ruskin library.

R: Yeah.

CT And of course behind Ruskin looms another figure who probably doesn't get as much airtime as him, but Ruskin regarded him as his intellectual idol, which was Thomas Carlyle.

R: Yes! Of course.

CT: He's another figure who's interested in, perhaps not as explicitly as Ruskin, what he regards as grotesque features of modern life. But Ruskin's writings on the grotesque are particularly good I think, and you'll find a lot of them in the *Stones of Venice*, particularly around the second of the three editions where he talks about the nature of gothic.

R: So, on that note of the sort of grotesque lifestyle people had in those days, I kind of wanted to look at...well with the Coronavirus at the moment with people in lockdown, there has been a kind of resurgence of craft activities. Things like knitting, myself included, and sewing and things would have pleased all the people involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement. I can only imagine it being a sort of reaction to our times, people wanting something safe and something that is familiar, something that is based in our history as people. Making things with our hands and by ourselves is something that seems to be a very crucial thing.

CT: Handmade- yeah that's it, that's the crucial thing. If you read Ruskin, particularly in the *Nature of Gothic*, he talks about the kinetic power of the hand of the Medieval craftsman. He's comparing the Medieval craftsman and his hands and what he sees as his sort of energy to what he sees as the sort of formulaic nature of the Greek sculptor, who's presented as a kind of automaton.

So yeah, it's about that authenticity of the energy that comes through a mobile hand, that expresses itself freely. So, the handmade thing is crucial and the other reason it's crucial to Ruskin, and to the Arts and Crafts Movement, is that it's unique- it's unrepeatable. So it's not reproduced: it's authentic. Ruskin is horrified by the Great Exhibition of 1861, because he sees it as the sort of cult of similitudes. Everything begins with what Jean Baudrillard, the famous French philosopher, said that everything's a production. Nothing is original, nothing is unique. Ruskin isn't really interested in quality of performance, rather quality of experience- quality of looking at something or making it. So, in a sense he's profoundly democratic, he has a cult of failure, Ruskin, he likes that in a sense in the Gothic period people thought somehow they weren't perfect, art couldn't be perfect, the only perfect thing is God, who is unknowable in some sense. Whereas he sees the Greeks and he sees the modern people and he sees the renaissance as being smug, convinced of their own

achievements and of their own modelling of achievement and their own modelling of knowledge- all those things are important for him. So, the hand becomes this kind of purity really, that free hand, that handmade thing that's not perfect in terms of its outcome, but perfect in how it's produced. What goes into produce it is more important than what is produced.

R: I find it really interesting that across most of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and I know for a fact that Ruskin would have been a part of this, but they seemed to be more accepting of female artists. They seemed more relaxed about that.

CT: That's right, that's another important thing isn't it, there was this sense of democracy, not just through work, but there isn't this hierarchy through this notion of training, specialisation nor the idea that men create better art than women because they're involved with 'higher forms of art'. The notion of the hierarchy of the arts is very much associated with academic art theory, which is taught at the Royal Academy, and they're not interested in that at all. So, they're interested in creating communities, which are egalitarian essentially, as much as they can be. Obviously, there would be a master craftsman who runs the workshop, but he had people he thought of as being equals effectively. And the people they trained up were seen to have these specialised skills that gave them their independence. Think of something locally, which we haven't mentioned- which again fits into this discussion of women being employed, do you know this very interesting gallery over at Birkenhead called the Williamson Art Gallery?

R: I think I've heard of it. I have to say I've never been to Birkenhead.

CT: They have this collection of works produced by this fascinating pottery that was set up by a man called Rathbone, who was a follower of Ruskin effectively, and it was called the Della Robbia Potteries. And they made all this wonderful earthenware, these wonderful vases which have become very collectable in recent years. They were funded by Rathbone through his family legacy- they were very wealthy Liverpoolians. And a lot of the people that worked there were women, they were clearly phenomenally talented, trained by one or two professionals and most of the collectables which look particularly wonderfully created were produced by working class men and women from Merseyside in the 1890's though to about 1910. So yes, women were important, not just as producers but figures that collaborate and were involved in organising some of these communities. The Home Arts Association, which we talked about earlier on, which is essentially an Arts and Crafts Movement community that was ran by women. And you'll find that a lot of the followers of Ruskin in the regions were also women. And there's a very good book by someone called Stuart Eagle, I don't know if you've heard of him, called After Ruskin- not really about the Arts and Crafts Movement but it's so incredibly detailed you'll get some of these communities popping up in the book. It's very thoroughly researched and well worth looking at.

R: Yeah, I'll have a look, that sounds really interesting. I want to finish this interview off with something about you, so what inspired your interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement in the first place?

CT: That's an interesting question isn't it? I mean, for years I was a bit blasé about the Arts and Crafts Movement, having written about all sorts of other subjects I kind of thought that it had been written about exhaustively by other writers. So, what actually brought me to it was Blake, realizing that a lot of these people, Crane and Ashbee in particular, though lots of others as well (but not Morris- Morris basically ignored Blake). But the others were interested in him and regarded him as a prototypical figure, someone who invented the ethos, the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts Movement. They saw him as a kind of brother, or a prophet perhaps he predicted their own interests. And as someone who writes about Blake, and I've written a very long book on Blake, *Afterlife* about how Blake gets reinvented in the 1850's through to the 1930's which I thought was a really important subject that hadn't been tackled. So, in a way, I came to the Arts and Crafts Movement via Blake. I've always had an interest in Ruskin as well.

R: Thank you very much for chatting with me