Utopia without irony. Socialist decorative idiom versus the Industrial Revolution (on the example of works by Walter Crane)

Sonia Nowacka

ORCID: 0000-0002-0112-5847

> The decline of art corresponds with its conversion into portable forms of private property, or materia lor commercial speculation. Its aims under such influences become entirely speculation. Its aims under such influences become entirely different. All really great works of art are public works – monumental, collective, generic – expressing the ideas of a race, a community, a united people; not the ideas of a class[1].
>
> Walter Crane, *The Claim of Decorative Art*

The stakes: creative practices in the Victorian era

English artists from the time of the Second Industrial Revolution were faced with a number of dilemmas regarding the ontology of a work of art and the creative process in terms of its relationship with the market. In this text I would like to consider how representatives of the Arts and Crafts movement (on the example of Walter Crane), who did art in the face of radical industrial growth, tried to describe and theorize their vision of art in the context of commodification and alienation. My thesis is that issues raised by Crane and William Morris in many aspects remain even more significant today and therefore worth revisiting, especially that nowadays we are dealing with another revolution in artistic tools offered by generative AI, ac-

[1] Walter Crane, The Claim of Decorative Art (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1886), 16.

companied by renewed theoretical debates regarding the ontology of art and the status of artists[2]. Therefore, the present paper has two aims: to reconstruct Walter Crane's views[3], which are virtually absent from Polish historical, theoretical, and literary research, and to identify areas in which his program may still be relevant and constitute an important benchmark for contemporary debates on the relationships between the market, art, and commodity. Later historical moments which also redefined modernity based on theoretical considerations of the Arts and Crafts movement in search for own answers to twentieth-century capitalism are also worth mentioning[4]. In terms of socialist aesthetic programmes, twentieth-century canons of modernist architecture and avant-garde art striving towards minimising means of expression, which translated into facilitating access to artistic design for the masses, are the most obvious point of reference. The post-WW1 aesthetics – antiornamental, antifigurative, subjugated to functional solutions – resulted from a socialist foundation (especially when we think about Bauhaus, transnational constructivist tendencies or different manifestations of geometrical abstraction)[5, 6]. What may seem paradoxical when we consider solely the aesthetic matrix (antidecorativeness versus decorativeness), modern leftist art was founded on rich, elaborate ornamentation in its preparatory phase.

This is how the Arts and Crafts movement should be perceived. Born in England in late 1880s, it provided foundations for aesthetic movements which would later develop in the first half of the 20th century both in Europe and globally, especially after WW1[7]. In Poland, the works by representatives of the Arts and Crafts movement and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood are typically discussed in the light of a historical fashion or aesthetics – scholars mostly recount postulates to return to craftsmanship or objections to industrialization, rarely discussing

[2] Eva Cetinic, James She, "Understanding and Creating Art with AI: Review and Outlook", ACM Transaction on Multimedia Computing, Communication and Applications (TOMM) 18 (2022).

[3] In terms of Crane's socially responsible art, his prints and engravings adorning the covers and pages of such magazines as "Justice Commonwealth" and "The Clarion", are the most recognizable. According to Morna O'Neill, since he proclaimed himself a socialist, Crane almost single-handedly created the visual culture of English socialism. His version of socialist print represented not only lush life close to nature, which reflected the Pre-Raphaelite, romanticist love for nature. Crane relied on rich ornamentation, creating bordures and covers for his works, in which the language of political commentary was frequently deeply symbolic. He resigned from political grotesque, caricature and satire, which were popular in the contemporary press. His visions of happiness and a unified society reached back to the inventory of Western mythological and Biblical thought. The socialist imagery of the late 19th century is utopian, sentimental, romanticist, often schmaltzy, based on a deep, often explicitly expressed faith in the model of a happy, fulfilled society. As O'Neill concludes – which is not obvious especially compared to Polish works on international art – "His work provides an important, decorative alternative to a realist idiom for socialist art". I would also add that this realist idiom of socialist art concerned not only representations which he published in leftist and anarchist magazines, but went much deeper, to the foundations of his artistic programme, manifesting itself in his postulate to unify the arts. See Morna O'Neill, "On Walter Crane and the Aims of Decorative Art", BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History (2012), date of access 15.02.2025.

[4] Por. Herbert L. Sussman, Victorians and the Machine. The Literary Response to Technology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

[5] See Agata Szmitkowska, "Filozoficzne tło architektury modernistycznej" [Philosophical background to modernist architecture], Architecturae et Artibus 3 (2016).

[6] See Aleksandra Sumorok, "Socrealizm od środka. Design, sztuka wnętrza i modernizacja" [Socialist realism from the inside. Design, interior design, and modernization], Artium Quaestiones 32 (2021): 187–227. Andrzej Szczerski, Modernizacje. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej [Modernizations. Art. and architecture in new Central-Eastern European states] (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2010).

[7] See Katerina Clark K., "Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space", in: The Landscape of Stalinism. The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space, red. Evgeny Dobrenko, Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 3–18.

the political background of this program[8]. Polish papers are dominated by stressing the artists' fondness of *quattrocento* painting or organization of work in medieval artistic guilds. In *Słownik terminologiczny sztuk pięknych* PWN [Dictionary of fine arts terms] and cross-sectional studies[9], the "Arts and Crafts movement" is typically discussed in terms of its visual aspects and aesthetic inspirations (nature, historical styles), techniques and its groundbreaking function for secession. In this paper, I would like to focus on Crane's views expressed in the 1886 manifesto *The Claim of Decorative Art*, as well as programme elements expressed in numerous articles and public speeches by William Morris[10], who, together with Crane, and following John Ruskin, laid the intellectual foundation for the movement, simultaneously actively engaging himself in leftist, socialist political movements (e.g. Social Democratic Federation and Socialist League)[11].

At first glance Crane's artistic programme may seem to have weak foundations or to defy the actual conditions in which it emerged. It should be stressed that his visions were future-leaning, and that Crane devoted much space to discussing the place modern art s h o u l d h a v e in the (tacitly) post-revolution society[12]. In his essays, the happiness of a man set free from the imperative of hard work, factory alienation, and the necessity to mass produce goods all become the basic and crucial condition for good art. In this sense it was an unironically utopian vision, in which the author analyses the relationship between the working class and the moneyed class, stressing that good art can flourish in society only if the current social relations are abolished.

The insufficient representation of this issue in Polish studies is obviously only one reason for which I would like to discuss this topic; the other, more important one is the question of the ontology of art, which allows to rethink the status of applied and decorative arts.

Against alienation

In his 2017 book *Why Architecture Matters as Art as Never Before: Le Corbusier, Tony Smith and the Problem of Use*, Todd Cronan considered a similar problem in reference to the on-

[8] Maria Rzepińska, author of one of the most important textbooks for students of art history, mentions the movement mostly in the context of Japan-oriented aesthetics and linearism. At one point she writes that the representatives of the Arts and Crafts movement were searching for "a remedy for the ugliness and tackiness of contemporary factory production", but she did not elaborate further, instead moving on to discussing the stylistics of Vienna secessionists. Maria Rzepińska, Siedem wieków malarstwa europejskiego [Seven centuries of European painting] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1979), 411. See Jan Białostocki, Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto [Art more precious than gold] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2022).

[9] Mieczysław Wallis, Secesja [Secession] (Warszawa: Arkady, 1974).

[10] In 1884 he gave a talk Art and Socialism, which influenced Crane's perception of socialism. The two artists saw a bridge between romanticism promising a unity of nature and products of human labour, and the Marxist vision of revolution.

[11] Morna O'Neill, Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics 1875–1890 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[12] Alan Crawford distinguished three major political ideas of the movement: unity of arts, joy in work, and a reform of design. Behind the "art guilds" which were supposed to be an implementation of the idea of the unity of arts, there was a late Renaissance conviction (when the previous, medieval model was supposedly abandoned), that this was the dominant understanding of creative work based on equating craftsmen with artists. Michele Krugh, "Joy in Labour: The Politicization of Craft from the Arts and Crafts Movement to Etsy", Canadian Review of American Studies 44 (2014): 281–301.

tology of art (on the example of Le Corbusier's architecture). He cited Adolf Loos's opinion that everything that served a practical purpose should by default be excluded from the sphere of art. However, Cronan argues for architecture which takes into consideration both its user and its beholder. The tension between a work of art and a commodity becomes crucial for him, because those works of architecture which highlight the unification of the building and the world (space) through their form can somehow transcend their utility[13]. Such ideas are close to arguments raised by Crane and Morris. Objects which can transcend their utility and simultaneously have a chance to escape conceptualizing the design of social spaces as a process functioning exclusively within the framework of the logics of supply and demand. In *The Claim of Decorative Art*, Crane refers to the common assumption that decorative arts are perceived as a lower category, not only requiring less skill than painting, but also posing a lesser intellectual challenge to the artist. However, he states that looking at those processes from the historical perspective, this view should be inverted altogether[14], thus appreciating decorative arts. According to Morna O'Neill, testing the line between "art" and "decoration" was fundamental for Crane's policy[15]. He thus wanted to transform the idea of "art for art's sake" into egalitarian, socially accessible art. Scholars and biographers typically treat Crane's socially engaged works separately, dismissing them as lower, "propagandist", which seems at odds with Crane's programme. However, O'Neill writes that:

> While it was not unusual for Arts and Crafts artists such as William Morris and Crane to openly declare their political commitments, the dynamic between their politics and their artistic practice was often considered a matter of form rather than content. The movement was inspired by John Ruskin's lament that moden workers had lost the art of their work, defined as the joy of imagination in creative labour inspired by an idealized understanding of medieval craftsmanship. In most accounts, the handcrafted objects produced by the Arts and Crafts movement – tapestries, textiles, wallpapers, ceramics, and the like – are thought to embody their very meaning in their making: beautiful and useful, these objects manifest the ideals of craftsmanship, fitness of purpose, and sensitive use of materials that implicitly, rather than openly, condemn industrial production and resist the capitalist marketplace[16].

As has been stated, according to Crane, a happy society was the foundation for all fields of art (he believed that the beauty of a painting or a sculpture cannot be achieved where there is no beauty in everyday things, no source of harmonious thinking, admiration for the colour and form of everyday objects and surroundings). According to Crane, wherever there is high quality decorative or applied art, supreme painting, architecture or dramatic art will follow on. Putting it this way may seem bold, even daring – Crane equates economic wellbeing and organization of social life with the quality of art. What is more, he claims that under capitalism,

[13]Todd Cronan, "Why Architecture Matters as Art as Never Before: Le Corbusier, Tony Smith and the Problem of Use", Nonsite 21 (2017), https://nonsite.org/why-architecture-matters-as-art-as-never-before/.

[14]Crane, 2.

[15]Morna O'Neill, "Pandora's Box: Walter Crane, «Our Sphinx-Riddle» And The Politics Of Decoration", Victorian Literature and Culture 35 (2007): 309–326.

[16] Morna O'Neill "Cartoons for the Cause? Walter Crane's The Anarchists of Chicago" Art History, 2014 38(1), p. 107.

doing just one field of art is like expecting "flowers to bloom without roots and stems, light, heat, and air" [17], and art "is not something accidental and fanciful, [...] it is an organic thing, having its own laws, [...] logical causes and consequences"[18] (this would implicitly concern the reasons connected to the socio-economic background). He states that artists and decorators bear responsibility towards society, dubbing them "trustees [...] of the common property of beauty"[19]. Therefore, Crane boldly claims that in a happy, free society there is automatically no room for bad art, as all art is conceived from the artist's joy rather than market demands and response to consumers' tastes. In his vision, beauty and richness of form are thus ethical, as they become synonymous with a free, classless society. Asked what beauty is, Crane could likely answer: social responsibility.

In terms of his considerations regarding class, Crane criticized the mechanism of social advancement, according to which advancing from one's social class is the condition for personal growth[20]. He believed that in a classless society, everyone would be provided with both work and leisure, so that their work would bring satisfaction. He wanted works adorning and organizing various aspects of social space and life to be created collectively by guilds of artists with broad creative competences, proficient at specialist techniques, having close contact with the produced matter, applying slow methods which allow artists ultimate precision (in opposition to unnatural, mechanised procedures of mass, factory production)[21]. This is where nonobvious relationships between Pre-Raphaelites and early twentieth-century modernist programmes manifest themselves.

Among others, Walter Gropius drew from the writings and experiences of late 19th century artists while formulating the manifesto of the school in Dessau established soon after WW1. In the 1919 Bauhaus manifesto Gropius writes that:

> Architects, sculptors, painters—we all must return to craftsmanship! So let us therefore create a new guild of craftsmen, free of the divisive class pretensions that endeavoured to raise a prideful barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us strive for, conceive and create the new building of the future that will unite every discipline, architecture and sculpture and painting, and which will one day rise heavenwards from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new belief to come[22].

[17]Crane, 2.

[18]Crane, 3.

[19]Crane, 3.

[20]Crane, 56. The artist critiques the notion of social advancement as embedded within the existing social structure, while simultaneously calling for respect toward the performance of socially necessary labor: "But why should it be assumed that a man must rise out of his class in order to raise himself? Why should a life of useful productive labour, of labour absolutely indispensable to the community, be despised, and a life of idleness be extolled and desired?

[21]As has been said, for Morris collectivity was the condition for the unity of arts: "This is, I say, the unit of the art, this house [...] built and ornamented by the harmonious efforts of a free people: by no possibility could one man do it, however gifted he might be". William Morris, Art and Its Producers, and The Arts and Crafts of To-day: Two Addresses Delivered Before the National Association for the Advancement of Art (London: Longmans & Co., 1901): [28].

[22]Walter Gropius, Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar 1919, https://bauhausmanifesto.com, date of access 25.02.2025.

Gropius derives the post-war postulate to unify art and craftsmanship directly from the guild model established by Arts and Crafts representatives. As stated by Lauren S. Weingarden in her analysis of the relationships with William Morris and Walter Gropiu's programme:

> we can identify two ways of reading the Arts and Crafts or Bauhaus object: 1) as the image of a collective activity and 2) as a record of the maker's disalienated and, in turn, beneficent social acts.40 Because of their expectations for such readings, functionalist realism was to serve Morris and his Bauhaus followers as a trajectory into a future socialist state. Therefore, what remained constant among these designers was their concern for rendering legible--whether by hand or machine-the process for making an ideal real. Thus when we defer strictly formal analyses of functionalist design, and reconnect unchanging theoretical norms with their conventional forms, apparent sylistic incongruities between Morris' and Bauhaus objects begin to dissolve[23].

The scholar argues that although the views of Victorian artists and theoreticians of Bauhaus realized themselves in extremely different aesthetics, ultimately the stakes of those projects and direction towards which they looked proved similar. Morris, whose writings inspired Gropius, programming a modern outlook on architecture, was famous for paying close attention to the sourcing and processing of materials, and ultimately to each stage of hand-producing a work of art by one (the same) artist. When he designed textile patterns, he followed the imperative of using natural textiles and agents, he taught himself long-forgotten production techniques, perceiving the artist's process from an idea to single-handedly making a work of art as crucial. Morris believed that a work of art should be designed and made by the same artist. Today, he is considered a precursor of modern environmentalism due to his objection to the degradation of natural environment, factory pollution, and dehumanization of industrial processes.

For Morris, the aim of ornament was twofold, as explained in his 1901 *Art and Its Producers, and The Arts and Crafts of To-day*: first, to add beauty to the results of the work of man, which would otherwise be ugly; and secondly, to add pleasure to the work itself, which would otherwise be painful and disgustful[24]. Although twentieth-century artists, following the experience of modernism and the avant-garde, no longer treated elaborate ornamentation as a "beautifying" factor (it had been rejected as a relic of overloaded bourgeoisie aesthetics), they shifted the focus to solid figures, matter, thus redefining ornamentation in art. They derived beautifying elements from geometry or colour, reducing ornamentation to bare minimum dictated by the internal logics of form. We can see here the desire to maintain craftsmanship as a collection of practices which by default would exclude capitalist mass production. In the industrial era, as Morris argued, artists were deprived of their collectiveness. This view directed him towards romanticizing medieval guilds. Morris treated his work as a total

[23]Lauren S. Weingarden, „Aesthetics Politicized: William Morris to the Bauhaus", Journal of Architectural Education 38 (1985): 8–13.

[24]Morris, 21-22: "Now I say without hesitation that the purpose of applying art to articles of utility is twofold: first, to add beauty to the results of the work of man, which would otherwise be ugly; and secondly, to add pleasure to the work itself, which would otherwise be painful and disgustful. If that be the case, we must cease to wonder that man has always striven to ornament the work of his own hands, which he must need see all round about him daily and hourly; or that he should have always striven to turn the pain of his labor into a pleasure wherever it seemed possible to him".

manifesto aimed against commodification and alienation[25]. Crane shared Morris's views in many respects, although looking at his works one could suppose that he would not fully agree with the statements that ornamentation plays only an aesthetic/beautifying function. For Crane, ornamentation was supposed to be first and foremost a medium for meaning, like in poetry, where the form (rhythm, structure) is inseparable from the content of a poem – although he also raised the question of deriving pleasure from work as part of a socially significant strategies. However, out of all those projects emerges a vision of life as an experience which is supposed to be pleasant and filled with beauty (of both romantically understood nature and art being an ontologically special product of human activity)[26].

Beauty and craftsmanship

The stake due to which artists appreciated the idea of craftsmanship so much, therefore, was the struggle against alienation inevitable in the reality of industrial production. What happened later to representations of Pre-Raphaelites and Arts and Crafts artists was mass copying of their work for commercial purposes (which remains popular until today, especially because of sentimental, history-oriented imaging). Such appropriation of works which on many levels stemmed from resisting the system, inherent to capitalist logics, was one of the elements which those artists likely did not yet predict. At some point their craftsmanship and original, vibrant style became appreciated among the upper classes, and subsequent epigons produced works intentionally highlighting their "craftsmanship" and handmade character[27].

In his book, Crane devotes considerable attention to the theory of labour under industrial conditions and to the intentions underlying the effort invested in the work process. In his view, the moment any activity becomes a compulsion or a condition for survival, it ceases to be a source of pleasure. In the writings of Victorian artists, the notion of pleasure derived from work recurs with striking frequency, becoming virtually central to their overall programme. The entire framework of the author's thought emerges from a set of assumptions regarding human nature, which are ultimately formulated from a historical perspective. He perceives the need for beauty as, on the one hand "natural", yet at the same time demonstrably historical. Crane seeks to address this issue by referring to the vividly coloured artifacts of folk art, which he interprets as evidence of a social need for expression. In reflecting on the disappearance of this form of art – which he regards as a natural manifestation of the need to shape life and fulfil a general longing for beauty, particularly as expressed through ornamentation – he writes:

[25]Morris.

[26]The lines between Crane's theoretical, artistic, political and activist work were often blurred. As part of his basic work, he often did work for children. Together with Nellie Dale, he published Steps to reading (1899), a richly illustrated textbook for teaching reading. He also made elaborate illustrations for children's stories.

[27]Madoc Cairns mentions this in his paper "Walter Crane Was a Socialist Visionary Who Illustrated the Triumph of Labor", Jacobin 5.06.2022 https://jacobin.com/2022/05/walter-crane-arts-crafts-victorian-britain-socialism. It is worth noting that nowadays a similar mechanism of commercializing the idea of craftsmanship can be observed, divorced from its original context, for example in the mass production of products styled after those created using the Japanese kintsugi technique. This method involves repairing broken vessels with a golden lacquer that accentuates the fracture lines. Many stores offer items that are deliberately shattered and reassembled, or simply painted with gold to mimic objects created in the spirit of Japanese philosophy, while in an ontological sense, they are its complete antithesis.

> One of those things the disappearance whereof we deplore is the art of the people – the peasant costume with its embroidery and jewellery, always so full of character and colour, relics of long antiquity and tradition, the odds and ends of which are carefully scraped together and served up to the tourist long after they have ceased to be realities in the life of the people. This narrative art, found in all unexploited countries, is highly interesting, as showing how naturally a people collectively express their sense of beauty in colour and form, how naturally, with leisure and fairly easy conditions of live, the art instinct asserts itself[28].

This argument is particularly compelling, as Crane at times slips into romanticist reflections on human nature, only to ground his intuitions moments later with reasoning embedded in anthropological and historical perspectives. He attempts to demonstrate anthropologically that the very idea of writing originates from decorative forms, tied to a commonly accessible pictographic script that was meant to be both ornamental and semantically meaningful. Mass-produced, machine-made objects, however, involve the unreflective replication of these forms and thus, according to Crane, cannot be considered art. Their production lacks meaning: the intention is not to endow a specific object with significance, but rather to manufacture the greatest possible number of identical items with predefined characteristics and parameters. During the Second Industrial Revolution, there was widespread concern about the future of painting in the face of photography's rapid advancement. Crane devoted an entire chapter, *Imitation and Expression in Art*[29], to the problem of pictorial representation. The greatest threat to painting and traditional arts, in his view, lies in the absence of a surplus of meaning, in the lack of an intellectual contribution by the artist, and in the pursuit of literal imitation driven by the market logic of supply and demand. A purely technical attempt to depict nature without reflective transformation results in the creation of objects that simply mimic nature convincingly, thereby becoming desirable commodities. Of course, to some extent – at least still in the 19th century – painting did rely on imitation, a fact of which Crane is fully aware. Yet he regards it only as one component of artistic activity and

> only in so far as imitation contributes to expression, whether of beauty, or thought, or story, or phase of nature, in which it ceases to be merely imitation and becomes an art [...]. Where would be either use or enduring pleasure in art, if it did not express something besides the mere accidents of superficial fact?[30]

If painting becomes intellectually lazy, it falls into an ontological trap in which its sole purpose is the faithful reproduction of nature or moods – and that is precisely the moment when nothing stands in the way of photography, then emerging as a field with its own artistic potential, to displace it as a more effective (and faster) representational medium. According to

[28]Crane, 76-77.

[29]Crane, 158-159 puts it in the following way: "The answer of course depends on our conception of the scope of art; what are its ends and aims? If it is indeed the exclusive pursuit of naturalism or literalism, there is nothing but the prospect of this unequal race with photography, which [...] puts any painting or drawing hopelessly at a distance. On this course it is clear that art is destined to be finally beaten by science [...]. Painting would certainly never have been brought to this pass if she had not been parted from the early companion of her way, but she has severed herself from craftsmanship, from ornamental design – nay, generally speaking, from design and invention, too – and given herself body and soul to literal imitation of nature dominated by commercial sentiment and sensation".

[30]Crane, 159.

Crane, technical skill alone, although valorised on many levels by the Pre-Raphaelites, is not a sufficient argument for calling an object a work of art if it is not accompanied by intellectual processes:

> As well might the poet deal in nothing but description, or the musician limit himself to reproducing the noises of the farmyard, as the painter be content to ignore invention and design, story and poetic suggestion. In these things the human mind comes into play, and it is these qualities that give life and endurance to art. Nor is there any substitute for them. We cannot get our designing done by machinery, or our thinking by photography. The only known mechanism for these processes is that of the brain itself. [...] If that is really the case, painting – pending its final extinction by photography – must be content to take an inferior intellectual position among the arts[31].

In this framework, beauty is achieved through the unity of arts, as well as the abolition of the hierarchy between high and low art. When art begins to cater to simple needs (such as the repetition of nature), it becomes a commodity. It is created in order to pander to market tastes; the artist makes effort to make it "sellable". Commodification and industrial production destroy art by stripping it of the genuine inventiveness the artist possesses when creating solely out of personal necessity. As previously mentioned, this is where the category of happiness enters: joy in the act of creation, followed by the joy experienced by the beholder, becomes a value in itself – an expression against alienation. Yet, as long as the laws of the market persist, society will remain unable to experience everyday beauty. From this book, then, emerges not only an aesthetic program but also, and primarily, a social one, in which art constitutes an integral component of social well-being on multiple levels. Crane concludes the entire discourse with reflections and proposals concerning industry and the arts in the chapter *Art and Industry*, ultimately asserting that only political and tangible change can lead society to a point where the fullness of art becomes possible. Fully aware of the utopian nature of this project, he summarizes in the final paragraphs:

> Hereafter we may be able to meet and gauge our progress. In the meantime I think it is most important to recognise certain facts – to know exactly how and where we stand in this matter of art and industry; which, moreover, cannot be separated from the great economic question of which, indeed, it is but a part. Do not let us deceive ourselves, or expect to gather the grapes of artistic or industrial prosperity from economic thorns, or aesthetic figs from commercial thistles. It is idle to expect artistic sense and refinement to spring from full and sordid surroundings, or a keen sense of beauty amid the conditions of monotonous and mechanical toil. Unless your artist and craftsman has personal freedom, leisure and cultivation, and continued access to the beauty of both art and nature, you will get neither vigorous design nor good craftsmanship[32].

By definition, beauty is for him synonymous with the liberation of the working class. Through its form, it expresses a value that is fundamental for Victorian socialists: the emancipation of the labouring classes and the creation of a world in which producers are no longer subjected to alienation. Art is to be the highest outcome of social and class development, to provide

[31]Crane, 159–160.
[32]Crane, 190.

pleasure to the artist-craftsman in the very act of creation, and, as a shared good, allow people to live surrounded by the beauty of art that is produced in accordance with the artist's vision. In the chapter *Art and Labour*, Crane writes: "society must work out its own salvation"[33] He asserts that in an ideal society, the imperative of profit would not exist, and only then would it be possible to work for the sake of – what he calls "a noble and beautiful human life – a life of useful and pleasurable, but not enforced or excessive labour"[34].

Visions of utopia. Art as an expression of social happiness

When successful trade becomes the sole reason for the production of goods, the producer is guided by the desire to cater to consumer tastes and by the logic of competition; the artist may be involved to a greater or lesser extent, but their vision will never be fully realized – what is being met instead is market demand. As the author writes:

> Now, the man of commerce – the controller of industry – seeks only to make a *saleable* article. He is influenced in his industrial production simply by this object. He takes the opinion of salesmen, of the trade, not of artists, as a rule, and so far as any artistic standard or aim enters into the produce of his manufactory, it is strictly checked by the average of what his rivals are doing, and by the discovery of what the big public can be persuaded to buy[35].

This is precisely why, in Crane's analyses, narrow artistic specialization becomes synonymous with the development of modern capitalism. This is also where his postulate of the unity of the arts and of the artist as a figure capable of executing all forms of artistic work and engaging in various domains of creative activity emerges from. From the perspective of the creative process, Crane considered ornament-making to be a source of pleasure. Yet ornament itself, in his view, constituted a kind of surplus that could imbue utilitarian objects with additional meaning – he literally referred to it as "picture-writing". He invoked the example of ancient and prehistoric functional art: from carved bones to the decorative frieze of the Parthenon, which tells a story and in which ornament becomes a necessary and inherent component of the object. For Crane, the Industrial Revolution is the origin of social ugliness and aesthetic stratification, while the "worker in art" becomes the figure who might elevate society from such ugliness. However, Crane emphasizes that figuration, allegory, and non-literalness, and above all, this decorative surplus within daily life, are of essential social importance. He critiques the industrialization of art as the production of objects devoid of artistic elements – that is, ultimately, of elements i m b u e d w i t h m e a n i n g :

> I am far from wishing to undervalue technical skill; [...] To disparage it would be like an attempt to throw discredit on the faculty of speech and writing; but we should soon tire of language and literature without thought [...]. If we hold, in short, that art is a language, not only for the expression of particular moods [...], but also for the conveyance of the higher thoughts and poetic

[33]Crane, 60.
[34]Crane, 61.
[35]Crane, 174.

> symbolism of the mind – then I think it is no longer possible to rest content merely with the results of industry and facility of hand, [...] [when art] lives to please, it must please to live [...]. Nay, there are people of the persuasion that ornamental art should be content to be ornamental and no more; they are content with figures elegantly employed in doing nothing, if, like the peer in the comic opera, they do it remarkably well. Allegory seems to depress them, and symbolism to put them out; life according to this schools is "a tale of little meaning, though the words are strong". I am far from saying that the exclusive study of line, tone, arrangement, and method is not of great value. But so are grammars and dictionaries. Rhythm, metre, and diction do not make poetry, though they are essential to it; and my contention is that you cannot separate style and matter in art, any more than in literature, without serious loss[36].

The above passage reveals that although the author recognizes the particular reverence with which 19th-century artists regarded craftsmanship, he is equally aware of the risks entailed in exclusively privileging form. Pure technical proficiency, abstracted from the complexity of the creative process, can easily be reduced to a commodified notion of craftsmanship. As Crane observes, this occurs when mere "appeal" becomes the condition for art's existence – when society loses the capacity to create beyond the logic of supply and demand. On an intuitive level, already in the 1880s Crane reaches conclusions concerning the autonomy of art that would, to a large extent, align with the views later articulated by Nicholas Brown in his book *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*. The tension between a work's meaning and its commodity form is defined by Brown as follows:

> It might seem absurd to say the art commodity is uninterpretable, but think for a moment of James Cameron's science-fiction film *Avatar*, still a kind of high-water mark of culture-industrial spectacle. The memory of critics producing a welter of completely incompatible (but also vaguely plausible) interpretations is an amusing one, and the phenomenon did not go unnoticed by the critics themselves. This empirical profusion is insignificant in itself: all of these interpretations (or all but one) could have been wrong. But it is also possible that since the film is concerned only with producing a set of marketable effects, it cannot at the same time be concerned with producing the minimal internal consistency required to produce a meaning[37].

In brief, the author refers to the example of a commercial film, demonstrating that its internal inconsistency (and consequently its lack of coherent meaning) stems from its aim to satisfy consumer expectations. As long as Cameron strives to produce a commercially appealing spectacle, he suspends the pursuit of meaning in favour of the more efficient commodification of his creation. For Brown, the central stake lies in the question of meaning in a work of art, as it is precisely meaning that allows a work to negotiate, however partially, the terms of its own existence – even if it cannot entirely escape commodification. Under capitalism, art is a commodity like any other product of human labour; yet it is meaning that constitutes the surplus, the excess, which enables the preservation of a certain degree of autonomy in the face of inevitable commodification. Brown continues his reflection as follows:

[36]Crane, 20-23.

[37]Nicholas Brown, Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.

> The question is whether the work of art is a commodity like any other or whether it can, within itself, suspend the logic of the commodity, legibly assert a moment of autonomy from the market. If the claim to autonomy is today a minimal political claim, it is not for all that a trivial one. A plausible claim to autonomy—to actions ascribable to intention rather than to causal conditions—is in fact the precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the *status quo*[38].

The risk that Crane identified at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution pertains to the conditions under which art exists within the logic of commodity form. He articulated this concern pointedly: "when [art] lives to please, it must please to live" [39]. This issue may not have felt as timely in the past as it does today. Consider, for instance, the recent protests by artists expressing concern over the perceived threats posed by generative AI – here, we encounter shared anxieties regarding the ontology of art. These models are capable of m i m i c k i n g certain technical features of artistic craftsmanship, yet the specific outputs of AI are ultimately devoid of intention. The meaning of such works will always remain linked to the intention of the subject who designed the algorithm to behave and respond in a specific manner to user prompts. On a visual level, we may recognize these outputs as artworks – images, texts, films – that appear to possess intrinsic meaning. However, their true meaning lies in being products of AI, generated according to predefined commands[40]. If we were to focus exclusively on analyzing structure and formal characteristics – as Crane warns – and placed sole value on craftsmanship, we might indeed recognize such outputs as legitimate and well-formed works of art. Yet, as he continues, "rhythm, metre, and diction do not make poetry, though they are essential to it" [41]. It is precisely this fear of industrialization and mass production that structurally echoes current debates around the replacement of the human artist with an automated, algorithmic model. For this reason, both Crane and Morris argued that in an ideal production context, a work should be executed from beginning to end by a single artist. In their vision, the aim and ethical stake of craftsmanship is to serve life and the universal pleasure of humanity, while the ultimate concern is the very quality of art itself.

One could argue that the entire body of Crane's work consists of an attempt to diagnose and capture the key threats posed by industrialization. The nature of his essays is clearly interventionist: he formulates programmatic aims intended to indicate a direction for the future. Crane does so boldly, repeatedly demonstrating his deep belief in the possibility of enacting social change. However, if we shift the weight of his conclusions from the speculative register to the domain of political diagnosis, we might assert that Crane, assuming the continuation of the labour relations he describes, sees no future for art. As long as human beings are compelled to work out of necessity, society will remain surrounded by low-quality objects that merely "imitate" art, products born solely of the dynamics of supply and demand.

[38]Brown, 34

[39]Crane, 21.

[40]It is worth noting that a frequently raised concern pertains to the question of subjectivity. AI-generated artifacts are ontologically incapable of expressing social or identity-based interests. In this sense, AI models cannot articulate any interests (whether consciously or unconsciously manifested through art),because they possess neither a position within the class structure nor an identity. They are only capable of simulating certain outward signs of such positions.

[41]Crane, 23.

The author is fully aware that he is formulating a program within conditions that preclude the large-scale production of good art. Decorative art, as the highest expression of joy derived from labour, would serve as a kind of manifesto adorning shared public spaces. The utopia in which overwork does not exist – because only a free and rested mind can create beautiful things (and thus socially beneficial things) – was, in Crane's view, not merely a theoretical construct, but a realizable program. He clearly revealed his belief in a vision shared with William Morris: that good art should hold a meaningful place in the everyday lives of working-class people. But for this to fully materialize, the class-based model of society must be dismantled.

In conclusion, Crane wrote that "what is good for humanity is good for art," and that great art will flourish in a society that values individual freedom and the "fraternity of common interest"[42]. Decorative art, in this framework, resists industrial production by expressing joy and creative invention. Simultaneously, it becomes, in a very precise sense, uneconomical – arising from individual need and existing as surplus from the standpoint of market logic and mass production.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[42]Crane, 82.

References

Białostocki, Jan. *Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto* [Art more precious than gold]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2022.

Brown, Nicholas. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

Cairns, Madoc. "Walter Crane Was a Socialist Visionary Who Illustrated the Triumph of Labor". *Jacobin* 5.06.2022. https://jacobin.com/2022/05/walter-crane-arts-crafts-victorian-britain-socialism.

Cetinic, Eva, James She. "Understanding and Creating Art with AI: Review and Outlook". *ACM Transaction on Multimedia Computing, Communication and Applications (TOMM)* 18 (2022): 1–22.

Clark, Katerina. "Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space". In: *The Landscape of Stalinism. The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko, Eric Naiman, 3–18. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

Crane, Walter. *The Claim of Decorative Art*. London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1886.

Cronan, Todd. "Why Architecture Matters as Art as Never Before: Le Corbusier, Tony Smith and the Problem of Use". *Nonsite* 21 (2017). https://nonsite.org/why-architecture-matters-as-art-as-never-before/.

Dale, Nellie, Walter Crane. *Steps to Reading*. London: George Philip & Son, 1910.

Gropius, Walter. *Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar 1919*. https://bauhausmanifesto.com. Dostęp 25.02.2025.

Krugh, Michele. "Joy in Labour: The Politicization of Craft from the Arts and Crafts Movement to Etsy". *Canadian Review of American Studies* 44 (2014): 281–301.

Morris, William. *Art and Its Producers, and The Arts and Crafts of To-day: Two Addresses Delivered Before the National Association for the Advancement of Art*. London: Longmans & Co., 1901.

O'Neill, Morna, *Art and Labour's Cause Is One. Walter Crane and Manchester, 1880–1915*. Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, 2008.

– – –. "On Walter Crane and the Aims of Decorative Art". *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History* (2012). Date of access: 15.02.2025.

– – –. "Pandora's Box: Walter Crane, «Our Sphinx-Riddle» And The Politics Of Decoration". *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35 (2007): 309–326.

– – –. "Walter Crane's Floral Fantasy: The Garden In Arts And Crafts Politics". *Garden History* 36 (2008): 289–300.

– – –. *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics 1875–1890*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Rzepińska, Maria. *Siedem wieków malarstwa europejskiego* [Seven centuries of European painting]. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1979.

Sumorok, Aleksandra. "Socrealizm od środka. Design, sztuka wnętrza i modernizacja" [Socialist realism from the inside. Design, interior design, and modernization]. *Artium Quaestiones* 32 (2021): 187–227.

Sussman, Herbert L. *Victorians and the Machine. The Literary Response to Technology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.

Szczerski, Andrzej. *Modernizacje. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* [Modernizations. Art. and architecture in new Central-Eastern European states]. Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2010.

Szmitkowska, Agata. "Filozoficzne tło architektury modernistycznej" [Philosophical background to modernist architecture]. *Architecturae et Artibus* 3 (2016): 168–172.

Wallis, Mieczysław. *Secesja* [Secession]. Warszawa: Arkady, 1974.

Weingarden, Lauren S. "Aesthetics Politicized: William Morris to the Bauhaus". *Journal of Architectural Education* 38 (1985): 8–13.

KEYWORDS

ontology fo art

commodification

Abstract:
This paper aims to explore the intersections of art, socialism, and the Industrial Revolution in the theoretical writings of Walter Crane, with particular emphasis on his conception of the ontology of art and its relationship to the commodity form. A central issue for Crane – an artist and theorist affiliated with the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement – is the status of ornamentation, which he regarded as a socially significant art form in decline under industrial conditions. By the late nineteenth century, decorative art in England had become an important idiom for socially engaged artists – among the first in Europe to systematically theorize their opposition to industrialization and its detrimental effects on human creativity. In this paper, I argue that the aspirations of the Arts and Crafts movement, when examined alongside the austere aesthetics of socialist realism in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the broader anti-ornamental turn of the early twentieth century, illuminate how conceptions of art – and the utopian visions of ideal society they often entailed – have shifted over time. On one hand, this study seeks to familiarize Polish readers with the theoretical underpinnings of the Arts and Crafts movement, which has often been sidelined in favour of more canonical aesthetic programs. On the other, it offers a philosophical inquiry into the ontology of art under conditions of rapid industrialization – an inquiry that continues to inform contemporary debates on the status of the artwork within market-driven cultural economies.

Walter Crane

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Industrial Revolution

Note on the Author:
Sonia Nowacka (1994) – PhD candidate at the University of Wrocław. Her research interests focus on science fiction elements in Polish and Anglo-Saxon poetry, history of literary criticism, and ontology of art. She is writing her dissertation on the rhetoric of disputes about poetry in post-war Poland.