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To Design Well is a 'Moral Duty': Nikolaus Pevsner's *Modern-Medievalist* Appeal

KONDO Ariyuki
Ferris University, Yokohama

1. Pevsner's Idealisation of the Middle Ages

In the section 'A Consumers' Society' in her book *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt (1906-75) wrote that 'Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of "making a living"; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in the professions who might challenge it, has decreased rapidly.'[1] According to Arendt, '[t]he only exception society is willing to grant'[2] is the artist. For Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-83), a contemporary of Arendt and one of the leading architectural, art and design historians of the twentieth century, 'design' was undoubtedly a profession in which one should refuse to engage in anything merely for the sake of 'making a living'.

In observing the inevitable consequence of 'a consumers' society' on artists who had come, 'during the centuries since the Renaissance, and especially during the years since the Industrial Revolution', to 'despise utility and the public' and create *art for art's sake* and *art for the artist's sake*[3], Pevsner defined 'the designer' as a professional 'who invents and draws objects for use'[4], *not* for making a living for himself or herself, but to make the lives of others 'fuller, happier and more intense'[5]. It was thus natural for Pevsner to idealise an age like the Middle Ages, when 'nothing exist[ed] in the world which does not come from God'[6], a time when the artist could live a life liberated from the mere necessity of 'making a living' dominated by worldly desire and trivial preoccupations.

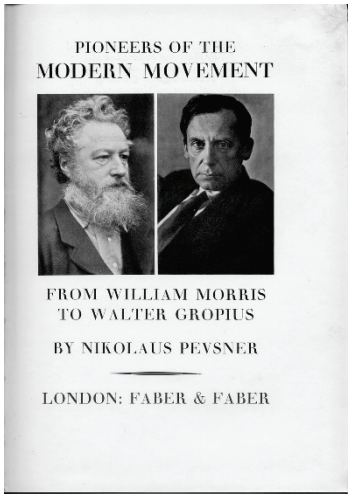
Pevsner's idealisation of the medieval way of artistic creativity was first expressed in his writings published in the 1930s and 1940s, the days when both his academic career and his personal life were hugely affected by perfidious politics, racism, ostracism and insecurity due to his being a Russian-Jewish German national who had fled to England[7]. In Germany, Pevsner had witnessed how architecture had come to be treated as a mere tool employed to appeal to the masses and foster a spirit of racial solidarity, and to advance the fame of designers and architects who earnestly sought worldly recognition from the anti-human nationalist regime in Germany. Among the most prominent of these designers/architects were Paul Ludwig Troost (1878-1934), Ernst Sagebiel (1892-1970) and Albert Speer (1905-81)[8]. Since the winter of 1929-1930, Pevsner, on the recommendation of Wilhelm Pinder (1878-1947)[9], had become a 'Privat-dozent' at Göttingen University, and taught seven art history courses a semester[10]; but in 1933 Pevsner lost his academic position as a result of the 'non-Aryan', newly passed Civil Servants' law, officially known as the 'Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service'. Pevsner fled to Britain and lived there during World War II, but his mother, who had remained in Germany[11], committed suicide in February 1942 in Leipzig at the age of sixty-five, out of her

fear of being deported; two months later, the news of her death reached Pevsner. Having thus experienced at firsthand the extreme racist policies and social values of Nazi Germany, Pevsner, as a historian specialising in architecture, art and design, was naturally directed, even compelled, to ask the question of how art could contribute to the rise of an ideal society.

Amongst the publications and manuscripts that he produced in those days, undoubtedly the most chaotic stage of his life, is »Kunst und Staat«, an article which he must have prepared when he was about to lose his academic post. It was published in May 1934 in the journal *Der Türmer*, an anti-Weimar Republic publication[12]. In this article, Pevsner criticises the ways in which designs and works of art were produced in the early twentieth century:

> Now art was no longer the highest ideal, with its task as the education of the human race, but existed simply for itself. Gautier, Verlaine, Wilde are the teachers of this gospel. With regard to painting, its sole sense was now to convey those sensations that the individual artist received from nature at a particular moment — extreme individualism, therefore, and extreme relativism.[13]

In clear contrast to the then predominant social tendencies, *viz.*, extreme individualism, liberalism and extravagant materialism, Pevsner saw in the work of the artists of the Middle Ages an ideal image of artistic creativity in which art was 'the highest ideal' with its task being 'the education of the human race'.



Pl. 1 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936)

While 'the Middle Ages were seen as the prime historical model to which the present age should aspire'[14], Pevsner was convinced that European art had begun to decline after the Middle Ages, when the artist started to produce his artwork in order to advance his own fame. According to Pevsner, it was during the Renaissance that the artist had first come to regard himself as a superior being who didn't have to flatter an uneducated and debased population, and 'withdrew in disgust from such squalor'[15]. In his first major publication, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936) (Pl. 1), Pevsner writes that, during the Renaissance, the artist had come to think that '[i]t was not for him to work for the needs of those classes, to condescend to the taste of the majority of his fellow men'[16].

In the days prior to the Renaissance, 'how we live, and how we might live' was every artist's imminent and primary concern. Anonymously created works of devotional art and architecture were all concerned with *how we live*, *how we might live* and *how we are supposed to live* in a world where nothing 'which does not come from God' exists[17]. During the Renaissance, however, the matter of *how we live* and *how we might live* was no longer the primary concern of artists, for they had 'learnt to consider themselves superior beings, bearers of a great message'[18]. They had come to devote themselves, through their work, solely to self-expression.

Pevsner refers to the ultimate outcome of this 'change' in the attitude and mentality of the artist in his *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*:

> The artist began to despise utility and the public [...] He shut himself off from the real life of his time, withdrawing into his sacred circle and creating art for art's, art for the artist's, sake.[19]

He then continues:

> Concurrently the public lost understanding of his [the artist's] personal, outwardly useless utterances. Whether he lived like a priest or lived a 'vie de Bohème', he was ridiculed by the vast majority of his contemporaries, and extolled only by a small set of critics and wealthy connoisseurs.[20]

Pevsner believed that none of all of these problematic tendencies in society and art had existed during the Middle Ages. Pevsner emphasised that '[i]n the Middle Ages, the artist was a craftsman, proud of executing any commission to the best of his ability,'[21] regardless of whether he won eminence as an artist or not. For medieval craftsmen, the attainment of worldly wealth was of little importance. They knew they would not be able to serve 'two masters', as is taught in Biblical scripture:

> No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.
>
> Luke: Chapter 16, Verse 13 (*King James Bible*)

> But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.
>
> I Timothy: Chapter 6, Verse 9 (*King James Bible*)

2. Pevsner on the Creed of 'Art for the Artist's Sake'

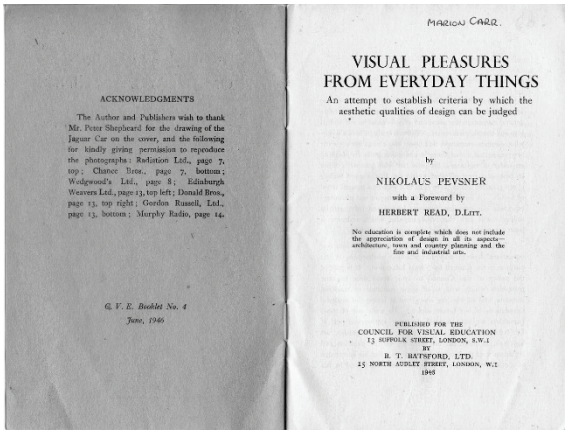
According to Pevsner, William Morris (1834-96) was the first designer to realise 'how precarious and decayed the social foundations of art had become during the centuries since the Renaissance, and especially during the years since the Industrial Revolution'[22]. Pevsner speaks highly of Morris in the paper he read at the meeting of the Royal Society of Arts in December 1935:

> There has never been an artist in Great Britain to whom the English nation owes so much gratitude as William Morris. Thanks to his theories and his work, and thanks to his influence on young artists, England became the leader of European art at the end of the nineteenth century.[23]

Having been introduced by Percy H. Jowett, Principle of the Royal Society of Arts, as a scholar who 'has done [...] research into the question of industrial art in England', Pevsner went on to explain the significant role that Morris had played in the 'precarious and decayed' nineteenth century:

> During the nineteenth century, the era of liberalism and industrial growth, art had become fatally divorced from craft, and the artist from the public. Painting, the art least limited by considerations of material and purpose, is the most significant expression of the nineteenth century spirit. Painters like Monet, Renoir and Cèzanne are its greatest geniuses. The art of such masters did not find any response in the contemporary public, and we understand why. What Monet painted was what he personally saw and felt, the expression of his individual pleasures and emotions, which were by no means concerned with the needs and problems of the society surrounding him. Architecture had also become a matter of surface adornment, the shaping of all the hundreds of new objects of everyday use in a changing civilisation being left to nobody in particular.
>
> Most architects of renown were neither interested in the spacial requirements of new types of building, such as schools, hospitals, railway stations, etc., nor were they willing to take advantage of the new materials and processes which industry offered them.
>
> This was the situation when Morris started. His passionate social conscience made him realise that no sound art can exist unless it serves the whole of the community. Art for a few connoisseurs only, regardless of work-a-day life, is a danger to any civilisation. To find a way back to popular art must therefore be the task of any conscientious artist. Thus William Morris became a craftsman, devoting his overwhelming energy to a revival of dyeing, tapestry and carpet weaving, cotton and wallpaper printing and book production.[24]

Yet it is important to draw attention to the fact that Pevsner was never a blind follower of what could be called 'Morrisism'. In fact, occasionally Pevsner was severely critical of Morris, for, in Pevsner's view, Morris had defined good design 'too narrowly'. In 1946, Pevsner published a booklet for the Council of Visual Education, *Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design can be Judged* (Pl. 2). In this booklet, Pevsner writes:



Pl. 2 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design can be Judged* (1946)

> William Morris, it is known, saw how abominable the products of industrial design were in 1860. He also saw how ugly the towns were in which workers lived, and the factories in which they worked. He connected these patent facts and concluded

> that beauty had gone out of design, when joy had gone out of the lives of those conceiving it. However, he took this conclusion too narrowly and instead of saying that good design can only come out of the fullness of life, he argued that it can only be the result of the maker's joy in making. Thus the machine, according to Morris, can never produce beauty. He is evidently wrong in this; it is snobbery if not cant to say that a printed dress material is beautiful, if the pattern is made by a hand-cut wooden block, but ugly if it is made by a copper roller.[25]

Here we can see what Pevsner believed: *good design can come out of the fullness of life*, not just 'the maker's joy in making'. For Morris to claim, opposed as he was to the mechanization of life and 'modern methods of production'[26], that good design 'can only be the result of the maker's joy in making' appeared to Pevsner too romantic, if not downright sentimental, and did not take into account the twentieth-century reality of industrial society and ordinary people's lives in that society[27].

Pevsner believed deeply that art should be functional and meaningful for the people for whom it was created[28]. Throughout his life, Pevsner consistently resisted the creed of *art for art's sake* or *art for the artist's sake*[29]; and, when Morris argued that good design can only be the result of 'the maker's joy in making', Pevsner realised that even Morris was, perhaps subconsciously, under the influence of the creed of *art for the artist's sake*.

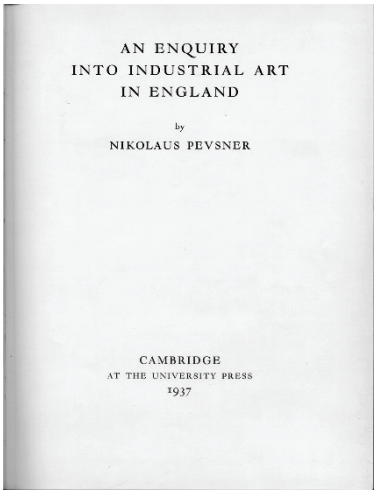
In 1948, Pevsner delivered the Cobb Lecture for the Royal Society of Arts under the title of 'Design in Relation to Industry through the Ages'. In this lecture, previously quoted from in this article, Pevsner defines 'the designer' as 'a man who invents and draws objects for use'[30]. The purpose of the use of these objects is, in one way or another, to fulfil the contemporary needs of a society in ways which mirror its systems, its senses of values, its religions, its social life, its scholarship and, above all, the spirit of the age. Bearing in mind this notion of the link of the spirit of the age to the contemporary needs of society, and to the role of the designer in inventing and creating objects for fulfilling these needs, Pevsner thus linked design to the spirit of the age. This idea naturally led Pevsner to think that Morris's obsession with 'the maker's joy in making' is anachronistic, completely out of touch with the spirit and reality of the age of mass production and the peculiar socio-economic needs of the time. The primary roles of articles and products that the designer invents and draws are intended 1) to be useful for the designer's contemporaries and 2) to fulfil contemporary needs; therefore the designer's joy in inventing and drawing, *viz.*, 'the maker's joy in making', should be a secondary concern.

3. Pevsner on the Age of Mass Production

Although he was critical of Morris's anti-machinery campaign[31], surely Pevsner was never blindly optimistic about the state of design in the age of mass production, a state in which anything can be produced by means of machinery. Through his detailed studies on industrial design in Birmingham[32], Pevsner was very well aware of the problems of mass-produced industrial products, especially in terms of their aesthetic qualities. He writes in his detailed study of English industrial design, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (Pl. 3), published by

Cambridge University Press in 1937, how terrible the situation was in the field of industrial design at that time:

> Things are extremely bad. When I say that 90 per cent. of British industrial art is devoid of any aesthetic merit, I am not exaggerating. A glance at the British Industries Fair or at any trade paper will corroborate this statement. However, it may be less insulting than it sounds at first. I do not know of any modern country where the majority of industrial products is not deplorably bad in design. So the aim of any campaign for better design can only be to reduce the percentage of objectionable goods from 90 to 80 or perhaps 75 per cent.[33]


AN ENQUIRY
INTO INDUSTRIAL ART
IN ENGLAND

by
NIKOLAUS PEVSNER

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1937

Pl. 3 Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (1937)

On the other hand, Pevsner realised the potential that mass production of industrial art held for reviving a society in which artists could work, not for fame and worldly wealth, but for the fulfilment of people's lives. The rise of mass production was undoubtedly a dynamic occurrence, for it meant the advent of a new age in which the artist no longer needed to serve a small circle of wealthy connoisseurs. In an age of mass production, Pevsner saw a chance for artists and designers to regain their status as craftsmen and feel pride in being able to execute any commission to the best of their abilities. As well as 'the maker's joy in making', Pevsner desired that designers, artists, manufacturers, etc., devote themselves to work for a greater cause than worldly fame and materialistic wealth.

Surely Pevsner was aware of the risk that the system of mass production would let '[s]ham materials and sham technique'[34] dominate industry, but he could dream, at the same time, that sooner or later designers and manufacturers would be able to produce, through means of new machinery, reasonably priced but aesthetically well-designed articles which served the actual needs and tastes of the vast majority of people. The manufacture of thousands of products 'in the same time and at the same cost'[35] that had formerly been required for the production of one well-designed and well-made object could now not only satisfy the creative urges of artists and designers, but serve the needs of ordinary people as well.

The problem was, therefore, how to synthesise William Morris's anti-machine, handicraft idealism with the actuality of mass production. Pevsner was not the first to realise this in the era of industrial growth, for Walter Gropius (1883-1969) had preceded Pevsner in tackling this difficult problem through his design of the educational programme at the Bauhaus. Just a few years after the closing of the Bauhaus in Dessau, Pevsner talked of what had been achieved by Gropius, whose 'principle aim' as the founder and director of the Bauhaus was, in Pevsner's words, to create 'a constructive unity between creative art and industry'[36]:

> Gropius has [...] admirably succeeded in combining the principles of handicraft with those of machine-production. His conviction is that the creative designer for mass-production must be trained to carry out a model of any article that concerns him, completely by himself.

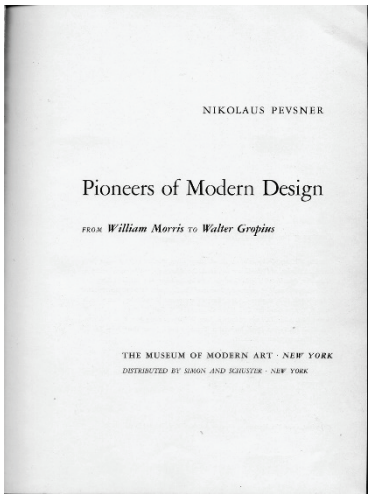
> Experimenting must be done by means of handicraft in a studio which is half a workshop and half a laboratory. Proceeding from the useful and well-balanced shape of an article worked out in the studio, the designer can later on develop a satisfactory model for mass-production. The lamps, chairs, pots and cups, and wallpapers created by the Bauhaus, and put on the market by German factories, prove that all this was not mere theory.[37]

4. Anonymity and Competency: Knowledge of the Middle Ages and the Hope of Modern Design

It was no coincidence that, in the 1930s and 1940s, Pevsner had simultaneously pursued studies of both anonymous stonemasons and master craftsmen of the Middle Ages and pioneers of modern design. Pevsner believed that a historian must always be aware of 'contemporary developments' in society and that, 'through his experience of past events and thought processes', a historian is able to 'mobilize his spirit for the ideas of the present'[38].

Knowledge of the Middle Ages propelled Pevsner's ideas about design and led him to view the creative master craftsmen of the Middle Ages as being prototypes for modern designers. If one could be freed of the worldly desire to be famous and wealthy, as had been the case with anonymous craftsmen of the Middle Ages, then design in the age of mass production could once again concern itself with service to people, *how we live*, and *how we might live*. Thus Pevsner came to relate the glorious achievements of the pioneers of modern design, from William Morris to Walter Gropius, to works by 'anonymous' medieval master masons and stonemasons.

When Pevsner published *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* in 1936, he noted at the end of the first chapter that, in creating immortal work as pioneers of the Early Gothic style while Romanesque architecture was still 'lingering on all over England', what 'William of Sens and the masters of Wells and Lincoln [Cathedrals]' did for England 'late in the twelfth and at the beginning of the thirteenth century' was done for the whole of Europe late in the nineteenth and at the beginning of twentieth century by 'Morris and his followers, Voysey, van de Velde, Mackintosh, Wright, Loos, Behrens, Gropius and the other architects and artists'[39].



Pl. 4 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1949)

In 1949, ten-odd years after publishing *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, Pevsner revised the entire text and published it as a new edition under the title of *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (Pl. 4). This was to be further revised and partly rewritten a couple of times, and in the 1975 revised edition, the ending of the first chapter reads as follows:

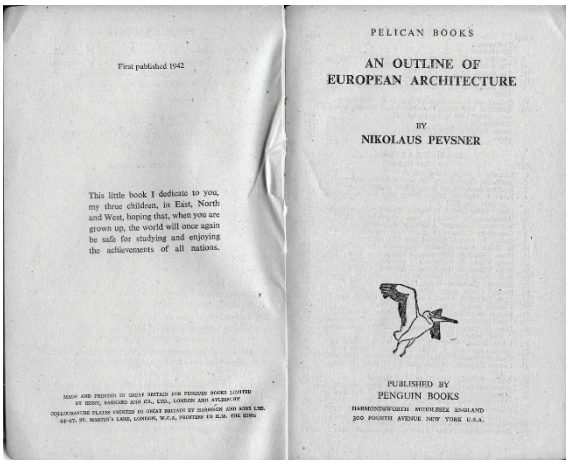
> Art historians speak of 'Transitional' preceding the harmonious perfection of 'Early Gothic'. While Romanesque architecture was still lingering on all over France, the master of the east chapels and the ambulatory of St Denis designed in a completely new style, as the pioneer

> of that style [Early Gothic] which was to spread over the next sixty or eighty years. What he did for France before the middle of the twelfth century was done for the world at the beginning of this century [the twentieth century] by Morris and his followers — Voysey, van de Velde, Mackintosh, Wright, Loos, Behrens, Gropius, and the other architects and artists [...] [40]

Pevsner changed the names he had previously offered as examples of what the precursors of the pioneers of modern design had achieved: instead of citing the names of 'William of Sens and the masters of Wells and Lincoln', he mentioned 'the master of the east chapels and the ambulatory of St Denis' who had worked anonymously 'before the middle of the twelfth century'.

Both examples are of medieval master masons, but the former lived and worked in the late twelfth century and at the beginning of the following century, while the latter was active before the middle of the twelfth century. In other words, Pevsner went back even further in time for an example of a 'predecessor' of leading early-twentieth century designers.

Why did Pevsner make this alteration? It was surely important for Pevsner to make clear that what was true for medieval craftsmen in the first half of the twelfth century was no longer true for those who lived at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century.



Pl. 5 Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (1942)

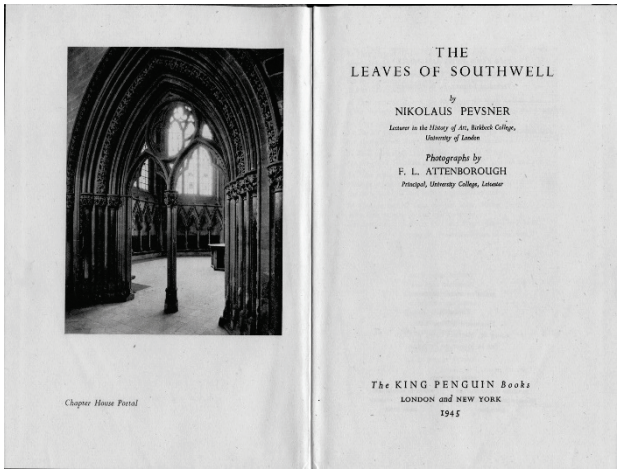
What was the peculiar feature of those master masons, responsible for the execution of great medieval edifices before the mid-twelfth century? Why did Pevsner wish to draw attention to them? We find the answer to these questions in *An Outline of European Architecture* (Pl. 5), first published in 1942. In the third chapter of this book, 'The Early and Classic Gothic Style, c. 1150 – c. 1250', Pevsner writes:

> The new type of architect to whom St. Denis and the later French and English cathedrals must be ascribed is the master craftsman as a recognised artist. Creative master craftsmen had of course existed before, and probably always designed most of what was built. But their status now began to change. It was a very gradual development. Suger in his book does not say one word about the architect of St. Denis, nor in fact about the designer of the church as such. It seems curious; surely he must have known very well what a daring work he had put up. To explain his silence one must remember the often-quoted and often-misunderstood anonymity of the Middle Ages. It does not mean of course that cathedrals grew like trees. They were all designed by someone. But in the earlier mediæval centuries the names of these men, immortal as their work seemed, did not count. They were content to be workmen working for a cause greater than their own fame. However, during the 12th and above all the 13th centuries the self-confidence of the individual grew, and personality came to be

> appreciated. The names of the architects of Reims and Amiens Cathedrals were recorded in a curious way on the pavement of the naves. A preacher complained that master-masons got higher wages than others by simply going about with their staffs in their hands and giving orders, and – he adds – "nihil laborant", they don't do any work. A century after this the King of France was godfather to the son of one of these men and made a considerable present in gold to him for enabling him to study at a university. But two hundred years had to elapse after the time of Suger to make such intimacy possible.
>
> One of the earliest cases in which we can form a live impression of the personality of one of the great master-masons of the early Gothic style, is that of William of Sens, architect to the choir of Canterbury Cathedral – a work as revolutionary in England as St. Denis was in France.[41]

Here, Pevsner's focus is on the fact that the status of master craftsmen had begun to change very gradually in the middle of the twelfth century, from that of an anonymous artist to that of a recognised artist, from the unnamed architect of St Denis to William of Sens, the merits of whom, in the course of the reconstruction of Canterbury Cathedral, following a fire which 'had destroyed the old choir in 1174', have been recorded by 'Gervase, the chronicler of the Cathedral'[42].

In altering the examples of what the precursors of the pioneers of modern design had achieved for the revised edition of his pioneering work on modern design, it was important for Pevsner to connect the pioneers of modern design, not with recognised artists who lived in an age when 'the self-confidence of the individual grew, and personality came to be appreciated'[43], but with those medieval master craftsmen content to be workmen working anonymously for a cause greater than their own fame.



Pl. 6 Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Leaves of Southwell* (1945)

In 1945, a few years before the publication of *Pioneers of Modern Design*, Pevsner published a little book on medieval art entitled *The Leaves of Southwell* (Pl. 6), in which he stressed the fact that artists and architects of the Middle Ages all worked anonymously and never intended to advance their own fame through their work: designing architecture or carving sculptural decorations.

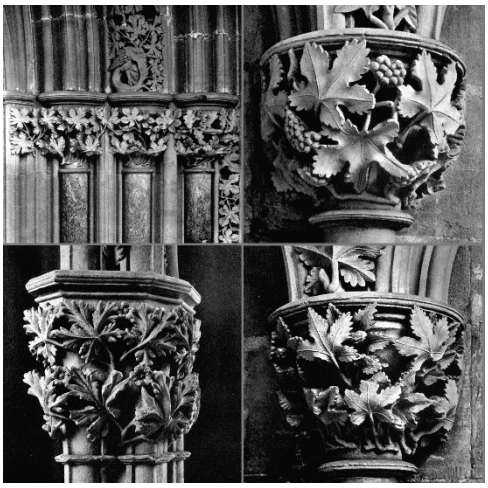
> [...] surprisingly few names of artists and architects of the Middle Ages have come down to us. They are not mentioned by the chronicles, because their work was but regarded as competent craft. Neither the term architect nor the term sculptor was in use. Architecture and sculpture issued anonymously from the cathedral or abbey lodge, that is workshop, not because there was no creative genius, but because it was taken for granted. If we hear of master masons of cathedrals or of sculptors, it is usually only by chance records of wages

paid or by chance deeds.[44]

Pevsner dreamed of the restoration of a society like that of the Middle Ages where architecture, sculpture and everything designed would be, once again, produced 'anonymously', competent productions which were not the expression of '[t]he whims of individual architects, the strokes of genius of others'[45]. This was certainly not an empty dream, for Pevsner could see how determined Walter Gropius, a giant of modern design, was to live and work like a medieval master mason and craftsman. In 1961, looking back at his Bauhaus days, Gropius said, '[h]ow to dwell, how to work, move, relax, how to create the life-giving environment; these were what occupied our minds'[46]; and it was a reasonable thing for Pevsner to connect the words of this Functionalist to his own medievalist belief in art as competent craft.

5. Closing Remarks: To Design Well is a 'Moral Duty'

For people in the Middle Ages, to 'design' well and execute any commission to the best of one's ability was ultimately a 'religious' duty. During and after the Renaissance, however, the artist had come to lose a sense of grand purpose, becoming a slave to worldly fame, wealth and avarice. Pevsner, lamenting this transformation, ended his *Leaves of Southwell*, a paean to the humility and dedication of medieval craftsmen responsible for the exquisite carving of decoration in the shapes and forms of leaves (Pl. 7), with this passage:



Pl. 7 Foliage decorations in the Chapter House of Southwell Minster (From *The Leaves of Southwell*)

> Could these leaves of the English countryside, with all their freshness, move us so deeply if they were not carved in that spirit which filled the saints and poets and thinkers of the thirteenth century, the spirit of religious respect for the loveliness of created nature? The inexhaustible delight in live form that can be touched with worshipping fingers and felt with all senses is ennobled — consciously in the philosophy of Thomas, the science of Albert, and the romance of Wolfram, unconsciously in the carving of the buttercups and thorn leaves and maple leaves of Southwell — by the conviction that so much beauty can exist only because God is in every man and beast, in every herb and stone. The Renaissance in the South two hundred years later was perhaps once again capable of such worship of beauty, but no firm faith was left to strengthen it.[47]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the situation and problems surrounding art and design remained essentially unchanged: Pevsner closes his *Pioneers of Modern Design* by contrasting the ways in which architecture was designed and executed in the Middle Ages with those of the early twentieth century:

> While in the thirteenth century all lines, functional though they were, served the one artistic purpose of pointing heavenwards to a goal beyond this world, and walls were made translucent to carry the transcendental magic of saintly figures rendered in coloured glass, the glass walls are now clear and without mystery, the steel frame is hard, and its expression discourages all over-worldly speculation. It is the creative energy of this world in which we live and work and which we want to master, a world of science and technology, of speed and danger, of hard struggles and no personal security, that is glorified in Gropius's architecture, and as long as this is the world and these are its ambitions and problems, the style of Gropius and the other pioneers will be valid.[48]

If there is no *firm faith* and *sense of religious duty* behind the execution of a commission to the best of one's ability in the present age, what then should lie behind artistic creation? Pevsner proposes the idea of 'moral duty'. In *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, Pevsner asserts,

> Personally I have no doubt that beauty, both of nature and of things made by man, beauty surrounding us in the streets, in the places where we work and where we live, beauty not only as a passing enjoyment of something outside our ordinary lives, but expressing itself in all the implements of everyday use, helps to make our lives fuller, happier and more intense. [...] the question of design is a social question, it is an integral part of *the* social question of our time. To fight against the shoddy design of those goods by which most of our fellow-men are surrounded becomes a moral duty.[49]

A sense of 'moral duty' may seem much weaker and far less compelling a motivator than *firm faith*, but Pevsner placed faith in the ethos and honesty of those determined to dedicate their lives in modern design to something greater than themselves. He made the appeal for 'moral duty' as a way to liberate art and design from avarice and lust for fame and for artists to design once again, with all due humility, useful goods and objects which would serve contemporary needs, just as the unnamed master masons, sculptors and craftsmen of the Middle Ages had served the needs of their communities in ages past.

Notes:

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 126-127.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 127.
[3] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London: Faber & Faber, 1936, p. 22.
[4] Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Design in Relation to Industry through the Ages', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 97, 1948, p. 91.
[5] Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937, p. 11.
[6] Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1942, p. 43.

[7] During the spring of 1934, when Pevsner decided to apply for a newly vacant chair in the history of art and architecture at the University of Edinburgh, he, as a German-born Russian Jew who had been baptized into the Lutheran church, felt that he would undoubtedly encounter prejudice against himself as a foreigner. Susie Harries, the author of the latest and most comprehensive Pevsner biography, quotes Pevsner's words at that time to show that Pevsner anticipated being asked the following question in the interview he was to have for the position: 'If a German — why this one?' (Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2011, p. 150.). Although Pevsner's application for the position was unsuccessful, and such a question was never actually asked during the interview, these words reveal the anxiety and insecurity Pevsner felt at that time. In 1939, when Pevsner was preparing an article for *The Architectural Review*, he felt even more uncomfortable at being an 'alien' inside Britain. J. M. Richards, then Assistant Editor of the magazine, wrote to reassure Pevsner about this on 9 October of that year: 'The other point you [Pevsner] mentioned in your [previous] letter was your position as an alien, but I need hardly say that that does not affect us in the least. I only hope that by now you are not being made too uncomfortable by it' (Letter from J. M. Richards to Pevsner on 9 October 1939, now held in the special collections at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA, USA). Before long, however, Pevsner was proved to have good reason for feeling insecure: he was detained as an enemy alien in Britain in mid-1940. For the details on Pevsner's internment and his life in one of the camps at Huyton, Liverpool, see Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, pp. 264-270 and 274-282.

[8] Pevsner writes about architects who advanced their fame under the Third Reich: 'In Germany Hitler put the clock back in 1933, and the country, after years of leadership [in architecture], disappeared from the stage of modern architecture. [...] Of the German buildings for the National Socialist party in Munich and for the Government in Berlin the less said the better.' Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963, pp. 410-411.

[9] Wilhelm Pinder, who had suggested to Pevsner in 1927 to accept the position at Göttingen, was Pevsner's most influential teacher and supervisor at Leipzig, and, for Pevsner, a controversial figure. Susie Harries, in her Pevsner biography, looks into this difficult student-supervisor relationship. Although Pinder had signed 'an academics' "Profession of Faith" to Hitler' in November 1933, Pevsner remembered his mentor as being 'vehement in his denunciation of the 1933 racist tract "What is German in German Art" by Nazi art historian Kurt Karl Eberlein'. However, before long, Pinder became 'widely perceived to be a Nazi stalwart', and it must have been quite a shock for Pevsner to realize that his former supervisor had deliberately maintained, on the occasion of Hitler's fiftieth birthday in 1939, that 'the departure of Jewish art historians from Germany' had ridden Germany of 'over-theoretical thinking'. Nevertheless, despite the fact that, by 1940, when Nazism was at its zenith, Pinder had clearly become a Nazi supporter, Pevsner expressed his appreciation of Pinder as his supervisor in the dedication of his book *Academies of Art: Past and Present* (1940): 'To W.P. in grateful and faithful remembrance of the past.' See Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, pp. 258-259.

[10] Although 'Göttingen had nothing like the reputation for art history' that the universities which Pevsner had studied at — Leipzig, Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt — did, Pevsner's reputation as a young academic clearly contributed to Göttingen's own reputation for art history, so that 'some of Germany's brightest students started enrolling' at the otherwise modest university. Stephen Games, *Pevsner — The Early Life: Germany and Art*, London: Continuum, 2011, pp. 143, 179.

[11] In 1939 Pevsner tried to get his mother out of Nazi Germany, but the outbreak of World War II in September thwarted his attempt.

[12] Interestingly, Pevsner initially seemed to be totally unaware of the potentially destructive power of fascism. In his highly informative and comprehensive study of Pevsner's debt to German art history in the early 1930s, Iain Boyd Whyte, Emeritus Professor of Architectural History at Edinburgh,

refers to Pevsner's rather 'optimistic position' and his 'essentially positive view of National Socialism'. Even after Pevsner lost his academic post at Göttingen as a result of the 'non-Aryan' Civil Servants' law, he retained this positive view until 1935, when he finally faced the fact that he had been condemned to live in England as a consequence of the enactment of the Nürnberg Race Laws. See Iain Boyd Whyte, 'Nikolaus Pevsner: Art History, Nation, and Exile', *RIHA Journal* 0075 (23 October 2013), URN: nbn:de:101:1-20131113230, URL: http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2013/2013-oct-dec/whyte-pevsner (date of access: 6 December 2013), ¶ 7. In this article, Whyte examines in detail two texts written by Pevsner in the early 1930s, »Kunst und Staat« and »Kunst der Gegenwart und Kunst der Zukunft: Zehn Abschnitte von --------«, in which Pevsner's adoption of 'the language and tone of the National Socialist Party' can be 'most clearly' read (¶ 8).

[13] „Nun war die Kunst nicht mehr höchstes Ideal, weil sie die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts zur Aufgabe hatte, sondern einzig um ihrer selbst willen. Gautier, Verlaine, Wilde lehren dieses Evangelium. Was die Malerei betrifft, so wurde es nun ihr alleiniger Sinne, diejenigen Eindrücke wiederzugeben, welche der einzelne Künstler in einem bestimmten Augenblick vor der Natur empfing, – extremer Individualismus also und extremer Relativismus." Nikolaus Pevsner, »Kunst und Staat«, *Der Türmer*, 1934, S. 515. Quoted in English translation from Whyte, 'Nikolaus Pevsner: Art History, Nation, and Exile', ¶ 27.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, p. 21.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] See note 6.

[18] See Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, p. 21.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 22.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.* Pevsner gives a supplementary explanation by stating that Ruskin, as a thinker, had preceded Morris in realising this point.

[23] Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 84, 1936, p. 248.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design can be Judged*, London: B. T. Batsford, 1946, p. 16.

[26] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949, p. 10. Pevsner quotes Morris's own words to summarise Morris's view on 'production by machinery': 'No doubt Morris's art has in the end beneficially affected commercial production in many trades, but that is precisely what he would have hated, because the diffusion of his style on a large scale involved reintroducing the machine, and thereby expelling once more the "joy of the maker". The machine was Morris's arch-enemy: "As a condition of life, production by machinery is altogether an evil."' Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London: Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 24-25.

[27] 'The Arts and Crafts Movement brought a revival of artistic craftsmanship not of industrial art,' writes Pevsner in *Pioneers of Modern Design*. Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, 1975, p. 25.

[28] A twentieth-century giant in architecture, Philip Johnson (1906-2005), once remarked to Pevsner, 'Nikolaus, you are the only man alive who can still say functionalism with a straight face.' Pevsner maintained that 'if an architect neglects function he neglects duty', and a building designed by an architect 'must not only function', but 'must also look as if it functioned'. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Architecture as a Humane Art: The 1972 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture*, Ann Arbor, MI: College of Architecture and Design, The University of Michigan, 1972, p. 23.

[29] See, for example, Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, pp. 75, 166, 608.

[30] See note 4.
[31] Morris was not necessarily anti-machine throughout his life. Pevsner writes that Morris himself was later to 'admit that we ought to try to become "the masters of our machines" and use them "as an instrument for forcing on us better conditions of life"'. Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, 1949, p. 10.
[32] For details on how Pevsner came to conduct his Birmingham-based socioeconomic analysis of industrial design, see Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, pp. 140-143.
[33] Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, p. 12.
[34] Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, 1949, p. 8.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 253. Pevsner explains, in *Pioneers of Modern Design*, how 'a constructive unity between creative art and industry' was pursued at the Bauhaus: 'It [Staatliches Bauhaus/the Bauhaus] was at the same time a laboratory for handicraft and for standardization; a school and a workshop. It comprised, in an admirable community spirit, architects, master craftsmen, abstract painters, all working for a new spirit in building. Building to Gropius is a term of wide import. All art, as long as it is sound and healthy, serves building. Hence all students of the Bauhaus were trained as apprentices, received at the end of their course the freedom of the trade, and were only after that admitted to the building-site and the studio of experimental design.' Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, 1975, pp. 38-39.
[37] Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 253.
[38] Pevsner, »Kunst und Staat«, S. 514. Quoted in English translation from Whyte, 'Nikolaus Pevsner: Art History, Nation, and Exile', ¶ 27.
[39] Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, pp. 42-43.
[40] Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, 1975, p. 39.
[41] Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, pp. 34-35.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[44] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Leaves of Southwell*, London and New York: The King Penguin Books, 1945, p. 36.
[45] Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, 1975, p. 217.
[46] Pevsner, *Architecture as a Humane Art*, p. 35.
[47] Pevsner, *The Leaves of Southwell*, pp. 66-67.
[48] Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, 1975, p. 217.
[49] Pevsner, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, p. 11.

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