

“Lethaby was the heaven-sent antidote to Morris.”

– Viscount Esher: ‘A Broken Wave: the rebuilding of England 1940-1980’, 1981

A National College of Design was set up in London in 1837 (later to become the Royal College of Art) and proliferated into a remarkable network of local art schools controlled (in curiously Gallic fashion) by a national examination system. But what emerged were artists capable of decorating industrial products a little less hideously than in the past, and what signally failed to emerge were designers capable of influencing or even understanding the industrial process. The arrival on this scene of William Morris and company was a disaster. By branding the machine itself as the enemy and hiding from it in a never-never-land of pseudo-medieval guild socialism, Morris and his followers reinforced the aesthetic escapism that was already rife among the mid-Victorian rich, while at the same time diverting the energies and the imagination of creative minds away from the real world of steel and glass to the handicrafts. By the early 1900s it was already clear in official circles that the Germans, with their Werkbund campaign aimed at the education of designers in industry and of industry in design, had the answer: but the Great War intervened. The Design in Industry Association (DIA), courageously set up in the midst of it on the German model under the inspiration of Lethaby, had by 1930 still achieved nothing of significance. Lethaby was the heaven-sent antidote to Morris. Brought up in the tough but humane atmosphere of Norman Shaw's big office, he was instinctively anti-elitist and was able to speak of a new architecture more attractively, and more in the language of a later generation, than any other Englishman, even though he had never emerged from his ninety-ish visual habits into building it. But by 1930 he was already seventy-one, and he died in the following year. None of the younger men in the DIA, whether they were craftsmen, designers, retailers or manufacturers, possessed the power of leadership that enabled Gropius to transform the Bauhaus.