

Special Exhibition: CR Ashbee in East London

19 November 1998 to 21 March 1999

This Autumn the Geffrye will stage the first major London exhibition of the Arts and Crafts designs of CR Ashbee and his Guild of Handicraft. It will be the first special exhibition to be held in the museum's new extension designed by Branson Coates Architecture.

Ashbee established the workshops of his Guild of Handicraft in Whitechapel in 1888, producing furniture and metalwork. In 1891 he moved them further east, to Essex House in Mile End, where they remained until 1902, when he moved the Guild to Chipping Camden in the Cotswolds. At Essex House, silverwork, jewellery, enamelling, wrought-iron work and printing were added to their skills, and it was during this period that the Guild's most exquisite and critically acclaimed work was produced. However, despite this success, Ashbee faced a continuous financial struggle in his attempt to compete with the more commercially minded firms such as Liberty's.

At its height, the Guild employed 40 men, most of whom were local, living in Stepney or Bow. Inspired by the teachings of William Morris and Ruskin, Ashbee believed that factory work was soul-destroying and his aim was to make people's lives better through the experience of making. In the early years, his Guild, which was anti-industrial in spirit, trained inexperienced, but gifted local men in the arts of furniture, silverwork and jewellery.

Ashbee established a shop in the West End in 1899, but before that many of his wealthy clients would make the trek into the East End, at a time when the area was renowned for its poverty and deprivation. They visited the Guild's workshops, to admire the artistry of the locals, purchase a piece, or make a donation to Ashbee's romantic cause.

The exhibition will display many pieces not previously exhibited, and will show the best of the Guild's luxury furniture, metalwork and jewellery. Pieces will be on loan from private collectors, Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum. In a section called 'Life Stories', the contrasting lives led by Ashbee's wealthy middle class clients and the local East End craftsmen will be examined, using contemporary photographs and accounts.

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Ashbee's connection with the East End is of particular interest to the Geffrye Museum which, since its foundation in 1914, has served as an educational resource, initially for the thriving local furniture industry, and now to the wider public. In recent years, the studios of contemporary designer-makers have flourished, and many artists continue to be attracted to the gritty character of the area. The museum is also housed in a beautiful range of early Georgian almshouses, which, in part, owe their survival to Ashbee. His work recording historic buildings in the East End led to the formation of the Survey of London, and it was his Arts and Crafts colleagues who originally suggested that the Geffrye almshouses should become a museum.

The exhibition has been curated by Alan Crawford, writer and lecturer on the history of design, based on new research into Ashbee and his ideals. Alan Crawford's book, "CR Ashbee - Architect, Designer and Romantic Socialist", (published 1985 by Yale University Press) was the first full-scale biography of Ashbee.

Programme of Related Activities

ADULTS

STUDY DAY: "ASHBEE IN....."

This special study day will highlight four distinct periods in Ashbee's life and work. The day will provide a unique opportunity to hear four internationally-acknowledged experts share their insights on Ashbee and his relationship with the English and American Arts and Crafts Movements.

Ashbee in the East End by Alan Crawford, exhibition curator and author of "CR Ashbee - Architect, Designer and Romantic Socialist" (Yale University Press)

Ashbee in the Cotswolds by Mary Greenstead, curator at Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum

Ashbee in America by James Elliott Benjamin, design historian, New York

Ashbee in Jerusalem by Felicity Ashbee, CR Ashbee's daughter

Saturday 27 February 10.00am to 4.00pm
Tickets £50.00 in advance (excluding lunch)

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- ADULTS** **CRAFT WORKSHOP - ARTS AND CRAFTS JEWELLERY**
A two-day course which will provide students with the opportunity to explore and develop their understanding and knowledge of the work of CR Ashbee, through the research, design and manufacture of a 'one-off' piece of jewellery. Students will be given the opportunity to experience the satisfying and creative process of designing, and hand-working a piece of Ashbee inspired jewellery. The course will include demonstrations, practical tasks and discussions.
Saturday 6 and 13 February 10.30am to 4.30 pm. Tickets £50.00.
- YOUNG PEOPLE** **ARTS AND CRAFTS JEWELLERY WORKSHOP**
A special one-day workshop for 13-15 years olds. Participants will be introduced to a range of techniques and materials, including silver and copper, to make a small piece of jewellery.
Saturday 13 March 11.00am to 4.30pm. Tickets £5.00 in advance.
- CHILDREN** **ASHBEE DESIGNS - HALF-TERM WORKSHOPS FOR CHILDREN**
A dynamic week of workshops and activities which will provide children with an opportunity to learn a range of crafts including enamelling, embossing and jewellery making.
Tuesday 16 to Friday 19 February 10.30am to 12.45pm and 2.00 to 4.00pm. Admission to these activities is free. Places are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.
- TODDLERS** **ASHBEE DESIGNS - MAKING ALPHABET BLOCKS**
Saturday 20 February 2.00pm and repeated at 3.15pm
Places are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The exhibition has been generously supported by private donors, Mr and Mrs Richard Paice.
2. The public programme of events has been generously supported by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths.
3. For further information or transparencies, please contact Nancy Loader, PR Officer, or Christine Lalumia, Deputy Director, on 0171-739-9893.

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