

THE STOURBRIDGE SCHOOL OF ART

DESIGN EDUCATION FOR ARTISANS

James Measell

Founded in 1851, the Stourbridge School of Art was among numerous provincial design schools operating within the Government Department of Practical Art and its successor, the Department of Science and Art. Nurtured by the willingness of Government to fund educational endeavours and to encourage improved design of British goods, such schools were charged with providing instruction in art and design to ‘artisans’ employed by local manufacturers.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the market town of Stourbridge tripled in population and became an industrial centre, with many employed in glass manufacturing or glass decorating firms at Amblecote, Brierley Hill and Wordsley or in ironworks along the Stourbridge Canal, such as John Bradley and Co or Foster and Orme.

Housed in a renovated theatre near the central markets, the Stourbridge School of Art offered classes in art (drawing, perspective, colour, painting, etc) and design, which followed the 23-stage South Kensington curriculum developed by Richard Redgrave, R.A., and mandated by the Department of Science and Art under superintendant Henry Cole.

Benefactors and Teachers

The Stourbridge School of Art was partly financed by Government grants, but also depended greatly on contributions from local benefactors – including gentry, clergy, industrialists, business owners and tradesmen.

Lord Ward of Witley Court, Lord Lyttelton of Hagley Hall, the Reverend William Henry Lyttelton, and J H Hodgetts Foley MP, held offices on the school’s Council and contributed regularly, as did industrialists

William Orme Foster and Charles Evers-Swindell, along with solicitor John Harward, currier William Akroyd and pawnbroker Edwin Stringer.

Art masters Henry Alexander Bowler and Andrew MacCallum taught briefly in 1851–1854, but others served for lengthy periods: George P Yeats (1854–1863); William P Bowen (1863–1881); Edward J Simms (1882–1893); and George Henry Cromack, whose tenure began in 1893 and extended into the next century. Each was well versed in aspects of fine art and had experience in teaching drawing, although none had direct connection with glass or iron interests in Stourbridge.



The Attack, cameo glass plaque by Thomas and George Woodall completed 1896.

Classes for Men and Women

The ‘Male Evening Class’ for ‘artisans’ usually convened from 7:00 to 9:30 pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and cost 6s per quarter. Enrolment records from 1864–1874 show many students employed in Brierley Hill or Wordsley – and one must imagine the perseverance needed to journey by foot to Stourbridge after a

typical Victorian workday, painstakingly copy examples of classical ornament or draw foliage for hours, and then walk home in the dark.

Although the Stourbridge School of Art sought to enrol employees engaged in glass manufacturing, the industry work schedule (six hours of work followed by six hours off, from Monday 6:00 pm through to Saturday noon) precluded regular evening attendance, so most of the students associated with glass came from decorating firms that did cutting, engraving, etching or painting.

An evening 'Penny Class' (1d per drawing lesson) instituted in 1891 proved popular with them and others, but a Monday morning class for 'Males Only' (5s per quarter) intended for glassworkers, offered in 1896-1897, attracted few students.

The 'Ladies Morning Class' (10:00 to noon on Tuesdays and Thursdays) enrolled daughters and wives of gentry, clergy and business owners, and instruction in painting from nature was imparted for 10s 6d per quarter. Bowen or Simms sometimes offered a 'Modelling' class, and Cromack taught 'Life Drawing' albeit with restrictions – 'Head Life for Ladies and Full Length Life for Males'.

Celebrating Achievement

The Stourbridge School of Art held annual public meetings and prize-givings that always caught the attention of the local *Advertiser* and *County Express* newspapers. Following routine reports from the art master on student progress and a Council member regarding the school's financial status, the chairman would read the names of students who passed examinations in art at first, second, or third (highest) grade and then present many local and national prizes, ranging from books, medals and monetary awards of up to £1, to scholarships providing students with an opportunity for study at the Head School in London.

Records of prize-winning students reveal many who rose to prominence in the glass industry and some who enjoyed careers in fine art, such as engraver Frank Short and painters Harriet Skidmore and Albert Gyngell. Brothers John and Joseph Northwood were medal winners in the 1850s before founding J & J Northwood, a glass decorating firm in Barnett Lane, Wordsley. John's sons Harry and John junior were also fine students, and his protégé Frederick Carder won a national medal. J & J Northwood employee James Hill enrolled in 1864 at age 14 and received much recognition for designs in etched or engraved glass.

Courtesy James Measell



Postcard view of Stourbridge Free Library and Technical Institute, c. 1909, home to the School of Art.

© Broadfield House Glass Museum



Design for etched glass vase by James Hill, c. 1878-1880.

Educational Attainments

The International Health Exhibition during 1884 in London featured exhibits from the Department of Science and Art that were testaments to technical education, and the Stourbridge glass displayed there was a tribute to past and present students, especially brothers Thomas and George Woodall, who designed many striking items in cameo glass, and William Adey and Theodore Kny, who designed brilliant cut glass articles.

Glass manufacturers Thomas Webb & Sons were awarded a gold medal for the cameo ware designed and executed by employees who were Stourbridge School of Art students.

The growth of technical education in the 1890s altered the course of the Stourbridge School of Art, as students of art and design shared cramped quarters in the aged theatre building with those who desired instruction in chemistry, geology, woodworking, cottage cookery, dressmaking, or shorthand.

New Premises

Members of the Stourbridge Urban District Council sought to add to the civic culture of Stourbridge by erecting a 'Victoria Institute' building for the 1897 Diamond Jubilee, but they were unsuccessful in gaining support. However, the idea was revived in 1902 and, with £3,000 from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, came to fruition in

the construction of the landmark Free Library and Technical Institute at Hagley Road and Church Street. A grand opening was held on 24 April 1905, and an extensive art and industrial exhibition was open for another month. The Stourbridge School of Art occupied an entire floor, continuing for more than sixty years until absorbed by the University of Wolverhampton. ●

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Further Reading

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Stuart Macdonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (University of London Press, 1970).

Nigel Perry, *A History of Stourbridge* (Phillimore, 2001).