The objects in this exhibition clearly demonstrate the principle known to anyone seriously interested in the decorative arts of the nineteenth century—that many of the best objects were designed by an architect. The concept however of the architect as the person who designed and controlled every aspect of the creation of a building and its contents is not unique to the nineteenth century. The architects of ancient Greece and Rome certainly played this role and those of the Middle Ages were likewise involved in every aspect of interior decoration and furniture. There is of course comparatively little documentary evidence for these early periods, but the celebrated manuscript sketch book of the architect Villard de Honnecourt, which dates from the fifteenth century, includes, amongst the buildings, sculpture and machines, designs for choir stalls and a lectern. The first English edition of this sketchbook was published in 1859 and was widely used by a whole generation of High Victorian architects. Victorian architects whether working in the Classical or the Gothic style saw themselves as part of a tradition stretching back into the distant past. Viollet-le-duc described how they sowed the period between the Middle Ages and the beginning of the eighteenth century. In a lecture published in English in 1877, he wrote: “During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries architects not only paid attention to internal arrangements, but subordinated the designs for the exterior to them. The usages of life dictated the arrangement and the arrangement suggested the form of the building. This was the dominant principle in times of Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages.” William Morris in his famous essay on the decorative arts, “The Lesser Arts of Life,” took a more wide ranging view: “Now speaking of the whole world at all times […] I shall still say that among ourselves, the men of modern Europe the existence of other arts is bound up with that of architecture. Please do not forget that whatever else I may say today, you must suppose me to assume that we have noble buildings which we have to adorn with our lesser arts […] its wider sense I consider to mean the art of creating a building with all the appliances fit for carrying on a dignified and happy life.” This attention to every detail within and without a building is well known to any student of eighteenth century interiors. Adam and his contemporaries packed the interiors they designed with Classical motifs. These appeared on furniture, carpets, ceilings, door knobs and fire grates, linking all the furnishings of the room into one ensemble, which becomes fatally mutilated aesthetically if objects are removed. The use of a linking motif whether it be Classical, Gothic, naturalistic or heraldic was clearly described by Frank Lloyd Wright The differentiation of a single, certain simple form characterizes the expression of one building. Quite a different form may serve for another, but from one basic idea all the formal elements of design are in each case derived and held well together in scale and character […] in every case the motif is adhered to throughout so that it is not too much to say that each building aesthetically is cut from one piece of goods and consistently hangs together with an integrity impossible otherwise (in Cause of Architecture, 1908)—a far cry from Robert Adam!) It would seem at first sight that the principles of hand-craftsmanship, put forward by the Arts and Crafts theorists of the later nineteenth century, would have encouraged the concept of the individual artist/designer/craftsman working by himself without an architect to guide him. But as we have seen Morris certainly believed in the importance of the architects’ role in the decorative arts. His view was shared by many Arts and Crafts architects. E. S. Prior in his essay in Arts & Crafts Essays (1903) wrote: “When we care for art sufficiently to summon her […] she will appear as a controlling force, using not only painting and sculpture, but all the decorative arts to shape room and furniture under one purpose of design whether we shall then give her the time honoured title of architecture, or call her by another name is of no moment.” It is also interesting to see F. W. Troup,
the well-known Arts and Crafts architect, taking an almost condescending attitude to the relationship of the architect and the craftsman. In “Influence on Design in Woodwork,” he wrote with reference to the architect: “It is possible, and if you are wise you will take the craftsman into your confidence, and you may be able to learn something of him, or at the least, you will know what he is equal to and perhaps find it advisable to modify the design to suit his capabilities, or, better still leave something for him to modify as the work proceeds” (The Arts Connected with Building, 1909). Voysey’s essay, “Ideas in Things,” in the same book, argued for the total involvement of the architect in the design of an interior down to the smallest detail “The effect of real richness is only obtainable by having precious materials, elaboration concentrated and harmoniously arranged, and eloquent with thought and feeling. Your attention to this principle is going to affect your design of every detail including spoons and forks.” It is clear from these statements, and numerous others by Arts and Crafts architects could also be quoted, that the idea of the design for an object evolving in the mind of the craftsman in solitary communion with his materials is a relatively modern one. This idea certainly dominates the craft world of today, but I merely wished to demonstrate that the views of the Arts and Crafts architects had more in common with those of the previous two thousand years than with those of the modern designer-craftsman. It is only necessary to mention a few names, Webb, Lethaby, Ashbee, Gimson and Voysey, architects to a man, to realise that virtually no objects made by any of them exist but those designed by them are legion. William Morris may be an exception but though he wove tapestries and understood certain craft processes, too much has been made of his activities as a craftsman. He did not make with his own hands metalwork, stained glass, wallpaper or furniture though he produced brilliant designs in several of these media. Not fully trained as an architect, the time Morris spent in Street’s office was crucial to his appreciation of architectural principles. The whole question of who was in whose office is vital to the understanding of architecture and design in the nineteenth century. There is no substitute for actually working with an innovative architect. Attitudes to design, craft practice, styles of drawing, historical precedent; indeed the first jobs when you set up on your own could only stem from actually working for a great man. In Street’s office in the 1850s were trained Philip Webb, William Morris and Norman Shaw and Shaw in his turn was to train a number of pupils including W. R. Lethaby, E. S. Prior and Sidney Barnsley. J. D. Sedding, another of Street’s pupils, trained Ernest Gimson and Ernest Barnsley. J. P Seddon, one of the as yet underrated architects and furniture designers of the century, worked closely with Burges, Webb and Morris on the design of the furniture in the Mediaeval Court of the 1862 Exhibition. It seems likely that Seddon trained Charles Bevan and in the 1870s Voysey was articled to him. The relationship of B. J. Talbert, J. Moyr Smith and Christopher Dresser, has yet to be fully explored. It was this ‘old boy’ network that gave such coherence to the decorative arts of the period, almost as though the architects decided what they wished to create, often impelled by the moral fervour of Gothic or Arts and Crafts principles, and only then did they find the patrons to fund the creation of their designs. Rich patrons who did not share the taste of such architects had to employ less opinionated and frequently less talented members of the profession. The one person I have not mentioned is A. W. N. Pugin; he worked without pupils, but it was he who, both with his books and his many executed works, had by his death in 1852 laid the foundations for most of the architects who followed him. He not only profoundly influenced the High Victorian architects but Voysey frequently stated that he admired Pugin above all other modern architects. Voysey wrote Pugin, “designed to the best of his ability to meet the requirements and conditions which presented to his mind, classifying them and anointing them with his devout spirit, allowing his moral sentiments to play like a dancing light on every detail […] search the Houses of Parliament from top to bottom and you will not find one superficial yard that is copied from any pre-existing building” (Individuality, 1915). In 1904, at a time when it would seem that Pugin had been forgotten, Hermann Muthesius wrote: “Pugin was entirely in his
element with decorative arts; he combined inexhaustible imaginative power with a thorough knowledge of the mediaeval repertoire of forms so that it was child’s ploy for him to find forms for every sort of commission […] Looking back today at the achievements of the Gothicists in the field of artistic handicrafts one can have no doubt that Pugin’s work stands supreme. Not only did he create the whole repertoire in which the next generation of Gothicists worked but also put into it the best of anything that was ever done. His flat patterns remain the order of the day, nothing could surpass his glass and metal, his furniture was either imitated or replaced by other inferior furniture” (Das Englische Haus). All the most important principles of the Arts and Crafts movement were derived from Pugin sometimes directly but often via Morris or Ruskin who unlike Voysey or Muthesius were slow to acknowledge their debt to him. The technique of revealed construction; the prominent structural braces; the use of solid wood rather than veneer all beloved by the Arts and Crafts designers as well as by Street Webb and Shaw start with Pugin. One undated letter written by him to his friend the decorator J G. Crace in about 1850 demonstrates how he was moving toward a simplicity in his designs for furniture quite removed from the elaboration of his earlier pieces. He advocates the making up of the elements of a piece for quick assembly but is anxious about, “this plain furniture and I send you at once a lot of designs rely on it the great scale will be in articles that are within the range of the middling class clergymen furnishing parsonage houses etc […] you ought to produce a dozen of each to make them pay and keep them all ready seasoned for putting together at a day’s notice keeping one sort always on show […] I am anxious to introduce a sensible style of furniture of good oak and constructively put together that will compete with the vile trash made and sold.” He died shortly after this in 1852 and it was left to others to carry on making simple pieces of furniture of the type which Pugin referred to as “the true thing.” In our own century the re-appraisal of the Victorian period is a recent phenomenon. At first the principles which had been applied for several decades to the Georgian period were applied to the furniture and decorative arts of the nineteenth century. These principles involve the deification of craftsmen at the expense of designers; until recently the great heroes to the historian of Georgian furniture were craftsmen like Adam Kent or Chambers. As I mentioned earlier, the romantic appeal of the designer-craftsmen is very strong. Surely Chippendale did not really need Adam to design the furniture he made? Likewise surely Gillow could make perfectly good furniture without Bruce Talbert’s intervention?

As we saw above this attitude did not originate in the 1890s; it seems to have arisen in the 1920s. The idea that the architect thwarted the creative instincts of Georgian craftsmen grew up at this period and was only much later applied to the nineteenth century. Herbert Cescinsky summed up this attitude in the Burlington Magazine in 1920 in his essay “The Influence of the Architect on English Furniture.” The architect once having satisfied his client with a design—with all inherent difficulties of manufacture either unknown or studiously kept in the background—the sketch was passed to the cabinet-maker whose business it would be to realize the architect’s idea without question […] Adam knew what he wanted and his detailed drawings in the Sloane Museum are marvels of painstaking accuracy […] from first to last every detail whether good or bad is shown with a careful minuteness which precluded even a craftsman of the renown of Thomas Chippendale from taking liberties with Adam’s own style. That this course submerged the individuality of Chippendale is perhaps a pity. Today I believe that the dominant role of the architect in the design of the furniture and decorative arts of the past is generally accepted. This exhibition is dedicated to one half century when the influence of the architect is particularly well documented. Though many shared Cescinsky’s view, in the 1920s architects themselves agreed rather with that of Sir Edwin Lutyens expressed in The Architectural Review (1931). In an essay to introduce an exhibition devoted to Voysey’s work, he said the 1851 exhibition awakened the idea of utility as the basis of art. All that was necessary for doily life could and ought to be made beautiful. This utilitarian principle began to be put into practice when William Burges, E W Godwin, A H Mackmurdo,
Bodley and others regarded nothing in or outside the home as too small to deserve their careful consideration. So we find Burges designing water taps and hair brushes, Godwin and Mackmurdo furniture, Bodley, like Pugin, fabrics and Wallpapers. Modern research confirms Lutyens’ view of the second half of the nineteenth century. The situation today is interesting. There is a dichotomy on the one hand we have the designer-craftsmen producing hand crafted furniture; and on the other we have the architects designing buildings and their furnishings in the traditional way described in this essay. When in a few years we are able to look back objectively at the 1970s which group will stand the test of time? I must admit that the names which spring to my mind of major furniture and decorative art designers of the twentieth century so far are Mies von der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto and Marcel Breuer architects to a man. Perhaps the twentieth century is not so different from the lost nineteen after all!