

From Exhibition to Knowledge Production: A Review and Prospect of Research on the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society

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Abstract:

With the shift in design historiography, design exhibitions have increasingly been recognized as critical media and research lenses for rewriting design history. This paper centers on the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (ACES) and examines its exhibition practices from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, while analyzing its position and influence within the Arts and Crafts Movement. It traces two major phases in the academic study of ACES: an early period of neglect followed by a phase of renewed scholarly attention. Building on this, the paper identifies emerging opportunities in ACES research, including the reconstruction of its exhibition system, the introduction of new theoretical approaches, and the expansion of interdisciplinary methodologies. By revisiting ACES, this study offers new perspectives on the role of modern design exhibitions in knowledge production, cultural identity formation, and institutional development.

Keywords:

Design History, Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (ACES), Design Exhibitions, Arts and Crafts Movement, Knowledge Production

1. Exhibition Studies as a New Possibility for Rewriting Design History

Since the late 20th century, design historiography has undergone a significant paradigm shift. Exhibitions are no longer viewed merely as platforms for showcasing outcomes, but have been reinterpreted as narrative media with the capacity for knowledge production. As early as 2010, the late scholar Yuan Xiyang observed that design exhibitions had transitioned from “constructing design history” to actively “writing design history,” becoming an essential tool for interpreting and reconstructing the historical narrative of design. He argued that exhibitions, through the organization of historical materials, consolidation of facts, and distillation of historical insight, offer a distinctive lens and methodology for design historical research [1]. Especially since the 1990s, as curatorial practice has become

increasingly research-oriented and systematized, exhibitions themselves have emerged as key platforms for the narration of design history. Curatorial teams, exhibited works, and related publications together form a knowledge-producing collective, continuously expanding the boundaries and discourse of design history.

Within this broader shift, exhibitions have evolved beyond mere showcases of design outcomes to become active sites for critical engagement with issues such as national identity, postcolonial theory, and gender discourse—largely due to their inherently interdisciplinary curatorial strategies. For example, in 2022, *The Journal of Modern Craft* published two special issues, “Exhibiting Making” and “Exhibiting Craft,” which examined how craft is presented, defined, and culturally positioned through the lens of exhibition history. These studies highlight how exhibition practices intersect with broader concerns in contemporary design, including decolonization, digital transformation, and democratic governance [2].

Given the growing significance of exhibitions in contemporary design discourse, it is particularly meaningful to revisit exhibition practices from the early stages of modern design. While the 1851 Great Exhibition in London is widely recognized as the starting point of modern design history, existing scholarship has primarily focused on world’s fairs from the perspective of industrial production and economic impact. In contrast, exhibitions that centered explicitly on design—featuring systematic presentations of design ideas, methodologies, and individual designers—have received comparatively limited scholarly attention.

The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (ACES), founded in 1887 by a group of decorative artists and craftsmen, quickly emerged as one of the most influential exhibition organizations in the Arts and Crafts Movement. The first exhibition was held in October 1888 at the New Gallery in London, with annual exhibitions continuing until 1890, when a triennial cycle was established and maintained through 1899. In 1902, the exhibition was postponed to 1903 due to ACES’s participation in the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Turin. The triennial schedule resumed thereafter, continuing until the disruptions caused by the First World War.

ACES’s exhibition model drew intellectual inspiration from figures such as Augustus Pugin and John Ruskin, while also adopting organizational practices from government-led industrial exhibitions of the Victorian era, and integrating the institutional experience of the Royal Academy of Arts and the commercial art galleries of London. The Society’s first president was the prominent decorative artist and socialist Walter Crane. In 1890, William Morris succeeded Crane as president, serving until his death in 1896, after which Crane resumed the role until his own death in 1915.

From 1888 to 1910, the first nine ACES exhibitions were held at the New Gallery, which remained the Society’s primary venue until the lease expired in 1912. Over time, ACES developed a sophisticated institutional structure that included mandatory authorship attribution, controlled sale of exhibited works, concurrent lectures and events, published catalogues, joint ticketing, and systems of patronage and professional committees. These mechanisms enabled collaboration across a diverse network of patrons, workshops, design schools, and manufacturers, forming an early paradigm of systematized design exhibition. In 1916, Henry Wilson succeeded Crane as president for the 11th exhibition.

Through its curated presentations of decorative arts, architecture, and craft, ACES significantly elevated the public visibility of the Arts and Crafts Movement and laid institutional groundwork for the development of modern design exhibition practices.

2. The Historiographical Trajectory of ACES Research

2.1. Misinterpretation and Neglect: ACES in Design Historiography from the Mid-20th Century to the 1990s

Since the mid-20th century, influenced by early design historians such as Nikolaus Pevsner, design history has often tended to frame the Arts and Crafts Movement as a brief and stylistically unified aesthetic phase. This style-centric, “elite narrative” approach has led to the neglect of the movement’s internal complexity and diversity—particularly the crucial role played by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (ACES), whose core practice was rooted in exhibition-making.

Within this historiographical framework, ACES was often regarded as a peripheral branch of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and its presence was largely subsumed under broader historical narratives. From the 1970s to the early 21st century, although scholars such as Alan Crawford conducted important studies on regional guilds, artist collectives, and architectural practices in Britain, systematic research on ACES’s exhibition mechanisms, organizational structure, and sociocultural impact remained limited. During this period, references to ACES typically appeared in biographical studies of key figures associated with the movement—such as W.A.S. Benson [3], Charles R. Mackintosh [4], Edward Burne-Jones[5], and C.R. Ashbee[6][7]-with the focus largely placed on their individual creative work rather than their roles within ACES and the significance of their participation in its exhibitions.

Moreover, ACES did not establish a centralized archival system in the early 20th century. Its historical records remain dispersed across various institutions and private collections, which has posed significant challenges for comprehensive scholarly investigation. Compounding this difficulty is the diverse composition of its membership, which included not only artists and craftsmen but also industrial manufacturers and educators. As such, ACES functioned simultaneously as an exhibition society aimed at elevating the status of the decorative arts, a rival institution to the Royal Academy of Arts, and a hybrid entity engaged in commercial enterprise, design education, and social reform. This multiplicity of roles and agendas has made it difficult for discipline-bound approaches—whether from art history, design history, or economic history—to effectively engage with its complexities. The resulting dual challenge of fragmented archival sources and a lack of suitable theoretical frameworks has constituted a structural impediment to the development of ACES scholarship during this period.

2.2. Reassessment and Theoretical Reorientation: From the 1990s to the Present

Since the 1990s, with the institutional consolidation of design history as an academic discipline, interdisciplinary frameworks drawn from sociology, cultural studies, and related fields have been increasingly introduced, offering new methods and perspectives for reinterpreting ACES. Scholarly attention has gradually shifted from style-based narratives toward institutional histories, cultural histories, and histories of knowledge production. Within this new paradigm, exhibitions have come to be understood as structured forms of discursive practice, thereby bringing renewed focus to ACES.

The advancement of digitization has further accelerated ACES research. The National Art Library in the UK has systematically digitized ACES's exhibition catalogues published from the 1880s through the 1930s, providing an accessible documentary foundation for scholarly work. In parallel, institutions such as the Furniture History Society have begun organizing and cataloguing archival materials related to ACES, offering empirical support for studies on its evolving exhibition system, organizational structure, and strategies of dissemination.

Since 2010, a number of art and design historians have begun to reconstruct the socio-historical context in which ACES was established, while also reassessing its formative influences and long-term significance. For instance, British art historian Imogen Hart, in her article *On the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*, examined the ideological tensions embedded within ACES's operational strategies and curatorial innovations. She argued that ACES filled a critical gap in the 19th-century British decorative arts scene by providing a high-profile exhibition platform. Hart also analyzed the Society's complex relationship with William Morris, its institutional interactions with the Royal Academy of Arts and design schools, and its contributions to the development of British decorative arts, professional training, and international recognition. [8]

Clive Edwards, in his analysis of the preface written by Walter Crane for ACES's inaugural exhibition, employed a series of historical details to illustrate the significant challenges the Society faced during its early organizational phase. He further highlighted the internal controversies that arose following the exhibition—surrounding selection protocols, display strategies, operational models, and the nature of exhibited works—which reveal the profound tensions and conflicting expectations among ACES members regarding the function and direction of the exhibition itself. [9]

Some scholars have also sought to clarify the long-standing and often misunderstood relationship between ACES and the broader Arts and Crafts Movement. For example, Imogen Hart has argued that ACES has frequently been perceived as the “public face” of the movement under the leadership of William Morris, with dominant narratives—such as anti-industrialism and socialist aesthetics—being uncritically projected onto the Society. Such interpretations, she contends, obscure ACES's internal diversity and agency as an independent historical actor. In her seminal work *Arts and Crafts Objects*, Hart traces the term “Arts and Crafts Movement” to its first appearance in Walter Crane's 1896 publication *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New*. She points out that in the original ACES documents, the term “movement” was initially used more loosely to describe a general opposition to the conservatism of the Royal Academy of Arts. It was only in the early 20th century that the label became retroactively affixed to ACES, eventually solidifying into the academic category now commonly accepted. [10]

Recent scholarship has also placed greater emphasis on the curatorial strategies and institutional frameworks underpinning ACES's exhibition practices. For example, Morna O'Neill, through her analysis of the Society's landmark exhibitions in 1888 and 1896, demonstrates how ACES employed display techniques to restructure the cognitive relationship between object and viewer, thereby challenging the hierarchical distinction between “fine art” and “decorative art.” [11] O'Neill further observes that when ACES represented Britain at the 1902 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Turin, its curatorial approach sharply diverged from that of the French delegation, which was aligned with the aesthetics of the Art Nouveau

movement. The ensuing cultural tensions—both during and after the exhibition—reflected deeper ideological divides in early 20th-century Europe concerning exhibition narratives, national identity formation, and competing models of consumption. [12]

In summary, research since the 1990s has challenged the previously monolithic understanding of ACES, gradually uncovering its complex institutional networks and cultural functions. This shift has contributed to a new wave of paradigm transformation in both exhibition history and design historiography.

3. Prospects for Future ACES Research

3.1. Reconstructing Exhibition Systems and Expanding Comparative Perspectives

With the progressive digitization of archival materials related to ACES—including the exhibition catalogues and publications issued in conjunction with its exhibitions since 1888—scholars now have access to valuable historical resources for investigating the evolution of its exhibition systems. Existing research has begun to uncover ACES's distinctive strategies in areas such as object selection, curatorial methodology, and spatial configuration. However, comprehensive studies that trace the institutional logic behind these developments remain limited.

Scholars such as Debbie Innes have pointed out that ACES's long-standing collaboration with the New Gallery in London not only shaped the spatial arrangement of its exhibitions but also influenced the modes of organization and audience interaction. This interplay between spatial and institutional structures offers critical insight into the formation of exhibition mechanisms. Future research could further explore dimensions such as exhibition governance, jury systems, and exhibition economics, thereby contributing to a more systematic framework for a “history of exhibition systems.” [13]

The exhibition experiences of ACES's core members may also serve as critical reference points for understanding the construction of early design exhibition systems. For example, Thomas Wardle—a leading figure in Britain's silk industry and a textile reformer closely associated with William Morris—later became a key member of the ACES committee. In 1887, he was invited by the Board of Trade and the Exhibition Council to serve as the principal organizer for the silk section of the Royal Jubilee Exhibition. There, he curated a comprehensive display of the entire silk production chain and organized a series of specialized lectures on textile techniques and industrial processes. Such curatorial strategies and practical experiences in large-scale industrial exhibitions had a direct and lasting influence on the institutional formation of ACES exhibitions.

Moreover, prior to ACES's inaugural exhibition at the New Gallery in October 1888, the gallery successfully launched its First “Summer Exhibition” in May of the same year. Edward Burne-Jones, one of the most prominent exhibiting artists, also served as a member of the ACES exhibition committee. Similarly, the prior experiences of William Morris and Walter Crane—ACES's first three presidents—in both industrial expositions and art exhibitions played a pivotal role in shaping the Society's curatorial logic and institutional model.

Furthermore, situating ACES within a broader international comparative framework represents a significant direction for future research. In particular, comparative analysis with contemporaneous exhibition institutions and curatorial systems in

countries such as France, Germany, and Austria can help illuminate how different national contexts constructed the interrelations between exhibition, design, and industry. Such comparisons also offer critical insights into the regional specificities and global ramifications of exhibition systems during periods of cultural transformation.

3.2. Theoretical Paradigm Shifts and Methodological Integration

The complexity of ACES research lies in its dispersed archival sources, the diverse identities of its members, and the multiplicity of its exhibition formats—factors that make it difficult for any single disciplinary approach to fully capture its historical dimensions. As such, the introduction of new theoretical models and interdisciplinary methodologies is essential for advancing the depth of scholarship in this area.

One promising direction is to interpret ACES's exhibition practices within the frameworks of “cultural industries” and “knowledge production,” which can help reveal how these practices were embedded in broader structures of modernity, social organization, and aesthetic ideology. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and field can be employed to analyze how ACES constructed and maintained its authority within the fields of art and design. Similarly, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model offers valuable insight into how exhibitions generated differential modes of reception and meaning-making across various social groups.

In addition, social science models such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can offer new explanatory frameworks for ACES research. ANT emphasizes the formation of dynamic networks composed of material artifacts (such as exhibition venues and display apparatuses), textual elements (catalogues, reviews), individuals, and institutions—all of which interact within the context of social practice. This approach is particularly well-suited to analyzing the multidimensional relationships among curators, artists, institutions, and audiences within ACES.

By constructing a “curatorial network map” of ACES, scholars can not only uncover the power structures embedded in processes of knowledge production, but also trace how exhibitions functioned as mechanisms of transmission across the domains of art, education, and industry.

3.3. Repositioning ACES within the Framework of Global Exhibition History

Current scholarship on ACES remains largely situated within a British national context. However, in light of the global turn in exhibition history, repositioning ACES within the broader framework of international modern design exhibitions holds significant potential.

For instance, comparative studies between ACES and other institutions that participated in international expositions after 1900 could reveal how “Britishness” was constructed within a transnational visual culture, and how exhibitions functioned as a means of national image-making. Additionally, exploring possible cultural exchanges or mutual influences between ACES and exhibition cultures in regions such as East Asia or Scandinavia may offer new pathways for challenging Anglocentric or Eurocentric narratives in exhibition historiography.

Future research that incorporates non-English-language sources and engages with scholarship from continental Europe and the Commonwealth could help to construct a

more diverse and open-ended research framework for ACES, thereby contributing to a global reconfiguration of exhibition history.

4. Conclusions

This paper has centered on the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (ACES), systematically tracing its research trajectory and exhibition practices to highlight the critical role of design exhibitions in reshaping design historiography. While ACES has long been marginalized within mainstream design history narratives, the integration of sociological theories and the increasing accessibility of digital archives have led to a growing recognition of its historical significance and institutional complexity. ACES was not only a key agent in the Arts and Crafts Movement but also a pioneering case in the development of modern exhibition systems, whose curatorial strategies, organizational mechanisms, and cultural discourses exerted far-reaching influence on both British and international design landscapes.

By reviewing the shifting scholarly perspectives since the mid-20th century, this paper identifies several ongoing challenges in ACES research: the underdeveloped framework of institutional history, limited engagement with interdisciplinary theories, and a lack of international comparative perspectives. In response, three directions are proposed for future study: (1) a deeper historical investigation into the evolution of ACES's exhibition system; (2) the integration of interdisciplinary theories from sociology, anthropology, and related fields to construct a multi-dimensional analytical framework; (3) the repositioning of ACES within global exhibition history to enable comparative studies across diverse cultural and epistemological contexts.

In conclusion, the renewed study of ACES not only fills a critical gap in the historiography of design exhibitions but also offers valuable theoretical foundations and historical insights for rethinking the institutional logics, cultural identities, and knowledge-production mechanisms underlying contemporary design exhibitions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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