

# A VERY MODERN VICTORIAN

*The multitalented British architect and designer E.W. Godwin, mikado of the Aesthetic Movement, at last gets his due in a rich new exhibition*

BY MARTIN FILLER

When Queen Victoria was at the zenith of her reign, there was one man to see in London if you wanted to live at the upper limit of contemporary high style. Celebrity tastemakers like the professional beauty and royal courtesan Lillie Langtry, the artist and social gadfly James McNeill Whistler, and the playwright and wit Oscar Wilde all flocked to their friend E.W. Godwin to do up their houses. Thanks to Godwin, the quiet Chelsea enclave of Tite Street—where he built Whistler's home and studio, designed another for the painter Frank Miles, and decorated Wilde's house—became Right Street for the leaders of the Aesthetic Movement. That artistic philosophy proposed that every aspect of daily life should be glorified through art. As Wilde wrote to his decorator when his interiors were finished, "Each chair is a sonnet in ivory, and the table is a masterpiece in pearl." Such rhapsodizing notwithstanding, Godwin was eminently practical. "It is essential," he wrote, "that the common objects of everyday life should be quiet, simple, and unobtrusive in their beauty."

Aside from his arty and often risqué friends, some of Godwin's patrons were extremely grand—like Princess Louise (amateur-artist daughter of Victoria and Albert, for whom he built a studio in Kensington Palace Gardens) and Prince Esterhazy in Vienna. All were assured of receiving the very latest word in stylish taste, but with the added cachet of artistic excellence that was a hallmark of the Aesthetic Movement. Yet despite all his high connections, Godwin failed to prosper. He was a terrible businessman who often went over budget on his commissions, as well as an argumentative and litigious partner who fell out with many of his collaborators.

His unconventional private life was no help to him professionally, either. An energetic womanizer, he was nicknamed "the wicked Earl" and conducted a scandalous six-year affair with the period's most celebrated actress, Ellen Terry, by whom he fathered two illegitimate children (one of whom, Edward Gordon Craig, grew up to become a pioneer of modern stage design). Godwin's early death in 1886 at the age of 53 gave him no time to secure his legacy for >



E.W. Godwin's output included, clockwise from top: Miles house, London, 1878; glazed ceramic tile for Minton and Hollins, c. 1881; ebonized mahogany and brass sideboard for William Watt, c. 1877; Sparrows and Bamboo wallpaper for Jeffrey and Co., 1872; design for Bamboo wallpaper, 1872.

posterity in the way his more focused and longer-lived contemporary William Morris did.

Long known only to design specialists, this hugely gifted character is finally the subject of the wider attention he deserves. "E.W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer," on view at New York's Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts from November 18 through February 27, 2000, collects more than 150 works in many mediums—including architectural drawings, ceramics, costume sketches, fabrics, furniture, stage designs, and wallpaper—that reconfirm him as a polymath of immense importance. The show was curated by the Bard Graduate Center's founder and director, the art historian Susan Weber Soros. She edited the superb catalog and is also bringing out a companion volume, *The Secular Furniture of E.W. Godwin* (both Yale). "I was first attracted to Godwin's modernist furniture," she recalls, "but as I started digging deeper I realized he was also the consummate commercial designer. Though he is best known for his Anglo-Japanese schemes, he worked in all the different eclectic styles that popular taste demanded—Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, Old English, Jacobean—and combined them in new and original ways. He was a terrific, protean character: an antiquary and a reformer, an architectural journalist and a theatrical producer. And his clients are absolutely fascinating."

At a time when the typical Victorian interior was suffocated under heavy layers of mass-produced goods, Godwin dared to strip away the claustrophobic clutter. He favored walls painted in pale, solid colors (rather than papered in dark patterns) and bare wood floors afloat with Persian rugs (rather than covered with thick wall-to-wall carpets). To promote more hygienic interiors, he wrote, "We require first that furniture be well lifted from the floor (thereby eliminating dust-catchers) and that it be as light as is consistent with real strength."

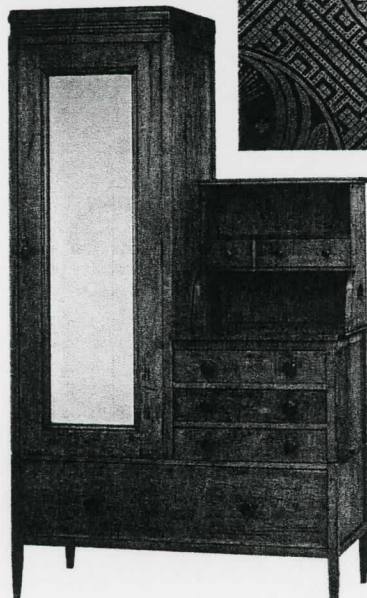
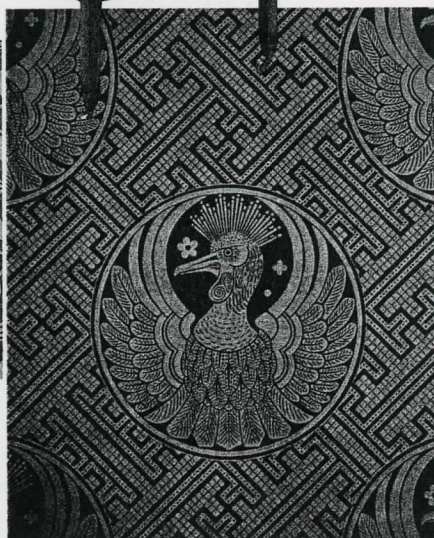
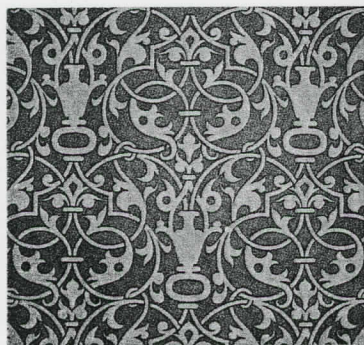
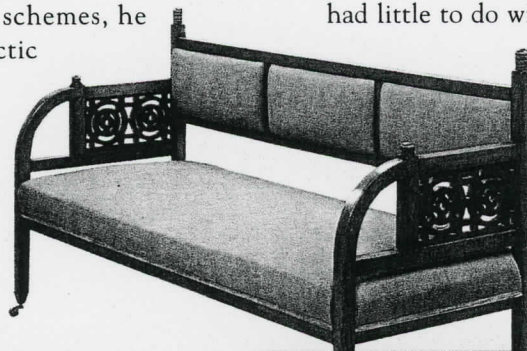
Looking at Godwin's elegantly elongated and sleekly pared-down ebonized furniture, one can see where Charles Rennie

Mackintosh, a generation younger, got many of his ideas. And in Godwin's comprehensive coordination of every aspect of a building and its furnishings—sometimes even including the dress of its inhabitants—one finds a direct precursor of Frank Lloyd Wright's organic design, with the architect as conductor of a veritable symphony of harmonious details.

Godwin's sources of inspiration encompassed every period of history and were international in scope. But he was always most mesmerized by the mysterious east, and he did as much as anyone to bring the principles of classical Japanese design into the modern consciousness. Born in 1833, Godwin was 20 when Japan was opened to foreign trade, and he became a pioneering collector of Japanese blue-and-white porcelain. By the late 1870s he moved from the Gothic Revival of his earlier work to the Anglo-Japanesque style that improbably but skillfully combined elements of the English medieval tradition, Chinese furniture of the Ming Dynasty, and Japanese architecture. Godwin's imaginative designs, which had little to do with authentic Japanese interiors, were as

freely inventive as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, the most popular expression of the period's Japonomania. Long closed off from the industrialized west, Japan seemed as artistically uncorrupted as England's design reformers imagined the Gothic Age to have been, a ready-made taste Utopia of the sort the Aesthetic Movement hoped to bring about at home.

Godwin's close identification with Wilde was a central factor in the designer's fall into obscurity soon after he died. When Wilde was prosecuted and jailed for homosexuality in 1895, the aestheticism he championed went into deep eclipse with him. Furthermore, the very fashionable is always doomed to become very unfashionable in short order, and new preferences made the Godwin style seem dated. Freed now from the distorting glass of fashion, Godwin's exhilarating designs again seem fresh and optimistic, raising the tenor of everyday life to the level of high art. ■



*Influences from many design cultures converged in Godwin's work, clockwise from bottom: Pine wardrobe, c. 1868; Queen Anne wallpaper, 1876; mahogany settee, c. 1869, all for William Watt; Peacock wallpaper, Jeffrey and Co., c. 1873.*