

Designer **Donna Taplin** of Greenes of Sussex argues the case for 'handmade' over 'mass made'

MAKE YOUR CHOICES COUNT

When William Robinson,

Irish gardener and author of *The Garden* magazine, campaigned to save craftsmen from extinction, he became part of a movement which encapsulated the zeitgeist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Arts and Crafts movement was born in the 1860s with textile designer William Morris, who was influenced by the writings of art critic, John Ruskin. Morris' company, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, specialised in producing carving, stained glass, metal-work, printed fabrics, carpets and tapestries with a strong medieval motif. By employing the craftsmanship of the past, the products appealed to those who were disillusioned with the new industrial age, which was dominating their present. He brought about a complete revolution in public taste, extending his influence into murals, furniture, cloth and paper wall hangings and jewellery.

Arts and Crafts came to be regarded as one of the most influential art movements since the Renaissance. Although it meant many things to many people, at its heart it stood for truth in the nature of materials and purity of form.

To William Robinson, this meant rejecting the new Victorian bedding schemes, which were artificial in colour and form, and choosing a more naturalistic approach. He began mixing herbaceous plants and shrubs to produce a mosaic of heights and textures and, in doing so, practically invented the mixed border. He made this fashionable through his writings, and probably had great influence on Gertrude Jekyll whose use of 'drifts' in her planting schemes are still much admired. This is a set of rules by which many of us still plant today.

Mass production and a rarity of skilled labour is a fact of life in the late 20th century and early 21st century. Long have we lived without a blacksmith at the end of the road, but the value of something handmade has never quite left our psyche and indeed seems to be re-emerging with some force. Values of sustainability have encouraged the consumption of local produce and skills but, more than that, the grass roots movement of craft is now so vast and organised that we can come across craft fairs and campaigns in every town and village at some point in their year.

Owning something handmade is about much more than having something expensive. There is an indisputable satisfaction every time you look at it and,

if you've made it yourself, an irreplaceable source of pride and confidence. To this end, the Crafts Council is spearheading a campaign called Make Craft Count and is working in partnership with Ofsted to provide craft development opportunities in schools (see www.craftscouncil.org.uk). They run many initiatives highlighting architecture, professional development and networking among craft professionals and are generally promoting contemporary craft wherever possible. Good to know.

Whatever your take on modern life and its often lamented disconnection with the source of things, there

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is an undeniable attraction in the sheer independence of producing something on your own, or buying something from

a person who has gone against the tide and risked their security on honing a skill. So before placing a sculpture or a fountain or some furniture in your garden design, stop for a moment and ask yourself if you could source this from a craftsman? You may be surprised at how easy this option is and that often the cost is much less than you think. Furthermore, having a skilled person onboard the project can lead to savings when things don't quite go to plan. Their practicality and willingness to see it through to the final result can be lifesavers.

In our experience, the benefits far outweigh the initial expense. When www.ironyweb.com produced those daisy chairs for the 2008 Chelsea garden that we co-planted with Diarmuid Gavin, they became the iconic symbol of not just the garden, but also the whole show. On a domestic level, the result is a much more satisfying, wholesome garden, one with soul and connections to the wider community. After all, garden design is one of the places where art, science and politics can come together, so why not commission something unique and be a part of the new movement? ■

If you have a response to or an opinion on this topic, write to gdj@jppublishing.co.uk