



Selwyn Image (1849-1930)

A designer, poet, stained-glass artist, typographer, and scholar, Selwyn Image embodied the Victorian polymath ideal, but is better remembered for his influence and network than for his own artistic productions. His “actual handiwork might bulk small in a retrospective exhibition of late Victorian art,” declared *The Studio* in 1898, “but his influence would be discerned in the work of many who might possibly have never heard his name” (4). That influence was especially important for fin-de-siècle periodical and fine book publications.

Image was born on 17 November 1849 in Bodiam, Sussex, where his father was vicar. He was educated at Brighton College and Marlborough College before matriculating at New College, Oxford. He intended to follow his father into the church, though his introduction to John Ruskin (1819-1900) shaped the direction of his studies and future career. Ruskin had taken up the first Slade Professorship of Fine Art in 1869, and Image began studying under him the following year. Buoyed by Ruskin’s encouragement, Image wrote to his older brother John in 1871:

For as far back as I can remember there were two possible lives, which seemed to me the only ones I could ever live for, a clergyman’s and an artist’s. The latter I had long given over seriously thinking about, or rather I never did so seriously think of it; till lately many things have forced it upon me, and the great blessing,

for which above all others I thank God—my getting to acquaintance with Ruskin, especially so. (*Letters* 26)

Ruskin remained a profound influence throughout Image's life, though in the short term, at least, the younger man did pursue a more stable career as a clergyman. Image was ordained Deacon in December 1872, the same month he was awarded his degree. The following year he was ordained priest, and took up his MA, yet the lure of the artistic life remained. He served as a cleric in London until 1880—whether he elected to leave or was fired remains unclear—after which point he turned his attention more fully to art. Lacking an independent income, Image cobbled together design work and other small commissions, along with occasional speakers' fees, to sustain himself and his craft.

In 1878, Image met and became close friends with architect and designer Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo (1851-1942). Four years later, they would join with Herbert P. Horne (1864-1916) to form the Century Guild, a group of artisans dedicated to the unity of the arts and the promotion (including the commercial promotion) of their crafts. Small but influential—the group's formal membership never exceeded the original three—the Guild produced a beautifully designed journal, *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* (*CGHH*; 1884, 1886-1891, later *The Hobby Horse*, 1893-4). It debuted in April 1884 featuring an instantly memorable cover designed by Image: a crowded, medieval-influenced natural swirl of brambles and a leafy tree framing a knight on horseback. The journal built on the legacy of the Pre-Raphaelite periodical *The Germ*, but took far more seriously the material aspect of book design. It was an early manifestation of the Arts and Crafts ethos and style, with bespoke typeface, decorated initials, and wide margins printed on hand-laid paper, elements that would be amplified or adapted by the Kelmscott Press as well as magazines including [*The Dial*](#), [*The Evergreen*](#), [*The Green Sheaf*](#), [*The Yellow Book*](#), [*The Savoy*](#), and *The Studio*, among others. Image's textual contributions included art criticism, beginning with "A Lecture on Art" in the first issue, as well as verse. Some of the poems that appeared in the *CGHH* were included in the 1894 *Poems and Carols* (Elkin Mathews), the sole volume of poetry that Image produced.

Via his role in the Century Guild and its journal, Image was a player in many important and influential fin-de-siècle artistic and publishing enterprises. When the Century Guild moved into a house on Fitzroy street in 1889, it became a hub of the London art scene. The Rhymers Club met there, and it gave its name to the Fitzroy Poster Society, founded in 1891 by Image, Mackmurdo, and Heywood Sumner (185-1940). Image's design work flourished in these years. On commission from poet (and later friend) Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), whose verse had appeared in the *CGHH*, Image designed the title page for the 1890 poetry anthology *Primavera*. He later designed the wrapper for Elkin Mathews's "Shilling Garland" series (1895-98); helmed by Binyon, its aim was to produce inexpensive volumes of verse from emerging poets.

In an indication of Image's position within the fin-de-siècle artistic circles, his name was included among a list of contributors to *The Yellow Book* in an 1894 [prospectus for the journal](#), though in the end he would not publish anything in it. He did contribute to the first two volumes of *The Savoy*, demonstrating his interests in [art criticism](#), on the one hand, and [verse](#), on the other hand. He also designed the [title page](#) for *The Pageant* (1896-97), edited by Charles Hazelwood Shannon (1863-1937) and [Gleeson White](#) (1851-1898), and contributed a [poem](#) to that magazine's second volume.

Throughout this and other work, Image's commitment to the idea of the unity of the arts vaunted by the Century Guild remained consistent. He was a member of the Art Workers' Guild from 1887, serving on the general committee from 1889-91 and as Master in 1900. In an address to its membership on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding, Image reflected that, "The central idea, the vivifying principle, which so appealed to our Founders, was the idea, the principle, unity, the interdependence, the solidarity of all the arts" (Stamp 3). He was equally committed to anti-puritan causes, perhaps most famously culminating in his support for [Oscar Wilde](#) (1854-1900) during his 1895 criminal trial for "acts of gross indecency." Image and Wilde's paths intersected as early as 1887, when Wilde reviewed Image's series of lectures on art, praising them in the *Sunday Times* as "interesting and intellectual" (Wilde "Art" 91). Image was approached to provide funds for Wilde's bail, but did not have the financial resources to do so. He did offer other kinds of support, which is clear from the letter Wilde wrote to

him soon after his release from prison: “The last message that reached me, when the prison-door closed ultimately on me, was from you – to tell me that there would be many people who would be kind and nice and gentle to me when I came out: and I often used to think of this in my dreadful life in gaol” (Wilde 879).

In 1910, Image took up the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at Oxford, a role he held until 1916, when it was suspended due to the First World War. He continued to lecture and to contribute to the cause of arts education until his health failed in the year preceding his death on 21 August 1930. A memorial exhibition of his drawings and stained-glass designs was held at the Cotswold Gallery in London in November and December of that year. In the preface to the catalogue, Binyon praised the “severity,” “inward grace,” and “subtle, pervading sense of beauty,” of his designs (n.p.), and suggested that Image would ultimately be remembered for his stained-glass work. The catalogue closed with a sonnet by fellow poet and artist (and frequent contributor to *The Dial*) **Thomas Sturge Moore** (1870-1944): “He lived a harmony that turned us all, / However diverse, to a courteous mood.” After his death, Image’s wife Janet (McHale Hanwell), whom he married in 1901, donated a number of his drawings and designs to the British Museum, where they remain today.

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Selected Publications by Selwyn Image

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(Mitchell, N. Rebecca. “Selwyn Image (1849-1930)” *Y90s Biographies*, 2021. *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, edited by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2021, https://1890s.ca/image_bio/.)