"Either in books or [in] architecture": Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue in the nineties

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“Either in books or [in] architecture”:
Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue in the Nineties

James F. O’Gorman

To James S. Ackerman, Teacher

In a letter of 28 June 1894, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue (1869–1924) reported to the photographer-publisher F. Holland Day that he was experiencing a momentary lull in his labors, “either in books or [in] architecture.” Within three years of his arrival in Boston, then, Goodhue was looking for work in two specialized fields, the two on which his fame principally rests, and the lull he then remarked was the last he was to enjoy for many years.

In preparing this brief profile of Goodhue that emphasizes his double-barreled career in the 1890s, I have visited some of his major buildings, held in hand some of his finest volumes, and cast an eye on some of his original decorative drawings at the Grolier Club and elsewhere, but I must confess to having drawn primarily on the work of other, more specialized scholars. Whoever seeks the historical Goodhue must use and acknowledge the contributions of such recent students as the late Richard Oliver, whose monograph on the architecture is currently definitive; Susan Otis Thompson, writing on the influence of William Morris in American book arts; Estelle Jussim, on the career of that “slave to beauty,” F. Holland Day; Beverly Brandt, on the local Arts and Crafts Society; and Nancy Finlay in her fine exhibition catalogue on artists of the book in Boston. Collectively, these publications provide an indispensable context for

This essay is adapted from a talk delivered in the Houghton Library, 30 October 1985, at a symposium on Artists of the Book in Boston.

1 Houghton Library MS Am 800.14.
Goodhue’s career. In short, I hold no special brief in the study of design in Boston in the 1890s; I draw upon the work of others and here attempt merely to make again whole that which specialized scholarship has tended to pull asunder.

We generally split art history in a way that separates fields such as architectural design from book decoration, and rarely do we discuss the two at the same time, but Goodhue was not the first to excel in both areas (I am thinking particularly of his Boston progenitor, Hammatt Billings), and in his case, at least, books and buildings must be thought of as variant flowers from a common stem. One cannot approach his bookwork without recognizing his origins, early development, and ultimate stature as an architect as well.

Born in 1869 in Pomfret, Connecticut, Bertram Goodhue was the scion of old New England stock. He was from his early years a student of design in all of its phases, with special attention to the medieval. Oliver reports that at the age of ten Goodhue set up a studio in the attic of his parents’ house and painted its windows in imitation of stained glass. Although allowed to grow up unburdened by much formal learning, he was bookish, reading the Arthurian legends and other romantic literature. His precocious talent as a graphic artist led him at fifteen to an apprenticeship in New York with the architectural firm of Renwick, Aspinwall & Russell, whose principal partner, James Renwick, Jr., was, with Richard Upjohn, a leading figure in the early Gothic Revival in this country. Renwick had provided Manhattan with two of its finest midcentury medieval churches: Grace on lower Broadway, begun in the 1840s, and Saint Patrick’s Roman Catholic Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, begun in the 1850s and completed a few years prior to Goodhue’s arrival in New York. It was this neo-Gothic world into which the budding designer plunged in 1884.


2 Oliver, Goodhue (note 2), pp. 2 ff.

Grace and Saint Patrick’s, like Upjohn’s Trinity at the head of Wall Street, represent the earliest phase on this side of the Atlantic of a design movement that originated in England, so far as Americans were concerned. Its chief voice was Augustus Welby Pugin, whose vision of an exclusively Gothic world (filled with churches of his own design) appears as frontispiece to his Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture (1843). Through Renwick, Goodhue’s professional lineage reached back to Pugin, the theoretical rock upon which rested English medievalism of the later nineteenth century, whether championed by Ruskin or Morris, the high Victorians, or the Arts and Crafts Movement. Pugin’s influence went far beyond mere building design. In his view reform was all-encompassing, and from his feverish talent stemmed drawings for churches and everything they contained. Another plate in the Apology drives home his program (figure 1). In it Pugin displays his wares, his designs for a spectrum of medieval liturgical hardware ranging from miters and incense burners to altar cloths and book covers.

Pugin died seventeen years before Goodhue’s birth. One might suppose that his influence had weakened by the 1880s, when Goodhue joined Renwick, but in fact it remained for the younger man focused and potent. We know from Goodhue’s early partner, Ralph Adams Cram, that Pugin’s books were an important source for Goodhue’s designs in architecture. And we have visual confirmation of continuity in the realm of the decorative arts in sheets of sketches such as the one (figure 2) that contains studies for the seal of the Boston Arts and Crafts Society, founded in 1897. Here Goodhue’s pen explores a host of design problems ranging from buildings to ecclesiastical furniture to book covers, all of medieval inspiration. On such a page, and on others like it, Goodhue practices the profession of total design prescribed by Pugin and reiterated by the English Arts and Crafters.

Goodhue was, then, an all-round designer, but at least through the 1890s he wore two principal hats. In the one guise, as he is portrayed in a grotesque in his chapel at West Point, he practiced architecture; in the other, he embellished books for the trade and private presses of Boston.

\[6 \text{ R. A. Cram, My Life in Architecture (Boston, 1935), p. 78.}\]
Figure 1 "Church Furniture Revived at Birmingham," from A. W. N. Pugin, *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England*, London, 1843
Figure 2 B. G. Goodhue, miscellaneous sketches for architecture and decorative arts, various dates
While still a teenaged apprentice to Renwick, Goodhue was publishing pen sketches of Pomfret buildings in professional magazines. At twenty he entered a Richardsonian Romanesque project in the competition for the Anglican cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York. This early perspective already shows the low angle of vision characteristic of his presentation drawings. Although his scheme for Saint John went unnoticed, two years later, now an aged twenty-two, he won a competition for the cathedral of Saint Matthew in Dallas. Recognizing his lack of experience in actual building, Goodhue associated himself in 1891 with the Boston architectural firm headed by Cram. By the next year he was Cram's partner. The firm's first triumph was All Saints' in the Ashmont section of Boston, a stylistically transitional work combining the seemingly irreconcilable characteristics of Richardsonian robustness and Gothic grace. Winning the competition for the major additions to West Point in 1903 established the firm on a national basis. Goodhue's drawing for the project, showing cliffs of architecture rising sublimely above the Hudson's waters, their picturesque silhouettes darkly emphasized against the blank sky, is an enhanced version of the low angle of vision in the perspective of Saint John's (figure 3). This trademark of Goodhue's graphics recurs over and over, for example, in the drawing for the Frederick Peterson house at Brewster, New York, of 1915. The low eye level dramatizes the image, urging the building to body upward from its geological base. This viewpoint is also characteristic of architectural perspectives in English romantic book illustration, such as the view of Ludlow Castle, after J. M. W. Turner, in an 1858 Boston edition of Milton's poetry (figure 4). The sublime may be tempered somewhat in Goodhue's presentation, but it remained the underlying aesthetic assumption on which his sensibilities rested. As Cram reported, "the sense of romance possessed him . . . and made him a Mediaevalist in all things."7

With the need to supervise the work at West Point, Goodhue moved to New York, where, starting in 1905, the firm created in Saint Thomas's on Fifth Avenue (across and down from Renwick's Saint

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7 Douglass Shand Tucci, All Saints' Ashmont (Boston, 1973).
Patrick's, one of the glories of turn-of-the-century urban Gothic. Goodhue's creative energy lingers in the smallest detail, and in such decorative accents as the ornamental door hardware, the spirit of Pugin lives on into the early twentieth century. When Saint Thomas was completed in 1913, Goodhue split with Cram and began a period of stylistic experimentation in architecture that eventually materialized in buildings such as the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln, begun in 1920, in which Gothic drive joins classic calm to emerge as modern synthesis. Goodhue died as its tower began to rise above the prairie.

Goodhue's winning design for the cathedral at Dallas was never built, but it represents a pivotal moment in his career. It brought him to Boston and into a circle called by various recent writers the "local
Figure 4 Ludlow Castle, after J. M. W. Turner, from John Milton, *The Poetical Works*, Boston, 1858
bohemian intelligentsia,"9 or "those brilliant young men of the nine-
ties,"10 that took for granted the totality of the design reform stem-
mimg from Augustus Pugin and reinvigorated by William Morris. The circle included the architect and polemicist Cram, the aesthete publisher-photographer F. Holland Day, Day’s partner, Herbert Copeland, the designer-printer D. B. Updike, the poet Bliss Carman, the architects and designers who collectively formed in 1897 the earliest Arts and Crafts group on this side of the Atlantic, and the intellectuals who gathered into such social clubs as the Pewter Mugs and the Visionists. It was a heady world for a twenty-two-year-old, even one as gifted as Goodhue. In this ripe atmosphere his abilities and inclinations flowered in memorable works of architecture and book design. Nor was he merely one of the crowd. As Cram wrote in the 1925 memorial volume to his former partner: "It was he, more than any one else, who was instrumental in bringing together that extraordinary group of young men who found such joy in life. . . . He would design a font of type or a sumptuous set of initials as quickly as he would clothe an architectural form with the splendid vesture of intricate Gothic ornament."11

In his Decorative Illustration of Books (1896), Walter Crane distinguishes between what he calls a volume’s "pictorial statement" and its "decorative treatment," that is, between illustration and ornamentation.12 If artists of the book in Boston are divided into such camps, then Hammatt Billings falls into the pictorial fold, and Goodhue must be counted a decorator. His illustrations, while significant, take second place to his borders and full-page designs, covers, bookplates, printers’ marks and seals, miscellaneous decorations, initials, tailpieces, endpapers, and printing types.13

If Goodhue’s architecture was deeply rooted in the English medieval revival, his work as book designer stemmed from both old and new layers of the same soil. The cover of the Knight Errant, that evanescent art magazine edited by Goodhue and Cram, with contributions by Day, Walter Crane, Bliss Carman, and others of the

11 Cram, "Partnership" (note 8), pp. 30-31.
13 Book Decorations by Bertram Crasvenor Goodhue (New York, 1931).
crowd, visually conveys their editorial stance (figure 3): sir knight, somewhat hesitantly to be sure (for he glances back toward a kerchief being waved from the open window of the castle-keep), rides forth to do battle with the forces of materialism and ugliness represented by snakes, turtles, toads, and other crawling things. The failures of previous aesthetics are graphically depicted by the skull half-submerged in the dank tarn lying athwart his path. This image reeks of Scott or Tennyson while it anticipates Howard Pyle; it is the illustrative equivalent of the romantic associations of Goodhue's architecture. At the same time, the cover's heavy black-and-white design punched up with red, and the magazine as a whole, a large quarto on handmade paper set in old-style type with wide margins and embellished with initials and tailpieces by Goodhue, shows an early awareness of the English Arts and Crafts book, especially of William Morris's new Kelmscott press.

His high-minded, high-art Knight Errant having succumbed to the forces of materialism within a year, Cram retreated to the opposite extreme, producing in 1893 a call to idleness entitled The Decadent: Being the Gospel of Inaction. We might think of it as the 1890s mild equivalent to Timothy Leary's 1960s call for a drop-out drug culture. Copeland and Day published it; it was dedicated to Goodhue, who provided the cover, three initials, and a frontispiece. This last reflects Cram's change of mood, for here the designer is toying with a variant stream of current English art, the Aesthetic Movement. This linear, flat, sanguine, asymmetrical, Japanese-influenced plate shows Aurelian Blake, the opium-beclouded hero (if a tract on inaction can have a "hero"), lounging in a hammock full of books and flowers, smoke from his hookah swirling around Shiratsuyu, his oriental serving girl. The art of Aubrey Beardsley comes to mind, but this is Beardsley denatured and, in truth, banalized. Cram's fin-de-siècle text and Goodhue's derivative illustration do nothing to enhance the reputation of either, and from this moment on, with notable exceptions, Goodhue stuck largely to decoration, leaving illustration to others.

Susan Thompson sees the frontispiece to The Decadent as clearly an Aesthetic creation, but she finds the book as a whole, with its heavy black letter scarcely relieved by a few historiated initials, decidedly Arts and Crafts. The Arts and Crafts book was known in Boston as early as 1891, the very year Morris opened his Kelmscott Press; in October, five months after it was published in Hammersmith, the
Boston trade publisher Roberts Brothers issued *The Story of the Glittering Plain* in photofacsimile. The heavy type, engraved initials, and swirling vegetable borders were to become standards of Morris’s work. The speed of *The Glittering Plain*’s publication in Boston attests to the anglophilia of local taste; and the speed with which Morris’s example affected the Boston publishing world in general and the work of Goodhue in particular attests to the permeation across the ocean of the Arts and Crafts spirit.
By 1892 this spirit had generated a native design, although not one from a fine-art press, nor one by Goodhue. The first American book to show Morris’s influence was a collection of sketches by F. Hopkinson Smith, published by Houghton Mifflin and designed by D. B. Updike. This has a title page border drawn by Harold Van Buren Magonigle, a man better known as a Gothic-revival architect than as a book decorator. Two years passed before Goodhue’s more accomplished emulation appeared, in Rossetti’s House of Life, from the house of Copeland and Day. According to the colophon, this exists in five hundred copies on French handmade paper plus fifty on Michallet paper, with three borders and one hundred fourteen initials by Goodhue. It is dated 1894, although printed in 1893 and—again according to Susan Thompson, upon whose research I draw heavily—was probably designed in 1892. A review in the Knight Errant, while recognizing the origin of Goodhue’s inspiration in this work, self-consciously sought to distance its editor from his source, and concluded that “while Mr. Goodhue’s style would hardly have been possible without Mr. Morris, it cannot be justly said that he has copied him.” I leave it to others to decide the size of Pugin’s American follower’s debt to Pugin’s English successor.

After the House of Life, Goodhue turned out one Arts and Crafts book after another for Copeland and Day, Updike’s Merrymount Press, and other Boston publishers. In some work, like the title page to the ballad of Saint Kevin, Goodhue’s tiny 1894 masterpiece for the guild of Visionists shown in apostolic assembly at the top (figure 6), the page spread for Louise Imogen Guiney’s Nine Sonnets Written at Oxford (Copeland and Day, 1895), or the Description of the Pastoral Staff...at Albany (Merrymount, 1900), Goodhue’s use of architectural rather than floral borders seems to penetrate through the Kelmscott influence to its Pugin-esque roots. Other work, such as the folio Altar Book published in 1896, achieves, despite the noticeable stylistic differences between illustrations and decoration, a kind and quality of design equal to the master of Hammersmith himself (figure 7). The Altar Book was a collaborative effort overseen by Updike, with heraldic designs by Charles Sherman of London, illustrations by Robert

\[\text{Thompson, American Book Design (note 2), pp. 77-78.}\]

\[\text{Friday, Artists of the Book (note 2), p. 4.}\]

\[\text{Knight Errant (January 1893), quoted in Thompson, American Book Design (note 2), p. 44.}\]
Figure 6 B. G. Goodhue, title page to [Bliss Cerman],
"Saint Kevin: A Ballad", 1894
Figure 7 Verso of facing pages of *The Altar Book*, Boston, 1895
THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD, OR THE BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST, COMMONLY CALLED CHRISTMAS-DAY.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin, Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

Amen.

HEB. 1.

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory, and express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For unto whom of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? And when he saith again, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee; who maketh his angels ministers, and his ministers a flame of fire. But unto the Son, he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity: therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. And, thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of thy hands: they shall...

Figure 7: Recto of facing pages of The Altar Book, Boston, 1896
Anning Bell of Liverpool, and borders, initials, and type (the first of two fonts to his credit) by Bertram Goodhue.

Goodhue's work as book decorator seems largely a function of his Boston days and milieu. His design for the cover of the *Knight Errant* is dated in the lower right corner 1891, the year he joined Cram; his last works are dated 1903-04, the year he moved to New York. Thereafter, lacking the stimulation of the Boston crowd, and increasingly becoming slave to a burgeoning architectural practice, with few exceptions (for example, one drawing for initials at the Grolier Club dated 1914), he abandoned his second design career.

Goodhue's output in both books and architecture was far richer than suggested here, but the medievalist roots and characteristics that have been emphasized are fundamental in any attempt to understand his historical position as a designer. It is possible, in fact, to envision him at work looking something like figure 8, at least during the first decade of his career, perhaps not dressed in a robe but totally immersed in a world of Gothic things. The fact is, this is not Goodhue, but Pugin; at least, this is the frontispiece to Pugin's *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), depicting the medieval designer at work. Perhaps the parallel is forced, perhaps not. Goodhue shows what is presumably himself looking a lot like that medieval designer in his personal bookplate (figure 9); he would certainly have acknowledged his descent from the English polemicist.

But this bookplate suggests another dimension, a decidedly macabre one, to Goodhue's self-image. Here Death stays the designer's hand, just as death in fact stayed Goodhue's hand in 1924 when he was only fifty-five. In his biography of Goodhue for the *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, Richard Oliver characterizes Goodhue's death as coming at an "awkward moment." It can be argued that most deaths are inconveniently scheduled, but what Oliver meant to emphasize was that Goodhue died just as he had begun to emerge in architecture from the Gothic Revival of his origins to a twentieth-century interpretation of historical materials in buildings such as the Lincoln State House. Goodhue's work in the book arts was cut off even earlier and more awkwardly, not by death but by the press of architecture. If we wish that he had had more time to work out his reinterpreted architectural style, what can we say of his potential as a book designer? All is speculation, of course, but
one piece of evidence at least suggests that Goodhue would have continued to develop in the realm of the book arts. The work that stands out from the line of Arts and Crafts designs listed earlier is his contribution, including endpapers, illustrations, and covers, to Emily Deaifield’s *Alice in Wonderland*, printed by Updike at the Merrymount Press and published by Dodd, Mead in 1898 (figure 10). Here, as at the beginning of the decade, Goodhue works as both pictorial and
decorative artist, to reiterate Crane’s distinctions, and has broken out of the black and white straightjacket of his coeval production. He works in the firm, flat, colorful style that marks and perhaps anticipates the product of contemporaries such as Maxfield Parrish. Here, in the book arts, he seems to prefigure the modernized medievalism that was to mark his last works in architecture. A full study of his achievement in book design will have to recognize the variety suggested by this image.
Figure 10 B. G. Goodhue, cover to *Alice in Wonderland: A Play*, New York, 1898
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