Rediscovering Herbert Horne

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Ian Fletcher has written so well about the world of the 1890s that it is hard to believe that his extraordinary creativity has ceased. Now thanks to the dedication of Robert Langenfeld, Loraine Fletcher, and Kathleen Mason Driskell the book that he was working on for many years, in the midst of doing so much else, has been made ready for the press. Perhaps the most important piece published previously on Horne was Ian Fletcher's own, written as long ago as 1970: "Herbert Horne: The Earlier Phase," in the English Miscellany, edited by Mario Praz who rivalled both Horne and Fletcher in the amazing and fertile range of his interests. Ian Fletcher had the rare ability to explore thoroughly and perceptively the many different worlds necessary to know for a discussion of the life and accomplishments of Herbert Horne.

Some years ago, writing about the acquisition by the Stanford University Library of a small but significant collection of Horne material, I attempted, as an introduction to the collection, to provide an overview of Horne's life. What Ian Fletcher has written is full of rich particularity and insight. But I thought it might be helpful to the reader, drawing on my earlier piece, to recount very briefly Horne's career to serve as a preface to a more detailed depiction and analysis of his accomplishments.

Herbert Horne was a man of wide-ranging talents. He began his professional career as an architect, but quickly branched out into other creative activities. He became a fine designer of books and type, an editor, a poet, an expert
collector of art, and a widely recognized art historian and critic.

Horne was in the tradition of William Morris, although more consciously an aesthete and lacking Morris's intense concern for politics. As the century turned, Horne made his mark in advanced artistic circles. His varied career tells us a good deal about what was happening then in the world of design, literature, art criticism, and architecture.

He began training with a surveyor, but he saw some drawings by the designer and architect A. H. Mackmurdo, who was in the process of starting his own building and design practice, and persuaded his father that he should be allowed to apprentice himself to him. Mackmurdo was one of the most interesting English figures in the generation after William Morris—working in his wake, influenced by him, yet disagreeing with some of his ideas. Mackmurdo was also a disciple and friend of John Ruskin's. As one of a growing group who believed that an architect should involve himself in all aspects of a building, Mackmurdo in the early 1880s designed in an exhilarating and exciting way.

At about this time, Mackmurdo, Horne, and the designer Selwyn Image brought into being a loose association of craftsmen in various mediums known as the Century Guild. The Century Guild was a design group that was anxious to strike out in a new direction; it was at odds with Victorian styles and heralded what was to come in the twentieth century. It was into this hothouse of new design that Horne plunged at the tender age of eighteen, and he was so successful that two years later he became Mackmurdo's architectural partner.

Mackmurdo and Horne actually designed only a few buildings, in Knightsbridge and elsewhere, but they were all striking, fresh, imaginative, comparatively simple, and representative of a new style that did not simply ransack the past. The partners also designed numerous objects and materials to
be used in their "new" architecture—delightful furniture, textiles, wallpapers. They obviously felt that they could do whatever they set their minds to.

Horne also participated in the literary life of London. Mackmurdo's office was at 20 Fitzroy Street, and the house became practically a literary and musical commune. Members of the Rhymers' Club met there and Arnold Dolmetsch, who recreated ancient instruments and played older music as it was performed in its own time, gave concerts. (One of the harpsichords Dolmetsch built was decorated by Horne together with Image and Helen Coombe, who would later marry the Bloomsbury painter and art critic Roger Fry.)

In addition, Horne was active in the related world of books, book design, and the founding of an important art magazine, the Century Guild Hobby Horse. The first issue of the magazine appeared in 1884; then between 1886 and 1892 twenty-eight issues were published; the final three appeared in a different format in 1893-94. As art historian Gillian Naylor has observed, "the Hobby Horse was the first of the art-oriented literary magazines of the 1880s and 1890s." The magazine was as committed as the Century Guild itself to total design, to the belief that every component of the printed page—type, margins, illustrations—was in a vital relationship to every other and that the journal itself must be a work of art. In keeping with this belief, it was printed entirely on handmade paper.

Although it had few subscribers, the Hobby Horse was very influential. It helped inspire Morris with the possibilities of good design. In 1888 Bernard Berenson—later to be less admiring and rather a rival of Horne's—met Horne and saw him as the successor to William Morris and "the great man of the next generation, as architect, painter, poet, fine critic, and editor of the Hobby Horse."

Horne also did some editing, presumably to supplement his income which was probably limited at the time. He was a

For a few more years Horne continued his activities in London. But he and Mackmurdo were on increasingly bad terms and in 1890 the architectural partnership dissolved. He had an enjoyable life in London—he was a devotee of ballet girls, as were Selwyn Image and Reverend Steward Headlam, the Christian Socialist priest who formed a guild for stage "artistes." All three enjoyed going to the Empire Theatre, and they supported Winston Churchill when he fought against the attempt to shut down its promenade, which was frequented by ladies of dubious virtue.

Horne became very fond of Florence and spent more and more time in the city. Finally he settled there permanently in 1900, perhaps to make money as an art dealer. He was a connoisseur and an art collector, and in Italy that aspect of his life would take in even greater importance. Even before he left London, he had amassed a considerable collection of English drawings; once he had settled in Florence, however, most of these were sold.

In Florence, Horne continued his dedication to the life of art, but primarily as an art historian and art expert. For a while he was quite friendly with Bernard Berenson, dedicating a translation of Vasari's essay on Leonardo Da Vinci (1903) to him. Horne wrote less material specifically about art history than Berenson, but he did publish one masterpiece in 1908, his mammoth study of Botticelli. Botticelli, although championed by Ruskin and Pater, had not yet acquired his present canonical status, and Horne's work was crucial in that progression. The study has recently been reissued by the Princeton
University Press with a foreword by John Pope-Hennessy, who states that it is "the best monograph in English on an Italian painter. . . . As an interpretation of Botticelli and his work it has never been surpassed." The art historian Fritz Saxl remarked about Horne that he was "perhaps the most accomplished art historian of art whom [England] has ever produced."

Horne's last triumph of aestheticism was the acquisition in 1911 of a handsome Florentine palazzo, now known as the Museo Horne, which in a gesture of thanks toward his adopted city, he bequeathed to Florence after his death there in 1916. Ian Fletcher has presented us with a rich picture of Horne, in all the multiplicity of his talents and accomplishments. The book that follows celebrates both men.

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