

Symbolism in Arts and Crafts

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The architects and designers who responded to the Arts and Crafts movement were essentially ecumenical; they fostered greater Christian unity and cooperation. Some went further, promoting the spiritual unity of all humankind; they concluded there was only one God, who was the source of all creation; all the major faiths derive from the same spiritual source; mankind was created equal; and different races and cultures were worthy of acceptance and respect. These ideas were expressed in William Lethaby's highly influential *Architecture Mysticism and Myth* (1891).

Arguing for the fundamental unity of mankind, it stood to reason that commonly held beliefs would be expressed in places of worship. There were symbols common to all races and cultures. The old architectural forms had survived because they served purpose; they were both functional and meaningful. So Lethaby looked for shared architectural forms and decoration, revealing their underlying meaning. Certain structures have been replicated across the world, such as the pyramid, which can be found from North Africa to South America. Pyramids, man-made mountains, express a common belief: man was created on the mountain top, where it made contact with heaven; in death man wanted to ascend to heaven, a spiritual realm.

Many ancient religions saw the world as a mountain, its base surrounded by an ocean and covered by a great dome. All vegetation sprang from a central tree, from which flowed four rivers; this enclosed garden became Paradise. So **the square** came to represent 'earth/man', while 'sky/spirit' was expressed as **round**; hence, saints are identified by their round haloes. **Divine Geometry**, based on the **square and circle**, explains why many churches have a dome or an apse; this is the space in which God resides. The **triangle** also had meaning, in Christianity standing for the Trinity or God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. The spire of a church or cathedral is a hopeful symbol, pointing to heaven, reminding us of the life hereafter. **Squares, circles and triangles** constantly reoccur in patterns, as in the **diamond lattice window** at St Edward the Confessor. This very simple design was thus given divine meaning.

The **wavy lines** on the font clearly allude to baptism and the cycles of life (the 7 ages of man); but **wavy lines** also symbolise the **Sea of Heaven**. This celestial sea forms the bottom of the over-world; Christ is sometimes shown standing on the Sea of Heaven, indicating he is in Paradise. While the floor of the church was likened to the sea, the vault above was the sky. **At Kempeley the single span vault**, with struts that spring directly from the wall, **suggests an upturned ship**; this was a very popular Arts and Crafts device already used by E.S. Prior and Lethaby.

The ship was a favourite Arts and Crafts motif, standing for 'craft-man-ship'. Medieval shipbuilding encompassed the skills admired by the craft fraternity; Lethaby wanted to keep art 'shipshape', unifying building skills with design. As a symbol **the ship signalled life's journey and the quest for happiness and fulfilment**. For the congregation the ship-form promised safety and protection. The motif expressed the longed for 'wholeness', a sense of community, which underpinned a movement that lauded village life. Following Lethaby's precepts Randall Wells created a building with both purpose and meaning.