

## **Kilpin and the English System of Art Education**

By Geoff Carr

Lekh Kilpin's contributions to the arts cannot be fully appreciated without considering how profoundly the system of art education in nineteenth century England influenced his career - both as an artist and as a teacher of art. Unlike most contemporary art instruction that encourages different approaches to making art, the English system of Kilpin's time was reductive, conservative and pragmatic. Nearly twenty years before his birth, a House of Commons committee (1835) determined that trade in English goods abroad was down due to the higher quality of design evident in French exports. To catch up with French manufacturers, a national program of arts training was founded. Ignoring the advice of those who had pressured the House into forming the committee, members chose to implement a German model of teaching (*gewerbeschule*) that focused on repetitive, "scientific" drawing exercises, rather on spontaneous studies of real human subjects, a key exercise in the French method. By avoiding the French *atelier* system, the committee did not hope to create artists, but artisans, who would satisfy the nation's need for "new blood" in manufacturing design, but who would not compete with fine artists for commissions. From the start, this policy hamstrung the effectiveness of the English system, evidenced by an enduring gap between French and English design, by the long succession of directors all intent in overturning the work of the previous administration and by the ceaseless renaming of the institution itself.

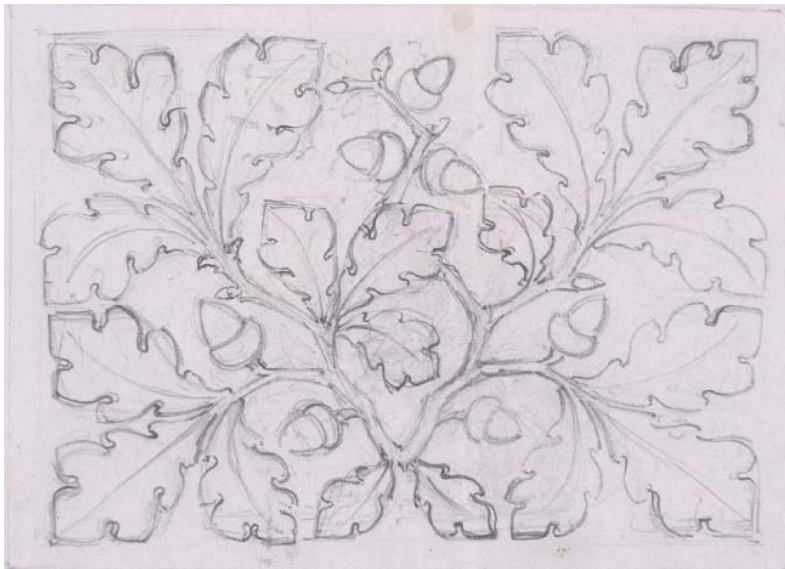
By 1880, when Kilpin became associated with the system, the then National Art Training Schools (so named from 1863-96) had become the target of much scorn. The art theorist John Ruskin, for example, blamed the administration for "corrupting the system of art teaching... into a state of abortion and falsehood from which it will take twenty years to recover". Similarly, Augustus Spencer, who would eventually help scrap the National Art Training Schools (NATS), charged that official instruction was "slow, vicious, feeble and antiquated", made ineffective because of a stubborn adherence to a program of precision copying of historical patterns of ornament and plaster casts of antique statuary. Not everyone agreed, however, with Ruskin and Spencer. It has been argued persuasively that the English system's focus on ornament later acted as a powerful influence on William Morris' Arts and Crafts designs - also, that the NATS' insistence on precise copying drills was a precursor to the linearity of the Art Nouveau. As both the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau styles did directly contribute to raising the appeal of English goods abroad, it could be concluded that through these influences, the NATS system did realize what it originally set out to do.

Despite these controversies, Kilpin's involvement with the NATS, or the "South Kensington School" as it was also called, would prove profitable. While earning the certification to teach, he had the good fortune of being present during a period of reform, and studied under the sculptor Jules Dalou and later under Dalou's successor, Edouard Lantéri. How deeply these associations influenced his work is in question, but Kilpin's strength as a draughtsperson, a skill clearly evident in many pieces in this collection, is not. The South Kensington system also provided Kilpin the means to make a living as an arts instructor and examiner. He worked as an examiner at South Kensington from around 1900 to 1906, when he left his post to relocate in Canada. He also taught art at the Enfield

Grammar School between 1880 and 1902. It is important to note that during this time, instruction in drawing was thought to elevate the moral character as well as the taste of the student - especially true of students who attended schools like Enfield, who studied drawing largely for self-improvement. This gives us reason to think that Kilpin believed his teaching work was important, morally charged labour.

After traveling to Canada in 1906, Kilpin taught art at the Montreal Technical Institute from approximately 1912 until the year of his death in 1919. As this institution shared with South Kensington an interest in improving domestic commercial design, Kilpin's experience in the English system program was undoubtedly crucial to his securing the job. He also held posts at Westmount High School and the King's School in the Westmount district during the 1910s, though the curriculum there is at this time unknown. What is clear is that Kilpin's involvement with the English system of training provided him the qualifications to earn a living as a teacher in England and in Canada. How this training and employment impacted his work as an artist is less obvious, but there is a sense of experimentation in some of his work suggesting his interest in working outside of the conservative tradition in which his career was so firmly rooted.

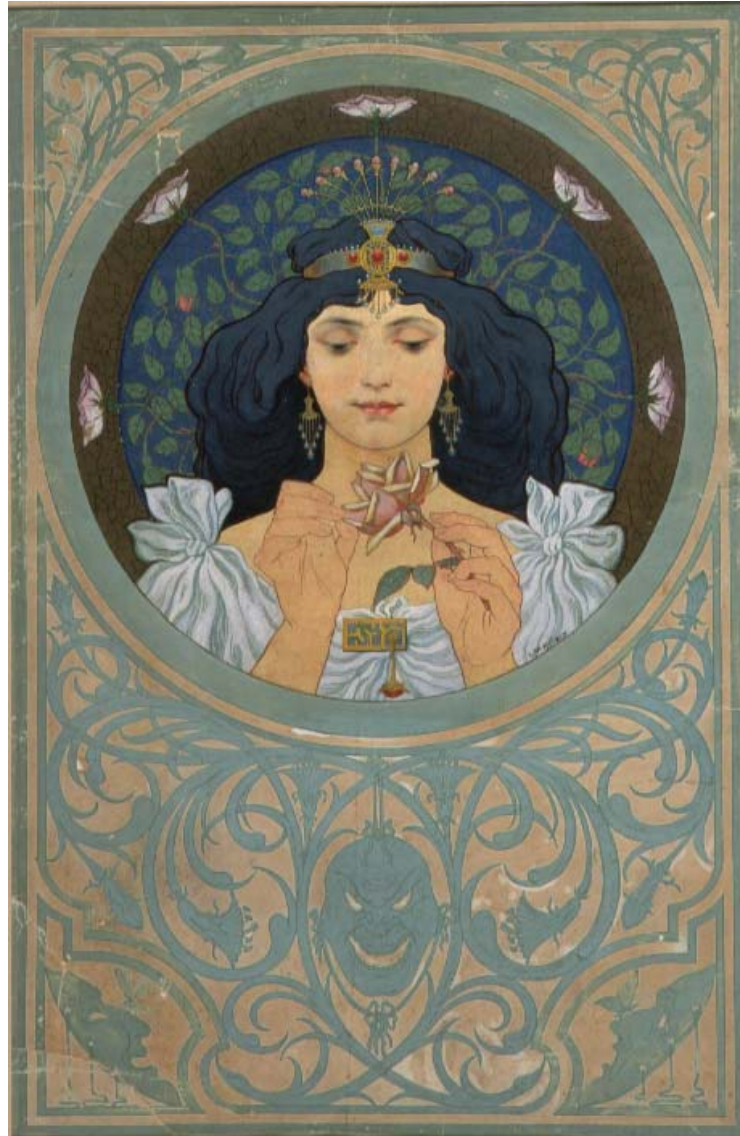
**Untitled**, n.d., graphite on paper, 9 x 12.2 cm, Langley Centennial Museum collection, 7328.



This pencil drawing is emblematic of the exercises taught in England's national arts education system. In the standardized manner, this oak leaf and acorn ornament would be copied "from the flat", that is, from another drawing. This common motif, like others taught in Kilpin's time, has numerous historic and symbolic associations that could be applied for multiple uses. Another feature that links this rendering to Kilpin's training at the National Arts Training Schools (NATS) is his conventionalized depiction of nature, rather than a more naturalistic one. This reflects an official desire to depict a balanced, orderly view of nature - to foil the more chaotic view advanced by the Romanticists. More than any other text of the period, Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), a diverse and richly illustrated collection of historical ornament from around the world,

clearly expresses the approved NATS version of conventionalized nature. Though enormously expensive, Owen's book was considered a crucial addition to any worthy art school's library. Its influence on subsequent generations of designers is beyond question.

**The Brunette**, n.d., watercolour, gouache on paper mounted on card, 67 x 44 cm, Langley Centennial Museum collection, not catalogued.



This large watercolour shows Kilpin's ability to work in the Art Nouveau style, the most commercial and popularized genre in turn of the century Europe. As the name suggests, Art Nouveau pieces typically attempted to displace accepted traditions of art and the authority they commanded with self-consciously modern approaches. Though there were utopian undercurrents associated with this renouncement of the past, it was more significantly tied to a profound sense of change wrought by material progress, especially by the explosion of mass-produced consumer goods and print media. Borrowing stylistic devices long used in Japanese woodblock prints – strong linear design, broad planes of

colour, simplification of pictorial space - this “new art”, as seen in Kilpin’s image, is flat, purposely rejecting the modeling of illusionistic space. Kilpin’s emphasis on nature, evident in his use of the writhing plant-like forms seen at bottom, is also characteristic of the Art Nouveau style. This type of ornamental foliage, derived from Islamic arabesques, would have been the type of design Kilpin would have practiced while at the National Arts Training Schools. Why Kilpin would choose to make this piece, however, is unclear. Though it resembles a type of lithographic poster used to advertise in European cities at this time, this piece is a large, hand-painted original, which raises interesting questions about his motivations for painting the work.

**Untitled**, n.d., watercolour on paper, 12.7 x 8.2 cm, Langley Centennial Museum collection, 8119.



This small painting is one of three such images in the Langley collection. Due to thick, paste-like applications of pigment on the paper, the colours appear richer than typically seen in most watercolours. The female subject rendered in profile, vaguely harkens back to Classical medallions. This free gathering from antiquity, characteristic of the Art Nouveau genre, implies a modern freedom from the traditional constraints placed on the language of Classicism - also, the linear floral ornament chosen by Kilpin is common to the style. Lacking a clear indication of why the artist would produce these cards, it is suggested that they may have been produced in advance for buyers unseen. In light of the widespread interest in collecting by the burgeoning middle class, this is not an unreasonable proposal. In this period, artists like Kilpin engaged in self-promotion to attract buyers who, leery of foreign forgeries of the “old masters”, sought local works “fresh from the painters loom”. Interestingly, at this time buying and displaying art was

thought to be an ethical way, especially among the middle classes, for money to be spent. Rather than regarding such purchases as mere acts of consumption, it was believed that displaying these goods would morally elevate those who viewed them, thus investing noble purpose to such expenditures on luxury.