The potent artistry of beer

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Opinion

I felt real excitement when Pillars brewery released their Vienna Lager in collaboration with the William Morris Gallery. Morris’ Wandle design adorns the labels and half of the proceeds support the gallery’s conservation and education programmes. As a former museum curator, there’s a lot I like here. Both partners have deep roots in Wandsworth, giving this beer a grounded sense of place. The slightly sweet, bready lager is light and refreshing, with a delicate citrus twist, making it very accessible. In the absence of reliable and consistent government funding, collaborations can help galleries raise awareness and money for their projects. It also helps a brilliant lager brewery reach a new audience. But more than that, I think that there are interesting parallels between modern microbreweries and the arts and crafts movement that Morris helped to establish. “Have nothing in your house you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful,” William Morris said. Compared to the high or fine arts, like painting and sculpture, arts and crafts practitioners focused on making everyday, useful items beautiful through their skills as crafts people. This dedication to functional craftsmanship, rather than creating something aesthetically beautiful with no purpose, strikes me as similar to brewing as an art form, not just a methodological science. Morris placed value on traditional skills over mass production. While modern brewing is usually a mechanised process, there is a distinction and value to small batch, limited release beers like Pillar’s Vienna Lager, compared to heavily commercialised, mass-produced lager. In his brilliant Craft: An Argument, Pete Brown unpicks some of the deep contradictions that existed within the arts-and-crafts movement. “Morris’ desire to make art and beauty accessible to all soon faded in relation to his desire to make work meaningful and fulfilling for the maker.” The movement generated highly decorated, practical things that cost much more than their mass-produced counterparts. Despite the socialist leanings of its founders, arts and crafts generated objects beyond the fiscal reach of the masses. I’m sure some would argue that craft beer does the same, preferring to buy a 660ml bottle of Stella down Tesco over a 330ml from Pillars for a pound more. Since reading Pete’s book, his suggestion that the word craft could describe things that are “nicer than they absolutely need to be” has stuck with me. There is a simple beauty in his words. And you will pay more for something that goes above and beyond the most basic functionality. But even these often costly decorative arts were viewed with disdain by the proponents of “fine art” – which tend to command an even higher price. Yet beer has been able to find a happy bedfellow with the high arts too, embodied by the tap takeovers that have been running regularly for years at Tate Modern. Verdant took inspiration from abstract artist Mondrian. Drop Project collaborated with London artist Emeka Ogboh. It is this heady mix of influences that I find so inspiring. The way brewers can draw from the coolest contemporary artists to the most traditional establishment classics to tell their stories. I can still remember the first time I saw gonzo illustrator Ralph Steadman’s hand on a Flying Dog bottle, probably 20 years ago. It was instantly recognisable but somehow, I was shocked to find it on a beer. It was messy, vital, brash and unapologetic. An impulse buy was a must, though I knew nothing about the brewery. Everything about the brand seemed so exciting and fresh. Happily, the flavour was there to match. I love it when breweries use artist collaborations to ooze cool from every pore. While some people may not rate the importance of the artwork that accompanies a beer, I think it can add real vivacity and personality. It enhances my experience of actually imbibing the liquid. Beer is a multisensory experience. I would have been really disappointed if Hand Brew Co’s Toadlicker was a terrible grapefruit pale because I viscerally needed it to live up to the breathless wonder that its joyous David Shrigley artwork evoked in me. I’m pleased to report it did not disappoint, and I was happy every sip of the way, glancing periodically over at the pump clip and smiling. There are so many other examples – Black Iris’ work with Kev Grey and Holy Goat with Jimbob Isaac bringing a true taste of heavy metal to our pubs. Whimsical captures of the South Downs countryside brought to us by Simon Gane for Burning Sky giving its beers an even more evocative sense of place. The dizzying pop culture kaleidoscope brazenly leaping from Mondo’s cans thanks to Luke Drozd. But few breweries have the privilege of putting work by a historic giant of the art world, like William Morris, on their labels. The administrative complexity involved in getting permission from an artist’s estate to reproduce bona fide masterpieces on a label, not to mention the often exorbitant expense, means the Pillars collaboration is something very special indeed. A draught to be admired, in every sense.