



A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY
OF
ESTAR, SER,
AND
THEIR UNIONS

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Certain elements of the intertwined histories of The Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (ESTAR) and of the Society for Esthetic Realizers (SER) are still controversial. However, other elements can be stated as fact, and are unanimously agreed upon, regardless of differences in temperament and tendency between those who, in times of unity or schism, have primarily identified with one Society or with the other. All associates of ESTAR(SER), for example, are scholars, researchers, and writers concerned with the relationship of historical knowledge and the practices that produce it to the Order of the Third Bird, and who devote themselves to freeing the Order's storied past from the marmoreal medium of history, as a sculpture emerges from a block of stone.

ESTAR was the first group to appear, and drew many of its original members from a trans-Atlantic Arts and Crafts milieu in the early 1880s. Its largely London and Boston-based scholars and academics – most well-nigh established in their respective disciplines as Classicists, Sinologists, and the like, and most having discovered each other in the course of late clubroom hours during an international Oxford conference on the “idea of Beauty” – freely exchanged materials and insights in their correspondence, and freely collaborated in their publications.

The writers and artists that later formed SER, in the 1890s, were younger, and far more inclined to embrace the decadent, Huysmanian aspects of the European Aesthetic Movement of that time. Its half Anglophone, half Francophone membership centered around the small journals that in the United States were known as “dinkey magazines,” and were based in San Francisco, Cambridge MA (among the Harvard Aesthetes), Oxford, and Paris.

Present-day allusions to an enduring rivalry between ESTAR and SER overlook that fact that both these acronyms, along with whatever real tensions there were, had their origin in the negotiations and discoveries leading up to their official joining in 1917. This move felt, at the time, like a necessity, since the already small membership of both groups had been put under considerable pressure. Among the university lecturers and whimsical dons of ESTAR, the aestheticist doctrines that had drawn them to the history of the Order had for some time been losing their *éclat*, in a rapidly changing artistic-cultural climate. Many of the young bohemians and dandies of SER, in the meantime, had either fallen in the Great War, or had defected to one of many glorious futures brandished by a new century: whether as fractured as Duchamp’s nude, smoothly machined as a Futurist’s dream, or implacable as a worker’s uprising or anarchist bomb.

The ESTAR-SER alliance of the early twentieth century was short-lived. Because of the rather loose daily ties that exist between writers and scholars living in different cities and countries, it is difficult to determine what year the activities of the alliance ended. But by 1925, none of the original members of ESTAR were still publishing or researching in relation to the Order. The output of the original members of SER tapered off sharply as well, though this also coincided with a changing of the guard: by the mid-twenties, what remained of SER consisted of an eccentric band of youth, many employed as journalists, who lingered in the peripheries of various radical leftist avant-garde groups. Even they, however, apparently ceased all activity during or immediately before the Second World War. It should perhaps be mentioned that a great deal of the interwar ambivalence and attenuation apparently concerned that perennial problem (not appropriate to take up in any detail in this sketch): to wit, the proper relationship between those working on the history of the Order and associates of the Order itself.

Then, in 1959, a person under the assumed editorial name of Hogfoot Milcom gathered together – or so he claimed – every single one of the texts written by both ESTAR and SER cohorts between 1883 and 1944, tracking down obscure single-issue journals and ephemeral flyers. After attempting to place his collection with various American publishers, he printed and bound the two volumes himself with a Mobile, Alabama imprint; these volumes form a part of what is now known as the W-Cache. Additionally, Milcom used this occasion to contact any of the members of ESTAR and SER who were still living, and even commissioned further work from them. Many responded with enthusiasm, and a very brief renaissance followed, with quantities of correspondence and a moderate influx of new membership.

In 2010, something happened that changed the course of this modest and punctuated history: the discovery of the W-Cache. It was not so much a discovery, however, as a delivery, for this vast and rich archive, contained in two stacks of red plastic moving crates, was quite literally dropped on the doorstep of an elderly couple who had first met when they were inducted into the fleetingly reborn ESTAR-SER consortium of the early 60s. The materials included a letter, unsigned, stating that they belonged to an individual who had spent decades compiling a history, across centuries and continents, of the Order of the Third Bird – and that this individual, who had passed recently away, had willed this research collection to any surviving members of ESTAR or SER locatable by the executor.

The recipients of the W-Cache, amazed by what they found therein, began then and there to rebuild a network of researchers. This time, however, ESTAR and SER were joined in unity from the outset, and ESTAR(SER) continues to be a vibrant and growing community, for all its various internal disagreements. And the W-Cache itself grows – since it is no longer a discrete collection, but the name for any new document or discovery that falls within ESTAR(SER)'s grasp. The collective, then, not only publishes critical editions of the original archival materials, but engages in original research that broadens and deepens the Cache, the Societies' membership, and knowledge and understanding of the Order.