

MORRIS & Co



An Art Gallery of South Australia Travelling Exhibition

Powerhouse Museum 18 August – 6 November 2005

Melbourne Museum 25 November 2005 – 12 February 2006

ABOVE: *Drawing Room, Auchendarrock, Mount Barker, Adelaide Hills*
Recreated interior using the original Morris & Co. *Spring thicket* wallpaper and *Armchair upholstered in Persian Brocatel*, supplemented with *Australia* table cover and Lily carpet [nos 21, 28, 43], and James Powell & Sons glassware. ©

Who was William Morris?

William Morris (1834-1896) was a remarkable man who lived and worked in Victorian Britain.

He was a leading figure in the revival of the decorative arts in the second half of the nineteenth century, and has sometimes been referred to as the father of modern design.

Whilst this is the legacy we remember him for today he was also known in his lifetime as an active conservationist, both of the environment and historical buildings, a leading socialist, a successful and accomplished writer, and the printer of fine books.

Abandoning a planned career as a clergyman Morris threw himself with energy into the arts and became not only a successful designer and craftsman but also a spokesman for the decorative arts and their place in the world.

The work he designed drew heavily upon nature. This influence can be found in his preference for strong, flowing curves and repeat patterns. He involved himself in almost all the decorative arts - wallpapers, curtains, carpets, furnishing fabrics, furniture, stained glass windows, embroidery and tapestry weaving.

Morris established a successful company to produce high quality goods for household decoration, using traditional production methods. Everything produced by the company Morris could produce himself - teaching himself the techniques needed before teaching the skills to others who worked for him.

In the 1880's Morris became more heavily involved in politics and most of the designs for his company were done by a former student of Morris, J. H. Dearle.

In the 1890's Morris began a new enterprise - the printing of fine quality books at his Kelmscott Press.

Morris died in 1896 but his firm continued until 1940, and his influence is still apparent today.

Morris - achievements

The work of William Morris revitalized the decorative arts in Britain, and has led to some calling him the father of modern design. Frank Lloyd Wright claimed him as a direct influence.

In the 1880's crafts guilds sprang up around Britain, with varying success and longevity. The Arts and Crafts Movement which developed from his ideas spread worldwide and has had an impact on the decorative arts ever since. As for Morris himself - even today his designs are sought after and many of his beliefs and ideas are still valid.

The sound business management of Morris's firm showed that quality, well designed products could compete successfully in an industrial market.



Original design for *Wreath* wallpaper by William Morris, c.1876. ©

Morris also showed that good design did not have to die as a result of industrialization. Although he chose more traditional production techniques other designers who were influenced by him embraced the use of new technologies, whilst still insisting on control over quality and design.

Although the company closed in 1940 Morris's legacy continued to influence the development of design and the decorative arts during the twentieth century. The company could even claim a role in the revival of the embroidery industry in India!

“The craft revival of the mid - late twentieth century was also indebted to Morris and his insistence on hand production, natural materials, sound design and, above all, commitment to improving the quality of life through objects of use and beauty.” (Christopher Menz *Morris and Co.* Art Gallery of South Australia, 2002, p. 40)

Morris - philosophy

Morris believed that the separation of manufacture and design and the introduction of mass production had debased the quality of British decorative arts. Mass production, he believed, provided a large quantity of goods which lacked quality of design.

He may have been the first to coin the phrase “cheap and nasty” - “... set on having things cheap ... they get them nasty also...” (William Morris : *The Lesser Arts* - lecture delivered to the Trades' Guild of Learning.)

Morris was a strong advocate for the decorative arts, believing that there should be no distinction between them and the so-called 'fine arts' of painting, sculpture and architecture. He believed the arts to be mutually supportive and necessary to each other, and argued against any discrimination between the terms artist and craftsman.

A committed socialist Morris also believed that labour had become dreary because people no longer 'created' and beauty was absent from what they made. He advocated a utopian society where men worked as craftsmen, believing that labour was not a chore if you could take pride in what you created. He proposed the abandonment of luxuries in favour of living simply, claiming that you should have nothing in your home that you did not know to be useful and believe to be beautiful. (Something of a paradox to our eyes, viewing the lavish interiors he created!)

At his works in Merton Abbey Morris created an environment for his workers that was in contrast to the industrial manufactories of his time -

"...an old world air clings to the place, an atmosphere of quiet, and some of leisure, in which the workers, not harried to death, have space to breathe, and to enjoy something of the repose and beauty of the world ..." (p.5-6).

Morris was also an environmentalist who saw industrial cities as ugly, polluting and destroying. He believed that science needed to teach "...Manchester how to consume its own smoke, or Leeds how to get rid of its superfluous black dye without turning it into the river...". He wanted people to care about "...carrying on their business without making the world hideous..." but acknowledged that such improvements would be expensive. (William Morris - *The Lesser Arts*)

"I cannot refrain from giving you once again the message with which, as it seems, some chance-hap has charged me : that message is, in short, to call you to face the latest danger which civilization is threatened with, a danger of her own breeding : that men in struggling towards the complete attainment of all the luxuries of life for the strongest portion of their races should deprive their whole race of all the beauty of life."

(William Morris *The Beauty of Life* lecture delivered to the Birmingham School of Art and School of Design)

Morris chronology

- 1834 William Morris born to wealthy parents.
- 1848 1860 John Ruskin (1819-1900), influential Victorian art critic publishes *Modern Painters* in 5 volumes.
- 1848 Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) founded by a group of young artists who, influenced by the writings of John Ruskin, believed that contemporary British art was artificial, controlled by rules and conventions. They blamed this on the direction art had taken since the



Compton curtain, designed by J.H. Dearle in 1896. ©

Renaissance and wanted to return to the principles of art from before Raphael to rebuild quality and a new direction in British art. The founding members were William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), John Everett Millais (1829-1896), Thomas Woolner (1825-1892), W.M. Rossetti (1829-1919), James Collinson (1825-1881) and F. G. Stevens (1828-1919). The Brotherhood was short lived but its principles and ideas were influential.

- 1850 PRB publishes its short-lived journal *The Germ* containing poetry and essays on the theory and practice of art.
- 1851 *Great Exhibition of all Nations* held in London in the Crystal Palace. The poor quality of British applied and decorative arts seen there is attributed to industrialization. The young William Morris refuses to join a family trip to the Great Exhibition on the grounds that nothing there will be worth seeing.
- 1851-53 John Ruskin publishes *The Stones of Venice*.
- 1853 William Morris goes to Oxford to study theology. He meets Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), also studying to be a clergyman. They discover a shared passion for the Middle Ages and Arthurian legends and form a friendship that lasts throughout their lives. They develop an admiration for the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artists and discover the work of the art critic John Ruskin. Becoming increasingly interested in art, they decide to become artists.
- 1856 Morris becomes articled to George Edward Street (1824-1881), an architect working in the Gothic Revival style. Through Street Morris meets Philip Webb (1831-1915), an architect who becomes another life-long friend and collaborator. He is also introduced to contemporary textiles in Gothic Revival Style.
- After twelve months Morris leaves Street, having decided architecture is not for him, and is persuaded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti that all true artists are painters.
- 1857 Dante Gabriel Rossetti brings together a group of younger artists, including Morris and Burne-Jones to paint a fresco in the Oxford Union Debating Hall based on Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The collaborative nature of this project is adopted by Morris in future endeavours.
- 1856-57 Morris's first textile designs are made for embroidery.
- 1859 Morris marries Jane Burden (1839-1914).
- 1860 The Morris family move into the Red House, designed for them by Philip Webb. Morris and friends design and execute much of the interior in part leading to the formation of Morris's interior design company. "... and set myself to decorating it, we found ... that all the minor arts were in a state of complete degradation especially in England, and accordingly in 1861 with the conceited courage of a young man I set myself to reforming all that." (Morris 1883)
- 1861 Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. established, the partners being Morris, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown (1821-1927), Philip Webb, Charles Faulkner and Peter Paul Marshall (a surveyor). The firm was set up as a "Company of Fine Art Workmen".

- 1862 The company receives public acclaim at the *London International Exhibition*.
- 1860's Morris becomes a major figure in the decorative arts in Britain.
- 1865 The firm moved to Queen Square, Bloomsbury. Morris and family move from Red House to live above the company workshops.

The company begins to receive major commissions.
- 1875 Original partnership dissolved, business restructured under Morris's sole control and renamed Morris & Co.
- 1881 Workshops established at Merton Abbey, London.
- 1880's Crafts guilds begin to be formed. Morris devoting more time to other endeavours, particularly socialist politics.
- 1888 Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society formed in London.
Last of Morris's textile designs for furnishing fabrics.
J. H. Dearle (1860-1932) becomes the company's main designer.
- 1890 First large scale tapestry *The Adoration of the Magi* completed and receives international acclaim.
- 1891 Morris establishes the Kelmscott Press. His involvement with textiles in the last years of his life was in the production of the *Holy Grail* tapestries at Merton Abbey.
- 1896 Morris dies.
- 1940 Morris and Co. liquidated.

Morris - social context

In the mid nineteenth century the British Empire was at its height.

Since the early eighteenth century Britain had been rapidly industrializing. By 1850 it was the most advanced industrial nation in the world. The rapid move from a rural to an urban nation had brought huge social problems and the adhoc development of industrial centres meant that they were ugly, impoverished and under serviced. Many Victorians looked back to the pre-industrial era as a 'Golden Age' when life was better for everyone.

Whilst to our eyes the social situation in Victorian Britain was appalling it was also a time of major advances as people came to grips with the impact of industrialization and began to deal with it. Legislation was gradually enacted to restrict the age and hours of



Adjustable-back chair 1875 - 1900 designed by Philip Webb and upholstered in *Bird* fabric, designed by William Morris in 1878. ©

employees and to provide schooling for the general population. Sanitation and drainage began to be built to improve living conditions. Political processes began to change and become less open to corruption.

Not only had Britain advanced industrially, Britain had also expanded, with colonies throughout the world. This led to a wide range of artifacts being brought to Britain both privately and publicly. The Victorians had a fascination with the 'mysterious east' fed by these items.

Many Victorians were avid collectors of artifacts, having a nostalgic attachment to the past as a time of honour and chivalry, and a love of the exotic. Their interiors tended to be cluttered and eclectic.

Morris shared the nostalgia of his age for the past, being passionate about the Middle Ages and Arthurian legends. He was also a man of his time in his interest in other cultures, claiming a study of Ancient Egyptian, Byzantine, Persian, Indian, Northern European and English traditions provided sources for his designs.

Morris - issues

Art v. Craft / Process and Ownership

Morris took active part in the debate about the relative value of the "applied" and "fine" arts that still continues today.

What makes "applied" or "decorative" arts different from the "fine" arts?

Do you agree that applied or decorative arts are quite different to other art forms? Why?

Can embroideries be considered a work of art in the same manner that a painting or sculpture is?

What processes has the designer gone through to produce an embroidery design? Are these the same as those a painter might explore?

Can you analyse the work in the same manner as a painting - colour, form, composition, balance, style, etc.?

Does it make a difference if the same person designs and produces the embroidery?

Who is the artist? The designer or the producer?



Hanging, from the 1890s, is attributed to May Morris, designer and Mary Isobel Barr Smith, embroiderer. ©

Morris - selected works from the exhibition

1. Embroidery

Acanthus Portiere - J. H. Dearle, designer

Mary Isobel Barr-Smith, embroiderer

1890's

silk embroidery on linen

embroidered in Adelaide

Morris and Co. supplied embroidery kits complete with silks. Most were floral designs on objects with practical applications - e.g. cushion covers, table covers, mantle borders, etc.

A wide variety of embroidery stitches have been used in this piece which would have been provided with the design marked out on the linen. The texture of the different stitches are as important as the colour to the overall effect of this piece.

2. Tapestry

The Adoration of the Magi - Edward Burne-Jones, designer

D.H. Dearle, designer of floral background

Designed 1887

Designed 1887

This tapestry woven 1900-1902



The Adoration of the Magi 1900-1902. ©

Morris's interest in the Middle Ages and traditional techniques naturally led to an interest in tapestry. Unfortunately, another company preempted his plans to produce tapestries - The Windsor Tapestry Works were established in 1875 under the Queen's patronage but it was not until 1879 that Morris began weaving. As soon as he had mastered the technique he taught it to Dearle and the firm began producing tapestries.

The technique Morris used was high-warp or *haute-lisse*, a technique used by medieval Flemish weavers, in which the weaver works from behind the tapestry and can see their progress in a mirror. The warp runs from side to side, so that when the weavers are working they are looking at the design sideways.

Weaving became almost an obsession with Morris, he had a loom set up in his bedroom and worked at it to relax himself.

The Adoration was the first large scale tapestry produced by Morris and Co.. At least ten versions of it were woven between 1890 and 1907, the first being for Exeter College, Oxford. The Art Gallery's *Adoration* is believed to be the sixth version.

The weaving was not Burne-Jones' only version of the design. In 1861 it was the subject of his first major painting commission, although the design was quite different, and in 1890-91 he produced a water colour on the theme entitled *The Star of Bethlehem* (watercolour on paper, 257x386 cm, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery).

The tapestry includes many Christian symbols. The white lilies are Madonna lilies, associated with the Virgin, and the red roses refer to the crucifixion. The other flowers are simply species found in English gardens.

3. Furniture

Sideboard - Philip Webb, designer
designed c. 1865
produced c. 1900
stained oak and brass

Webb, an architect, often collaborated with Morris on designs as well as providing his own designs for the company. He was one of the founding members of the firm in 1861, and designed the Red House for William and Jane Morris in 1859.

The simplicity of the sideboard's style is typical of wooden furniture produced by the firm and in contrast to the ornate designs of their soft furnishings and much other Victorian furniture.

4. Carpet

Hand Knotted Carpet - after William Morris, designer
attributed to J. H. Dearle, designer of border
c. 1895
hand knotted wool pile on cotton and jute warp

Hand knotted carpets were at the exclusive end of Morris and Co.'s range. They also produced cheaper machine made carpets. The carpets incorporated floral design, often using repeat motifs and showcase Morris's and Dearle's design skills. The knotting at each end of the carpet serves a decorative purpose, but it is also functional, tying off the weaving of the pile and keeping it secure.



Carpet c.1895. ©

5. Book

The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer Now Newly Imprinted -
Kelmescott Press, Hammersmith, 1896

Books were one of Morris's life long interests and the Kelmescott Press was his last great artistic endeavour. He approached it with all the energy that typified him, although he began the venture only five years before his death.

This work was planned from 1891 and is accounted Kelmescott's greatest work. It is an example of collaboration between Morris and Burne-Jones, who provided 87 illustrations. The flowing borders are by Morris.

6. Curtain

Evenlode - William Morris, designer
designed 1883
this fabric c. 1924
indigo discharge and colour woodblock print on cotton

Soft furnishing fabrics are one of the things people most closely associate with Morris. Until the 1880's the designs were all by Morris, but in 1888 Dearle took over. As with the carpets most designs revolved around flowing naturalistic forms and repeat patterns.

The indigo discharge technique involved dyeing the fabric with indigo, then printing the areas to be coloured with a bleaching agent. Woodblock prints were then used to print the colour in the bleached areas.

Morris – texts and websites

Morris - Texts to look at

Menz, Christopher, *Morris & Co.*,
Art Gallery of South Australia, 2002

Menz, Christopher, *Morris and Company, The Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts Movement*,
Art Gallery of South Australia, 1994

Aymer, Vallance, *The Life and Works of William Morris*,
Studio Editions, London, 1986 (first published in 1897 by George Bell and Sons)

Dore, Helen, *William Morris*,
Chartwell Books Inc., New Jersey, 1990

MacCarthy, Fiona, *William Morris, A Life for our Time*,
Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1994

Morris, William, *Hopes and Fears for Art - Five Lectures delivered in Birmingham, London and Nottingham 1878-1881*,
Ellis and White, London, 1882

Thompson, E. P., *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*,
Stanford University Press, California, 1955

Morris – websites to explore

www.speel.demon.co.uk/artists/morris.htm
Bob Speel's Website - William Morris
a brief biography of Morris and links to other websites.

<http://www.lbwf.gov.uk/wmg/home.htm>
William Morris Gallery Website
not a lot of general information on Morris - more specific to gallery

<http://www.victorianweb.org/>
The Victorian Web
a great resource for information on all sorts of aspects of Victorian life, including the visual arts and design.
Contains many links to other sites

<http://www.morrissociety.org/>
William Morris Society Website
many links to other sites providing loads of information.

www.workhouses.org.uk/
The Workhouse
information about the notorious Victorian workhouses

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/~bpn2f/victorian/bibliog.html>
Victorian Resources Online
An annotated list of scholarly websites covering many aspects of Victorian life.

www.victoriana.com/welcome/
Victoriana.com
A commercial site dedicated to Victoriana with links to other sites.
Interesting range of Victoriana to explore - much of it American

www.iath.virginia.edu/mhc/
Moments and Dust - The Culture of Victorian London
Still under construction
provides a good 'feel' for the time.
Excerpts from the *Times*.
Includes a virtual tour of the Crystal Palace.

For more information on the exhibition *Morris & Co*, visit the Powerhouse Museum's website
<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com>

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