

WILLIAM MORRIS



Figure 1: William Morris in 1889, seven years before his death.

WILLIAM MORRIS

Decor & Design

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DRAIG PRESS

FOREWORD

The 19th century is generally viewed as a time of declining technical standards in printing as demand for mass publication increased, and it is true that a few printing companies in Britain maintained high typography standards in the face of a broadening but less specialized market. The designer, writer, and polemicist William Morris was concerned with both the decline in aesthetic standards and the erosion of craft skills brought about by the industrialization of printing. Morris commissioned the Chiswick Press, founded by Charles Whittingham, to publish two of his books of poems, and later set up the Kelmscott Press in 1891, with the intention of restoring standards of craft and quality in printing. Morris was responsible for new typefaces based upon a Humanist model, most notably Golden Type, and the Black-letter faces: Troy and Chaucer.

Equally significant was the work of Morris's associates Emery Walker and T.J. Cobden-Sanderson, who founded the Doves Press in 1900. The Doves Bible of 1905 used a Humanist face, the Doves Type, recognized as a far more sensitive interpretation of the of the 1476 Jenson model than Morris's.

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ILLUSTRATION LIST

Figure 1: William Morris in 1889, seven years before his death.

Figure 2: Jane Morris, posed by Rossetti, photographed by a professional photographer, in the garden of Rossetti's London home in Cheyne Walk, summer 1865.

Figure 3: Design for *Bird*, woven wool double cloth, 1878. Design for *Avon* chintz, 1886.

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Figure 5: William Morris in 1876.

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Figure 2: Jane Morris, posed by Rossetti, photographed by a professional photographer, in the garden of Rossetti's London home in Cheyne Walk, summer 1865.

HIS LIFE & WORK

William Morris a designer of wallpaper and textile patterns which have remained in production for over a century. His work in the field of applied arts inspired an entire generation of designers and architects; his concern with decorative honesty and truth to materials had a direct bearing on the principles of what was to be the Modern Movement. He transformed the whole status of decorative art, challenging the mass-produced mediocrity of the nineteenth century and reestablishing the value of handcrafted work.

During his lifetime, Morris was renowned not as a designer but as a writer of visionary, romantic verse, much of which retold classical myths and

medieval tales. He was one of the first to translate the Icelandic sagas; his own poetry was so well regarded that he was offered (though did not accept) the Poet Laureateship on the death of Tennyson.

One hundred years ago William Morris was best known as a poet whose medieval romances had captured public imagination. Today, William Morris the poet is largely forgotten. William Morris the political thinker has been reappraised by succeeding generations of critics, at one time disparaged as reactionary and historicist, more recently reinstated as an important theorist of the early socialist movement. But what has never been in dispute and never forgotten is his work as a designer, chiefly as a designer of pattern. The name William Morris is synonymous with a particular type of design, a flowing, intense evocation of the natural world, described with great clarity and skill. In these patterns can be found all of Morris's passionate observation of nature and all of his deep dedication to history and man's place in it. Morris insisted on integrating life with art, and art with life, and he rejected the destructive and spiritless specialization of industrialization, with its remorseless separation of work, leisure and creativity. This holistic attitude meant that he simply

could not conceive a design without considering how it would be made, the techniques and materials that would be used, the eventual purpose to which it would be put and the conditions under which it would be produced.

A Morris design celebrates the natural world. All of Morris's work, with its emphasis on harmony with our natural environment, is particularly timely today. But his patterns also display the value of artisanship and the intimate connection between form, function and beauty. It is the unique combination which holds a particular attraction and relevance for us now.

William Morris was born on 24 March 1834, at Elm House in Walthamstow to the northeast of London. Although by the 1880s Walthamstow could be described by Morris as "terribly cocknified and choked up by the jerry-builder," during his childhood it was "a pleasant place enough," no more than a country village. Morris was the eldest of five sons, the third of nine children altogether. His father was a successful broker and the family prospered, moving from Elm House to a grander Georgian house, Woodford Hall, in 1840. Woodford Hall stood on the edge of Epping Forest. Its extensive grounds and the neighbouring wildness

of the Forest were a stimulating environment for a small, imaginative boy.

Morris spent an idyllic childhood riding in the forest with his brothers and sisters and inventing games of chivalry and adventure. An early and voracious reader, his head was full of the novels of Sir Walter Scott. The old Essex churches also made a lasting impression, as did a visit to Queen Elizabeth's Lodge in Epping Forest, where he was struck by the romantic sight of a room hung with "faded greenery."

In 1847, Morris was sent away to school, to Marlborough College, then recently established. He was miserable at school, a place he later described as "very rough" and, even more bitterly, as a "boy-farm," admitting that he had "a hardish time of it, as chaps who have brains and feelings generally do at school." One consolation, however, was the setting of the school, in beautiful countryside near the ancient stone circle at Avebury. Morris explored the vicinity thoroughly, absorbing the local history and making detailed observations of the architecture, artefacts, and the natural landscape. His unhappiness threw him on to his own resources and he became a "great devourer of books," feeding a prodigious memory and capacity for retaining detail. These early experiences had a

critical influence on the development of Morris's sensibilities both as a poet and designer. A pervading nostalgia for a romantic past can be traced to those blissful hours of play in the Forest, the tangible sense of history to his direct observations of ancient churches and prehistoric monuments, and the avid reading of medieval works in the library at Marlborough. A delight in nature is already being expressed: in a letter to his sister Emma, the closest of his siblings, he wrote, "So for your edification, I will tell you what a delectable affair a watermeadow is to go through" Still essentially medieval, Oxford impressed Morris with its beauty, although he was less captivated by academic life. Together with Edward Burne-Jones, and a close-knit set of friends that included Charles Faulkner, Morris devoured poetry, especially Chaucer, Malory, Keats, Tennyson and Shelley, read novels, studied Carlyle and Ruskin and pored over illuminated manuscripts in the Bodleian. All of this reading and the discussions it provoked nourished a growing conviction that society would be better organized along the lines of the religious communities of the Middle Ages.

The work of Ruskin was particularly influential. *The Stones of Venice* (1853) "seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel." From

Ruskin, Morris learned that “art is the expression of man’s pleasure in his labour,” and that with the Renaissance and its divisive distinction between designer and craftsman, the free, creative and fulfilling work of the medieval artisan was destroyed. Through Ruskin’s lectures, Morris and Burne-Jones also learned about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Millais’ *The Return of the Dove to the Ark* was exhibited in an Oxford shop in 1854. This, and other works by Holman Hunt, Ford Madox Brown and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, seemed breathtaking and original. The heightened sense of beauty and the intense medievalism of these paintings began to convince Morris and Burne-Jones that their futures lay in the direction of art, not theology.

In 1855 Morris and Burne-Jones travelled in northern France, visiting the great medieval cathedrals of Chartres, Rouen and Evreux. Although it was architecture which made the holiday such a turning point in his life, it is typical of Morris that in letters home he is almost as lyrical in his descriptions of the surrounding landscape. One night, “the most memorable night of my life” as Burne-Jones recalled, while walking on the quay at Le Havre, Morris and Burne-Jones finally resolved to give up any notions of becoming clergymen to “begin a life

of art.” Morris had decided to become an architect, Burne-Jones a painter.

When Morris left the university in 1856 he stayed in Oxford, apprenticed to G.E. Street. Street was a leading figure of the Gothic Revival. Although Morris stayed in his office only nine months, he must have been influenced by Street’s view of the architect as a complete artist, involved not only in building, but also in the design of glass and fabric: Street was particularly interested in historic textiles and ecclesiastical embroidery. Morris was put to work copying a drawing of the doorway of St. Augustine’s Canterbury, an exercise so tedious that it led him to reconsider architecture as a future.

It was in Street’s office that Morris met another person who was to be of prime importance in the development of his life and work. This was Philip Webb (1831-1915), who later would design Red House for Morris. After a short while, they moved, to Red Lion Square, to a studio that had formerly been occupied by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82). Burne-Jones already knew and admired Rossetti; now Morris also fell under his spell. Inspired and charmed by this charismatic figure, Morris determined to abandon architecture and take up painting.

In the meantime, unable to find furniture that he liked for the studio, Morris designed chairs, a table, and an enormous settle. His new friend Webb designed a wardrobe. The furniture was made up by a local carpenter and decorated by Rossetti and Burne-Jones with scenes taken from Morris's own poems, from Chaucer and from Dante's Beatrice. This communal effort, both in terms of design and execution, prefigured the work of the "Firm."

Artists working on the murals modelled for each other, but female models were harder to come by. One evening at the theatre Rossetti was struck by the extraordinary beauty of a young woman. He asked her to model and she agreed, posing for him as Guenevere and for Morris as Iseult. Morris fell deeply in love.

Jane Burden, an ostler's daughter, was the personification of the Pre-Raphaelite ideal, a fact noted by the novelist Henry James when he met her in 1869: "It's hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all the Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made—or they a "keen analysis" of her—whether she's an original or a copy. In either case she's a wonder." Jane was the subject of Morris's only painting in oils, *La Belle Iseult*.



Figure 3: (right) Design for *Bird*, woven wool double cloth, 1878.
(left) Design for *Avon* chintz, 1886.

In stained glass, as in the other areas of decoration with which he became concerned, Morris was quick to grasp and master the potential of the medium, instinctively knowing what the material could do best. Morris supplied glass for over four hundred buildings during his lifetime but the best examples date from this early period, when he designed more than one hundred windows himself as well as providing backgrounds for Burne-Jones's figures and Webb's animals. The Firm returned to the medieval notion of using coloured glass in a mosaic to tell a story, rather than merely painting on to glass. Its use of pure colour, strong outline and detail was much admired.

The Firm had another popular line in hand-painted tiles for panels and fireplaces. Faulkner's sisters Kate and Lucy did much of this work. Morris began a collaboration with the artist William de Morgan (1839-1917) who was to become a ceramist noted for his natural forms and Islamic motifs.

Embroidery was also a large part of the early output. Jane, her sister Bessie and Georgiana Burne-Jones tackled much of the work, under Morris's direction. Morris had taught Jane medieval techniques which he discovered by laboriously unpicking old examples. It was Jane who discovered the length of indigo serge in a London shop

which together they transformed into the *Daisy* hanging for the bedroom at Red House. According to Jane, when she took the fabric home, Morris "was delighted with it and set to work at once designing flowers. These we worked in bright colour in a rough simple way."

In 1871 Morris bought the lease of "an old stone Elizabethan house" in the Cotswolds. Kelmscott Manor near Lechlade in Gloucestershire was not actually Elizabethan but dated from a later period. The house, with its grey stone gables, is described in Morris's utopian work, *News from Nowhere*. For several years the Firm had been run mainly by Morris without much participation from the other partners. Reorganization was in order. The old partnership was dissolved fairly amicably and Morris and Co. was formed in 1875. By now the market for their work was largely domestic, as opposed to ecclesiastical. At the beginning of the 1870s Morris had begun to design wallpaper again; the period between 1872 and 1876 was his most fruitful, when designs such as *Willow*, *Jasmine* and *Larkspur* were produced.

The year 1875 also represented a turning point in Morris's involvement with textile design. Early experience in this field had been disappointing and unsatisfactory. The new aniline dyes produced

harsh colours which were also technically unsound: they faded and bled. At this point Morris began to collaborate with Thomas Wardle, the brother of his new business manager George, who had a dye-works in Leek, Staffordshire, experimenting with the techniques of vegetable dyeing. Morris found the work absorbing, particularly the challenge of indigo dyeing. He studied old herbal and medieval treatises, creating colours by such arcane means as boiling twigs and crushing the carcasses of insects.

Over half of the forty chintz designs Morris produced during his lifetime date from the period 1876-83. The beautiful hand-printed cottons for which he is best-known include the flowing, naturalistic *Tulip* (1875), *Honeysuckle* (1876) and *Snakeshead* (1876-77). During the second half of the 1870s Morris also became interested in weaving, taking inspiration from both medieval and Eastern sources. This, in turn, led him on to tapestry weaving and carpet design, driven by an ambition to recapture the height of perfection displayed in Persian carpet-making. At this stage, naturalism in his designs gave way to a more abstract and Eastern style.

Morris finally found the workshop space he needed in Surrey. Merton Abbey was situated on the banks of the River Wandle. Originally estab-

lished by the Huguenots as a silk-weaving factory, it was at that time being used as a print works. Morris retained the old buildings with their red tiled roofs and weather-boarding and converted them into workshops for printing, glassmaking, weaving and dyeing. Carpet looms were built and pits for indigo dye vats were dug. The river water was found to be ideal for madder-dyeing.

All in all, Merton Abbey, with its buttercup meadows, willow and poplar trees growing beside the riverbank and millpond, with its garden full of cottage flowers and the rushing stream turning the water wheel, was a setting fit to inspire Morris's finest work.

Mackail, Morris's biographer, describes lengths of cotton "bleaching on grass thickly set with buttercups" and "trout leaping outside the windows of the long cheerful room where the carpet looms are built." George Wardle, Morris's business manager, described it more succinctly as "altogether delightful." It certainly was a fulfilment of Morris's particular vision to create a working environment where dyes could be made from the twigs of trees growing nearby and processed using local river water, where cloth could be bleached in the sun and dried after dyeing on the meadows and where

there was an abundance of natural beauty to fuel the imagination.

The years following the move to Merton Abbey were prolific, even by Morris's standards. Nineteen new designs for chintzes were produced between 1881 and 1883, including *Strawberry Thief*, one of his best-known. Most of these were floral designs but the scale of the patterns varied from small repeats to large, more diagonally stressed designs, and, although Morris and Co. was never highly profitable due to Morris's exacting standards, this was a successful time for the business, with its growing reputation for quality, and a fashionable artistically-minded clientele.

At Merton Abbey, Morris employed a number of former Spitalfields weavers to help produce the handwoven textiles, chiefly in wool. The size of the new premises meant that he could design and produce larger carpets and tapestries. Carpet-making was very labour-intensive and very expensive. The Howard family commissioned Morris to design a carpet for the library at their home, Naworth Castle. It took a year to complete.

Morris had long been interested in tapestry, which he called "the noblest of all the arts of weaving." Characteristically, he taught himself the difficult technique of high-warp weaving from a



Figure 4: *Queen Guinevere*/(La Belle Iseult), 1858, oil on canvas, 71,8 x 50,2 cm.

pre-revolution French manual, building a loom in his bedroom at Kelmscott House and rising at five in the morning to get in a “few hours practice” before the day began. As with the stained glass the Firm produced earlier, tapestries were communal design efforts. Burne-Jones, who remained Morris’s principal designer, drew the figures, Webb the animals and Morris and J.H. Dearle tackled the backgrounds. Dearle, who began as an assistant in the glass studio in 1873, went on to run the works at Merton Abbey during the last years of Morris’s life.

Embroidery remained an important part of the Firm’s output. As well as specially commissioned wallhangings, the Oxford Street showroom sold embroidery kits to be made up at home and a popular range of embroidered accessories, including ladies’ bags, covers for photograph frames and books, gloves and even bell pulls. May, Morris’s younger daughter, was a talented embroiderer and designer herself. From 1885 she was in charge of this part of the firm’s business and later in life campaigned, lectured and wrote widely on the subject of embroidery.

Morris suffered a breakdown in health in 1891 when a severe attack of gout weakened his kidneys. Jenny was also seriously ill at the same time, which caused great anguish. During the last years of his

life, he became preoccupied with an entirely new interest—the art and craft of printing. In 1891, he founded the Kelmscott Press, based in Hammer-smith, and set to work with Burne-Jones designing type and illustrations, cutting wood blocks, and ordering paper and ink, going back to fifteenth-century sources to learn the techniques. This collaboration with Burne-Jones restored their friendship, which had been strained by the years of political activity. Over fifty books were printed by the press, including Ruskin’s *On the Nature of the Gothic* from *The Stones of Venice*, *The Earthly Paradise* and a edition of Chaucer which was four years in the making. Although the press never made a profit and closed down in 1898, its influence on the quality of commercial printing was considerable and it helped to stimulate a revival of the private press.

Early in 1896 it became obvious to his friends and family that Morris’s health was failing. Diabetes was diagnosed and in April he visited Kelmscott House for the last time. The final weeks were spent at Kelmscott Manor, where Georgiana and Ned Burne-Jones were frequent visitors. There had always been a deep affection between Georgiana and Morris. William Morris died on 3 October, at the age of 62. According to Jane, among his last

words were: "I want to get mumbo-jumbo out of the world." Three days after his death, his coffin was taken by train to Lechlade, loaded onto an open hay cart "festooned with vines, with alder and with bullrushes" and driven along country lanes to Kelmscott. His grave is marked by a simple stone in the Cotswold tradition designed by Philip Webb.



Figure 5: William Morris in 1876.

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COLOPHON

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