



William Morris (1834-1896), was influential in the British Arts and Crafts Movement.

William Morris Textiles

By Valerie Butler

A weaver takes numerous opposing threads, warp and weft – like point and counterpoint – and merges them into a single cloth, rug or tapestry. Observing the process and product of the loom, one can see an analogy for life: how one's background – the warp – intersects with the threads created by choices.

This view of life can take contradicting lines of thought or ideas that seem to clash, and weave them into a strong and unified philosophy. This view would have predicted that William Morris – son of moneyed capitalists, champion of working artisans – would be a master of woven materials.

Morris was born in 1834 to a broker (also named William) and the daughter of a prosperous merchant and landowner. His father's shares in a Devonshire copper mine brought the family much wealth, leaving them well-off even after the elder Morris died. (Henderson 3-7)

The younger William Morris arrived at Exeter College, Oxford in 1853, intending to become a High Church clergyman. (P. Thompson 3) It was there that he met Edward Burne-Jones, who in turn introduced him to a circle of men who became their lifelong friends and artistic collaborators.

“This group was concerned... with modern secular writing, poetry, and social problems, Factory Acts and sanitation. They were more interested in Christian Socialism than Anglo-Catholicism. The group met in the rooms of Charles Faulkner, who was to become an Oxford mathematics fellow, and one of Morris's closest friends. Here, between violent arguments and practical jokes, they held readings of Shakespeare, Tennyson, Carlyle, Ruskin and other favourite authors.

“Morris [already known as something of a poet] was able to convey his enthusiasm for visual arts to the group.” (P. Thompson 4-5)

In these informal caucuses on an 11th-century campus, one sees early threads of medievalism and socialism. On a between-terms tour of France, Morris and Burne-Jones viewed French Gothic cathedrals, the glories of the Louvre, and pre-Raphaelite paintings. Seeing the visual arts as their highest calling, both men decided against the priesthood: Morris was soon the pupil of an architect, Burne-Jones of a painter. The latter teacher, pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, became a major influence in Morris' life. (P. Thompson 6,7)

Morris envisioned a socialist utopia where citizens lived artfully within an artfully built environment. (Freeman-Moir 205) He and Burne-Jones made their post-collegiate home at 17 Red Lion Square, where Morris designed what he deemed “suitable” Gothic furnishings. Burne-Jones and Rossetti embellished the furniture with favorite medieval scenes: from Dante, Sir Galahad, and the Canterbury Tales.

The men obtained a commission to paint scenes from *Morte d'Arthur* at the Oxford Union, and Rossetti persuaded Jane Burden to sit as a model. Morris and Burne-Jones were still amateur painters, and even the more accomplished Rossetti had no experience in painting frescoes. Morris' compositions were poorly proportioned, and everyone's pigments peeled and faded within a few months of completion. Though the project proved a failure, the experience brought Morris a beautiful wife – and helped him discover his truest talent: textile design. (P. Thompson 8-11)

Like his brief foray in designing Gothic furniture, Morris' immersion in textile design arose out of his need for artful living in his own home. Persuaded that he'd never be a great painter, he dreamed “of a new paradise, a ‘Palace of Art’ peopled by his wife and children.” (P. Thompson 11) The medieval-style Red House was built by Philip Webb, a close friend from Morris' architecture days:



(Clutton, 2010) – Red House, Bexleyheath, Kent, England, designed by Philip Webb for William Morris in 1859.

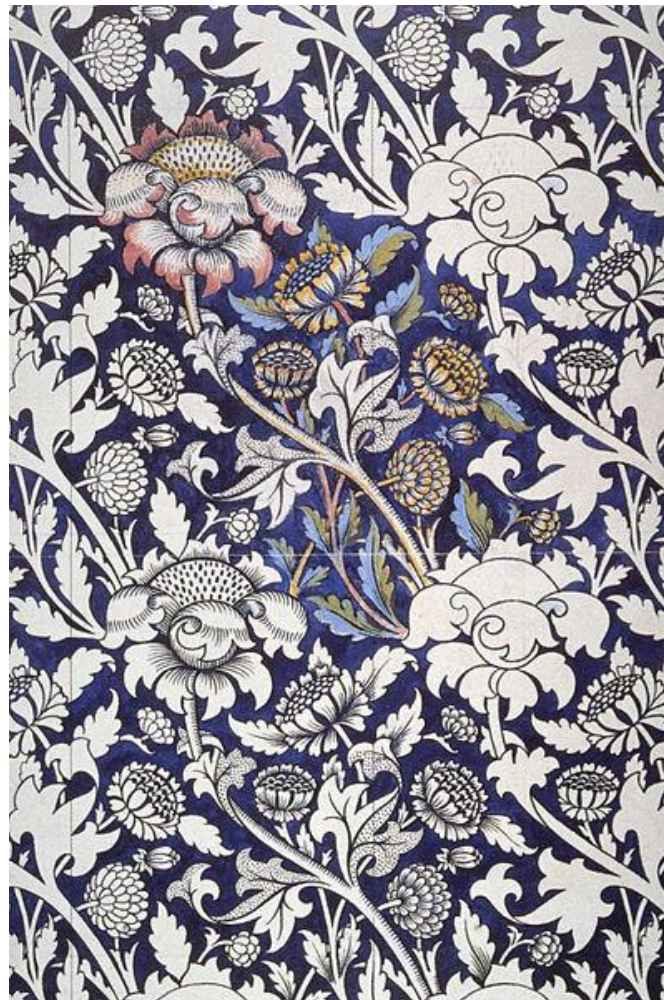
“Janey and her husband worked together on tapestries to hang on the walls. Morris turned his hand to embroidery as quickly as to decorating furniture, making tiles, and designing stained glass. At Red House all the parts contribute to the whole, from the orchard and garden surrounding the place to the windows, walls, and carpets.” (Tillinghast 33)



Furnishing Red House took several years, “and once again showed the impossibility of buying anything modern in the right style.” (P. Thompson 14) Morris despised the fussy and pretentious Second Empire décor often favored in his Victorian era. He wanted medieval simplicity, “good materials and sound workmanship... rich and suggestive surface decorations... simple constructive forms.” (E. P. Thompson 94) His quest led to the formation of Morris, Marshall,

Faulkner & Company (often simply called the Firm), and later Morris & Company.

The Firm was determined to wage holy warfare against England's Industrial Age and its devaluation of artisans and handicraftsmen. Morris, scorning mass-produced wares, promoted his love for all things medieval, including embroidery, weaving, block-printing and tapestry-work. (E. P. Thompson 98-100)



Design for indigo-discharge printed textile by William Morris.

(Identification from Linda Parry: William Morris Textiles, New York, Viking Press, 1983)

Morris agreed with social thinker John Ruskin that no master should be too proud to do a laborer's or artisan's work. Combining study and practice, Morris was determined to revive the use of old-fashioned vegetable dyes. (E. P. Thompson 99-101)



Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris (for the design) and Morris & Co. (for the production), Pomona, 1885. Tapestry woven wool, silk and mohair on a cotton warp, 300 x 210 cm. The Whitworth Gallery, University of Manchester, Manchester.

Morris set up a handloom in his bedroom and used an 18th-century book to teach himself tapestry weaving. Like his friend and former teacher Rossetti, he believed that any reasonably intelligent person could be trained to be an artist or craftsman. Eventually he moved his tapestry production, fabric printing and dye works to Merton Abbey in South London. The Merton Abbey tapestries were produced by boys Morris selected and trained in the tradition of the medieval craft guild. (E. P. Thompson 102-105)



Morris & Co Strawberry Thief Fabric

Morris' print designs were characterized by clear form, strong, crisp detail, and firm structure in recurring patterns. He preferred bright colors to muted tones: he told a patron seeking more somber hues, "If you want mud, you can find that in the street." His entire oeuvre was grounded in the careful study of design history and his detailed observations of nature. (E. P. Thompson 106-108, 103) The quality and timelessness of his designs ensure that his wares are still popular more than a century after his death.

Associate of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, ardent medievalist and socialist: William Morris might have bridled at being called a Renaissance man. Yet the scholarship and skill that he brought to his pursuits – be it poetry, art, craft, or politics – have earned him such an anachronistic title. Though a man of means, he didn't sit by idly and watch others do the hardest work: "His way was to tackle the thing with his own hands." (E. P. Thompson 99-101) He showed by his example how beautiful life could be "if one were willing to apprentice oneself to the rediscovery of ancient crafts and their techniques." (Tillinghast 32)





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