MORRIS AND THE KELMSCOTT PRESS

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TURE OF GOTHIC.

LIAM MORRIS,
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WORLD OF VICTORIAN

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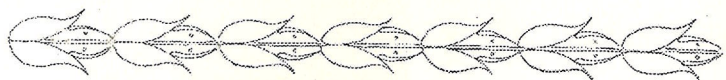Romantic to Revolutionary

elmscott
Press

Morris as Book
Designer

Undesigned Structures

William Morris

A designer, poet, writer, craftsman, and early Socialist, William Morris revolutionized Victorian design and was a primary influence of the Arts and Crafts movement. He was born in Essex, near London in 1834. He was born to a privileged family, and received an extensive education, going to preparatory school as a child, Marlborough College at age 13, and the University of Oxford at 19. Morris attended the University with the intention of becoming a clergyman, and met Edward Burne-Jones during his time there. Burne-Jones, a celebrated English painter and designer, was a lifelong friend and important collaborator of Morris. He introduced Morris to the "Brotherhood", who had a profound influence on the early development of Morris's taste and ideas of society. After encountering written works like "On the Nature of the Gothic," by John Ruskin, Morris began to engage with ideas like the social and moral implications of architecture and design. Ruskin's philosophy remained a massive influence on Morris's work throughout his life, most notably Ruskin's rejection of hierarchy among the arts, a belief in creating hand-crafted and affordable art, and a belief in the creative satisfaction of labor. It is often said that Morris was the visual representation of Ruskin's philosophies, and together, the two of them were the backbone of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England. Another great influence of Morris was Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle wrote "Past and Present," which was another influential text that Morris encountered during his time at Oxford University. Carlyle's doctrine that there is profound value in work permeated Morris's career, specifically his doctrine that "All true Work is is sacred; in all true Work, were it but true hand-labor, there is something of divineness." [1]

Morris is often recognized for his contributions to design, most notably for his wallpaper and textile designs. Many don't realize that during his lifetime he was a well known poet and a prolific writer. Some of Morris's earliest contributions to Victorian society were a variety of written works, many of which were poems. His first published work, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, was put out in 1857. It received mixed reviews, perhaps dissuading Morris from publishing further works. It wasn't until 10 years later that Morris published again, this time with a narrative poem *The Life and Death of Jason*. This work was met with great acclaim, and soon after he published *The Earthly Paradise*, another epic poem which gave Morris an

(1) Thompson, Edward P. *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary.* London: Merlin Press Ltd., 1955.

established place among the poets of his time. A change seems to have occurred in Morris in between the writings of *The Life and Death of Jason*, and *The Earthly Paradise*. "Critics responded to William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* with fulsome praise for its alleged narrative simplicity, Chaucerian charm, and romantic avoidance of serious social issues." *(2)* In comparison, *The Earthly Paradise* seemed to trouble Victorian readers, because of its intensity, its representation of romantic and marital love, it's vulnerability. This contrast seems to hint at a departure from mere Romanticism for Morris, into some realm of psychological or moral wrestling. Morris went on to publish a myriad of other works, including the poems *Love is Enough* (1873) and *Poems by the Way* (1891), the fantasy romances *A Dream of John Ball* (1888) and *News from Nowhere* (1890), and his essay *How I Became a Socialist* (1894). Morris was also the chief writer for the Commonweal, a British Socialist newspaper that was founded in 1885. He contributed articles to almost every issue.

After his marriage to Jane Burden in 1859, Morris appointed his friend Phillip Webb to design and build a home for them in the countryside. The home became known as Red House, because of its remarkable red brick exterior. Their goal was to create a home that was medieval in spirit, and one that encompassed Morris and Burne-Jones's desire for a craft-based artistic community. It was by the hands of this community that the home became furnished and decorated with custom furniture, textiles, wallpapers, and murals. Most of these furnishings were hand-made by craftsmen and artists that Morris was close with, and their creation was prompted by a dissatisfaction with items that commercial sellers had to offer at the time. "A symbolic 'apartness' was manifested in Red House in more ways than just its geographic seclusion. Redolent of medieval guilds, which they saw as the pinnacle of craftsmanship, the home's largely custom furniture and interiors were sourced not from the increasingly mechanized market for house design but instead handcrafted by Morris and his friends." *(3)* Red House is widely regarded as having an enduring influence on a number of architectural styles, such as Victorian Gothic and Queen Anne Revival. Its interiors are emblematic of the Arts and Crafts movement, and British decorative arts. Morris had visions for Red House to become a medieval sort of commune where fine arts craftsmen could live and work together, but that aspiration was never fully realized.

Largely in response to the success of Red House, and the joy experienced in working with their hands in this communal fashion, Morris and his group of friends were prompted to cre-

(2) Boos, Florence Saunders. *History and Poetics in the Early Writings of William Morris, 1855-1870.* Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015.

(3) Jones, Brittany Rosemary. "Red House: The Perfect Home for a Victorian Socialist." *JStor Daily,* May 8, 2023.
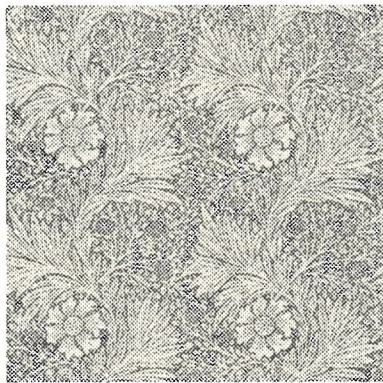https://daily.jstor.org/red-house-the-perfect-home-for-a-victorian-socialist/.
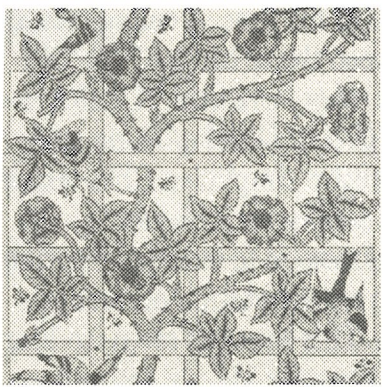
Trellis

Fruit

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ate an interiors firm in 1861. The company was called Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co., and they were set apart from other companies in this era because of their dedication to creating with their hands, while the majority of manufacturers at this time were captivated by the idea of industrialization and automation. The company began by continuing to create the sorts of embroidered hangings and murals that were made for Red House. After exhibiting work at the 1862 International Exhibition in South Kensington, the firm garnered attention, and began to receive commissions. They began to create a lot of work for churches, and made forays into stained glass design, which proved to be lucrative. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. began to expand the items they produced, and in the 1860s they were offering carpets, tapestries, metalworks, jewelry, glasswares, furniture, paintings, cloth hangings, and more. While working for this interior firm, Morris taught himself a multitude of skills. Morris was well known for his pattern designs for wallpapers and fabrics, and he taught himself the technique of woodblock printing in order to produce them. He preferred this to the roller printing method which was popular at the time. Morris also taught himself the art of dyeing, and spent much time at the craft of dyeing fabrics for his products. He taught himself many textile skills, such as carpet weaving and tapestry weaving, in which he preferred a medieval style. Among the most reputable of the firm's commissions were a new dining room at the South Kensington Museum, and a dining room at St James's Palace. The firm had an impressive influence over Victorian styles during its years of operation. "By the 1870's the Firm was not only well established: it was beginning to set the pace among wealthy circles where any claim was made to cultivation. Even the fiercest opponents were forced to alter their designs, and to adapt some of the minor superficial characteristics of the Firm's work to their own." *(4)* It was during his time designing for the firm that Morris first began working on his patterns. In order to design them, he would research historical making methods, and would draw inspiration from natural landscapes like English gardens, hedgerows, and other flora. Morris's first wallpaper designs included *Trellis*, and *Fruit*, which were created between 1862 and 1864. Examples of his later patterns include *Jasmine* and *Marigold*, which he created in the 1870's. In 1875, Morris would restructure the company, and he renamed it to reflect that restructuring, as Morris & Company. In this new company, Morris was the sole director and designer, and would go on to create an impressive catalogue of work, including 32 printed fabrics, 23 woven fabrics and 21 wallpapers.

(4) Thompson, Edward P. William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary. London: Merlin Press Ltd., 1955.

Golden Type

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Chaucer

In 1891, Morris began a new venture: his own private press, which he named the Kelmscott Press. Emery Walker was a large influence in the creation of the Kelmscott Press, as well as the revival of fine printing as a whole, and he was Morris's unofficial partner at Kelmscott. Morris brought a rigorous intensity and a deep knowledge of the physical form of the book to this endeavor, which allowed him to achieve so much during his short time as a printer. Between 1891 and 1896, Kelmscott Press published 53 titles in 66 volumes, and Morris designed three different type styles for the press: *Golden type*, *Troy type*, and *Chaucer type*, which he used for his illustrated edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Morris's *Chaucer* was his most ornate work done at Kelmscott, and was perhaps his most famous. Morris employed a small team of craftsmen at Kelmscott Press, and together they proved that there was a market for finely produced printing that used quality materials, and that it could be more than a hobby. Kelmscott helped create this market, and Morris and Ruskin had already helped popularize the ideology that justified the hand-labor that it took to uphold the market. Despite having some commercial success relative to the small quantities of books they produced, Kelmscott, like many of Morris's artistic endeavors, was meant to symbolize a protest against Victorian age industrial capitalism. The press was also created to value the dying art of fine printing, to value the hand-labor that was necessary to uphold that dying craft. Perhaps contrary to his desire to oppose capitalism and consumerism, Morris and the Kelmscott Press created a wave of interest into the Arts and Crafts book, and his influence was enormously evident in printing styles during this time, especially in American printing. "The nature of Morris's contribution to modern book-design may still inspire debate, but it is indisputable that he is the progenitor of nearly all twentieth-century private presses that have emphasized fine printing." *(5)*

Morris's personal beliefs are baked into all of his literary and artistic works, and from the work he produced as a young man at Oxford to the work made in the years preceding his death in 1896, the shift, or increased depth, in his ideologies is apparent. From his writings as a young man, it's evident that Morris was a romantic, an empathic person driven to not only create and value beauty, but to find some ethical framework that made that beauty meaningful. At Morris & Company, he was making work with a community of craftsmen, already attuned to the importance of creative work that is unalienating, personal, and to quote Ruskin, able to "express the roughness and majesty of one's own soul." By the 1880's, Morris had become a passionate Socialist, and had found a political inertia that coincided with

(5) Peterson, William S. The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

the ideals of labor, fellowship, and social justice he had naturally come to hold throughout the course of his life. "By this time in his life he had come to the unhappy conclusion that individual craftsmen - or even groups of craftsmen - were powerless to change the fundamental structure of a corrupt capitalist society; only political action, culminating in revolution, could bring about the root-and-branch transformation that was required." *(6)* Morris became incredibly devoted to the Socialist League, writing for the Socialist newspaper the Commonweal, and publishing such works as News from Nowhere, which depicts a utopian society in which art, or "work-pleasure" is a possibility for all. While Ruskin and Carlyle are well documented influences of William Morris, Karl Marx left just as notable a mark on him. Morris concretely illustrated such influence in his 1894 essay, "How I Became a Socialist." Morris's deep convictions and devotion to early Socialism spurred him on throughout the latter years of his life, and energized him until the very end. When Morris died in 1896, "his family doctor pronounced with 'unhesitation' that 'he died a victim of his enthusiasm for spreading the principles of socialism.' Another doctor had a different diagnosis: 'I consider the case is this: the disease is simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men.'" *(7)*

(6) Peterson, William S. The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
(7) Thompson, Edward P. William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary. London: Merlin Press Ltd., 1955.

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