

Living with Beauty

WILLIAM MORRIS AND DESIGN

by *Gail Leggio*

In 1854 the twenty-year-old William Morris (1834–96), touring the Continent, fell under the spell of the great cathedrals at Rouen, Chartres, Amiens and Beauvais. He also took as his own the motto of the Flemish painter Van Eyck: “Als ich Kann” (If I Can). The modesty and pragmatism of that phrase is the bedrock of Morris’s phenomenal creativity. He wrote some of the finest poetry of the nineteenth century, revived the arts of stained glass and tapestry-weaving, revolutionized domestic design and worked tirelessly to heal the rifts in contemporary society, not only between the classes but also between art and commerce. Morris and Company, the association of “fine art workmen” which he personally ran for over thirty years, was rooted in medieval ideals of craftsmanship and handiwork, but the Firm’s philosophical and practical influence would extend into the twentieth century, serving as a model for the American Arts and Crafts movement and the modernist Bauhaus in Germany.

That achievement was vividly chronicled in “‘The Beauty of Life’: William Morris and the Art of Design,” at the Yale Center for British Art this fall. Organized by the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, the exhibition benefited in New Haven from important additions of books and manuscripts from Yale collections. The 250 works on display offered fascinating glimpses into how Morris mastered the skills that brought his vision to life. The exhibition took its title from his 1880 lecture articulating a core belief:

Beauty, which is what is meant by art, using the word in its widest sense, is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people may take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life, if we are to live as nature meant us to....¹

Morris’s tonic mix of idealism and practicality provided a matrix for imaginative enterprise. Inspired by the medieval windows he had seen on tour, Morris made stained glass an early priority at the Firm, which made its official debut in the Medieval Court of the South Kensington International Exhibition in 1862. Contemporary trends—the ritual revival associated with the High Church theology of the Oxford Movement, heightened public awareness of Britain’s medieval buildings fostered by the nascent preservationist movement—made ecclesiastical furnishings a good business proposition. And, of course, Morris had absorbed a passion for medieval art from two mentors, John Ruskin and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

The stained-glass revival began with A.W.N. Pugin's championship of colored glass in the 1850s, triumphed with Morris and Company's spreading of the Pre-Raphaelite gospel and further evolved in the work of innovative Americans from Louis Comfort Tiffany to Frank Lloyd Wright. By recovering the technical prowess of earlier artists, Morris and his circle of designers and craftsmen opened new vistas of formal and imaginative exploration. The exhibition began gloriously with a stunning eighteen-foot-high stained-glass window (c. 1898), installed in the Yale Center's skylit entrance court (see cover). Taken from the now-demolished Unitarian Chapel in Heywood, Lancashire, the window is an ensemble of thirteen tracery panels and ten lights featuring male and female allegorical figures designed by Edward Burne-Jones. Burne-Jones was Morris's most important collaborator. They formed their friendship at Oxford, where both began by studying holy orders. Influenced by two temperamentally different medievalists, the charismatic painter-poet Rossetti and the prophetic Ruskin (whose *The Stones of Venice*, 1853, had just been published), Morris and Burne-Jones quickly found a new vocation—art. For Morris, the question was what kind of artist to be. He apprenticed himself to an architecture firm, published the first book of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, *The Defence of Guinevere* (1858), and began teaching himself a variety of design skills.

Morris was no dilettante, flitting from hobby to hobby. When he became interested in something, he plunged in and mastered the craft, and his energy was prodigious. His championship of the working man grew out of his own joy in meaningful physical and intellectual work. In his 1877 lecture "The Lesser Arts" he explained:

If we do not study the ancient work directly and learn to understand it, we shall find ourselves influenced by the feeble work all around us.... Let us therefore study it wisely, be taught by it, kindled by it; all the while determining not to imitate or repeat it; to have either no art at all, or an art which we have made our own.²

When Morris and his colleagues revived a medieval craft, they made it their own.

This achievement is exemplified by the window shown at Yale. The figures represent Truth, Faith, Love (an image of Jesus), Courage, Liberty, Generosity, Charity, Justice, Mercy and Humility. Dynamically placed in their niches and glowing with gem-like color, they make a strong impact at a distance. Attributes are kept to an eloquent minimum, a pair of wings held, not worn, or a torch. Gestures are subdued. Mercy opens her arms and inclines her head to comfort the smaller figure crouched beside her. Each narrow niche is bordered with alternating white and pale green strips that further set off the principal subject, but figures occasionally push beyond this border to energetic effect. Leading is essential to the graphic legibility of the compositions. Some related, full-scale chalk cartoons are included in the exhibition, showing how Burne-Jones established strong body silhouettes. Morris insisted that the prerequisites



William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, frontispiece and opening text, Kelmscott Press, 1893
YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART, NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

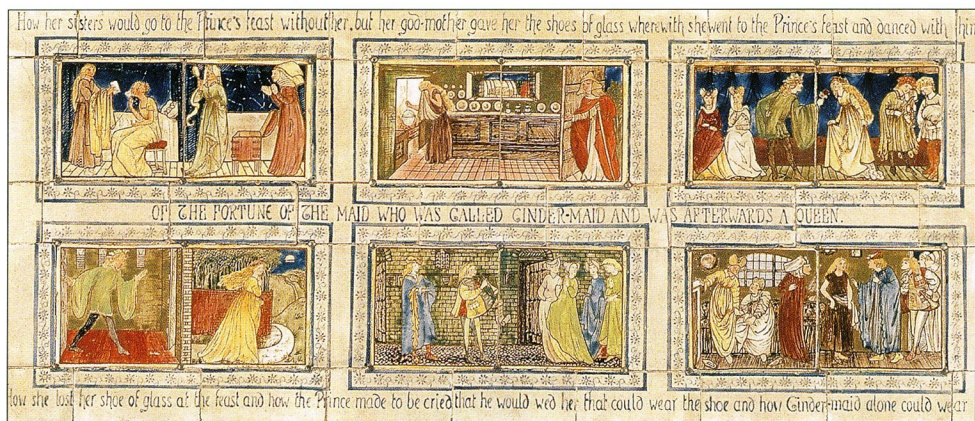
for stained glass were “clear, bright emphatic” color, along with “beauty and clarity of outline; exquisite, clear, precise drawing of incident...”³

If you look at the panels up close, subtle details emerge: sensitively rendered faces, delicate drawing in the green background screen of foliage, sumptuous embellishments on armor and fabric. These marvelous embellishments are achieved by painting on clear glass with silver stain, which fires to shades of pale gold and amber. The Firm experimented with decorative quarries using silver stain as well as the more jewel-like “pot metal” glass, which was colored throughout. In composing for stained glass, the artist needs to control depth of field. One solution is to slot hieratically flat figures into their niches, and some of the Firm’s earlier glass uses this strategy to excellent effect. The designs for a window showing Christ with saints and prophets, St. Peter’s, Bradford, Yorkshire (c. 1864), follows this plan; Morris, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown and Philip Webb all contributed to the project. The firm undertook secular—usually Arthurian—as well sacred subjects, and designers worked out their own idiosyncratic styles. Rossetti created drama by ingeniously manipulating his figures, picture-puzzle fashion, to fit odd spaces. Burne-Jones began by emulating Early Netherlandish artists such as Memling. But by the 1890s he had added Michelangelo to his roster of influences and allows himself more rounded figures and even a modified contrapposto, while keeping the space shallow.

Honoring the formal demands of the flat surface while celebrating the

richness of the natural world, William Morris found a workable strategy for all sorts of design, notably his humblest and perhaps most famous undertaking, wallpaper. His utopian vision of a society steeped in beauty started with everyday aesthetic experience, especially in the home. His botanical patterns draw from a variety of sources: first-hand observation of native plants, the illustrated medieval herbals he collected, historic textile specimens on view at the South Kensington Museum and nineteenth-century pattern books such as Owen Jones's 1856 *The Grammar of Ornament*. In his encyclopedic survey Jones emphasizes geometry, and his brightly colored two-dimensional illustrations tend to flatten relief ornament. In contrast, Morris sought to retain a feeling of natural spontaneity within the geometry of repeating patterns. The result, he wrote, would be "a wall of order against vagueness, and a door for imagination."⁴ Morris achieves a sense of natural abundance by layering pattern over pattern. A marvelous video, prepared by the Victoria and Albert Museum and on view in the Yale galleries, showed the painstaking process of printing *Acanthus*, designed by Morris in 1874. The large-scale pattern, with fifteen different colors within a subtle palette, requires thirty different blocks and—allowing for drying time between stages—four weeks to complete. The acanthus is most familiar as a design motif from the classical Corinthian capital, where it appears growing upward and in relief. For this flat, overall design, Morris has taken his cue from two-dimensional exemplars, calligraphy and medieval illuminated manuscripts. Against a tiny background, the large leaves scroll in dynamic s-shapes. A woodblock for another wallpaper, *Pink and Rose* (c. 1890), was also on display, along with Morris's preliminary design.

There are a variety of ways of establishing stability and balance without rigidity, from Tree of Life symmetry to diagonal meanders. Some designs—the delicately layered *Jasmine* wallpaper (1872), the ogee-patterned *Columbine* printed fabric (1876)—are open and light. Others—such as *Acanthus* and



Edward Burne-Jones and Lucy Faulkner, *Cinderella* tile panel, 1862–65

HUNTINGTON LIBRARY, ART COLLECTIONS AND BOTANICAL GARDENS, SAN MARINO, CALIFORNIA

Strawberry Thief (1883)—are rich and dense. The cotton *Strawberry Thief* textile, dyed and block-printed at the Firm's Merton Abbey works, is one of Morris's most popular and colorful designs. The bright berries and pink-tinged blossoms are vivid against the dark background, and the physical movements of the two types of birds are lively. The redcaps open their beaks and sound the alarm as the bluewings bite at the fruit. The rich variety of flowers and foliage is symmetrically organized. Technically, *Strawberry Thief* is also an achievement. Dismayed by the crude colors of commercial dyes, Morris began concocting his recipes from native plants. The exhibition featured a Merton Abbey book of dye recipes for printed textiles from 1882. *Strawberry Thief* marked Morris's first revival of the indigo-discharge method. The whole cloth is dyed indigo, and blocks are printed in the negative with a bleaching agent; alizarin red and weld yellow are used at a later stage. The documentation on the creative process and technical experimentation at the Firm is an invaluable resource; the Huntington Library has the largest collection of Morris design materials outside the United Kingdom.

One of Morris's great accomplishments was fostering a communal sense of creative enterprise. "For Morris," Linda Parry writes, "designing was an exercise in fellowship."⁵ Morris and his friends believed the work they were doing was vital, but they were anything but dour in their zeal. An 1856 illustrated letter by Burne-Jones (from the Beinecke Library at Yale) depicts the artist lying at the feet of a haloed, sainted Ruskin, with a sketch of Venice in the background and a winsome pig to bring the whole cartoon down to earth. Some of the work produced by the Firm is lighthearted. A *Cinderella* tile panel (1862–65), to be used as an overmantel decoration, is a narrative in six scenes, designed by Burne-Jones and painted by Lucy Faulkner, sister of one of the Firm's original partners. The overglaze polychrome decoration on tin-glazed Dutch earthenware, shown with its original frame painted with daisies to match the scene borders, has a deliberately quaint charm, like a medieval comic strip.

A prolific polymath, Morris was truly an interdisciplinary force. Besides lecturing widely on design and socialism, he published poetry, prose romances and translations of Norse and classical texts. Morris commissioned a pair of watercolors from Rossetti and, inspired by their hallucinogenic medievalism, wrote two marvelous poems, "The Blue Closet" and "The Tune of Seven Towers." The damozels of "The Blue Closet" are not fancy-dress Victorians. Their complaint has the shudder of an ancient ballad and a whiff of proto-existential malaise:

And there is none to let us go;
To break the locks of the door below,
Or shovel away the heaped-up snow;
And when we die no man will know
That we are dead....

Pre-Raphaelite scholar Cecil Lang said about Morris's poetry: "no line is mere decoration, every verse has its poetic logic."⁶ This kind of tensile energy underlies every art Morris put his hand to. His most ambitious literary project, *The Earthly Paradise*, published 1868–70 in four parts, is set in the late fourteenth century. A party of Norse travelers, in search of the Earthly Paradise, arrives at a Greek colony. The stories they trade—taken from classical and Norse folktales, the Arabian Nights, Chaucer and Malory—are interspersed with lyrics on the months. The Huntington's blue-paper manuscript, including numerous revisions, is a fascinating document. Burne-Jones made a hundred drawings for the project, but less than half of them were engraved.

Morris always loved books, not just for their content but also as physical objects, and he collected medieval manuscripts and early printed books (a large part of his collection is in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City). In the last decade of his life, the unflagging Morris embarked on a new career as book printer. His Kelmscott Press would publish forty-two books between 1891 and 1898, on handmade paper and using a hand press. Typography, ornamental initials and borders, page layout, format and bindings were all Morris's responsibility. A superb calligrapher, he personally fashioned hundreds of motifs. He also designed three typefaces, Golden (named for the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, the press's seventh book), the semi-black letter Troy and Chaucer. The frontispiece and opening text for Morris's socialist romance *News from Nowhere* (1893, Yale Center for British Art) show how intimately he was involved. The "old house by the Thames" pictured is Kelmscott Manor. The grapevine borders are energetic and graceful, the type is Golden, and the decorated capital U and S are pierced by and enmeshed in supple plant life. Burne-Jones remarked: "I think Morris is the greatest master of ornament in the world."⁷ A sheet of graphite and ink sketches for an ornamental capital L in the exhibition shows Morris working out ten different ways of wrapping the right-angle form of the letter in organic yet controlled foliage. Burne-Jones contributed many illustrations to Kelmscott books, including a marvelous frontispiece for Morris's *The Well at the World's End* (1896, Yale Center for British Art). Their last collaboration and the greatest of the Kelmscott books was *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1896). Burne-Jones's vignettes—set in Morris's rich botanical borders—are brilliant accomplishments in black-and-white design. Willowy figures are deployed in a frieze across a screen of foliage or isolated in a garden or storm-tossed boat. The rhythmic use of line establishes a suitably flat graphic design while expressing the emotional pull of the narrative. Every age has its own version of a classic author. Morris and Burne-Jones emphasized the poignant introspection in some of *The Canterbury Tales* and the otherworldliness of the old legends, just as Rossetti ripened the eroticism of Dante's *Vita Nuova* in his translations and paintings.

The Firm continued to do business for several decades after Morris's death, under his talented protégé John Henry Dearle. In Dearle's *Seaweed* wall-

paper (1901) the familiar house style seems to be evolving toward Art Nouveau, with muted undersea colors and sinuous kelp fronds. Dearle also became principal stained-glass designer, after years of supplying decorative backgrounds (he worked on the window at Yale). But Morris's legacy extended far beyond the Firm, all across the Continent and the United States, changing the way artists, craftsmen and the public look at the objects that surround them in everyday experience. It was a particular pleasure to see the exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art, in the last building designed by the great modernist architect Louis I. Kahn (1901–74). Stylistically, Kahn and Morris are very far apart, but the Yale Center's skylit atria and natural-toned materials (fabric, concrete, wood) create a welcoming space infused with "the beauty of life."⁸ Yale Center for British Art, 1080 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06520. Telephone (203) 432-2853. On the Web at www.yale.edu.ycba.

No single exhibition can do justice to Morris's accomplishments. Visitors to London should plan an excursion to the only public museum devoted to him, the William Morris Gallery at Walthamstow, at the rural edge of the city. In an intimate setting, fabrics and stained glass, rugs and furniture are revealed as objects to live with. (Morris wove his first tapestry on a loom set up in his bedroom at Kelmscott.) Highlights of the collection include the *Woodpecker* tapestry, woven at Merton Abbey, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Labours of the Months* tile panels, a Burne-Jones design for a *Pelican in Its Piety* window and related design works. William Morris Gallery, Lloyd Park, Forest Road, London E17 4PP, UK. On the Web at www.lbwf.gov.uk/nmg/about.html.

NOTES

1. "*The Beauty of Life*": *William Morris and the Art of Design*, edited by Diane Waggoner (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 9. The book, with 128 illustrations, sells for \$24.95 in paperback. The exhibition was curated by Waggoner, with Elisabeth Fairman as in-house curator at Yale.
2. Cited, *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, edited by Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 30.
3. "*The Beauty of Life*," p. 65.
4. Cited, Ray Watkinson, *William Morris as Designer* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1893), p. 49.
5. In the catalogue for the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition, *William Morris*, edited by Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), p. 37.
6. Cecil Lang, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 510. The poems, from *The Defence of Guinevere* (1858), appear on pp. 252–56.
7. Cited, "*The Beauty of Life*," p. 97.
8. The Yale Center's collection includes two marvelous paintings, fine examples of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism: Burne-Jones's *Fair Rosamund* and *Queen Eleanor* and Arthur Hughes's *The Knight of the Sun* (both 1867).