CHAPTER I

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE DECORATIVE ARTS

I Introduction

DURING the years between his marriage and his con-
version to practical Socialism in 1883, William Morris
established his reputation as a poet, and as a craftsman in
the decorative arts. His activities during these years have been
described in close on an hundred different books—among the
best of which are the first two which were written J. W.
Mackail's biography and a study by Aymer Vallance. These
years are usually regarded as those of his most fruitful achieve-
ment. The building of the Red House, the establishment and
growth of the Firm of Morris & Co., the writing of *The Earthly
Paradise* and *Sigurd the Volsung*, the formation of the Society for the
Protection of Ancient Buildings; and the famous series of public
lectures on art and society—all these took place during these
twenty years.

It was during these years, also, that Morris's personality
appeared to take confident shape. In place of the shy, self-con-
scious youth, with his outbreaks of rage or boyish humour,
Morris presented a face to the world made up of bluff self-
assertive decision, vigorous application to detail, matter-of-fact
workmanship. He was damned if he would let anyone take *him*
for an ineffectual aesthete[1] "I sits with my feet in a brook", he
used to recite,

> "And if anyone asks me for why,
> I hits him a crock with my crook,
>   For it's sentiment kills me, says I "[1]

In Bohemian and artistic circles he became familiar, with his
rough beard, his disordered hair, his fierce intolerance of fools and
fashions—a character resembling the King of Thrace in *The
Knight's Tale* of his favourite poet, Chaucer

[1] Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (1916), p 216

"Blak was his berd, and manly was his face .
And lyk a griffoun lokèd he aboute,
With kempe heres on his browes stoute."

His robust bearing, and a slight roll in his walk, led him to be mistaken more than once for a sailor. He was delighted when he was stopped by a fireman in Kensington High Street, and asked. "Beg pardon, sir, but were you ever Captain of the *Sea Swallow*?" Acquaintances were amazed at the gusto with which Morris could enter into all the pleasures of life. Madox Brown recalled a period when he sat down regularly to a dinner of roast beef and plum pudding. Visiting him one day at the house of the Firm in Red Lion Square, he saw Morris come on to the landing and roar downstairs "Mary, those six eggs were bad. I've eaten them, but don't let it happen again."[1] Others were surprised to meet a poet with so straightforward and business-like a manner. The Icelandic scholar, Eiríkr Magnússon, first met him in 1869, and found—

"a ruddy complexioned, sturdily framed, brawn-necked, shock-headed, plainly dressed gentleman of middle stature, with somewhat small, but exceedingly keen and sparkling eyes "[2]

Henry James, visiting him in the same year, was impressed "most agreeably":

"He is short, burly, corpulent, very careless and unfinished in his dress   He has a very loud voice and a nervous restless manner and a perfectly unaffected and businesslike address. His talk indeed is wonderfully to the point and remarkable for clear good sense He said no one thing that I remember, but I was struck with the very good judgement shown in everything he uttered He's an extraordinary example, in short, of a delicate sensitive genius and taste, saved by a perfectly healthy body and temper."[3]

Later anecdotes show Morris in one or other of his occupations with the Firm, designing, weaving, wood-engraving or dyeing, as when—

"in the cellars of his old house in Bloomsbury Square   on heavy sabots of French make, aproned from the armpits, with tucked-up

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[1] Ford Madox Hueffer, *Ancient Lights* (1911), pp. 3–4
[2] Eiríkr Magnússon, "William Morris", in the *Cambridge Review*, November 26th, 1896
[3] *Letters of Henry James*, Vol. I, pp 16–18

shirt-sleeves, his fore-arms dyed up to the elbow, the great man lectured most brilliantly on the high art of dyeing, illustrating his lecture with experiments in the various dyes he wanted for his silks and wools "[1]

Finally, he is seen—as he became familiar to the Socialists in the 1880s—greying early, but otherwise as brisk and vigorous as in his youth—

"with a gray beard like the foam of the sea, with gray hair through which he continually ran his hands erect and curly on his forehead, with a hooked nose, a florid complexion, and clean, clear eyes, dressed in a blue serge coat, and carrying as a rule, a satchel "[2]

Such recollections as these do not give us the whole picture of the man. It is not easy to reconcile them (as we shall see) with the pervasive melancholy of Morris's poetry in the 1860s and early 1870s, nor with the note of despair in some of his more intimate letters The true picture of Morris during these years must be made up of far more conflict and of more private unhappiness than was revealed in the sturdy public character which he turned towards the world. Nevertheless, throughout the vicissitudes and disappointments of these years, he drew sustaining strength and kept a practical and sane grip on life by means of the constant activities in which he was engaged connected with the famous Firm

II   The Red House and the Firm

After his marriage, Morris turned his attention to building a house which might embody the Palace of Art upon earth. He wished to reject the age of Gradgrind, not only in his opinions and actions, but in his daily surroundings The architects of the time (he later recalled)—

"could do nothing but produce on the one hand pedantic imitations of classical architecture of the most revolting ugliness, and ridiculous travesties of Gothic buildings, not quite so ugly, but meaner and sillier, and, on the other hand, the utilitarian brick box with a slate lid which the Anglo-Saxon generally in modern times considers as a good sensible house with no nonsense about it."

Morris and his friends refused to accept such buildings as the inevitable expression of their age. If the romantic revolt had

[1] Magnússon, *op. cit*   [2] Hueffer, *op cit* , p 18

broken through in the fields of literature, could it not also transform their architecture? they asked.

"Were the rows of square brown brick boxes which Keats and Shelley had to look on, or the stuccoed villa which enshrined Tennyson's genius, to be the perpetual concomitants of such masters of verbal beauty? was the intelligence of the age to be for ever so preposterously lop-sided? We could see no reason for it, and accordingly our hope was strong, for though we had learned something of the art and history of the Middle Ages, we had not learned enough It became the fashion among the hopeful artists of the time . . to say that in order to have beautiful surroundings there was no need to alter any of the conditions and manners of our epoch, that an easy chair, a piano, a steam-engine, a billiard-table, or a hall fit for a meeting of the House of Commons, had nothing essential in them which compelled us to make them ugly, and that if they had existed in the Middle Ages the people of the time would have made them beautiful "[1]

Accordingly, Morris and his friend Philip Webb, the architect, set to build the Red House at Bexley Heath in Kent The house was built, not—as in previous Gothic revivals—in an attempt to combine a number of superficial medieval characteristics which pleased the taste of the architect, but in a definite attempt to adapt late Gothic methods of building to the needs of the nineteenth century. To-day the Red House may no longer excite wonder: but in its time it was revolutionary in its unashamed use of red brick, its solid, undisguised construction, and absence of fussy façades and unfunctional ornamentation A visitor in 1863 described his first reaction on seeing the house as one of "astonished pleasure"

"The deep red colour, the great sloping, tiled roofs, the small-paned windows, the low, wide porch and massive door; the surrounding garden divided into many squares, hedged by sweetbriar or wild rose, each enclosure with its own particular show of flowers, on this side a green alley with a bowling green, on that orchard walks amid gnarled old fruit-trees, all struck me as vividly picturesque and uniquely original "[2]

On entering the porch, the same visitor found that the hall "appeared to one accustomed to the narrow ugliness of the usual middle-class dwelling of those days as being grand and severely

[1] "The Revival of Architecture", *Works*, Vol XXII, pp 321-2

[2] See Aymer Vallance, *William Morris, His Art, His Writings, and His Public Life* (1897), p. 49.

simple". A solid oak table stood upon a red tiled floor. Opposite the door a wide oak staircase was placed, with no skirting or cupboarding beneath it, so that its construction was unconcealed. The keynote of simplicity and straightforward construction recurred in many rooms the open roofs the tall bricked open hearth, without any mantelpiece the pale distemper on the walls. the black, rush-seated chairs. Side by side with the essential simplicity of the whole, there were to be found examples of rich decoration. painted panels on the solid cabinets: embroidered serge on the walls of the principal bedroom. experiments in ceiling decoration and in stained glass. Burne-Jones declared that Morris was making the Red House "the beautifullest place on earth". There is no cause for surprise that contemporaries saw it as the prototype of a daring new revival [1]

It was the need to furnish the Red House which led to the formation of the famous Firm At first it was merely a matter of decorating Morris's Palace. Morris and Burne-Jones had already tried their hand when furnishing their studio in Red Lion Square. At the Red House, Rossetti, Philip Webb, Madox Brown, and others were all brought in to help. Burne-Jones, who had already undertaken one or two commissions for stained glass, now set to work on painted tiles for the fireplaces Morris designed flower-patterns in wool for the walls. Webb designed table-glass, metal candlesticks, and furniture. The successes of the small group made them think of more ambitious projects In Rossetti's recollection, the actual origin of the Firm was in a casual discussion

"One evening a lot of us were together, and we got talking about the way in which artists did all kinds of things in olden times, designed every kind of decoration and most kinds of furniture, and some one suggested—as a joke more than anything else—that we should each put down five pounds and form a company Fivers were blossoms of a rare growth among us in those days, and I won't swear that the table bristled with fivers Anyhow the firm was formed, but of course there was no deed or anything of that kind In fact, it was a mere playing at business, and Morris was elected manager, not because we ever dreamed he would turn out a man of business, but because he was the only one among us who had both time and money to spare. We had no

[1] For a modern opinion as to the importance of the Red House, see Nicolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936), pp. 65–6

idea whatever of commercial success, but it succeeded almost in our own despite "[1]

Burne-Jones recalled rather more of conscious decision upon Morris's part His income from the copper mines, was diminishing fast his apprenticeship as a painter had not been an unmixed success he was forced to consider some practical means of earning a living without compromising with his own age On every side it was apparent that the minor arts were "in a state of complete degradation" (he recalled in 1883), and accordingly "with the conceited courage of a young man I set myself to reform all that" [2]

In its origin, then, the Firm had both a private and a public significance. In its private significance, it was the last and most ambitious attempt to project the old "Brotherhood" into life, to build a world of art in the face of the nineteenth century This attitude persisted in Morris's mind for several years, and found expression in 1865 when it was planned to extend the Red House into a great quadrangle, in which the workshops of the Firm would be housed, and Burne-Jones (now married to "Georgie" MacDonald) should live. When this plan fell through, Morris, who was recovering at the time from an attack of rheumatic fever, was plunged into dejection, and wrote to his friend:

"As to our palace of art, I confess your letter was a blow to me at first .   in short, I cried, but I have got over it now, of course, I see it from your point of view but I like the idea of not giving it up for good even if it is delusive."[3]

This letter sounded the knell of the "palace of art". Shortly afterwards Morris and the Firm moved into a convenient house in Queen Square, and left the Red House, never to return

From this time onwards the public significance of the Firm became all-important for Morris—the attempt to "reform all that", to reform a philistine age by means of the decorative arts; and, as a first step, to reform the arts themselves. The first circular of the Firm (drafted, most probably, by Rossetti) proposed self-confidently to undertake work in "any species of decoration, mural or otherwise, from pictures, properly so called,

[1] Theodore Watts-Dunton in the *Athanaeum*, October 10th, 1896

[2] *Letters*, p. 186 See also *Memorials*, I, p 213.   [3] *Ibid*, p 22.

down to the consideration of the smallest work susceptible of art beauty".[1] Branches of work offered included Mural Decoration, Carving, Stained Glass, Metal Work, including Jewellery, Furniture and Embroidery On the other hand, the circular was cautious to avoid any explicit attack upon the state of the decorative arts at the time By the time that Morris began to set down his own theories in the form of lectures fifteen years later, some of the points in his battle had already been partly won. He rarely referred in any detail to the conditions against which he was reacting in the 1860s Of all those who have since discussed his aims, perhaps the most penetrating has been his old comrade in the Socialist movement, Walter Crane, who developed in the same climate, and was touched by the same winds of revolt as was Morris himself.[2]

Crane never looked upon the Firm as the random hobby of a great man, but as an important movement of revolt within a definite artistic context The guide and preceptor was, of course, John Ruskin, who directed attention to the poisoning of the very sources of art and of creative labour in industrial capitalism, and who advocated the community of artists which the Firm at first sought to embody, working equally with their minds and with their hands. But under Morris's leadership, this movement took on more specific form

In an article published shortly after Morris's death Walter Crane characterized this movement as—

"in the main a revival of the mediaeval spirit (not the letter) in design, a return to simplicity, to sincerity, to good materials and sound workmanship, to rich and suggestive surface decoration, and simple constructive forms"[3]

Since the Great Exhibition of 1851, domestic decoration and furniture had fallen under the Second Empire taste in upholstery, the "antithesis of the new English movement" The impulse towards Greek and Roman forms (Walter Crane wrote)—

"which had held sway with designers since the French Revolution,

[1] See Mackail, I, pp 150-2, for the full circular

[2] Walter Crane was not an early associate of the Firm At the time when it was founded he was apprenticed as an engraver to W J Linton, the old Chartist and Republican See Walter Crane, *An Artist's Reminiscences* (1907), p 46

[3] *Scribner's Magazine*, July, 1897.

appeared to be dead. The elegant lines and limbs of quasi-classical couches and chairs . . . had grown gouty and clumsy, in the hands of Victorian upholsterers. . . An illustrated catalogue of the exhibition of 1851 will sufficiently indicate the monstrosities in furniture and decoration which were supposed to be artistic The last stage of decomposition had been reached, and a period of, perhaps, unexampled hideousness in furniture, dress, and decoration set in which lasted the life of the second empire, and fitly perished with it Relics of the period I believe are still to be discovered in the cold shade of remote drawing-rooms, and 'apartments to let', which take the form of big looking-glasses, and machine-lace curtains, and where the furniture is afflicted with curvature of the spine, and dreary lumps of bronze and ormulu repose on marble slabs at every opportunity, where monstrosities of every kind are encouraged under glass shades, while every species of design-debauchery is indulged in upon carpets, curtains, chintzes and wallpapers, and where the antimacassar is made to cover a multitude of sins When such ideas of decoration prevailed, having their origin or prototypes, in the vapid splendours of imperial saloons, and had to be reduced to the scale of the ordinary citizen's house and pocket, the thing became absurd as well as hideous Besides, the cheap curly legs of the *uneasy* chairs and couches came off, and the stuffed seats, with a specious show of padded comfort, were delusions and snares Long ago the old English house-place with its big chimney-corner had given way to the bourgeois arrangement of dining and drawing-room   The parlour had become a kind of sanctuary veiled in machine-lace, where the lightness of the curtains was compensated for by the massiveness of their poles, and where Berlin wool-work and bead mats flourished "[1]

The building of the Red House, and the unorthodox methods by which it was decorated and furnished—this was all very well so long as it remained a rich man's private hobby. But when the Firm challenged the established trade in the public market, it was bound to provoke the fierce opposition of philistine taste and vested interests. The amount of prejudice which the Firm aroused, wrote Aymer Vallance, "would scarcely be believed at the present time."

"The announcement came with the provocation and force of a challenge, and dumbfounded those who read it at the audacity of the venture . . Professionals felt themselves aggrieved at the intrusion, as they regarded it, of a body of men whose training had not been strictly commercial into the close premises of their own particular domain, and,

[1] Walter Crane, *William Morris to Whistler* (1911), pp 51-3

had it been possible to form a ring and exclude Messrs. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co from the market, the thing would infallibly have been done "[1]

As it was, the early expansion of the business was hindered not only by philistinism amongst the only public wealthy enough to buy the Firm's products, but by the active hostility of the trade. This was one of the factors which caused the Firm to specialize in its first years in particular in ecclesiastical work, where little rivalry existed. At the 1862 Exhibition, where the Firm presented some of their first work, opponents went so far as to start a petition to get their exhibits disqualified, maintaining amongst other things that the stained glass was a fraud, and was old glass re-touched. It was not until 1867 that the Firm obtained an important commission to decorate a non-ecclesiastical building— the Green Dining Room at the South Kensington Museum.

As the Firm expanded, it became the spear-head of a movement which challenged the fussy and pretentious in one field after another of decorative art. Walter Crane (looking back on the half-century) described some of the points of conflict:

"The simple, black-framed, old English Buckinghamshire elbow-chair, with its rush-bottomed seat, was substituted for the wavy-backed and curly-legged stuffed chair of the period, with its French polish and concealed, and often very unreliable, construction Bordered Eastern rugs and fringed Axminster carpets, on plain or stained boards, or India matting, took the place of the stuffy planned carpet; rich, or simple, flat patterns acknowledged the wall, and expressed the proportions of the room, instead of trying to hide both under bunches of sketchy roses and vertical stripes, while, instead of the big plate-glass mirror, with ormulu frame, which had long reigned over the cold white marble mantlepiece, small bevelled glasses were inserted in the panelling of the high wood mantleshelf, or hung over it in convex circular form Slender black wood or light brass curtain-rods, and curtains to match the coverings, or carry out the colour of the room, displaced the heavy mahogany and ormulu battering-rams, with their fringed and festooned upholstery, which had hitherto overshadowed the window of the so-called comfortable classes Plain white or green paint for interior wood-work drove graining and marbleing to the public-house, blue and white Nankin, Delft, or Gres de Flandres routed Dresden and Sevres from the cabinet, plain oaken boards and trestles were preferred before the heavy mahogany telescopic British dining table of the mid-nineteenth century, and the deep, high backed,

[1] Vallance, *op cit*, p 58.

canopied settle with loose cushions ousted the castored and padded couch from the fireside "[1]

By the 1870s 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 more superficial characteristics of the Firm's work to their own.[2] In short, Morris and Co. (for the original partnership was broken up with some acrimony in 1874, and Morris—still with the assistance of Burne-Jones and Philip Webb—took sole command) had become fashionable: and, moreover, the revolt had begun to bring rich returns in the form of commercial success.[3]

If Morris had been concerned only with the effecting of some reform within the decorative arts, it would seem that at the end of the 1870s he might have rested satisfied In fact, it was exactly at this time that his bitter discontent found its expression in his famous lectures on art and society. For the reform for which he looked went beyond his own practice of the arts, these arts were the forum which his early revolt had chosen, in which to conduct the "holy warfare against the age". But on every side the age remained undismayed, the squalid slums and the jerry-built suburbs advanced. His work was accepted, but only too often it was only to gild the philistinism of the rich and complacent élite. His work had opened many new vistas in the decorative arts; but at the end of each one he was faced by the soiled, utilitarian chimneys, and the facts of mass production of shoddy goods for profit. By means of his own private income, and with the asistance of a clientèle made up variously of enterprising men of wealth, nostalgic parsons, and persons of genuine sensitivity and taste, he might widen for a moment the charmed circle of his art. But, outside that circle, the age remained indifferent or

[1] *Scribner's Magazine*, July, 1897

[2] See Crane, *op cit* , p 55 Mr Peter Floud has recently criticized the view that Morris made any decisive break with Victorian design For his opinion that "Morris must be regarded not as a revolutionary pioneer and innovator, but rather as the great classical designer of his age", see *The Listener*, October 7th, 1954

[3] "Through all this time I have been working hard at my business, in which I have had considerable success even from the commercial side, I believe that if I had yielded on a few points of principle I might have become a positively rich man, but even as it is I have nothing to complain of." Morris to Scheu, September 5th, 1883, *Letters*, p 187.

hostile as before, so that he was impelled to write to Andreas Scheu in 1883.

"In spite of all the success I have had, I have not failed to be conscious that the art I have been helping to produce would fall with the death of a few of us who really care about it, that a reform in art which is founded on individualism must perish with the individuals who have set it going Both my historical studies and my practical conflict with the philistinism of modern society have *forced* on me the conviction that art cannot have a real life and growth under the present system of commercialism and profit-mongering "[1]

It was his success, rather than any failure, which brought him into conflict with his age

III Morris as a Designer and Craftsman

During the early stages of the Firm Morris was too busy to concern himself with this kind of problem. He and his friends had engaged upon a considerable venture—the establishment of a company of artists and craftsmen who intended to revive the minor arts of England, on a sound financial basis and in the face of an age of shoddy Morris took upon himself the major responsibility He was one of the Firm's principal designers, the main link between the other designers and the craftsmen who executed their designs, and the man responsible for much of the day-to-day business management [2]

From the very outset, Morris showed that he had taken to heart John Ruskin's words

"It would be well if all of us were good handicraftsmen in some kind, and the dishonour of manual labour done away with altogether   . .

[1] *Letters*, p 187

[2] For example, in the Firm's work in stained glass, the designs of Burne-Jones and Madox Brown came normally to Morris in the form of plain, uncoloured cartoons It was his task to mark the lead-lines, to select the colours, sometimes to design the backgrounds, etc This could not be done without the most thorough understanding of the processes of painting and firing the glass, which he gained by working at the small kiln constructed in the Firm's basement at Red Lion Square To gain an idea of his complete mastery of the technique of glass-firing and staining, see his letter to John Ruskin, *Letters*, pp 168-9 See also *Life and Letters of Frederick Shields*, p 98

The letters of Warrington Taylor (business manager of the firm between 1865 and 1869) to Philip Webb (printed in *Philip Webb and His Work* by W R Lethaby) provide an amusing commentary on Morris's qualities (or lack of them) in the financial affairs of the Firm

In each several profession, no master should be too proud to do its hardest work."

Disturbing as such a doctrine was to the servant-ridden Victorian middle class, it was inescapable in the work Morris had on hand. In the view of W. R. Lethaby, one of the "Morris group", there were two quite different currents of "Gothic revival" among the architects and designers of the nineteenth century The fashionable one, represented by men like Sir Gilbert Scott—

"for the most part .   followed the movement—backward—of attempting to 'revive the Gothic style of design' rather than settling down to perfect a science of modern building "

To Ruskin and the group around Morris and Philip Webb, the architecture "to which we give the modern name 'Gothic' was the customary way in which masons and carpenters did their work" In their view, an "Architecture of Aristocracy",[1] originating at the time of the Renaissance and coming to dominance in the eighteenth century, had destroyed these natural manners of work. "The national arts were flattened out and destroyed in the name of gentility, learning, and 'taste'." The two schools of nineteenth-century medievalists, can therefore be sharply distinguished. The fashionable architects attempted to impose a superficial Gothic style upon their work, copying interesting Gothic features, often disregarding both structure and modern requirements. Philip Webb and Morris and their group, on the other hand, were concerned with the *manner* of work in the Middle Ages, with the handling of materials by the medieval builder and craftsman, with substance and structure rather than with "style".

This distinction can be clearly seen in all Morris's work as a designer. While he may have occasionally fallen into the faults

[1] W R Lethaby, *Philip Webb and his Work* (1935) See esp Ch V. In Lethaby's view, the classical revival imported into Renaissance England "was no longer a customary art growing up from the bottom and out of the hearts of the people It was a 'taste' imposed on the top as part of a subtle scheme for dividing off gentility from servility In England Italian art (so-called) became a badge of the superiority claimed by travelled people, especially those of the grand tour, over the people at home It was an Architecture of Aristocracy provided by trained middle-men of 'taste', who now wedged themselves in between the work and the workers, who were consequently beaten down to the status of mere executioners of patterns provided by an hierarchy of architectural priests " This was substantially Morris's view

of the first attitude, the essence of his approach was in the second. Looking back upon his work, he told a *Clarion* interviewer in 1892.

"I have tried to produce goods which should be genuine so far as their mere substances are concerned, and should have on that account the primary beauty in them which belongs to naturally treated natural substances, have tried for instance to make woollen substances as woollen as possible, cotton as cotton as possible, and so on, have used only the dyes which are natural and simple, because they produce beauty almost without the intervention of art, all this quite apart from the design in the stuffs or what not "[1]

Since many of the arts in which the Firm commenced to work were—to all intents—extinct in England, Morris had no alternative but to concern himself with the substance of the arts and the practical details of the craftsman's work first of all

From the foundation of the Firm until the end of his life, Morris was continually busy with close study, experiments, and practical engagements with the materials of his craft Glass-firing, the glazing of tiles, embroidery,[2] woodcutting and engraving, pottery and book-binding, weaving and tapestry-work, illuminating—all these were among the skills he mastered to a greater or lesser degree Characteristic of his thorough application was his determination in the mid-1870s to revive the use of vegetable dyes. For months the problem absorbed his mind, and he studied the question in old books and in the London museums. He experimented at his own dye-vat, and his mind was running on it even during his favourite relaxation:

"I was at Kelmscott the other day, and betwixt fishing, I cut a handful of poplar twigs and boiled them, and dyed a lock of wool a very good yellow   "[3]

Next, he paid visits to Leek, in Staffordshire, where at a large dye-works he could experiment on a larger scale, and gain the

[1] *Clarion*, November 19th, 1892

[2] There is a note by Jane Morris, written after William Morris's death, in the British Museum (Add MSS 45341), describing his first work in reviving embroidery "He must have started   as early as 1855—he taught me the first principles of laying the stitches together closely so as to cover the ground smoothly and radiating them properly—afterwards we studied old pieces & by unpicking, &c we learnt much— but it was uphill work, fascinating but only carried through by his enormous energy and perseverance "

[3] Mackail, I, p 315

advice of workmen who remembered using the old dyes in their youth. From here he wrote to "Georgie" Burne-Jones.

"I shall be glad to get back to the dye-house at Leek to-morrow I dare say you will notice how bad my writing is, my hand is so shaky with doing journey-man's work the last few days delightful work, hard for the body and easy for the mind. For a great heap of skein-wool has come for me and more is coming and yesterday evening we set our blue-vat the last thing before coming here I should have liked you to see the charm work on it we dyed a lock of wool bright blue in it, and left the liquor a clear primrose colour, so all will be ready for dyeing to-morrow   "[1]

"His way was to tackle the thing with his own hands", recalled Walter Crane—

"and so he worked at the vat, like the practical man he was in these matters. An old friend tells the story of his calling at the works one day and, on inquiring for the master, hearing a strong cheery voice call out from some inner den, 'I'm dyeing, I'm dyeing, I'm dyeing,' and the well-known, robust figure of the craftsman presently appeared in his shirt-sleeves, his hands stained blue from the vat "[2]

The problem had at last been solved to his satisfaction

This practical genius has often been commented upon, both in his own time and since. But it is not always realized that Morris was also a first-rate scholar in the history of the decorative arts. Study and practice he regarded as inseparable. This union was expressed in his own experiments in tapestry weaving. Here he found no living craftsmen to learn from. Gobelins, the old French centre, he declared had degenerated into a "hatching-nest of stupidity". After close study, he set up a handloom in the bedroom of his Hammersmith house. There he worked from one of his own embroidery patterns, and wove—

"a piece of ornament with my own hands, the chief merit of which, I take it, lies in the fact that I learned the art of doing it with no other help than what I could get from a very little eighteenth century book "[3]

This constant interplay of study and practice gave him his great authority in all the decorative arts. "They talk of building museums for the public", he once said:

[1] *Letters*, pp 65–6   [2] *Scribner's Magazine*, July, 1897

[3] Letter of Morris in the *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society*, April 5th, 1893, quoted in the *History of the Merton Abbey Tapestry Works* by H C Marillier, p 16

"but South Kensington Museum was really got together for about six people—I am one, and another is a comrade [Philip Webb] in the room "[1]

When called before .the Royal Commission for Technical Instruction in 1882 he remarked of the same museum, "perhaps I have used it as much as any man living". Testimony to the regard in which his knowledge was held can be seen in the fact that he was consulted by the Museum as a professional referee when important purchases in tapestries and textiles were to be made [2] "Went to S.K M yesterday", he notes in his diary of a visit to the Museum in January, 1887—

"to look at the Tray tapestry again since they have bought it for £1250 I chuckled to think that properly speaking it was bought for me, since scarcely anybody will care a damn for it "[3]

In his lectures and papers on the decorative arts delivered in the 1880s—in such a lecture as "The History of Pattern Designing"— he reveals the astonishing body of knowledge which he had acquired during these years of his most active practice within the minor arts knowledge derived from the closest study of Ancient, Egyptian, Byzantine, Persian, Indian, and Northern European and English traditions in particular

    This study of the traditions of the past he held to be essential for any designer. "My view is", he declared before the Royal Commission for Technical Instruction—

"that it is not desirable to divide the labour between the artist and what is technically called the designer, and I think it desirable on the whole that the artist and designer should practically be one   .   There are two chief things that would have to be thought of, in providing facilities for study for the art of design However original a man may be, he cannot afford to disregard the works of art that have been pro-duced in times past when design was flourishing, he is bound to study old examples, but he is also bound to supplement that by a careful study of nature, because if he does not he will certainly fall into a sort of cut and dried, conventional method of designing . . . It takes a man of considerable originality to deal with the old examples and to

[1] Lethaby, op cit , pp 39–40

[2] I am indebted to the Keeper of the Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum for the information that a number of Morris's professional reports are still in his files

[3] Socialist Diary, 1887. Brit Mus Add. MSS 45335.

get what is good out of them, without making a design which lays itself open distinctly to the charge of plagiarism."[1]

By means of his own practice and writing, as an Examiner in the National Competition for the South Kensington School of Art, and through the private and public propaganda of himself and his friends, he did much to stimulate the formation of collections and provincial museums and to encourage the revival of research in the history of the decorative arts

But Morris's interest—as can be seen in the passage above—did not stop short with the mastery of the designer's work. He stated in his evidence before the same Commission:

"What I want to see really is, and that is the bottom of the whole thing, an education all round of the workmen, from the lowest to the highest, in technical matters as in others   ."

While Morris was interested in the quality of the art products themselves, he was equally interested in the manner in which these products were made, and in the people who made them On the one hand, he deprecated the separation between the artist in his studio and the technical designer to whom nothing was left but the "grinding work" of adapting the design to the lathe or the loom. In textiles:

"I think it would be better . . . that the man who actually goes through the technical work of counting the threads, and settling how the thing is to be woven, through and through, should do the greater part of the drawing "

On the other hand, he desired that the man who executed the work should be given opportunity to exercise his own creative abilities. Of all the principles which Morris shared with Ruskin, this was the most difficult to put into operation, even within the small charmed circle of the Firm, so long as the Firm was no more than an eccentric island set in the capitalist sea. Certainly, many attempts were made, and as the Firm expanded and the Merton Abbey works were established, a method of work was built up distinct from normal commercial practice. In several branches of work experienced craftsmen were engaged from the beginning, who taught Morris their business, and worked side by side with

[1] Morris's evidence before the Royal Commission (1882) is reprinted in full in May Morris, I, pp. 205-25.

him in all experiments. When apprentices were taken on, a point was made of not seeking out the exceptionally gifted and outstanding lad, it was taken for granted that any intelligent lad had the makings of an artist and craftsman in him. This was especially justified in the case of the tapestry work at Merton Abbey, where on Morris's death—not twenty years after he had revived the art with an old book and a handloom—a body of skill had been educated quite adequate to ensure the art's continuance. Morris was gratified to be able to say of one piece which was exhibited at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in 1893:

"The people who made it—and this is by far the most interesting thing about it—are boys, at least they are grown up by this time—entirely trained in our own shop It is really freehand work, remember, not slavishly copying a pattern   and they came to us with no knowledge of drawing whatever, and have learnt every single thing under our training And most beautifully they have done it!"[1]

Carpet-making, weaving, jewellery and metal-work, glass-making —all provided some opportunity for the exercise of the craftsman's creative initiative, while the atmosphere in every branch of the Firm was one which tended to draw out the workman's initiative and intellectual powers. But, looking back upon his results in 1892, it was here that Morris felt that his achievements had fallen most short:

"Except with a small part of the more artistic side of the work", he told a *Clarion* reporter, "I could not do anything (or at least but little) to give this pleasure to the workman, because I should have had to change their method of work so utterly that I should have disqualified them from earning their living elsewhere You see I have got to understand thoroughly the manner of work under which the art of the Middle Ages was done, and that that is the *only* manner of work which can turn out popular art, only to discover that it is impossible to work in that manner in this profit-grinding society "[2]

This struggle—like so many others—he found he must merge in the greater struggle for Socialism.[3]

[1] Quoted by Vallance, *op cit* , p 121   [2] *Clarion*, November 19th, 1892.

[3] On this whole question see Peter Floud, "The Inconsistencies of William Morris", *The Listener*, October 14th, 1954 Mr Floud brings important new evidence and a fresh judgement, but unfortunately over-states his case For example, it was not a principle of Morris's theory that the designer and craftsman must be one nor was he unaware of the "inconsistencies" to which Mr Floud directs attention

This practical work—directing, experimenting, above all designing—must be remembered as the constant background to all other activities of Morris from the formation of the Firm until the end of his life "It is very characteristic of Morris", wrote Edward Carpenter on his death, "that his chief recreation was only another kind of work."[1] The volume of this work was prodigious. In 1881, when he was giving up much time to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and to the National Liberal League, such an entry as this in his diary is by no means exceptional:

"Up at 6.15   2½ hours tapestry   Then pointing carpet. to S P A B in afternoon   then to N L L meeting "[2]

Most of his tapestry work was done in this way, before the main business of his day had started During his most active period as a Socialist propagandist, the work had sometimes to be laid aside for weeks at a time, but nevertheless it was still fermenting in his mind. On the back and at the bottom of his lecture notes there are often found the leaf designs and experiments in lettering, which indicate that the Kelmscott Press was already occupying a part of his thoughts.

Sir Sydney Cockerell has estimated that Morris's "designs for wall-papers, chintzes, silk damasks, stamped velvets, tapestries, carpets, tiles and stained glass number something like six hundred". What can be said of the quality of this great output? First, it is necessary to distinguish Morris's work from that of other designers for the Firm. Very often the artists of the Firm adopted co-operative methods of work. Morris's partnership with Philip Webb was always successful, but his lifelong collaboration with his friend of the "Oxford Brotherhood", Edward Burne-Jones, is to be regretted, and has sometimes led to an under-valuing of his own achievement as a designer Despite the sympathy which persisted between the two friends, Morris continued to grow and change throughout his life, whereas Burne-Jones was arrested and immobilized early in his artistic development. Over his effeminate knights and saints, and his characterless virgins with long necks, cramped brows and snaky strands of hair, there is thrown the sickliest cast of Pre-Raphaelitism in its latest

[1] *Freedom*, November, 1896   [2] Brit. Mus Add MSS 45407

and most sentimental phase The gentle, self-critical humour of his youth became less and less in evidence as his life became more marked with fashionable successes, and those qualities in him which attracted Morris to him as a man rarely got out of his sketch-book into his more studied work In designing a stained window or tapestry, Burne-Jones would often execute the cartoons for the figures, while Morris attended to the colours, the background and the pattern design, and he appears to have been oblivious to the fact that the bold vigour of his own style was incompatible with the dreamy sentiment of his friend As the years passed, Morris became almost aggressive in his partisanship for Burne-Jones Any critical comment upon his friend's work provoked in him a fierce onset of rage,[1] and, while this may be a proof of his whole-hearted admiration, it might also suggest a lurking uncertainty in his mind, a defensive sympathy reaching back to the ambitions shared in their Oxford days, and a fear that his friend had failed to fulfil the possibilities of his youth

In some of the Firm's work, then, and most notably in the windows, tapestries and engravings where Burne-Jones designed the figures, there is present more than a suspicion of that maudlin sentiment which is one of the most obnoxious symptoms of the Victorian decadence But Morris, in his own work, avoided both human and animal forms,[2] and his great achievement was in pattern design All his work in this field (declared his friend Philip Webb after his death)—

"was based on an extraordinarily wide knowledge of the rise, decay and fall of the arts, this he was able to assimilate as a foundation for his work, and proceed with *real* originality, thus avoiding the fatal step of imitation "[3]

[1] Two such outbreaks of ungovernable rage in Morris's last years, occasioned by tactless references to Burne-Jones, are described in J Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement*, pp 50–2, and in Shaw's Introduction to May Morris, II, p xxxiii Shaw comments "The most innocent joke at [Burne-Jones'] expense   wounded Morris to a degree that roused him to fury   Morris was beyond reason on the subject he seemed to have transferred to himself all the jealous sensitiveness on his friend's behalf which most artists feel on their own "

[2] Philip Webb often did the animals in Morris's designs, and—while Webb's animals are delightful—it is a pity that Morris did not have more confidence in his own powers in this line, since his own birds and animals are colourful, robust, and humorous

[3] Lethaby, *op cit*, p 220,

Morris himself set down the principles which guided him in his pattern designing in two essays in his later life, and in these several precepts frequently recur.

"The aim should be to combine clearness of form and firmness of structure with the mystery which comes of abundance and richness of detail . Do not introduce any lines or objects which cannot be explained by the structure of the pattern, it is just this logical sequence of form, this growth which looks as if it would not have been otherwise, which prevents the eye wearying of the repetition of the pattern Do not be afraid of large patterns

"The geometrical structure of the pattern, which is a necessity in all recurring patterns, should be boldly insisted upon, so as to draw the eye from accidental figures. .

"Above all things, avoid vagueness, run any risk of failure rather than involve yourselves in a tangle of poor weak lines that people can't make out Definite form bounded by firm outline is a necessity for all ornament Rational growth is necessary to all patterns . Take heed in this growth that each member of it be strong and crisp, that the lines do not get thready or flabby or too far from their stock to sprout firmly and vigorously, even where a line ends it should look as if it had plenty of capacity for more growth if so it would . Out-landishness is a snare . Those natural forms which are at once most familiar and most delightful to us, as well from association as from beauty, are the best for our purpose. The rose, the lily, the tulip, the oak, the vine, and all the herbs and trees that even we cockneys know about, they will serve our turn . ."

In the same essays he emphasized his preference for pictorial suggestion or direct expression, which was pushed to its extreme in his late tapestry-work with Burne-Jones:

"You may be sure that any decoration is futile, and has fallen into at least the first stage of degradation, when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol

"I am bound to say that I, as a Western man and a picture-lover, must still insist on plenty of meaning in your patterns, I must have unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields, and strange trees, boughs, and tendrils, or I can't do with your pattern, but must take the first piece of nonsense-work a Kurdish shepherd has woven from tradition and memory, all the more, as even in that there will be some hint of past history,"[1]

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[1] See "Textiles" (1888), May Morris, I, pp 244–51, "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing" (1881), *Works*, Vol XXII, pp 175–205, "Textile Fabrics" (1884), *Works*, Vol XXII, pp 270–94

These passages reveal clearly the leading characteristics of Morris's designs In the opinion of his colleague, W. R. Lethaby, the architect:

"They stand supreme in modern pattern work, and will necessarily remain supreme until as great a man as Morris again deals with that manner of expression with his *full force* as he did   Even the most formal of his work recalls to us the strong growth of healthy vegetation   Others, more directly, speak in ordered pattern-language, of a flower-embroidered field, of willow boughs seen against the sky, of intertwined jessamine and whitethorn, of roses climbing against a background of yew, of branching pomegranate, lemon and peach, of a rose-trellised arbour in a garden   . ."

Nearly all his designs show the same vigour and boldness, both in the strong recurring lines, and heavy curling leaves, and in their unashamed use of the brightest colour ("If you want mud, you can find that in the street", he told an important customer who thought his colours were not sufficiently "subdued") copious in their luxuriant growth and foliage: suggestive in their pictorial detail His years of research into the problems of dyeing brought their reward. In Lethaby's opinion

"Even in the choice of single colours, reds, greens, yellows, Morris's mastery appears; if it be kermes and indigo in dyes, or red lead and yellow ochre in pigments, he looked on these colours when *pure* as in themselves beautiful natural products, the individuality and flavour of which would be destroyed by too much mixing "[1]

Everything which left his hand, or which had been produced at the Firm under his eye, reveals the excellence of materials and of workmanship. Where properly cared for, the colour and fabric of his textiles have endured to the present day, still preserving their miraculous freshness. "He was the greatest pattern designer we ever had or can ever have"—this was Lethaby's considered judgement—"for a man of his scale will not again be working in the minor arts. His work was sweet and noble in every curve of line and stain of colour."[2]

Towards the end of his life, Morris remarked to Edward Carpenter (moved for a moment by the simplicity of the life he found in Carpenter's cottage at Millthorpe (p. 416)):

[1] W R Lethaby, *William Morris as Work-Master* (1901).
[2] W R Lethaby, *Philip Webb and His Work*, p 62.

"I have spent, I know, a vast amount of time designing furniture and wall-papers, carpets and curtains, but after all I am inclined to think that sort of thing is mostly rubbish, and I would prefer for my part to live with the plainest whitewashed walls and wooden chairs and tables "[1]

Half-humorous as these words are, they reveal that sense of conflict which—as we shall see—he had come to understand and express so forcibly in his Socialist lectures.

Shoddy—that was his enemy "It is a shoddy age", he once shouted in his last years "Shoddy is king From the statesman to the shoemaker, all is shoddy."[2] The Firm fought shoddy from start to finish, and nothing it turned out could come under this accusation In his work as a designer Morris desired to combine two things sound workmanship on good materials, and richness of decorative detail In his first objective, simplicity and good quality, he was the main pioneer of that trend which is continued in the best design of our own day. If he is taken to task to-day by some critics for over-elaboration and sweetness in some of his work—for the heavy and intricate ornamental lines of some of his later wallpapers and chintzes—yet it is still Morris himself who first laid down both the text and the practice on which his critics stand. Moreover, it should be remembered that Morris's second objective (that of richness of decoration) could only be reached by finding customers among the wealthiest class. Here he was subject to a constant sense of impatience and irritation which was one of the forces impelling him forwards to Socialist conclusions (p 287). His brusqueness of manner with his customers, and his steadfast refusal to compromise the standards of his art, became famous and even made his Firm a centre of fashionable curiosity. As Rossetti once remarked "Top's very eccentricities and independent attitude towards his patrons seem to have drawn patrons round him "[3] But it was only to be expected that younger designers who followed him would turn away from such difficult customers as these, with their freakish fashions and desire for ostentation, and, in consequence, would turn aside from the extravagance of some of Morris's work, which—while not compromising in any way with the

[1] Carpenter, *op cit* , p 217   [2] *Clarion*, November 19th, 1892
[3] T Watts-Dunton's recollections in *The English Review,* January, 1909

philistinism of his patrons—nevertheless was planned in a grand and costly manner, and was suited to large rooms and long perspectives. Already there are marked signs of a revival of interest in Morris's work, and we can be confident that in a Socialist Britain, when once again there are public buildings which are decorated to match the dignity of the people's occasions, the bold and noble conception of his designs will have an enduring fertilizing influence.