

Morris's 'Working Folk and the Future of Art'

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The first lecture that Morris delivered in Manchester was on 'The Progress of Decorative Art in England', at a banquet celebrating the opening of the Fine Arts Exhibition at St. James's Hall on 20th October 1882. (See Charles Harvey and Jon Press, 'Morris and Company in Manchester' in this *Journal*, Vol. IX. No. 3 (Autumn 1991), p.5). But this was not the first time that his views had been aired in the city. On 10 February 1879 a communication from Morris to Thomas Coglean Horsfall had been read to the Manchester Literary Club. It was subsequently published under the present title in the *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club*, Vol. V (1879), pp.51-5; we are grateful to the Secretary of the Club, Mr. Glyn Davis, for permission to reprint it. In it Morris first formulated his dictum "have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful", which he repeated in his lecture 'Labour and Pleasure versus Labour and Sorrow', given on 19 February 1880 to the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design.

Horsfall (1841-1932) was, as Norman Kelvin explains in a footnote, "a Manchester philanthropist who believed that the wealthy middle class had an obligation to supervise the leisure activities of the working class". (See Kelvin, editor, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, Vol. II., Princeton U.P., 1987, p.12). His scheme for an Art Gallery for the city was first outlined in the *Manchester Guardian* 27 February 1877, and included by Ruskin in *Fors Clavigera* for July 1877. Later Horsfall sought advice from various people, including Morris, who replied on 9 February 1881, and wrote again on 7 April. Horsfall's proposal was discussed at a meeting of the Literary Club. He argued that Art should become "a teacher, an agent in the social reform and elevation of the people". He amplified his statement by saying that art should not remain a mere luxury for the educated few, but should be "an instrument of the greatest possible culture among the community at large". This was a view that Morris enthusiastically accepted, and it is not surprising that later Horsfall pressed him to lecture in Manchester a second time, which he did on 6 March 1883. It was on that occasion, when Morris spoke on 'Art, Wealth and Riches', that the Manchester dilettanti found themselves highly critical of what they heard. This was the beginning of regular visits by Morris to Manchester, many of his lectures being given to the Ancoats Brotherhood. (Eugene LeMire's *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, Wayne State U.P., 1969, gives the fullest account of when and where Morris gave his lectures).

In the original publications in the *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club*, the following footnote appeared:

A letter addressed to Mr. T. C. Horsfall, a member of the Club, and the originator of the Art Museum Scheme for Manchester, and read for him in his unavoidable absence. The President, in introducing the reader of the letter, said Mr. Morris was not only the author of *The Earthly Paradise* and other poems, but he was the

practical head of a famous firm of decorative art manufacturers in London, and therefore wrote upon the subject of art from actual and intimate knowledge.

Then followed Morris's discourse with the title 'Working Folk and the Future of Art':

At the risk of seeming a mar-plot, I feel myself bound to lay before you my views about the difficulties of your [Art Museum] scheme.

In the first place, I must say that I believe cheap art to be an impossibility. All art must cost time, labour, thought, anxiety; in short, wear and tear of body and soul. It will cost this when the world in general is in full consent as to the necessity of its existence. At the present time the world is not so consenting. Thoughtful men are divided on the subject; some look upon art as a disease, or a folly of childhood; others, while admitting its present decrepitude, cannot see what is to supply the place of it in men's minds when the last of it is gone. Meanwhile, the great mass of civilized men will neither make up their minds to have it or leave it; the old ideas yet cling to them, and though they must needs be influenced by things that are coming, they cannot foresee them or prepare for them. About one thing, however, they have made up their minds, and that is that art, though it may still be allowed to live if it can, must at all times and in all places yield to every other consideration. Now, if the practice of art at all times must be laborious and exhausting, how much more must it be so when it is carried on in the teeth of the general mind of men?

On the other hand, the demand which is made for cheap art by those who wish to keep up the old traditions is met by the supply of sham art, manufactured by people who do not care about it, but who turn it out on business principles, as they would guns, or poison, or other curses of mankind if they were asked for them. This, of course, can be had at any price that people will give for it; but to my mind, and I have no doubt to yours, the blankness of a prison or a workhouse would be preferable to the "decoration" thus supplied, which does not give the maker pleasure to make nor the user pleasure in using. If it were not for the slavery of habit we should speedily be quit of this; and one day, doubtless, we shall be quit of it, with other hurtful rubbish. Meantime, I repeat that all who care for art must make sacrifices for it much greater, in these days of transition, than they would have to if art were an admitted necessity, and it were cherished by all men.

Are working men in a position to make those sacrifices? Surely we must say that, as individuals, they are not. Nor have they any thought of it; the sea is salt wherever you draw up the bucket, and ten average working men are just like ten average manufacturers, barristers, parsons, or whatnot. Whenever they do begin to think of it we shall all have news of the same from the trades unions; the hearts of the handicraftsmen (in combination) are set upon lifting up their class as a body. It is both natural and necessary that they should have begun that endeavour by the struggle about wages, but I think they have already begun to see other necessities; and if art is ever to be anything else than a grievous battle for a few discontented artists, and a languid amusement for a few dilettanti fine gentlemen, they will one day see the necessity of art. I do not hope to see that day, but, if I should, how fully shall I be rewarded for any pains I have taken; for then, indeed, the battle of art will be fought and won; because these are the people who make all objects of architectural art, and their bestirring themselves in the matter will mean that the

civilized world in general is also stirring, and has begun once more to crave for the decencies of life.

Meantime I must needs say that art knows no distinction of classes; what is good for the palace is good for the cottage, and vice versa. In architectural matters the vices of the rich are pretty much the vices of the poor. Yet if anything I could say could be of any use to a man here and there who may have any longing for art, I should be sorry to leave it unsaid. So at the risk of wearying you with truisms I will write down a few things that have occurred to me, as they probably have to everybody else that has thought of decorating a man's dwelling.

First, as the text to preach from: Do not have anything in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful. If this rule were to be carried out, we should get rid of most upholstering.

Second: Never have anything which is not good and sound in workmanship; of such sham articles, the dealing in which forms such a large part of modern commerce, one must say that the handicraftsman, the salesman, and the public strive mutually to cheat each other, and succeed.

Third: A thing (house, piece of furniture, or the like) if it is essentially ugly is made uglier by any attempt to decorate it with surface ornament – *e.g.*, it is impossible to ornament a modern piano or a chimney-pot hat.

Things that have been said over and over again, I know, but almost never acted upon in our day; and I do not think that there can be any other general principles than these.

As to matters of more detail, the first thing to be considered for London and the big manufacturing towns is, what is to be done to beat the smoke and dirt? I am afraid that is a very difficult question. We can hardly help using some paper-hangings nowadays; but the very cheap ones are, besides being generally ugly, almost impossible to clean. A patterned wall that will wash without being ruinously expensive is very much wanted for smoky towns. Rich men and public buildings might use marble and tiles and mosaic, of course, but some kind of cement wall, like the Arab work, would be the general thing. All curtains, of course, ought to wash; and the public in general ought at once to strike against the manufacturers printing other than fast colours on their chintzes. In places where people come and go with muddy shoes, no one ought to have carpets laid down. As for poor houses nothing makes a place look more disastrously uncomfortable than a mangy strip or two of carpet about; and in rich houses it goes against the grain with me to see London mud stamped into beautiful and laborious pieces of eastern work; in the East of course people always take off their shoes before they tread on the carpeted part of a room. No room anywhere should be covered all over with carpet; it is a stuffy custom, and I am glad to say people are largely giving it up. My own feeling would be for bricks or tiles, or some kind of cheap mosaic, like, say, that plum-pudding looking stuff they use in Italy for all floors; but you know these things would be costly unless they were almost universal, and workmen were well used to laying them. Still the ordinary deal floor of an English house is most discouraging, unless it is kept as clean as the deck of a smart yacht; an impossibility in London or Manchester.

If it were not for the degradation of the arts of architecture and building, the well-to-do handicraftsman would have a very great advantage over the middle-

class people just above him in one respect, and even now he has some advantage. I mean that his household treasures are like to be all in one room, and will help to decorate it. Ridiculous as the custom is that has already grown up of covering a drawing-room wall with all kinds of plates, a real kitchen dresser can hardly fail to look well if it is trim and clean; nor is there any decoration, short of pictures, better than books that look as if they were used and beloved. I dare say you know what middle-class houses are apt to be in this respect – pretty much a desert.

Now, what is a poor man to do about furniture, chairs, tables, and the like? A board on trestles is always and everywhere the best table; but chairs? the ordinary ones are so cheap, and – so very nasty. I am afraid you will laugh at me if I recommend the old-fashioned windsor chair, but I don't know what else to do, though even they are made much worse than they used to be. For cupboards and that sort of thing a man who is not rich must either have them very rough, or be cumbered with the unsound work and hideous sham art of the cheap furniture shops. And after all, I cannot choose but turn back to our first principles, and say that the best remedy against sham art is to do with as little of things as one can, and get those few that one has good, sound in workmanship, and interesting to look at. In saying all this, I am really putting myself in the place of a handicraftsman, and thinking how I should like to deal with my lodging; and I believe that, setting aside the dismalness of smoky surroundings, I could make it look pleasant and comfortable without getting myself into debt; but I should have to forego many things which my fellow-workmen would consider, if not necessary comforts, at any rate necessary pieces of respectability. But I should do the same if I were a man of narrow means in the class just above the workman's. I would forego the dismal drawing-room and Debrett's *Peerage*, and should expect my fellow-clerks to think my house looked bare, and lacking in respectability in consequence. Nor any the less, if I were a rich man or a lord, should I fail to get into trouble for foregoing a good many of the things "due to my station." In short, I must say that it seems to me obvious to a rational man that the way to live comfortably is to have as few things as possible about one; and that same is, I am sure, the counsel of Art, who has always found luxury her worst, because her most insidious, foe.

Finally, from all I have said, I suppose you will gather that I do not see my way to any direct means of getting the working men, such as they are to-day – such as civilization has made them – to take interest in the arts and decencies of life. I myself hope, as many people fear, that their relative positions will change to their advantage; and I think that change will be to our advantage also. What the result of such a change will be on art I cannot tell; yet I believe it must be for its good if more light and less strife befalls the world. Meantime all education must surely help us, and the education you in Manchester have taken in hand of late by means of a museum is unquestionably both good and important, and I heartily congratulate you on the fact.