

## **Program for William Morris Society in the US Session at CAA, Feb. 10-13, 2021**

All talks will be pre-recorded for on-demand viewing with a scheduled time for live conversation. The live time will be scheduled in October, and conference registration will open in November.

### **William Morris Today**

Session Co-Chairs: Morna O'Neill, Wake Forest University, and Imogen Hart, University of California-Berkeley.

William Morris (1834-1896) has never seemed more prescient. As an artist, designer, poet, printer, preservationist, socialist, environmentalist, and pacifist, Morris's life and work seem to speak to the most pressing concerns of our current moment, from climate change and resource allocation to income inequality and socialism. In 2021, we will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the William Morris Society in the United States, an organization dedicated to furthering knowledge of Morris's life and work. Remarkably, it also marks the first appearance of the WMS-US as an affiliated society of the College Art Association. This session aims to highlight Morris's influence on art and artistic discourse up to the present day. What are the most pressing questions for scholars today in relationship to Morris's work? What new perspectives are they bringing to Morris's work? How can William Morris's life and work provide new perspectives on artistic practice and art history? What is the legacy of the Kelmscott Press? How are contemporary artists and designers such as Jeremy Deller, Bob and Roberta Smith, Kehinde Wiley and others engaging with Morris, his art, and his writings?

### **Presentations:**

*Morris's Imperial and Environmental Materials: A Study in Indigo*

Sarah Mead Leonard, Independent Scholar

In the past, William Morris's materials have gone under-examined in favor of design scholarship which focuses on content, visual effect, and consumption. However, a materially-centered approach to Morris's designs can open new perspectives on Morris's place in his own time and his legacies in ours. In this paper, I will show how an in-depth study of indigo, the material of Morris's signature blue, can illuminate unexplored aspects of Morris's relationship with the world around him – from global political systems to localized ecosystems.

Grown in India, indigo was a product of imperial control and exploitative global capitalism. In use at Merton Abbey, its dyeing and processing would have impacted the local environment and the health of the River Wandle. By understanding indigo as a material with its own stories, we can begin to see Morris's works within larger contexts – not as isolated expressions of artistic and ideological intent, but as pieces which operated within local and global systems of resource exploitation and environmental degradation in the second half of the nineteenth century. And by asking questions of Morris's contexts through materials, we can also begin to complicate canonical views of Morris and to open dialogue with current discussions in the academy and beyond.

*Where is our William Morris?: Global Legacies of Morris and the Morrissian*

Antonia Behan, Assistant Professor, Queen's University, Canada

How do we read William Morris today? This paper will make the case for critically analyzing the legacy of Morris within a global frame. Recent important challenges to decenter Britain in discussions of the broader phenomenon of craft revivals are complicated by the striking fact of Morris's influence on—and emblematic status among—a wide range of non-European and anti-imperial thinkers, as well as colonial officials. This paper will focus on the challenges such links pose for decoupling Morris and the Morrissian from Arts and Crafts' global legacy. First, I track the remarkable recurrence of my title's question ("Where is our William Morris?") in crafts discourse ranging from India, Ireland, and America, to Japan, Mexico, and Hungary. Examining how colonial administrators and anti-colonial nationalists alike drew inspiration from Morris's call to redefine fine art, decorative art, and industry, I show how such disparate and sometimes confusing appropriations call out for substantive and critical reassessments, both historical and historiographic. Instead of evidencing Morris's diffusionist influence, such appropriations (I argue) took his work as a model for responding to experiences of industrialization and capitalism within the colonial context. In my conclusion, I will suggest the further portability of Morrissian ideas about politics, ecological and cultural custodianship, and the pleasure of everyday things in more recent craft-revival contexts, from the postcolonial to contemporary

phenomena including the rise of Marie Kondo and the Fashion Revolution movement.

Monica Bowen, Instructor, Seattle University

*Bittersweet Sensations of William Morris and Kehinde Wiley*

Contemporary painter Kehinde Wiley is well known for incorporating William Morris designs into several of his portraits of Black people. Analyzing the work of William Morris can enable a better understanding of Kehinde Wiley's work. By using the designs of expensive Arts & Crafts objects, Wiley challenges racist assumptions that notions of cultural refinement could be limited to a specific racial identity. Wiley has further explained that his paintings, by juxtaposing Black portraits within European motifs, create sensations that are "bittersweet" because of "rubbing two oppositional forms together." It is within this framework of bittersweet oppositions that Kehinde Wiley's art can, in turn, serve as a springboard to better understand the work of William Morris in the 19th century. Through an analysis of images by both artists, as well as an exploration of the politics of their respective times, this paper analyzes how these artists are similar in their blending of oppositional elements that are new and old, progressive and traditional, and ultimately bittersweet.

**Discussant**

*Victorian Radical: William Morris Today*

Tim Barringer, Paul Mellon Professor, History of Art Department, Yale University