

Obituary: Barbara Morris (1918–2009)

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Few of those interested in the study of nineteenth century British decorative arts will not know the work of Barbara Morris, one of the most important figures in the revival of interest in Victorian design which has taken place over the past sixty years. Born Barbara Trotman in Willesden, London, she was educated at Brondesbury and Kilburn High School, and the North London Collegiate. Although academically gifted, Barbara showed an early interest in, and talent for drawing, and from 1937 she studied at the Slade School at University College, London. The outbreak of war meant that her studies were put on hold and she took up various teaching jobs, returning to the Slade and graduating as the war ended. For the next two years she worked at various jobs including copywriting for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency but also undertook part-time research work at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1947 she joined the staff on a full-time basis, becoming an active and enthusiastic member of the Circulation Department, which created exhibitions on a range of artistic subjects and toured these throughout Britain.

Circulation (later to be called the Department of Regional Services) was then the most outward looking and adventurous department in the Museum. Alongside Peter Flood, the dynamic and forward thinking Keeper of the department, Barbara became one of a group of left-wing, scholarly curators who were part of the post-war political and socially aware modernising drive experienced throughout Britain, which had witnessed Clement Atlee's Labour party land-slide victory in the general election of 1945. The same year as she joined the Museum, Barbara married Max Morris, a leading communist, teacher and trade union leader, later to become the president of the National Union of Teachers (NUT). The marriage was dissolved in 1960 although the two remained friends throughout their lives until Max died in 2008. During the early 1960s Barbara set up home with Dave Bowman, another committed socialist and a leading figure in the National Union of Railwaymen. They married in 1991.

The 1950s proved the most radical period in the V&A's history, heralded in

1952 with the ground-breaking exhibition 'Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts' which celebrated the centenary of the Museum's foundation with a study of the decorative arts in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. The Museum had collected very few Victorian artefacts, which until this time were dismissed as being inferior in both design and technique. The exhibition led to the revival of interest in the period and a craze for collecting and interior design based on what became known then as 'Victoriana'. The organising group of curators included Barbara and her colleagues Shirley Bury and Elizabeth Aslin (referred to by some as 'Flood's women' or 'the three graces').

Barbara's first chosen area of study was textiles. Throughout the 1950s she worked alongside Peter Flood, researching the origins of the printed textile industry in Britain for an exhibition held in Manchester in 1955 and later planned for the V&A. Flood died suddenly in January 1960, and it was only through Barbara's efficient organisation, resilience and hard work that the exhibition opened in May of that year. He had also agreed to curate a centenary exhibition on 'Morris & Company' at the Arts Council in 1961. Yet again Barbara stepped in and took over the task. Considering the limited time available to work on catalogue entries, these are informative and scholarly and the catalogue remains an important work of reference. The final paragraph of her introduction declared that the exhibition should be seen not 'as a pious commemoration of a dead movement but as the celebration of a live and continuing tradition of English design'. This was a typically pragmatic view from one of William Morris's most knowledgeable and enthusiastic followers, and remains true to this day.

All of Barbara's published studies on nineteenth century design were meticulously researched, and because they are well organised and well written, are interesting and informative. *Victorian Embroidery* (1962) and *Inspiration for Design: the influence of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (1986) are exemplary in their comprehensiveness and detail. Barbara also held a keen interest in contemporary design, and was responsible for building up the V&A's important collections of twentieth century textiles. With the gradual closure of most sections of the British textile industry throughout the 1960s and 1970s, she was frequently summoned by phone with little warning in order to collect whatever she could from closing factories and shops, and it is thanks to her energy and good taste that the collection is as comprehensive and important as it is today.

The Circulation Department closed in 1976, and Barbara transferred to the Museum's department of Ceramics and Glass, both of which subjects had interested her for many years. Characteristically she took on these new responsibilities with enthusiasm, becoming as well known and respected in these fields as she had in textiles. On retirement in 1978 she was headhunted for the newly opened education department of Sotheby's, and spent a number of years teaching and then head of their short arts courses from 1984–8. Her great talents at commu-

nication were also recognised by the BBC and she became a regular expert on the 'Antiques Road Show'. She was always generous with her time, lecturing and meeting students and scholars and offering advice wherever and whenever asked. She was also a keen committee member and supporter of many specialist groups, including our own, and the Decorative Arts Society, the Glass Circle and the Art Worker's Guild.

Barbara was a superb hostess and loved to give dinner parties, initially at her home in London and later in Brighton where she and Dave spent weekends, eventually living there full time when she retired from Sotheby's. She was an attractive, vivacious woman, always well turned out with an insatiable love of life and interest in people. She lived a full and busy social life and possessed a wide circle of friends by whom she will be greatly missed. For those who did not have the opportunity to meet her, her influence will endure through the vigour and clarity of her published work.

I first met Barbara as a young curator joining the V&A's Textile Department staff during the early 1970s and, gingerly stepping in to study an area she had made all her own, I was dazzled by her eminence and presence. She proved a courteous and generous colleague, instructively critical at times, but also appreciative and generous with her praise. It was a great privilege to have known and worked with her.