



William Morris Society in the United States Newsletter January 1990

MORRIS AT THE 1990 MLA CONVENTION

✍ This year's Modern Language Association convention will be held 26-29 December in Chicago. Two sessions sponsored by the Society are planned, "Morris and the Fin de Siècle" and "Morris and Architecture." In both cases talks which consider Morris's influence on local (that is, midwestern) culture would be especially welcome. "Architecture" in the second panel is taken broadly to include any aspect of the decorative arts. Offers of papers should be sent to Florence Boos (Department of English, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242) or to Mark Samuels Lasner.

✍ The Society hopes that a tour of the Glessner House, designed by H. H. Richardson in the 1880s and furnished in part by Morris and Co., can be arranged. The Art Institute of Chicago has at least one Pre-Raphaelite picture worth seeing, too, a version of Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*, in the midst of its splendid collection of Impressionists.

✍ An account of the 1989 convention in Washington, DC, will come in the April *Newsletter*.

THE WIDOW'S HOUSE BY THE GREAT RIVER

✍ Work on Helen Timo's edition of Morris's unpublished tale, *The Widow's House by the Great River*, has reached preliminary proof stage. The April *Newsletter* will give details of this publication of the American branch of the Society. (Note for British readers: copies will be available from Kelmscott House.)

THE PRB ON NBC

✍ Viewers of NBC television's "Saturday Night Live" must have been mystified at the show's recent change of "set"--two large wooden picture frames holding enormous blow-up reproductions of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. I cam across this unintentionally, while changing channels and sat mesmerized, disregarding the feeble attempts at comedy and loud music which are the program's mainstays. For the likes of Burne-Jones's *Pygmalion* series (all four of them), Rossetti's *Proserpine*, and works by Waterhouse and (I think) Strudwick are not often seen on television these days. Requests for an explanation from NBC have elicited no response but there does seem to be something going on in the network. For just two weeks later, in mid-December, "Today" show critic Gene Shalit singled out our member Alicia Faxon's *Rossetti* (recently published by Abbeville Press, \$85.00) as one of his choices for a book to give at Christmas. Literally *millions* have now at least heard the name of Rossetti and seen some Pre-Raphaelite art works: one wonders if this a desperate attempt to increase ratings or (I wish it were) a subtle membership drive for the William Morris Society?

AT THE MUSEUMS (SHOPS)

✍ Though this will reach you too late for Christmas 1989 it seems worth recording the increasing number of Morris-related items available from a number of museum shops across the country. The Brooklyn Museum's 1990 Calendar (\$9.95) is *William Morris Wallpapers*, handsomely done though there is relatively little space for writing appointments. According to the price list printed on the back this ought to be available in Canada (\$13.95), the U.K. (£9.95 including VAT) and Australia (\$16.95). Many of the illustrations are used for the same museum's *William Morris Designs and Wallpapers*, a book of tear-out postcards (\$7.95) too beautiful to disfigure for its intended purpose.

✍ The Metropolitan Museum of Art's holiday catalogue offers a box of cards reproducing Morris's *Strawberry Thief* pattern, 10 cards for \$4.95; other Morris cards can be spotted in more general

assortments. Also from the Met comes the *Artist's Birthday Book* (\$8.95) bound in a reproduction of a wallpaper, and a packet of "Giftware by Artists" has Morris's designs--another piece of self-destruction. Both of these are sold in stationers, so you don't need to order them directly from the museum. (Memory tells me that the Met, or some other gallery, had some silver-plated boxes and letter-openers done up after a Morris design. Perhaps some reader has the details?)

✂ These New York institutions face still competition from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, which had many Morris items in their catalogue. These included a boxed set of three *William Morris Blank Books* (\$16.95); the *Cafe Mug Set*, 4 with a blue-and-white adaptation of a textile design for \$36.00; *William Morris Napkins*, 200 in various patterns (a better value, but not very permanent, for \$19.50); and the wood *Rose and Thistle Box*, same pattern as the *Mugs* but in red (\$55.00). Of the same period but *not* Morris--still irresistibly attractive--was a silk *ABC Scarf* reproducing a colored alphabet by Kate Greenaway (\$39.50). At the MFA itself they are said to sell cards of Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata*, acquired by the museum several years ago.

✂ The Smithsonian has, as far as can be discovered, only one Morris offering this year, a silk tie done in a variation of the Acanthus pattern (\$ 22.00). A similar scarf was once available but seems to have disappeared from both the Smithsonian's shops and their catalogue.

✂ Finally, a *British* catalogue, *The Museums & Galleries Collection* (Museums and Galleries Marketing Ltd., 24/25 Catherine Hill, Frome, Somerset BA11 1BY) contains an amalgamation from historic houses and art galleries. The prices are in sterling but shipments (and charges to credit cards) to North America can easily be made. There are two scarves, of interest *Eyebright*, a Morris design (£26.95), and *Poppy: The De Morgan Scarf* (£19.95), based on the pottery of Morris's associate. Then, in a two-page spread, comes a variety of document wallets, notecards, notecard holders, and greeting cards, all in Morris patterns, with a special section for the co-ordinated *Strawberry Thief Collection* of similar items. Finally, the back cover offers the *William Morris Scarf*, in the Chrysanthemum pattern, described as "a pleasure to give or receive" for £26.95.

✂ Given the obvious success the museums have with selling Morris perhaps the Society should put out its own catalogue. Our expanded offerings could include the *William Morris Board Game*, or, better still, the *Wilfird Scawen Blunt Board Game*--the Pre-Raphaelite form of (*Anti-*)*Monopoly*, the cards reading things like "stuck in a demonstration in Trafalgar Square: You lose two 'moves'" and "Morris and Co. decorates large mansion of armaments manufacturer: Collect £10,000 but move back one space politically."

THE GARDEN SALE

✂ On 10 November Sotheby's New York branch sold the book and manuscript collection formed by "The Garden Limited," the *nom de vente* for the collecting/investing team made up of Haven O'More and Michael Davis. This auction, like the Doheny and Bradley Martin sales which preceded it, was hyped to the sky, not only by the auction house but also by O'More's fatuous and quasi-religious catalogue preface. The results were generally as expected--"important" books bringing "important" prices, including the four Shakespeare folios for \$1.9 million (the purchaser of these, clearly a glutton for punishment, was seen the same evening at the Boston antiquarian bookfair). While the collection included numerous examples of fine printing, including books from the Doves and Ashendene presses, there were only three Morris items *per se*. Lot 239 was a set of *The Earthly Paradise*, all later impressions, bound by Roger De Coverly; this had a roundabout association, an inscription from Madeline Wyndham (one of Wilfird Scawen Blunt's cousins and ladies) to Ada Phoebe Godman, described in the catalogue as a tapestry weaver for Morris and Co. in whom T. J. Cobden-Sanderson was interested. There were *two* copies of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. The first, a presentation copy from Morris to Cobden-Sanderson, bound in tooled pigskin by the Dove bindery to the recipient's design, brought \$150,000.00. The other, also bound in pigskin by the Dove binder, but to a design by Morris himself, was a "bargain" at \$60,000.00.

PRE-RAPHAELITES IN NEW YORK

✂ At one time New York had several commercial galleries who specialized in Victorian art. Now there is only one, the Shepherd Gallery (21 East 84th Street, New York 10028), which arranges an annual exhibition of works sent over by leading British dealers. Their most recent show, *English Romantic Art 1850-1920: Pre-Raphaelites, Academics, Symbolists*, 18 October-18 November 1989, was large and, rather surprisingly, quite comprehensive. Though there were networks by Morris, his friends and associates were well-represented. The Burne-Joneses included a large *Study for the Arras Tapestry*,

done for Morris and Co. about 1893, a lovely pencil *Study of Sleeping Beauty* for the *Briar Rose* series, and a portrait of Venetia Benson, the wife of Morris's friend, the metalworker W. A. S. Benson. There were only two Rossetti drawings, but these were of the two "right" subjects, *Elizabeth Siddal* (recently sold by Christie's as a portrait of Christina Rossetti) and *Mrs. William Morris*, done at Kelmscott Manor in 1873. (For those interested in prices, the last was marked \$45,000.00.) Also shown were drawings and paintings by Fairfax Murray, Ruskin, Albert Moore, Leighton, Millais, Walter Crane, Henry Ryland, G. F. Watts, and John Brett.. An illustrated catalogue is available.

GOBLIN MARKET IN BOSTON

 In 1887 Emanuel Aguilar composed a cantata based on Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. Now, a century later, there is a musical adaptation, written by Polly Pen and Peggy Harmon, which came to Boston's Erlich Theater after a successful run in New York. Bill Marx, the Boston *Phoenix* drama critic, found that the director had submerged Rossetti's work in a "hubba-hubba" production which focused entirely on the supposed sexual relationship between the two sisters and the goblins:

Šdirector Roland Tec's in charge of the goblins' "let's make whoopee" wares, and he thinks we need help to see that Rossetti's mixing oranges and orgasms. The crudity of this hormonal approach, coupled with the writhing and off-key warbling of Lesley Bennett and Justine Serio as the two sisters, transforms the fragile piece into *Laura and Lizzie do Goblinland*. Pen's modernist score (arty Gilbert and Sullivan) is strummed by a mediocre string trio banished to the back of the set--like a bump-and-grind band like a strip joint.

 And this from an obviously sympathetic critic who, while glossing over recent feminist interpretations, described *Goblin Market* as "gothic porno" and clearly relished Ruskin's definition of lovemaking: "the sexual syringing of the female by the male" (a quote surely out of context, but from where?).

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Contacts: United States: us@morrissociety.org • United Kingdom: uk@morrissociety.org • Canada: info@wmisc.ca

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