Magazine

Autumn 2019
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Welcome

There are lots of interesting things to report back on in this issue. In August I found myself at Wightwick Manor for a talk by the Collections Manager Helen on Rossetti’s early artistic style. This ties in with their current exhibition Rossetti, Pre the Pre-Raphaelites, which runs until 24 December (nationaltrust.org.uk/wightwick-manor-and-gardens). Along with finding out more about the drawings on display in the exhibition, there were many amusing anecdotes about the teenage Rossetti. A disruptive presence at art school, he frequently truanted and busied himself instead slouching along the streets of London thinking up ways to put the art world to rights. Helen also took us on a whistle stop tour of the highlights of this wonderful Arts & Crafts house, which is filled with Morris designs and Pre-Raphaelite art including a fantastic collection of Siddal’s work, over seventy by Rossetti, fifty by Burne-Jones, twenty three by Evelyn De Morgan and twenty by Millais. There is also a copy of the hand-knotted rug mentioned in our fascinating article on Morris’s Merton Abbey carpet knotting girls on page 14.

At the beginning of September I joined the Poems of Protest afternoon of readings at Kelmscott House to mark the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo massacre. Society President Tom Sawyer got the session off to a fine start reading from the works of the ‘laureate of smoky pubs and clubs’ Andy Croft (andy-croft.co.uk). He followed with Walking Wounded by gritty street fighting poet Vernon Scannell, then finished with The Parliament by Chartist H R Nicholls. Tom was followed by writer and broadcaster Michael Rosen, who started with two fine Morris poems, Wake, London Lads! and The March of the Workers, then read from a selection of his own work. Actor Adjoa Andoh gave a stirring reading of The Mask of Anarchy by Shelley, the poet’s personal response to events at Peterloo. Finally, members of the audience were invited to take to the floor.

We have lots more interesting events coming up at Kelmscott House too. If you admired our cover, you may be interested to know the image is taken from a new book called William Morris’s Flowers. The author of this stunning volume is the William Morris Gallery’s Senior Curator Rowan Bain, who will be giving a talk at Kelmscott House on 15 February next year. Meanwhile, our next exhibition at Kelmscott House features the work of contemporary artist Benjamin Deakin. Called Nowhere Reimagined: Exploring the Legacy of News from Nowhere, it opens on 14 November (interview on page 12). Benjamin will be in conversation with researcher Diana Taylor on Saturday 30 November, discussing the influence of landscape and memory. If you are interested in attending either of these events, visit our website (williammorrissociety.org) for more details.

Finally, our Library Development Fund Appeal has raised over £2,500 so far which is 32% of the target. It’s easy to donate. The simplest way is online (justgiving.com/campaign/williammorrissocietylibrary).

Please do drop me a line at sarahwilsoneditor@wmsmagazine@gmail.com if you have anything you’d like to share. Until the next issue...

Sarah Wilson, Editor

Increase in membership subscriptions

Members are reminded that an increase in subscription rates came into effect on 1 January 2019. The new rates are listed below: While many of you have updated your subscription, a significant number are still to do so. Letters were recently sent out with standing order forms for those who use this method of payment, and we would be grateful for prompt return of these forms. A reminder, too, that if you are a UK taxpayer, you can increase the value of your subscription to the Society by 25% by signing a Gift Aid declaration. You can download a form from the membership page of our website. For any queries about your subscription, please contact Cathy DeFreitas on 020 8741 3735 or email membership@williammorrissociety.org.uk.

The membership rates are – UK: individual and family £32 (cheque/Paypal) or £30 (direct debit/standing order); student £15; corporate £40. Overseas (EU): individual and family £55; corporate £70. Overseas (outside Europe): individual and family £65; corporate £80.
A few years ago when I moved into my house, one of the things that delighted me most was the abundance of ornate stained glass in the area. Comprising mostly houses influenced by the picturesque and vernacular revival and Arts & Crafts styles, the neighbourhood has been described by the local town planners as ‘the quintessence of middle-class Edwardian suburbia’. The often highly eclectic style of decoration is most notable in the porch and window joinery, decorative plasterwork, tile hanging, fine brickwork and flamboyant stained glass. I like to think that these North London houses would have pleased William Morris if he had been around at the beginning of the twentieth century to see them finished.

The best, however, was yet to come. The spire of an impressive George Gilbert Scott church dominates the skyline on the local green. But it was several years before I discovered its unique connection with Morris and the treasure that lay within. What led me to visit Christ Church, Southgate was its Gothic Revival link, an architectural movement that interests me greatly. The stunning exterior with its lancets and trefoils doesn’t disappoint. Scott was influenced by the decorated Gothic style of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, which is what he aimed to reproduce here albeit on a smaller scale. But this paled in comparison with the stunning stained glass within. I picked up the guide notes and discovered that the foundation stone was laid in 1861, the same year that Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co came into existence. Consecrated in 1862, the commission to create the stained glass windows went to Morris’s new firm. The medieval character of much of their early work appealed to the Gothic Revival architects engaged in church building during this era. I read that Morris was very involved in the drawing of designs for the windows in the early days of the company and it was likely he regarded this commission for the new Gilbert Scott church in Southgate to be of sufficient importance to merit his personal attention, especially as the two men were friends. While Morris had overall responsibility for the works, the general scheme and layout of the windows was delegated to Philip Webb. The resulting body of work forms one of the finest collections of stained glass by Morris and his Pre-Raphaelite circle in London, with additional works by Philip Webb, Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Quite a collaboration and, fortuitously, right on my doorstep.

A unique collection
As I browsed the wonderful stained glass windows other significant factors started to come to light. The Christ Church glass covers a substantial period from 1861 until well into the twentieth century, all still in its original setting, which is of course now highly unusual. In the Lady Chapel, which is thought to have at least two or three examples of Morris’s own work in the figures of St Luke (definitely) and St John (maybe), there is also a window by Morris depicting St Matthew writing on a scroll. It is thought to be a self-portrait and the curly haired,
bearded figure does indeed bear a resemblance to Morris. If this is the case, it’s the only stained glass self-portrait of Morris in existence, a fact that makes it even more special. The combined cost of these windows, together with the one depicting St Mark by Ford Madox Brown, came to £4 according to Philip Webb’s accounts book. Quite a bargain considering the total cost of building the church was £11,689.28.

In the chancel the pair of lancet windows of Dorcas and the Good Samaritan by Burne-Jones are also significant. Notes in the accounts book (£10 for the pair) suggest the designs were prepared by means of photographic enlargements from small drawings, with subsequent retouching. This is thought to be the first occasion on which there is unmistakable evidence of this procedure being carried out. There is also a set of four pairs of windows by Burne-Jones depicting the Christian virtues: Hope and Faith; Temperance and Charity; and Generosity and Humility. Eight beautiful figures in the Pre-Raphaelite style, donated over a period of years from 1865 to 1898, yet all remarkably consistent in their texture, colour and surrounds, such were the exacting standards of the firm.

Also worthy of mention are the panels depicting St James (by Burne-Jones) and St Jude (by Rossetti), both surmounted with angels by Rossetti thought to be modelled on his wife Lizzie Siddal. Interestingly the angels, each holding a shield specific to a saint, have been transposed during installation so each appears over the wrong saint. There are many other exquisite windows by Burne-Jones in the nave and also a later window depicting St Francis by John Henry Dearle, who became the chief designer in the stained glass workshop after the death of Burne-Jones. Aside from the stained glass, it would be remiss not to mention the stunning mosaic reredos by the Italian glass manufacturer Antonio Salviati. It is very similar to the one in Westminster Abbey also designed by Salviati.

An artistic collaboration
Morris saw the firm’s stained glass work as the continuation of an ancient tradition, looking to the past for inspiration and revisiting medieval themes and imagery. In an 1890s contribution to an edition of the Chambers encyclopedia he wrote ‘Glass painting is no lost art’. He believed that the processes employed in the nineteenth century were essentially those of the twelfth century, and departing from these processes would ‘only lead us astray.’

The Morris studios quickly garnered an unmatched reputation for the fine quality of their work. Morris did not paint the designs himself, preferring to leave this to Burne-Jones, who became the principal stained glass artist in the studio. In the early days Morris also used designs by Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown, while Webb completed much of the lettering and architectural pattern work which made up the surrounds. It was a real team effort. But Morris retained overall control during production, always casting his eye over the final work.

Drawings would be produced in the studio. Once complete they would be enlarged to the actual size of the window and used as a template. Drawings were added to a catalogue of designs that could be adapted for different locations. The stained glass process involved piecing together coloured glass with lead, then painting on the glass to define figures and shading. The glass was then fired to make the image permanent. The huge windows such as those at Christ Church would have been made in sections and great skill was needed to ensure continuity of colour and pattern when they were pieced together.

A fitting tribute
In the first ten years of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co’s existence, over three-quarters of the work was in stained glass. Christ Church is an exceptional example of their Pre-Raphaelite artistry at its best. Gazing upon the remarkable panels in the hushed interior of the church offers an opportunity for quiet contemplation not to be missed should you ever find yourself in the area.

With thanks to Fr. Chrichton Limbert (christchurch-southgate.org) and the following publication: Christ Church Southgate: Notes on the Windows by D. Jeeves (1990)
Jane Carcas and Alison Hartley reveal the fascinating history behind a rediscovered portrait of May Morris by her friend Mary Annie Sloane

As a child, May Morris was often the subject of portraits by her father’s circle of friends, but her appearance in adult life is known mostly from photographs. Among the best-known painted images of a mature May are two watercolours now in the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow. They show her at Kelmscott Manor, the first standing in the doorway of her father’s bedroom and the second seated in the Tapestry Room, checking the proofs of her edition of his collected writings. They were made by the artist Mary Annie Sloane (1867-1961) on a visit to Kelmscott presumed to have taken place around Easter Monday 1912. On that day May wrote to her former lover John Quinn:

‘I have a guest, who is painting just now, my colleague on the Women’s Guild of Arts. She is doing for me a picture of Father’s bedroom and another of this room with me half in the picture, at work (her idea).’

To these images may now be added another Sloane watercolour of May at Kelmscott, found in early 2018 in an upstairs room at 8 Hammersmith Terrace, the house occupied by both women at different times and still in the ownership of Sloane’s family. This picture takes its place among a large amount of material that has recently come to light that allows a broader appreciation of May’s involvement in politics, teaching, writing and textile crafts.

The rediscovered painting shows the Tapestry Room again, but a different angle. In it May is seen in left profile, facing the fireplace, seated in a chair with distinctive ram-head armrests and familiar from a photograph of Kelmscott made in 1896 by Frederick Evans. May wears a white dress with double sleeves very similar to that in the painting of her checking proofs, and this and the presence of vases of spring flowers in both paintings suggests they were made during the same visit to Kelmscott at Easter 1912. The wooden chest in the background and the tapestries concealing a door and a window alcove are as seen in another photograph by Evans.

In the image of May checking proofs her spinning wheel (currently unlocated) stands in front of a window, dormant under a blue cloth. In the new painting she is seen actively spinning at what is presumably the same wheel. With her right hand she guides fibres, most probably of wool, from an airy mass supported on the finial of a distinctive floor-standing brass candlestick (still at Kelmscott), using it as a makeshift distaff. Her left hand, nearer the wheel, is controlling the twist of the fibres. The position of her hands suggests she is ‘long draw’ spinning, a technique used to produce a woollen-style yarn. May is seen in a similar position in a photograph of her at her spinning wheel in the Kelmscott Manor garden around the same time.

The spinning wheel, of the Saxony type, is crisply and largely accurately drawn in ink (though the drive wheel itself is not shown turning, but stationary). Mary Annie Sloane was no stranger to textile production and made numerous images of the people and machinery

‘Quiet and serene and contained’
May Morris at Her Spinning Wheel in the Tapestry Room at Kelmscott Manor by Mary Annie Sloane, watercolour on board, c.1912 (private collection).
engaged in it. She was a native of Leicestershire, at the time of her birth a county famous for its stocking knitters. Among her most popular works is a watercolour of A Woman Framework Knitter (Alice Dobson) (1891, Leicester Museums) that she later turned into an etching. Having moved to London she visited Bethnal Green to paint the silk weavers there. She seems to have been drawn to depict figures engaged in related activity (knitting, making lace or sewing) throughout her career.

Like May, Mary came from a comfortable but by no means narrowly conventional middle-class background. She was the daughter of a doctor in Leicester, and attended a progressive school where her art teacher, Edith Gittins, was a suffragist and admirer of William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement. Mary studied at the Leicester School of Art for two years from 1885 before moving to London at the age of twenty, and enrolling at the National Art Training School (NATS) in Kensington. From there she went to Sir Hubert von Herkomer’s art school in Bushey, Hertfordshire from 1890 to 1892 and studied printmaking at the NATS under Sir Frank Short from 1898. She became known chiefly for her etchings and watercolours and exhibited regularly with the Society of Women Artists and Leicester Society of Artists, at the Royal Academy and Paris Salon, and elsewhere. She also travelled, often with her older sister Eleanor, producing images of the Netherlands, Greece and Spain in the 1900s.7

Mary and May Morris are presumed to have met around 1908 when Mary joined the Women's Guild of Arts (WGA). Founded by May the previous year it allowed female artists and craft workers, who were excluded from the Art Worker’s Guild, to meet for mutual support. When May spent the winter months of 1909-10 lecturing in North America she asked Mary to take over her role as the Guild’s honorary secretary, and later they shared the work. In 1912 Mary visited May at Kelmscott and painted at least the two watercolours discussed above, and probably the newly discovered image, too. A fourth painting by Sloane, of May apparently at her spinning wheel in the Green Room at Kelmscott (private collection), may have been made at the same time, but the presence of a loom in the foreground indicates it is no earlier than 1918, when May referred in letters to setting up the loom and receiving her first orders for tapestry. It is likely that Mary did visit Kelmscott more than once, and certainly differences in the size, support and technique of her known pictures of May at the Manor suggest she made them on different occasions.

The friendship developed further when in 1913 May and Mary spent three months together on holiday in Mallorca. Long letters from May to her mother and sister describing this trip have recently been discovered. They appear to show the pair as highly compatible: as local people described them, ‘one Signora paints all the time, and does nothing else, “s’altra Señora” does everything: she can cook and wash and sew etc etc etc … “And see! She spins,” said a neighbour with an amused smile (I had brought my spindle along)!’ Spinning’s blending of work with domestic life appealed to May, who had taken up the craft around 1902 on a visit to Melsetter House in Orkney; and she took a keen interest in local practices in Mallorca. Several paintings and an etching by Mary inspired by this visit are among those still in the possession of her family.10

The absence of its two secretaries caused some turbulence within the WGA in 1913, when its members were divided over the issue of whether to bestow honorary membership on men.11 Once they had weathered this storm, May and Mary continued to run the Guild together for some time after. Mary was secretary for fifteen years and remained very closely involved with the organisation in various roles for the next three decades. In her group biography of the WGA’s founders, Zoe Thomas goes so far as to say that Mary’s death in 1961 ‘effectively marked the end of the guild’.12

Evidence of May and Mary’s relationship in later years is patchy, only hinted at in the archive of WGA correspondence retained by Mary and recently donated to The William Morris Society.
When Mary resigned the secretaryship in 1923, for example, letters record that May offered to produce a tapestry chair cover as a present from the membership.\(^1\) Also in that year May, fearing she was running short of money, decided to sell her possessions in 1923; they are visible in photographs taken of 8 Hammersmith Terrace just before she died in 1961, she left these pictures to the Morris family.

The watercolours evidently found favour with May, who intended to give them to John Quinn as a birthday present. Whether this happened is uncertain, as the pictures were certainly in May’s possession in 1923; they are visible in photographs taken of 8 Hammersmith Terrace just before she moved out in that year.\(^2\) Back in 1912, May had explained to Quinn: ‘I am sorry Miss Sloane’s Kelmscott drawings were not finished in time to send. I hope you’ll like them when they come. They are really rather charming. She is a distinguished artist in her line, and a pleasant-house-mate, quiet and serene and contained.’\(^3\)

Mary’s care over the acquisition and disposal of her paintings and other Morris relics begs the question why she left the rediscovered portrait among a pile of watercolour sketches in the attic at 8 Hammersmith Terrace. Perhaps its technical inconsistencies – the use of ink outlines only on the spinning wheel, chair and tapestries – denoted it to a sketch in her eyes; or perhaps it was merely forgotten when ill health caused her and Kate Whitaker to move back to Leicestershire in the late 1950s.

The manner of its rediscovery adds a mysterious dimension to an image that already has a certain dramatic appeal; Annette Carruthers has noted the element of performance in spinning.\(^4\) At the same time the painting conveys the comfortable relationship between sitter and artist, capturing a moment at Kelmscott, ‘quiet and serene and contained’, with May absorbed in demonstrating one of the skills she did so much to promote. A compelling illustration of her practical participation in the Arts & Crafts movement, it also testifies to a fertilised spirit in the context of the practicalisation of female art activity in Britain at the start of the twentieth century.

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**Notes**

1 See ‘All known portraits’ of May, compiled by Jan Marsh for the catalogue Later Victorian Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, London, published online at npg.org.uk/research/programmes/late-victorian-catalogue

2 William Morris Gallery London, W157 and W158 respectively


4 A number of these new perspectives are introduced and explored in Lynn Hulse, ed, May Morris: Art and Life, London, 2017

5 William Morris Gallery, London, Ph901ix

6 We are indebted to Andrea Eassey of the Association of Guilds of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers for help interpreting the depiction of spinning here

7 The account of Mary’s career in this article owes much to the research of Shirley Aucott, whose biography Mary Anne Sloane ARE (1867–1961). A Portrait of the Artist, was published to accompany the first comprehensive exhibition of her work at the New Walk Gallery, Leicester, in 2016

8 MM to Jane and Jenny Morris, letter 29 (July 1913), The Society of Antiquaries


10 An article on the holiday by Anna Mason and Alison Hartley is planned for The William Morris Society Magazine in 2020

11 This controversy is recorded in letters and other documents in the WGA Archive, The William Morris Society, London

12 Zoe Thomas, Founding members of the Women’s Guild of Arts (act. 1907-c.1939), ODNB. doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.111253

13 Letter from Ellen Mary Rope to Maud Beddington, 2 February 1904, WGA Archive, WGA/2/6

14 MM to AC, 19 August 1923, May Morris Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

15 Letter from MM to MAS, 12 July 1909, WGA Archive, WGA/2/5. Kate and Mary lived together from some point in the 1910s until their deaths

16 Letter from Frances Kinningston to MAS, 5 December 1923, WGA Archive, WGA/2/6

17 ‘It is a very great loss for us all – most especially for yourself & Miss Whitaker!’ Letter from Martha Bowerley, 24 October [1938], The William Morris Society, Verstage Collection

18 Letter from Dorothy Walker to Kate Whitaker, 30 July 1939, William Morris Gallery, Box 54/4.8

19 Lot 329 in the auction catalogue annotated by MAS, William Morris Gallery, Box 54/4.8


21 MM to Jo, 25 April 1912, Londraville 1997, pp112


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Jane Carcas is the great grand niece of Mary Annie Sloane. Alison Hartley is a freelance editor specialising in art history.

Our thanks to Chris Moore and Ann Dowlen for access to family records and reminiscences of Mary Annie Sloane, and to Anna Mason for her helpful comments on this text. The painting will be on public display for the first time at the exhibition May Morris: Art & Life at Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, from 20 November 2019 (on tour from the William Morris Gallery).
Sarah Wilson: By way of introduction, can you tell us a little bit about your background?

Benjamin Deakin: I grew up in Cumbria. The Lake District national park was practically my childhood playground. It was only when I moved to London to attend art school I began to think about how artificial constructed places like the Lake District really are and the role that the visual arts, and painting in particular, had on these ideas. I studied at Kingston University and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design respectively, gaining an MA in Fine Art in 2006. I live and work in London, however my childhood wanderlust still influences much of my work and ideas. I have travelled and taken part in artist residency programmes in some fairly remote places, including Iceland, and the Klondike goldfields of the Yukon in Canada. In 2013 I spent three months cycling through the Andes visiting ancient Inca and Wari ruins. Earlier this year I returned to Nepal, a country I’m very fond of, to hike in the Himalayas.

SW How would you describe your style of painting?

BD I make paintings of fictional hybrid spaces using a range of stylistic and historical references. My most recent work combines personal experiences of places and landscapes with broader ideas about our relationship with certain types of environment. I am interested in the way places take on cultural associations as well as political and economic significance. Why do we value one type of environment more than another purely on aesthetic grounds? As I discovered in South America, these aesthetic preferences can be universal, spanning many different cultures. These ideas are persistent too. The influence of the Late Romantic preference for ‘sublime’ landscapes can clearly be seen in the film and video game industry today. The politics surrounding the classification of landscapes as national parks or World Heritage Sites is complicated. These issues reveal the complexity behind the genre of landscape painting and landscape imagery in general.

I try to probe this by making paintings that fuse my personal observations with the shapes and forms I have seen in traditional landscape paintings. Most recently I have become interested in the role of geometric shapes and patterns in images of landscapes, which are often used as signifiers of the symbolic value of places. The obsession with creating repeating patterns, as I’ve discovered on my travels, seems to be an almost universal human trait. In pursuing these ideas I create densely layered paintings in which architectural traces suggest ruination and geometric interventions disrupt and bisect the composition and organic forms.

SW Where do you find inspiration?

BD I am often drawn to fairly challenging natural environments, yet even in those harsh surroundings, associations and familiarities abound. I’m now at a point where on almost any journey I’ll find something that triggers an idea for a painting or reminds me of something I’ve been hunting for creatively.

I believe that we bring expectations and past experience to all our physical encounters. Painting is a way for me to process all these different experiences and re-construct the physical and emotional experience of being in those places. The paintings become composites of memories and mediated experiences as well as physical ones. In this way I hope to show how landscape images are not only cultural
SW Your book Reimagining Somewhere and Nowhere came out last year. What is the theme?

BD The book came out of an introduction to the writer Stephen Baycroft at my 2018 exhibition Seeking News from Nowhere, which was a direct reference to Morris’s novel. Stephen’s interests in the literary history of utopias and early science fiction as well as his extensive knowledge of philosophy and art history took us both on a fascinating journey, drawing connections between everything from Thomas More and Shakespeare’s The Tempest to Hypercubes and augmented reality.

SW When did your interest in William Morris begin?

BD It’s almost impossible to be interested in art and design and not know something about Morris, especially if you go to a British art school. My parents also had reproductions of his designs around the house. But it was his book News from Nowhere that really piqued my interest. I found his vision of a socialist utopia with a futurist and medieval twist very interesting. It was only after I’d read it that I started thinking about my increased use of repeated patterns in my own paintings in relation to his design work. I sometimes wonder if Morris was thinking about all the artworks and artefacts that were destroyed in the Reformation and how different British visual culture might have looked if they hadn’t been.

SW How did the idea for the new exhibition at Kelmscott House come about?

BD The works in this exhibition are my attempts to make paintings that represent the heightened visual state I sometimes experience on my travels, where the present is so overlaid by associations either from my own experiences or from films or images that I can feel like I’m in multiple places all at once. It’s similar to the narrator in News from Nowhere, who in several sections of his journey struggles to disassociate his present surroundings from what he remembers. My paintings are intended to be immersive and fragmentary spaces that allow the viewer to roam around in them yet they never quite coalesce into a tangible space or any suggestion of scale.

SW What are you hoping to achieve with the exhibition?

BD I try to make paintings that are engaging enough without the viewer needing to know about my motivations or the background to the work. From what I understand this is what Morris was striving for too, to make art and beautiful design that is approachable to all.

SW If you had to choose your favourite Morris design, what would it be?

BD I’m particularly drawn to the designs that are more abstracted, or where Morris takes a medieval motif and gives it the art nouveau treatment, such as the Acanthus wallpaper design. You almost stop reading them as leaves or flowers, they become quite psychedelic.

Nowhere Reimagined: Exploring the Legacy of News from Nowhere opens Thursday 14 November and runs until Saturday 29 February 2020. To find out more about Benjamin’s work, visit bendakin.co.uk.
With their complex designs featuring scrolling foliage and stylised flowers and birds, the large woven carpets produced by hand at Merton Abbey were the work of a group of young women employed by Morris & Co from 1881. Archaeologist David Saxby explains how Morris taught them the art of carpet knotting and how the spirit of comradeship prevailed in their ‘delightful workroom’

The carpet knotting girls

In 1878 William Morris began to manufacture hand-knotted carpets and with the help of a Glasgow hand-weaver set up a carpet frame in a back attic at Queen Square. After Morris mastered the technique he bought other carpet frames and in 1879 he set up in the Coach House and stable loft at Kelscott House, where he produced handmade ‘Hammersmith’ carpets and rugs. Believing their smaller hands were better suited to the intricate work, Morris took on a number of local girls and taught them the techniques of carpet knotting. Initially, Morris employed about six girls including eighteen-year-old Melinda Hancock and fifteen-year-old Alice Fryer. Another carpet knitter was Kate Faulkner, the sister of Charles Faulkner, a partner in the original firm.

According to Linda Parry in her book William Morris Textiles (V&A Publishing, 2013), at the beginning of 1881 Morris received a number of commissions for larger carpets so he expanded the workshop at Hammersmith and added two large looms. The first commission was to produce the ‘Redcar’ carpet for Sir Hugh Bell’s house Red Barns in Coatham near Redcar in Yorkshire. Then Morris began to design a carpet for the library at Naworth Castle in Cumbria for his close friend George Howard. Called ‘The Vase of Flowers’, it was the largest carpet that Morris & Co had undertaken and measured 31’3” by 15’2’. With the business expanding, Morris employed more carpet knotters and by March there were eleven girls. Bell’s ‘Redcar’ carpet was finished by the middle of April and the following day Melinda began work on a ‘Flower Garden’ carpet. Soon, Sir Hugh’s father, Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell, commissioned a carpet for the drawing room of his home at Rounton Grange in Northallerton, Yorkshire, which Morris & Co had been decorating since 1879. On 10 May Howard’s carpet was started on the big loom. It took six months and was finished in October.

The move to South London

With the business expanding, the workshops at Queen Square, Great Ormond Yard and Hammersmith were becoming cramped, so Morris started looking for larger premises. He found George Welch’s table cover printing workshops at Merton on the river Wandle and moved the business there on 7 June 1881. During the following months the workshops were adapted to suit Morris’s needs. Past the new dye house, stained glass and tapestry workshop was a wooden bridge that crossed the river Wandle leading to a large workshop overlooking a mill pond. Morris adapted the ground floor to house the carpet frames with the first floor used for block-printing. At the entrance to the works was a large eighteenth-century house. It was the home of one of George Welch’s workmen, fifty-two-year-old Edwin Merritt, his wife Sarah and their children. Morris kept Edwin on as a caretaker to look after the works.

On Thursday 21 July, Morris started designing the large 13’sq ‘Peacock and Bird’ carpet for a member of the American Vanderbilt family. Throughout autumn and winter, Morris continued setting up the Merton works. On Christmas and Boxing Day he was pointing the ‘Peacock and Bird’ carpet. On 27 December, Morris went to Merton Abbey. He noted in his diary “…the 13 feet carpet loom being got up. To Faulknors and supper there left border of Peacock to finish…’ It would appear that Morris was getting the 13 feet loom ready for the ‘Peacock and Bird’ carpet, which was probably on the loom early in 1882. The carpets made at Merton continued to be known as ‘Hammersmith’ carpets to distinguish them from the firm’s machine-made carpets.

After the move it’s uncertain whether Melinda, Alice or any of the other carpet knotters from Hammersmith went to work at Merton Abbey. Morris took on local girls, with the first being eighteen-year-old Eliza Merritt, the daughter of the new caretaker Edwin. She was joined by fifteen-year-old Diana Penn, who was living with her widowed mother Mary Ann and siblings at 5 Red Lion Cottage on London Road (High Street, Colliers Wood). Eliza and Diana were joined by fourteen-year-olds Louisa Phipps, the daughter of Robert and Eliza, of Mitcham, and Clara Adaway, the daughter of Daniel and Hannah. Clara lived with her parents at 9 Walnut Tree Place on London Road. After training by Morris, the girls soon got down to...
knotting their first carpet, the Vanderbilt ‘Peacock and Bird’. This beautiful carpet was acquired for the William Morris Gallery by the Monument Trust in 2010.

According to Linda Parry, around 1882 the young carpet knotters undertook a large work for Lord Portsmouth at Hurstbourne Priors, near Andover. Then in 1883 two carpets ‘Large Swan House’ and ‘Swan House’ were made for Wickham Flower’s home, Old Swan House at Chelsea Embankment. For Alexander Ionides’ house at 1 Holland Park in Kensington a ‘Holland Park’ and a version of ‘Carbrook’ were woven. Morris & Co also supplied a number of carpets and rugs to the Foreign Fair in Boston in 1883. In the same year, Morris took on another carpet knitter, Eliza Merritt’s fourteen-year-old sister Mary. We get an idea what it was like for the young carpet knotters at Merton when a correspondent for The Spectator of 24 November 1883 visited the carpet workshop and wrote: ‘We turn through doors into a large, low room, where the hand-made carpets are being worked... The strong, level afternoon light shines round the figures of the young girls seated in rows on low benches along the frames, and brightens to gold some of the fair heads. Above and behind them rows of bobbins of many-coloured worsteds, stuck on pegs, shower down threads of beautiful colours, which are caught by the deft fingers, passed through strong threads, tied in a knot, slipped down in their place, snipped even with the rest of the carpet, all in a second of time, by the little maidens. Twenty-five rows does each do in a day, – that means about two inches of carpet. One of the rugs being made is of silk, instead of worsted, very exquisite in quality of surface. The workers may be as tiresome as most young people between the ages of a girl and a woman generally are, but they do not look tiresome in this bright sunlit place, so near the shining river, but merry and busily happy. It is a delightful workroom.’

In 1886 the five were joined by Louisa Phipps’s fourteen-year-old sister Minnie. The girls wove a version of the ‘Swan House’ carpet for an American client, John J Glessner for his home on Prairie Avenue in Chicago. The following year, Clara Adaway’s fourteen-year-old sister Annie joined the team. This meant there were now seven carpet knotters, with three pairs of sisters.

In 1888 a ‘Holland Park’ carpet and an original design called ‘Clouds’ was woven for the Hon Percy Wyndham for his Wiltshire country house Clouds. A further two carpets ‘Little Tree’ and ‘Little Flower’ were woven for Alexander Ionides. This was followed by three carpets in 1889 for John Sanderson’s house Bullers Wood at Chislehurst in Kent. The second drawing room carpet was named ‘Bullerswood’ and it is currently on display at the V&A. Later in the year Morris & Co exhibited a number of carpets and rugs at the second Arts & Crafts Exhibition in 1889, which included ‘Mohair’, ‘Van Ingen’, ‘Black Tree’, ‘Flowery Field’ and ‘Cherry Tree’.

Eliza and Mary Merritt’s mother Sarah died in 1890. The sisters left Morris & Co and went to live with their brother Walter and his family at 35 Hubert Road in South Wimbledon. They were now both employed as laundresses. The Merritt sisters were replaced by two local girls, the first being fifteen-year-old Mabel Harris, daughter of Elizabeth and Thomas, a local dairymaid. At the time the family were living on Merton Road (opposite the Six Bells public house) just along the road from the works. The second was fourteen-year-old Catherine Paris, the daughter of widowed John Paris, a labourer who was living a few doors along from the Harris family.

**Prestigious customers**

During the 1890s a number of carpets were produced for philanthropist Joanna Barr Smith, a large ‘Holland Park’ carpet was made for Conservative politician John Reginald Yorke’s home Forthampton Court in Gloucestershire, a rug was made for industrialist Theodore Mander’s Honeysuckle bedroom at Wightwick Manor in Wolverhampton, and a number of carpets were produced for wealthy businessman
and art collector William Knox D’Arcy’s home, Stanmore Hall in Middlesex, which included versions of ‘Bullerswood’, ‘Large Swan House’, ‘Holland Park House’, ‘Montreal’ and an enlarged version of ‘Clouds’. To keep up with demand, it would appear that four more girls were taken on as carpet knotters in 1894, as The Queen of 17 November records ‘…four girls are weaving a rich and harmonious carpet, fit for a king to tread, and perhaps destined for a ducal mansion or the palace of a millionaire… They are young lasses, of some fourteen or fifteen summers, and their earnings are from 16s to 18s a week, while they work in a light and airy room, which must go very far to prevent their factory work having any injurious effect physically’.

During the second half of the 1890s many of the original carpet knotters left Morris & Co to get married. Between the years 1900-1902 those remaining wove a carpet for George McCulloch’s summer homes at 184 Queen’s Gate in London and in 1901 a ‘Montreal’ carpet was created for Charles Hosmer’s home Drummond Street in Montreal, Canada. On 1 June 1901 Diana Penn married William, the brother of Eliza and Mary Merritt, a marine fireman at Christ Church in Colliers Wood. In 1908 William became employed as a stoker for Morris & Co and the family moved back to William, Eliza and Mary’s childhood home at the Merton Abbey works. Eliza, now a dressmaker, moved in with William and her sister-in-law Diana.

Dwindling business

In 1912 major changes took place at Merton Abbey. With declining orders managing director, Henry Marlier decided to close the carpet workshop and carpets were transferred to the Wilton Royal Carpet Factory Ltd. However, it would appear that the carpet knotters were now training as tapestry weavers. Gordon Berry and John Glassbrook had left the tapestry department, leaving only John Martin and George Fitzhenry. Two tapestry looms were set up in the carpet workshop while Martin and Fitzhenry remained in the tapestry workshop at the northern end of the stained-glass workshop.

An interesting article appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette of 27 November 1912 describing the situation. The author meets a lady who takes them for a tour of the works. This lady is likely to be Eliza Merritt who was probably persuaded to return to Morris & Co, especially as she was living there: ‘A man’s figure, followed by two dogs, enters the barn. A chattering of women’s voices comes through the open windows on each side. Along its length are placed big upright looms. Near the door hangs an exquisite tapestry, depicting a woman in a chariot drawn by white doves and surrounded by dancing girls [‘The Passing of Venus’]. Five or six women are talking and working at one loom at the foot of the room, and three women are engaged on a smaller loom at the side. There is a good deal of Cockney accent emanating from the big loom, and so you feel that the kingfisher and the swans and the willow trees must have been an illusion. A woman from a smaller loom answers your look of surprise. “We are learning to make tapestry”, she says in a cultured voice, “and the women over there are making carpets… come over to the other barn and see the men’s work”. She leads the way across the rustic bridge. “That is where Morris used to sit”, and she points out an old oak tree. Through a room in which stained glass is being painted she passes into a second… “This is a copy of Botticelli’s Spring [‘Primavera’] we are weaving”, says an elderly man coming forward to greet the visitor… The woman accompanies you to the gates. “What a lovely place to work in!” you say. “Yes isn’t it? And Morris has left such a tradition of comradeship here that many of us unattached folk feel that this is our home. That [pointing to a grey house just inside the gates] is where the apprentices used to live in Morris’s time. He educated and trained them himself.” The gates closed, and before you once more are the long, straight, the red brick villas, and the ugly shops with the iron roofs.’

Eliza Merritt continued in the weaving departments and probably produced a few rugs at Merton in the 1930s. She left Morris & Co around 1939 at the age of 74 having worked for the firm for 35 years. Interestingly, evidence of the weaving of ‘The Passing of Venus’ can be found in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which acquired a small piece of tapestry measuring 11” x 9½” as a gift by Edward C Moore Jr in 1923. On the back is a nearly illegible inscription in pencil that reads ‘Piece of tapestry (copied from head of Venus in large tapestry at [illegible] from cartoon by Burne-Jones) w orket at M erton by M orris & Co Feb 1913’. It seems highly likely that this piece was woven by one of the former carpet knotters referred to in the 1912 article. Sadly, the two tapestries were probably abandoned due to the Great War in 1914. 

LOUISA PHIPPS left Merton Abbey around the age of twenty seven. On 24 November 1895 she married William Husband. Sadly, Louisa died seven months later on 19 June 1896 two weeks after giving birth to her daughter Minnie.

CLARA ADAWAY left the works at the age of thirty when she married James Howard on 1 October 1898. She had worked for the firm for sixteen years. She and her husband James then moved to Bridgnorth in Shropshire and Clara went to work at Southwells Carpet Factory. She died on 17 March 1938 at the age of sixty nine.

MARY HIGGINSON (née Merritt) died in 1970 in Wimbledon at the age of 101 having worked for the firm for seven years.

MABEL HARRIS left Merton Abbey in 1895 at the age of twenty when she married Arthur Dynes and after the wedding they set up home at 11 East Road in South Wimbledon. She worked for the firm for around six years. She emigrated to New York with her family and died on 17 August 1936 in Bakersfield, California at the age of sixty.
Hugh Hobbs reflects on Professor Michael Robertson’s recent talk at Kelmscott House on Morris biographies

Morris: a life revealed

A year into his research for a new biography of Morris, Michael Robertson recently gave a lecture on the subject at the Society. The professor of English at the College of New Jersey and Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck is also author of The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth-Century Visionaries and Their Legacy, which includes a chapter on Morris and his News from Nowhere.

First Robertson mentioned three widely read biographies of Morris: The Life of William Morris by J W Mackail, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary by E P Thompson, and William Morris: A Life for Our Time by Fiona MacCarthy. He described Mackail’s biography as detailed but discreet, Thompson’s as Marxist revisionist, and MacCarthy’s as possibly the definitive biography. He emphasised that each biography is a product of its own time.

Piecing together a picture of Morris

Mackail was Morris’s official biographer after his death. He was an Oxford Classics scholar, the son in law of Edward Burne-Jones and widely published. Robertson said Victorian biographies were written by those who knew their subjects. ‘Tact had to be exercised right and left,’ as reticence was important in Victorian biography. Mackail’s biography of Morris, for example, ignored the affairs of Jane Morris. It was a patriarchal/life of great man approach in a life and letters format. Mackail was a master of the character sketch and painted Morris as self-absorbed. However, Mackail preferred Morris’s poetry to his politics. He felt socialism divided everything Morris did, but his biography didn’t really cover his socialist activities.

Robertson also mentioned other significant works. The Memoirs of Edward Burne-Jones by his wife Georgiana included many anecdotes about Morris, while the introduction to The Collected Works of William Morris by May Morris gives a vivid and personal account of her father as she recounts tales of family life. She dismisses the Late Romances as holiday work, and plays down her father’s political activities. William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement by John Bruce Glasier includes memories of Morris, while the Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin, a nephew of Burne-Jones, wrote about Morris with a poetry and arts focus. Another important early text was William Morris: The Man and the Myth by Robert Page Arnot, which dismissed the myth that Morris’s socialism was not a big part of his life and set the framework for E P Thompson’s biography.

In Robertson’s opinion William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary gets to the heart of the argument. Morris started as a late Romantic in revolt against the railway age, then in the 1880s came into contact with Marxists who explained transformative possibilities. The Romantic Morris accepted Marx theory and became a revolutionary. The first part of Thompson’s biography is literary criticism. The second part is a biography of Morris and a history of socialism in the 1880s.

Robertson also mentioned Philip Henderson’s William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends, which contains no politics, but posits that Morris is ‘our greatest designer’. Jack Lindsay’s William Morris: His Life and Work is a Freudian analysis and study of his poetry. As Morris’s sister married when Morris was sixteen years old Lindsay suggests Morris had an Emma complex, that he was upset and struggled throughout his life to compete with another man for a woman.

Bringing together the various threads

Jan Marsh’s Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story, 1839–1938 portrays the Morris marriage not as a failure but instead as one that weathered serious distress without rupture. Robertson said Marsh’s book sweeps away the myth in Jane, and he also pointed out that the Rossetti-Jane letters create a revised view of Morris. Most biographers put the business and socialist practices at odds in Morris’s life. William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain edited by Charles Harvey and Jon Press proves that Morris vigorously fulfilled the manifold Church of England commissions in the 1860s and in the 1870s he diversified. But Robertson said that Morris saw through his business experience that only socialist transformation could achieve an equal society.

In 1994 William Morris: A Life for Our Time by Fiona MacCarthy was published. Robertson described it as beautifully written and carefully researched with a novelistic concern with character. He said it is extremely perceptive of Morris’s design work, politics and writing. He suggested Morris’s previous biographers had an agenda but in MacCarthy’s book the whole character of Morris is present. Robertson feels MacCarthy is the fullest, most artful, most engaging Morris biographer, who presented him as a Marxist, but also a Libertarian.

Concluding thoughts

Robertson wound up by asking whether MacCarthy’s biography will always be definitive. His answer: ‘can any biography be definitive?’ Suggesting each age creates its own, he believes the twenty-first century is sure to bring forth new interpretations. Robertson mentioned 2013’s Jane Morris: The Burden of History by Wendy Parkins, a feminist, post-structuralist study, as no doubt becoming a great influence on future biographers.

In the questions that followed, Robertson confirmed his view that Morris was a Marxist revolutionary socialist as E P Thompson had advanced. Explaining why he hadn’t spoken about William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer by Paul Meier, Robertson said he felt it wasn’t a biography but a study. Then he referred to the proposed title of his new biography: William Morris, The Journey towards Utopia. He said he was bringing in the topics of Victorian masculinuty, queer studies, and Morris’s concept of the Nordic Race in relation to Victorian race politics. Morris produced things in the gift economy such as illuminated manuscripts — these were given away and were not commercial. Robertson is keen to look into this further. Also, Morris had a deep love of very old buildings and Robertson would like to focus on his involvement with the Society for the Protection of Buildings (SPAB). Morris spent hours in SPAB meetings and many of his letters are in their archive. The session ended with a discussion of the friendship between Morris and Philip Webb, which Robertson felt was as profound as that with Burne-Jones. He ended by suggesting Webb had a greater influence on Morris’s vision than Burne-Jones.
William Morris’s ideas on art, architecture and socialism were all informed by a sense of beauty. Dr Phil Stevens considers this in the context of Morris’s world and also the one we live in now

‘It’s a beautiful world’

I was introduced to the concept of beauty by Ray Elliot, the aesthetics education tutor on my MA course at the Institute of Education. Later, when I taught for the Open University, the first student essay I had to mark was entitled, ‘Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?’ This fundamental question in aesthetics was first proposed by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. His original assertion that beauty was a feeling and entirely subjective was challenged by those who wanted to be able to judge the value of a work of art and say whether it was good or not. Hume met this challenge by amending his theory to include the idea that, yes, beauty is a feeling, but it is aroused through exposure to beautiful objects or qualities in objects. Hume conceded that an art object contains ‘a nest of aesthetics qualities’ that trigger the feeling. The next step for Hume was to identify these ‘qualities’. He goes back to the ancient Greeks for inspiration. Beautiful objects possess classical form incorporating harmony, line, colour and proportion. The combination and arrangement of these aesthetic qualities are what allows us to value one work against another.

In this revision, Hume concedes that there is a causal link between subject and object. In their essays, most of my students carefully set out Hume’s initial position and his amended version, before arguing for beauty existing as aesthetics elements in the work. Interestingly, some of the essays also argued for beauty existing in nature and applied his theory to this valid point – think of the intricate tracery of a spider’s web draped in dew on a sunny morning. But if this is the case, as most observers would agree, how can we distinguish between, for example, the joy of a beautiful sunset, a classical Greek sculpture or the incomparable voice of Aretha Franklin? Hume’s claim permits us to enjoy or appreciate aesthetic qualities in nature and art but asks us to put aside questions of value and judgement, but these are questions that will not go away.

The power of the aesthetic imagination

Today art is defined, not within a discourse about aesthetics, but as the theory of art and the role of the artist in society. Beauty is neither a necessary or sufficient condition for something to be a work of art. There are endless examples of cultural artefacts such as signed urinals and dead animals set in formaldehyde that the art world wants to include as art, but which do not necessarily possess aesthetic qualities, unless we stretch the point beyond any meaning. In philosophy of art, it is art that is in the eye of the beholder, not beauty – subjectivity remains everything. These artefacts are presented to us as objects of intellectual interest rather than for aesthetic experience – not much ‘buzz’ here. In this sense everything is in. The separation of aesthetics from art means that it is unlikely we will be moved by art in the way Hume intended. Similarly, this rupture means we no longer have a vocabulary for making judgements about art. Beauty, one of the most evocative words in our language, remains a mystery beyond either philosophical or scientific understanding.

In the visual arts, the abstract work of Matisse, Picasso and Sir Terry Frost offers light and colours of hope and optimism, while the joyful work of Patrick Heron continues to delight. However, external influences do find their way into art, but it is a tricky artistic endeavour to combine, for example politics and aesthetics, and few succeed. Heavy-handed political messages fail to inspire against the aesthetic imagination in the work of Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. Stevie Wonder’s Songs in the Key of Life is one of the few examples of the beauty of the music perfectly matching the subtlety of the lyrics. Auden’s libretto of Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring or Karl Jenkins inspirational The Armoured Man are among the best. The reason I love contemporary dance is that words do not get in the way of the aesthetic experience – who needs rationality when you can enjoy the purity in the movements of the Ballet Rambert, or the delightful performances seen most nights at Sadler’s Wells.

Art can engage with the world in the most dramatic and unexpected of ways. As a younger, Rosh Keegan’s father refused her the opportunity to follow her passion. Years later studying art at the Working Men’s College (WMC) in Camden, London helped her to cope with a dreadful personal tragedy. She flourished in the college’s safe environment while building a career as a professional ceramicist. It is a heartening tale showing tremendous fortitude. In 2011 Keegan won the Theatre and Performance prize at the V&A and in 2014 was shortlisted for the ArtGemini Prize, which promotes international contemporary art. Inspired by Picasso and aspects of primitive art, Keegan’s work has sold in New York and London. Despite her achievements, she continues to attend WMC in London where she moves from one class to the next. Her art is both an outlet for her creativity and a form of therapy – of self-accounting, if you like.

Keegan’s young daughter died in tragic circumstances a few years ago. She has used her art to help her get through. This is what the search for beauty can do. Many of my students have been motivated over the years by a love of beauty. Keegan’s story illustrates just how the notion, whether contained in an object, part of the artistic process, or, as in Hume, merely a feeling, can make life worth living again. Mindfulness, meditation and other relaxation tools have therapeutic possibilities, but I would argue, beauty has the potential to provide both consolation and within it the way to find true meaning.

In search of the sublime

It has been suggested that sublime works better than beauty as a way of describing either a feeling, the experience of engaging with an art object, or with a particular quality intrinsic to the work. Either way the sublime is a useful category in the overall discourse on beauty. The sublime suggests greatness in art and arousing awe and wonder in the observer. Beauty in nature has been interpreted as sublime, for example, and has inspired artists for centuries. William Morris’s naturalism and plant-based patterns have inspired many, including the work of designer Orla Kiely. But unlike beauty as a necessary condition for something to be a work of art, the sublime involves value and judgement because it is usually associated with high art. For example, the recordings of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols by the choir of King’s College Cambridge is a sound of such purity and precision that it is often referred to as representing the sublime in music. Later recordings of Fauré’s Requiem by the choir at King’s are a further example of the very best in music. It helps that the chapel’s acoustics are among the best in the world. Perhaps the sublime has found its home in music of this kind. David Wilkocks was appointed Musical Director at King’s College in 1958 and gave the choir’s followers the opportunity to find comfort in the years following the horrors of the Second World War. Even the most sublime art cannot escape the politics and social context in which it is created.

When it came to Morris’s ideas on art,
architecture and socialism, they were all informed by a sense of beauty. Ruskin’s too. This takes us away from beauty as a quality intrinsic to the object and even deeper into the murky worlds of politics and society. The visions of Ruskin and Morris are not dissimilar to that of Karl Marx, who believed that true beauty is found in work, in creative possibilities that are at the heart of what it is to be human – our essence, if you like. We will regain our human essence only when the conditions of society allow. Marx’s aesthetic is very close to the ideas of Morris and Ruskin about the creative potential of beauty in work itself, or production as Marx would describe it. In this argument art is not something that hangs in galleries, it is ordinary and as such a far more democratic concept than the claims for beauty proposed by Hume. Any definition of art is bound to be subjective, as in post-modern theory. This a little worrying but Morris and Ruskin save us by associating work, self-fulfilment and aesthetics with fellow-feeling, even love. These nineteenth-century philosophers believed in the perfectibility of human beings. Only when we remove the shackles that bind us can we become our authentic selves. As Morris wrote, ‘love and work – these only’ will enable us to achieve our human essence. Beauty remains a feeling but one far more profound than Hume’s idea on aesthetic pleasure.

The skilled craftsman and pride in work
My father Jack was a painter and decorator of the old school. Every day he set off in a shirt and tie, and his work was always beautifully accomplished. He took great pleasure in working with gold leaf, hanging Morris wallpapers, and in his delicate use of tip and cush, a technique used to apply gold leaf and other material to elaborate cornices. The cushion resembled a drum stick with a small circular rubber cushion at the end that would be laid against the cornice. Jack would then rest the tip of his brush against the ‘drumstick’ steadying his hand as he applied the gold leaf. He had an infallible eye for detail and was proud to be a skilled workman. Aesthetic pleasure, fulfilment and pride in work are all central to the thinking of Ruskin, Morris and Marx about the relation between production and the artistic process. Beauty and art are for living.

Although applauding the commitment of my father to his craft, you may also have identified a weakness in the argument in favour of ‘work for work’s sake’. In his novel The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists, Robert Tressell’s central character Robert Owen delights in his work with no thought of any personal gain. For Owen, as with my dad and others like him, the virtue of work consists of doing a job properly and to the best of your ability with no thought of personal gain. Tressell’s fictional decorator takes great pains in picking out door mouldings and ceiling cornices in gold leaf, being careful not to allow pools of gold to collect in the hollows of ornate carvings where it would not attract the light. While Owen thought only about the beauty in his craft, his ruthless boss Rushton was more concerned with how much money could be made from his employee’s skill. While applauding Owen’s lofty ideal, Tressell sets it firmly within the context of poor wages, long hours and the constant pressure by employers to cut corners, thereby maximising profits. Tressell was writing before the introduction of effective trade unions and, of course, health and safety legislation. Workers were exposed daily to toxic chemicals and careless working practices. Not much beauty here for Robert Owen and his fellow workers. However, Owen would not allow appalling working conditions to distract his commitment to his craft. Under increasing pressure, he stood firm against ‘scampering’ – the practice of cutting corners, or ‘bodging’ as it is called today. Owen continued to find solace and beauty in his labour, while Morris and Marx, if not Ruskin, worked for the revolution which would free Tressell’s workers from the constraints of their employers’ greed.

Whether we see beauty in art, music or in our working practices, it is no longer even a sufficient condition for something to be included as art or artistic practice. We no longer search for beauty, nor do we reflect much on its passing. But there are signs of hope. Despite being surrounded by a world of ugliness, violence and hatred, this year the drawings of Whistler and Michelangelo have drawn large crowds. David Hockney, one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century, explained his legacy as, ‘to be of making people see it’s a beautiful world’. In the nineteenth century Morris took the same view with his ‘informal naturalism’ and distinctive designs. The artist, designer, writer and entrepreneur had a passionate belief in the power of skilled labour to give working people meaning to their lives, and as a means of developing their aesthetic sensibilities. I’m not sure Morris ever used a tip and cushion or gold leaf in his work. I like to think he might have done. In conclusion, perhaps we can now return to that first essay title I gave my class with a little more confidence. Is beauty in the eye of the beholder? Well, yes and no.
William Morris was a man who did things thoroughly. A recent article by Florence Boos considers his prodigious output in written material. These included calligraphic poems, complete and partial drafts of published works, lectures, letters and other ephemera. She estimates this could have originally numbered tens of thousands of items. According to Morris’s daughter May: ‘The legend of the mysterious cupboard in Queen Square, piled from floor to ceiling with manuscripts, has the authority of Rossetti, but his picturesque word must be taken as it was intended, i.e., an extension of the fact that Morris’s ease of writing did accumulate a quantity of matter forgotten by him or laid aside with little care for stuff that could be easily replaced.’

It is almost impossible to estimate how many items still exist. They have been dispersed across the globe; some catalogued in collections that can be viewed by the public, but many in private collections and therefore unknown to scholars and the public. The task of making sense of this unwieldy collection fell to May Morris. It was a lifelong endeavour. May was not a neutral archivist in this work; she cared deeply about how her father would be remembered and as the curator of his legacy she felt this responsibility keenly. In a letter to John Bruce Glasier in 1919, while giving her comments on a draft of his book William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement, she reprimanded him: ‘I assure you those who tell stories of Father make too much of his “temper”. It didn’t worry those who had the privilege of living with him one bit. I look to you keep the correct impressions alive,

Catherine White reveals how a piece of ephemera gives us an insight into the lives of William and May Morris

‘A scrap of a poem’: a gift from May Morris
as I know you would wish to do.’

May spent four decades of her life ensuring that her father’s work was respected, preserved and documented. She began by producing the *Collected Works of William Morris*. There were twenty-four volumes, published between 1910-1915, each containing an introduction by May. Her letters from this period reveal the burden this endeavour placed on her. It was less than two decades after William Morris’s death, yet it took significant effort to track down materials which had been dispersed to friends or sold. Then nearly twenty years later, in 1934, the publisher Basil Blackwell expressed an interest in any unpublished work that May owned. May sent him a parcel estimated to contain 500,000 words. This culminated in her two-volume *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, published in 1936, near the end of May’s life.

May was aware of the importance of the drafts that her father produced as an insight into the evolution of his finished works. In her 1936 publication she compiled an appendix that is a list of important ‘fragments and discarded fragments’. She wrote: ‘The trustees of the family, having carefully considered these writings, have come to the conclusion that beyond those printed or quoted in these volumes [Artist, Writer, Socialist] and in the *Collected Works*, they are only of value to students who are interested in the development of the young man’s poetical powers or, in the case of later writing, in the growth and working out of an idea.’

This article brings to light a modest example of how some verses grew and were worked out by Morris. We know about them thanks to a gift from May to Ellen Wright, who began working as an apprentice embroiderer for Morris & Co in 1889 at the Iffley Road embroidery rooms in Hammersmith. On first impressions, a lifelong friendship between the two women would have appeared unlikely. Ellen was aged fourteen, saw May as elderly (May was twenty seven at the time!) and while Ellen was probably diffident in her transition from schoolgirl to employee, it appears May didn’t initially make efforts to put her at ease. However, they did establish a rapport and by the next year, when May moved the embroidery workers to her home in Hammersmith Terrace, Ellen was always ‘at arms to defend her Miss Morris’. Ellen was employed by May until May left her management role at Morris & Co the year after her father’s death. Ellen joined the Central School of Arts and Crafts as an embroidery tutor in the early 1900s, probably thanks to May’s recommendation, and it was during this time that their professional relationship became a friendship. They corresponded for the next thirty years until May’s death.

In December 1923, May sent Ellen a letter and a gift:

‘My dear Ellen,
It is always such a pleasure to get your kind greeting at this season: it is dear of you never to forget me. I am writing my belated Christmas letters now, having been rather bad with a chill before, and unable to get things off.

I am sending a proof of the early drawing of my Father which no doubt you know, but you may be interested to have the proof. Also a scrap of a poem in his own hand, a bit of draft, which I know you’ll be glad to have.

I wish you could come down here. Can’t we manage it somehow this year?

I’ve had to give up Hammersmith Terrace, and now go to a little hotel when obliged to be in town. Do you know the International Franchise Club in Grafton St? I’ve joined that (so cheap!): you must

Opposite: Draft of three verses from the poem Earth the Healer, Earth the Keeper handwritten by William Morris. A variation of these were published in the collection *Poems by the Way* in 1891.

This page, from the top: a letter dated December 1923 from May Morris to Ellen Wright that refers to the ‘scrap of a poem’. Photographs of Ellen Wright, Morris & Co embroiderer and friend of May Morris, c.1900 (portrait), and seated, third from right (group shot), in 1936 with fellow teachers from Camberwell School of Art.
The ‘proof’ was of a self-portrait of William Morris that was published in the Collected Works of William Morris. The ‘scrap of a poem’ were three verses handwritten by him from his Earth the Healer, Earth the Keeper poem. It was published in his poetry collection called Poems by the Way, printed by the Kelmscott Press in September 1891. May explained about the publication: ‘The pieces in it were collected from various sources and are of very different periods and moods; some are lyrics from discarded unfinished narrative poems of quite early times; some are written “by the way,” as a distraction in the midst of more important productions, while some, in later days, were “made to order” for Socialist needs, and one or two turned out in that easy way the poet had at times, literally to lengthen the volume.’

May describes Earth the Healer as a more ‘recent’ poem, so presumably written near to the publication of the book, c.1890. There exists a bound book that contains the draft of Poems by the Way. The poems are mainly written out by Morris and are in the order of the final publication. A few of the poems have two versions included in this book, and this includes Earth the Healer. Version 1 in the book has fifteen verses (the final published version had nineteen verses). There are thirteen written in pen and two in pencil. The last verse is running up the side of the page – he perhaps wanted the next page to be kept for a full poem. Version 1 does not feature the verses given to Ellen. Version 2 starts on the next page and now has 19 verses, and includes the ones given to Ellen as verse 15-17. The verse running up the side of the page of version 1 became verse 18.

Ellen’s verses are written in pencil on an otherwise blank piece of paper. When writing out version 1, William Morris seems to have felt dissatisfied with the ending, but he had run out of space on the page. It is likely that he wrote down three new verses on a piece of paper that came to hand, just as May says, to work out an idea. He then writes out the poem in the book in full, with very minor adjustments to the wording, and these nineteen verses became the final text for the published version.

These two versions give an insight into William Morris’s process when writing poetry. It shows the ease with which he forms the poem – if Ellen’s verses are the very first time that he commits these to paper, there are relatively few changes. The changes he makes to version 2 are mainly to simplify the text, for example from ‘That thou lookest soon to hold’ to ‘Whereon thou layest hold’. He also moves to a more definite stance from ‘Shall Earth hold for a tiding’ to ‘Earth keepeth for a tiding’.

The other insight that Ellen’s verses give us is into the sheer quantity of material that May was left with as the custodian of her father’s literary life. Morris himself was lackadaisical about the drafts of his work – one manuscript was rescued when he was about to light a pipe with it – but those around him preserved what they could. Ellen’s verses are a case in point, no longer needed as soon as Morris had copied them into the notebook in the 1890s, but still in existence in May’s archive in the 1920s.

When she gave Ellen these verses in 1923, May was sixty-one years old. Perhaps it came to hand when she packed up her house at Hammersmith Terrace, where she had lived for three decades, and moved permanently to Kelmscott Manor as she now had the extensive Morris archive in one place. By this time, so many of those of the older generation whom she loved had died. Her mother died in 1914, and the next decade saw a series of losses of family friends, such as Philip Webb in 1915, Evelyn de Morgan in 1919 and Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1920. These were the extended circle of her parents’ friends who were such an important part of her childhood and while May grieved for each individual loss, she also experienced a more profound grief as the ties were loosened that bound her to the family life that she once knew. On hearing of the serious illness of John Bruce Glasier in 1919, she wrote to him: ‘One after another you all slip away, my Father’s old friends and comrades and the loneliness gets so overwhelming that when I’ve got all the work I can do for him done, I shall await my own turn with courage.’

There were, of course, a few stalwart supporters of her father in her life in the 1920s, such as Emery Walker and Sydney Cockerell, but she felt increasingly isolated in her passion to keep her father’s memory ‘…not only green but dynamic’. May’s sister Jenny’s health meant she was unable to share in this task. Many of the younger generation had other concerns in this interwar period. Hence May deeply appreciated those who valued her father’s life and work. She wrote to Ellen in 1920:

‘I am touched by your loyal appreciation of my Father and his work. I say “loyal” because somehow people seem to get side-tracked from all the direct and dignified ideals – those things that my Father and his circle stood for and lived for, and it cheers one to find that the things that are my very life still seem “worthwhile” to a few. I go to Wales for Christmas: when I come back I will try and look up some bits of things that may interest you. Remind me of this if I am too long over it.’

May remembered her promise and Ellen kept her gift as a token of her esteem for May as well as for William Morris himself.

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Catherine White studied at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She has been researching May Morris since 2010 and is ever hopeful that she will find time to complete May’s biography.

With thanks to: Mrs Rosemary Dyer; University of Liverpool Library; The William Morris Archive (where a digitised draft manuscript can viewed of Poems by the Way); The Huntington Archive, San Marino, California.

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An early self-portrait by William Morris, c.1856, included in the Collected Works of William Morris.
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MAY MORRIS’S CORRESPONDENCE
Editors seek contributions
A new project is seeking to publish the edited correspondence of May Morris (1862-1938). Shedding new light on her multi-faceted career as a designer, embroiderer, teacher and activist, as well as the critical role she played in shaping her father’s legacy, the project will be led by Margaretta Frederick of the US William Morris Society and Anna Mason, former curator at the William Morris Gallery. It will build on research undertaken for the recent exhibition and conference held at the Gallery. The editors have collected over 2,000 letters so far. May had an international network of people she corresponded with, especially following her involvement with socialism and her travels to Europe, Iceland and the US. While her letters to well-known personalities in her father’s circle tend to be catalogued and preserved in public collections, correspondence with friends of her own generation, particularly other women artists, are often difficult to trace. The editors would be grateful for any information, especially regarding material in private collections or letters to lesser-known personalities. If you are interested in helping please contact maymorrissletters@gmail.com.

UTOPIAN DREAMS: RUSKIN’S TORY PATERNALISM
Hugh Hobbs reports on a recent lecture at Kelmscott House
John Ruskin was a major influence on Morris. Blewitt suggested Ruskin is often seen as a progressive as he was a critic of industrial capitalism. However, Ruskin was not a socialist. Blewitt presented evidence that Ruskin was an influence in the formative years of the Labour Party and Ruskin’s thought can explain much of twentieth-century British Socialism. After the 1906 General Election, fifty one Labour members were returned. Forty-six of these replied to a review of who they found most influential. Their responses were as follows: Ruskin (sixteen); Carlyle (fourteen); Morris (three); Marx (two); and Kropotkin (one). Of the three who chose Morris, two mentioned his poems and the other News from Nowhere.

Ruskin referred to himself as a violent Tory of the old school, although he abhorred the party machinery. His thought was informed by Plato, who favoured an ordered society. Plato was later identified by Karl Popper in his 1945 The Open Society and its Enemies as a source for totalitarian trends. Blewitt asked the question ‘What were Ruskin’s values and where did they come from?’ His mother Margaret was an evangelical Christian and he was brought up in this tradition. She was harsh and thought the way to heaven was through the Bible. It was felt that wealth and prosperity showed God’s favour and Ruskin earned money through involvement in the wine trade. At dinner his father read Blackwood’s Magazine, the nineteenth-century Tory publication that was critical of the Great Reform Act of 1832, and Ruskin eventually supported restricting the franchise.

Ruskin made his name as an art and architectural critic. He felt one could sharpen one’s perception by observing and drawing. He was aware that conditions in urban cotton mills and factories were the cause of a developing radical criticism. Carlyle’s 1840 pamphlet Chartism had criticised the development of cash being the sole means of exchange as there are lots of things money can’t buy. Ruskin’s 1854 Nature of Gothic had criticised capitalism as it devalued the role of work in personhood.

Blewitt highlighted that Ruskin had a crisis of faith. He now felt that people should show themselves through good deeds not just Bible study. Therefore he wrote Unto this Last in 1860, a running criticism of the political economy of John Stuart Mill. Blewitt focused on the paternalistic elements of the text. It contains a Bible story from Matthew in which a master gave all workers the same pay irrespective of how much they had worked. Blewitt identified this as showing Ruskin supported the master having control over whether people are equal.

Ruskin’s later critics see him as promoter of social mobility. However, Ruskin wanted people to be good at what they do but not to change their position or status in society. He felt people should treat their workers as their own children and care for them to create order and harmony in factory, family and society. He supported the Empire and the suppression of rebellion in Jamaica. But Ruskin had a progressive idea of education in art and science, and promoted similar education for men and women. He supported the right of women to be artists. He felt women should try to stop men from going to war. He also supported intentional communities, such as the ‘no technology’ Guild of St George.

Blewitt spoke about how Morris was familiar with the writings of Ruskin from the 1850s, but there is no evidence Morris read anything by Ruskin after 1862. Morris’s idea of alienation came more from Ruskin’s Nature of Gothic than through reading Marx. Morris asked Ruskin to join in his Socialist activities but the latter declined for health reasons. Blewitt’s conclusion was that Ruskin was neither progressive nor reactionary. Instead he was contradictory.
influential critic of industrialism, he wanted to restore order, obedience, reverence and hierarchy to a pre-industrial style. Not in order to go back, but to restore it in the present.

In the question and answer session that followed anti-democratic similarities in the thought of Ruskin and John Stuart Mill were discussed. Blewitt described how Ruskin was a critic of party machine politics as he felt it took responsibilities away from the gentry and aristocracy. I mentioned that perhaps the concentration on economic utilitarianism in the USSR had been a reason for its demise and that an awareness of the concepts of aesthetic alienation in the thoughts of Ruskin and Morris may have led to a different form of historical socialism in the Eastern bloc. Blewitt said that Marx’s writings on the spiritual and aesthetic alienation in capitalism were only translated in the Sixties and were considered new in the Seventies. The session ended with a discussion of railways and the environmental and social disruption they caused in the nineteenth century, with an acknowledgment that Morris criticised them partly as they were built for profit not philanthropy.

**SYMPOSIUM ON MORRIS & CO INTERIORS**

Taking place on 6 November at The Art Workers’ Guild, London. Organised to coincide with the exhibition Morris & Co: Inspired by Nature at Standen

The Morris & Co interior is an instantly recognisable aesthetic, devised to bring art into the everyday, and give joy to both maker and user. This symposium will explore the different types of Morris & Co interiors, private and public commissions ranging from decorative schemes designed by the firm to interiors created by customers, and the artist homes of Morris and his close associates. The latest research papers will be showcased at the conference, covering fresh perspectives and changing perceptions on Morris & Co interiors and their influence on contemporary architecture and interior design. For more information, visit artworkersguild.org and nationaltrust.org.uk/standen.

**JOHN BLEWITT BOOK TOUR**

A series of talks to tie in with the publication of William Morris and John Ruskin: A New Road On Which The World Should Travel

Reappraising John Ruskin’s Influence on William Morris

25 November, 6pm, The Lit & Phil, Newcastle

John Blewitt will talk about how Ruskin’s writings on architecture and painting were ‘a revelation’ for Morris. Late in life he wrote that Ruskin’s chapter ‘Nature of the Gothic’ from The Stones of Venice was one of the few ‘necessary’ pieces of literature of the whole of the nineteenth century. In homage he reprinted it in a special Kelmscott Press edition in 1892 because it had helped shape his own understanding of the need for creative labour, architectural and environmental conservation and for a new society devoid of factory production and ‘profit-grinding’. Ruskin’s political and social criticism, he said, gave form to his own discontent and throughout his life he recommended others, including readers of the Pall Mall Gazette, to read the great man. However, Ruskin’s ideas were set within a profoundly conservative and paternalist philosophical framework. He valued obedience, reverence and wise mastership, arguing that only the foolish or the wicked delight in a world with no masters. Morris, however, came to believe that art and humanity could only be saved if there were ‘neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master’s man’. For more information, visit litandphil.org.uk.

**MEET A TRUSTEE**

John Stirling became a Trustee of The William Morris Society two years ago after more than 25 years’ membership. He is also on the Education and Publications Committee, and helps with advice on employment issues. He is now retired from Northumbria University, where he was Head of Social Sciences and a tutor in trade union studies, a role that led to teaching assignments in Europe, West Africa and the USA. John is Chair of the charity Lipman-Miliband Trust and helps plan educational events in the lead-up to the Durham Miners’ Gala each year. He is actively involved in the North East Labour History Society and has published articles on Morris and the 1887 Northumberland miners’ strike and his visit to the Tyne Theatre in Newcastle. He describes himself as a Morris enthusiast who wants to remind people that Morris was an active socialist with much to say that’s relevant today, as well as being a brilliant designer.
Kelmscott House

Lectures, workshops, exhibitions, concerts and visits organised by The William Morris Society

‘THE DEAR WARP AND WEFT AT HAMMERSMITH: A HISTORY OF KELMSCOTT HOUSE’
Until 26 October
When William Morris reported to his wife Jane that he proposed leasing Kelmscott House in Hammersmith in 1878, he said ‘the house might be made very beautiful with a touch of my art’. Certainly this eighteenth-century riverside house is one of the most significant of Morris’s homes. While living here he set up the Kelmscott Press and his textile production works at Merton Abbey, established the Hammersmith branch of the Socialist League in the Coach House where speakers included George Bernard Shaw and WB Yeats, began carpet weaving and continued his innovative approach to design, printing and dyeing techniques.

This is the first exhibition about the most magical of Morris’s homes and will feature original designs, textiles and wallpapers, complemented by beautiful photographic prints. They faithfully convey the atmosphere of Kelmscott House, bursting with creative activity and providing a welcome to some of the most influential minds of the period. The exhibition also includes details of its history and the people who lived in the house before and after Morris, as well as incorporating interesting quotes and anecdotes from Morris’s contemporaries.

Free admission

ARTS & CRAFTS TEXTILE TOURS: THE WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY AND EMERY WALKER’S HOUSE
1 October, 5 November and 26 November, 10.30-1pm
An opportunity to get up close to items that are rarely on show to the public with a specialist tour of both the Society’s premises and nearby Emery Walker’s House. The tour will explore the Arts & Crafts textiles in both collections, including exquisite examples of May Morris’s work. The tour will start at The William Morris Society, where you will be led by textiles and embroidery expert Sally Roberson. It will begin with an introduction to the Society’s textile collection. A short walk along the river will then take the group to Emery Walker’s House (7 Hammersmith Terrace).

Due to space constraints at Emery Walker’s House, places are strictly limited to eight per tour. Tickets cost £35

THE 2019 KELMSCOTT LECTURE AT THE V&A: WILLIAM MORRIS: SOUTH KENSINGTON AND SOCIALISM
Tuesday 8 October, 7pm
Dr Tristram Hunt
‘I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.’ So said Morris, a great champion of the Arts & Crafts movement and a key figure in British socialism at the end of the nineteenth century. Morris’s belief in equality of access to the arts made him a great friend to the South Kensington Museum (later renamed the V&A). Today, he remains one of the most famous names in the V&A collection. Morris had an important influence on some of the museum’s earliest collecting policies, but as an artist he was also inspired by its collections. His legacy can still be found all over the V&A, not only in its extensive collections of Morris’s work, but also in the very fabric of the building that Morris helped to design. In this lecture, V&A Director Dr Tristram Hunt traces the history of Morris’s engagement with the V&A, exploring how the museum helped to shape both his artistic endeavours and his political beliefs.

£12 (WMS members), £15 (non-members), £8 (students)

NOWHERE REIMAGINED: EXPLORING THE LEGACY OF NEWS FROM NOWHERE
Thursday 14 November to Saturday 29 February 2020
Benjamin Deakin
The new exhibition by contemporary British artist Benjamin Deakin explores the modern world through cinema, writing, music and art from the past hundred years, as well as Morris’s seminal magazine News from Nowhere.

To book an event listed here please visit: williammorrisociety.org/whats-on

Advance booking is strongly recommended. Unless otherwise stated, ticket prices for lectures are £12/£10 (WMS member)/£5 (student).

Events usually take place in The William Morris Society’s premises in the basement and Coach House of Morris’s London home for the last eighteen years of his life: Kelmscott House, 26 Upper Mall, London W6 9TA.

For more information call 020 8741 3735 or email events@williammorrisociety.org.uk
notion of utopia, dystopia and the legacy on visual culture of Morris’s News from Nowhere. Deakin is particularly interested in combining historical and contemporary landscape painting styles and repeat patterns bringing an immediate connection with Morris’s designs. The exhibition consists of some newly created paintings and prints together with others first seen in Deakin’s solo exhibition Seeking News from Nowhere last year. Deakin says the exhibition will ‘highlight that Morris’s vision of utopia sits alongside a wide variety of writers of Victorian science fiction that have left a strong visual legacy’. He hopes the exhibition will introduce more contemporary art lovers to Morris’s work. Reimagining Nowhere is also influenced by other quasi-utopian literature particularly that of EA Abbott, HG Wells and Aldous Huxley. Other influences include surrealist painter and war artist Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland, who worked in glass, fabric, prints and portraits. 

News from Nowhere first appeared in the form of serial publication in the Socialist League’s Commonwealth between January and October 1890. It seems particularly fitting that the Reimagining Nowhere exhibition is in the Coach House at Kelmscott House as this is where the novel’s narrator begins his dream. Free admission

THE PRE-RAPHAELITES AND SCIENCE LECTURE
Saturday 16 November, 2.15pm
Professor John Holmes

In their manifestos from the early 1850s, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood argued that art should model itself on science, aiming to achieve the same standards of rigour, precision and truth. In this lecture, John Holmes will explore how they put this ideal into practice in their early paintings, poetry and sculpture, showing how it changes our view of Pre-Raphaelite art if we look at it in this light.

The culmination of the first, scientific phase of Pre-Raphaelism came in the design and decoration of a new museum in Oxford in the late 1850s. As the museum was being built, William Morris, who had recently been a student at Oxford, worked with architect Benjamin Woodward and fellow Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones on the new Oxford Union building. Although Morris was more ambivalent about science than some of the other Pre-Raphaelites, as this talk will show their scientific attention to nature, their experiments in art, and their collaboration with scientists and architects in Oxford all helped to shape his work and his values.

John Holmes is Professor of Victorian Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham. His book The Pre-Raphaelites and Science (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) won the British Society for Literature and Science book prize in 2018. £12 (WMS members), £15 (non-members), £8 (students)

BENJAMIN DEAKIN IN CONVERSATION WITH DIANA TAYLOR
Saturday 30 November, 2.15pm

Benjamin Deakin will discuss the influence of landscape and memory, utopias and fragmentation in his current show at Kelmscott House with artist and researcher Diana Taylor.

£12 (WMS members), £15 (non-members), £8 (students)

EVELYN DE MORGAN AND JANE MORRIS: REINVENTING PRE-RAPHAELITISM
Saturday 7 December, 2.15pm
Sarah Hardy

Evelyn De Morgan visited Kelmscott Manor in the early twentieth century with one clear objective: to use Jane Morris as her muse. Despite following so clearly in Rossetti’s footsteps, her intentions as a radical feminist artist were quite different. Jane Morris sat as an older woman for Evelyn’s beautiful and undeniably Pre-Raphaelite paintings. The Hourglass (1905). Join Sarah Hardy to discover how De Morgan’s use of this Pre-Raphaelite stunner as a model allowed her to depict the passing of time away from the art of a brotherhood towards a brighter, feminist future. Sarah Hardy is a Victorian Arts & Crafts specialist who has worked at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the National Gallery and the British Library. Sarah is currently Curator-Manager of the De Morgan Foundation.

£12 (WMS members), £15 (non-members), £8 (students)

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE FOUNDING OF THE BUILDING CONSERVATION MOVEMENT
Saturday 25 January, 2.15pm
Philip Venning

In 1877, William Morris and Philip Webb, alarmed by the destructive ‘restoration’ of ancient buildings that was occurring in Victorian England, together founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Morris pleaded for ‘Protection in the place of Restoration’; he thought all restoration was a ‘feeble and lifeless forgery’. Morris adopted the role of honorary secretary and treasurer of the SPAB, and was a vigorous advocate for the protection of buildings both at home and abroad from restoration. In this lecture Philip Venning will reveal the extent of Morris’s involvement in the early work and campaigns of the SPAB. Philip Venning was formerly Chief Executive of the SPAB and has also served on the Expert Panel of the Heritage Lottery Fund. He now travels widely as a lecturer accredited by the Arts Society. £12 (WMS members), £15 (non-members), £8 (students)
Exhibitions

NEW
WILLIAM BLAKE
Tate Britain
Until 2 February 2020
Lauded as the creator of some of the most iconic images in British art, Blake was called a ‘glorious luminary’ by William Michael Rossetti, ‘a man not forestalled by predecessors, nor to be classed with contemporaries, nor to be replaced by known or readily surmisable successors’. Radical and rebellious, he continues to be an inspiration to artists, musicians and poets worldwide. Featuring over 300 original works including watercolours, paintings and prints, this is the largest show of Blake’s work for almost 20 years. He was, of course, an influence on the Pre-Raphaelite movement, particularly Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais. While Morris cannot really be said to be one of his followers, Blake’s combination of image and text in the sphere of design can perhaps be seen as an influence in Morris’s work. Like Morris and his contemporaries, Blake was interested in medieval culture. The Spiritual Vision section of the exhibition shows how the Gothic world influenced his art and imagination, and includes his illustrations for Chaucer and Dante’s Divine Comedy. For the visionary Blake, Gothic was the epitome of the spiritual integrity to which art must aspire. Including a room showing his works at enormous scale using digital technology, this exhibition rediscovers Blake as a visual artist for the twenty-first century.

tate.org.uk

PRE-RAPHAELITE SISTERS
National Portrait Gallery, London
17 October to 26 January 2020
This major new exhibition focuses on the women of Pre-Raphaelite art and explores the often overlooked contribution of 12 women who were key to the movement including Evelyn de Morgan, Effie Milias, Lizzie Siddal and Joanna Wells, an artist whose work has been largely been ignored. Featuring new discoveries and unseen works from public and private collections, the exhibition reveals the women behind the pictures. Through paintings, photographs, manuscripts and personal items, Pre-Raphaelite Sisters explores the significant roles they played as artists, models and muses who supported and sustained the artistic output of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

southerncontemporaryartgalllery.com

BEYOND THE BROTHERHOOD: THE PRE-RAPHAELITE LEGACY
Southampton City Art Gallery
18 October to 1 February 2020
Artworks from Southampton City Art Gallery and The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum together with masterpieces from national collections including Tate Britain, the V&A and the Royal Academy come together in this major exhibition. Highlighting the importance of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and its influence on contemporary art and culture, as seen in the fantastical imagery of The Lord of the Rings and Game of Thrones, this exhibition brings together stunning imagery following the movement’s influence on artistic developments including Realism, Aestheticism, Symbolism and Art Nouveau. It will illustrate how Pre-Raphaelism lives on in contemporary fantasy book illustration and film, and how it continues to inspire artists today.

nationaltrust.org.uk/standen

CONTINUING
RUSKIN, TURNER & THE STORM CLOUD: WATERCOLOURS AND DRAWINGS
Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal
Until 5 October
This landmark exhibition is one of the biggest in the UK to celebrate the 200th anniversary of John Ruskin’s birth, and moves from York Art Gallery to Kendal. There are more than one hundred works spread over five rooms examining the relationship between the two men, their work and the impact Ruskin had in highlighting climate change. With substantial loans from both regional and national collections, the exhibition will feature watercolours and drawings with a dozen works by Turner and more than forty by Ruskin. There are also large-scale drawings by Emma Sibbton, who retraced the steps of Turner and Ruskin in 2018 with a trip to the Alps. Her work shows how the Alpine landscape so treasured by Ruskin and Turner has been impacted by climate change over the last two centuries.

abbothall.org.uk

MORRIS & CO INSPIRED BY NATURE
Standen House and Garden, West Sussex
Until 10 November
The exhibition at this historic Arts & Crafts house explores how the natural world inspired Morris. Supported by Morris & Co, the inspiration behind Morris’s patterns of flowers and birds is explored, focusing on fabrics, wallpapers, tapestries and embroideries. Morris & Co patterns were chosen for furnishings throughout the house in the late nineteenth century and exemplify the popularity of bringing nature indoors. Visitors can discover how repeating patterns of flowers and birds in Morris & Co designs were chosen, and the value that Morris placed on the revival of traditional skills and techniques including natural dyeing and tapestry weaving. The exhibition includes a recreation of the company’s original showroom. Wallpaper blocks for Larkspur, the original drawing for Daffodil, and Fox and Hare, two drawings by Standen’s architect Philip Webb, are among the items on display, as well as exquisite embroideries by May Morris.

rukin, turner & the storm cloud: watercolours and drawings

A trail inspired by Morris’s poem Tapestry Trees leads visitors through the Arts & Crafts garden overlooking the Sussex Weald, showing why each of the trees included oak, ash and yew was important to Morris.

nationaltrust.org.uk/standen

MAY MORRIS: ART & LIFE
Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh
28 November to 14 March 2020
Organised by the William Morris Gallery in association with Dovecot Studios, this landmark exhibition tells the story of May’s life. At 23 she took charge of the Morris & Co embroidery department and was responsible for creating some of the company’s most iconic textiles and wallpaper designs. The show features outstanding embroidery and designs by May, as well as artefacts and objects from her life including her notebooks, jewellery and clothes.

dovecottudios.com

ROSSETTI, PRE-RAPHAELITES
Wightwick Manor, Wolverhampton
Until 24 December
The unique collection of Pre-Raphaelite art at the Arts & Crafts former home of Sir Geoffrey and Lady Mander includes works by Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Evelyn De Morgan and Millais. Now, thanks to a gift accepted in lieu of inheritance tax, drawings by Rossetti from his early career have been acquired by the National Trust and are on display to the public for the first time. All the drawings date from between 1844 and 1848 when the teenage Rossetti was receiving an art education. A disruptive student who frequently truanted, many illustrate the preoccupations of the young man at the time such as what he was reading, the Gothic macabre and ladies of questionable virtue.

nationaltrust.org.uk/wightwick-manor-and-gardens
Books

THE LAST UTOPIANS: FOUR LATE 19TH-CENTURY VISIONARIES AND THEIR LEGACY
By Michael Robertson
Princeton University Press, 336pp, £24.95, HB, press.princeton.edu
With this entertaining story of four utopian writers – William Morris, Edward Bellamy, Edward Carpenter and Charlotte Perkins Gilman – Robertson reintroduces us to the utopianism that seized the imaginations of late nineteenth-century American and British writers, and explores its continuing influence today.

The four key figures lived during an extraordinary period of literary and social experimentation. The publication of Bellamy’s Looking Backward in 1888 opened the floodgates to an unprecedented wave of utopian writing. Morris was a committed socialist whose News from Nowhere envisons a workers’ Arcadia. Carpenter was an early activist for gay rights, while women’s rights activist Gilman was author of numerous utopian fictions, including Herland, a visionary tale of an all-female society.

According to Robertson, these writers shared a belief in radical equality, imagining an end to class and gender hierarchies and envisioning new forms of familial and romantic relationships. They held liberal religious beliefs about a universal spirit uniting humanity, believed in social transformation through non-violent means and were committed to living a simple life rooted in a restored natural world. And their legacy remains with us today, as Robertson describes first-hand accounts of contemporary utopianism such as Occupy Wall Street.

Robertson is Professor of English at The College of New Jersey, and has lectured at The William Morris Society.

NEW BOTanical PAINTING
By Harriet de Winton
Octopus Publishing Group, 66pp, £12.99, PB, octopusbooks.co.uk
If you’re inspired by Morris’s designs, it could be time to bring out your inner artist by delving into this book. Artist Harriet de Winton shows you how to create contemporary watercolour artworks to treasure. With over thirty step-by-step projects, you can discover how to paint individual flowers and foliage as well as create botanical compositions. Many Morris favourites are here, such as peonies, tulips, roses, chrysanthemums and blossom, and there are detailed instructions on how to tackle each type of bloom to create beautiful results. The last chapter is a chance for you to get creative: colour palettes and flowers combined in wreaths, patterns and borders in true Morris style.

BEYOND THE BROTHERHOOD: THE PRE-RAPHAELITE LEGACY
By Anne Anderson with contributions from Rupert Maas, Kirsty Stonell Walker and Rebecca Moisan
Sansom & Co, 96pp, £17.50, PB, sansomandcompany.co.uk
Packed with stunning images, this new book is out in October to accompany the major exhibition at Southamton City Art Gallery (18 October 2019 to 1 February 2020).

Today the Pre-Raphaelite movement lives on in fantasy art and film, and rather than seeing it as an historic style, this book argues it’s a living tradition. Adding a modern spin, one chapter of the book takes the Pre-Raphaelites from their mid-nineteenth century origins and looks at their reinvention for the twenty-first century via The Lord of the Rings and Game of Thrones. But the story starts with the original Pre-Raphaelite Brothers – William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the circles they moved in. It also includes a fascinating look at lesser known artists such as Noel Laura Nesbit, Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale and May Cookey.

Author Dr Anne Anderson worked on the ‘Closer to Home’ exhibition at Leighton House Museum in London and other recently published work includes The Perseus Series: Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones.

WILLIAM MORRIS’S FLOWERS
By Rowan Bain
Thames & Hudson in association with the V&A, 144pp, £14.95, HB, thameshudson.co.uk
The vast majority of Morris’s designs for carpet, fabric and wallpaper patterns are based on natural forms including plants, trees and flowers. His genius as a designer lay in his ability to distil nature into well-ordered patterns for the home.

This beautifully designed book features a wealth of Morris designs where flowers are the principal motif, and includes working designs in pencil and watercolour as well as the finished items. Exploring the sources that inspired Morris’s flower-based designs such as the gardens at Red House and Kelmscott Manor, it also looks at other influences including sixteenth- and seventeenth-century herbal, illuminated medieval manuscripts, medieval and Renaissance tapestries, and objects from the Islamic world that Morris studied at the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A).

Rowan Bain is senior curator at the William Morris Gallery and has put together a stunning volume that’s a real treat.

WILLIAM MORRIS & HIS PALACE OF ART
By Tessa Wild
Philip Wilson Publishers, £35, HB, bloomsbury.com
A mix of biography, art history and lavish images, this study of Red House is a fascinating insight into Morris’s work and design principles. The only house commissioned by Morris and the first independent architectural work of his close friend Philip Webb, Morris moved in to Red House as a young man of 26. Together with its garden, Red House is the physical embodiment of his exuberant spirit, youthful ambition, passionate medievalism and creativity. For five intense years from 1860–5, it was the country retreat of Morris and his circle. Good times were had by all, centred on plans for the decoration and furnishing of the house, and the design of the garden. This book covers how Red House was an ambitious and critical chapter in Morris’s design history, the inspiration it provided for the founding of the Firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co in 1861, and the vital collaboration of Webb, Burne-Jones, Rossetti and the rest of their circle in realising Morris’s dreams for his house.
THE LAMB AND FLAG
WATERCOLOURS

Kelm scott House curator Helen Elletson writes about Philip Webb’s designs for Llandaff cathedral

Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co developed a wide range of designs for church embroidery and vestments, including altar frontals, several of which were designed by Philip Webb including one for Llandaff Cathedral. Not a great deal is known about early embroideries made by the firm but there remain two existing altar frontals from the 1860s, one of which is based on Webb’s Lamb and Flag design at Llandaff Cathedral, Cardiff. This beautiful embroidery was worked on by Morris’s sister-in-law Elizabeth Burden, the younger sister of Jane, who sewed her name and the date (1868) on the reverse. ‘Bessie’ became a member of the Morris household at 26 Queen Square, Bloomsbury. With only a very rudimentary early education she built up her skills in embroidery and was described by Morris as having ‘complete mastery of the theory and practice of all kinds of needlework’, and as ‘a first class needlewoman’ skilled in both theory and practice.

Together with Jane Morris she worked on many projects for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co and began embroidering designs by Webb and Morris in the 1860s, including the Llandaff altar frontal. She excelled at crewelwork (decorative stitches in wool yarn rather than thread) and had the rare distinction of having a stitch named after her. The ‘Burden’ was a revival of a medieval European stitch that gave a basket-weave effect resembling woven tapestry.

She tutored pupils in needlework at Queen Square to supplement her income from Morris, Marshall Faulkner and Co, where she was employed as an embroideress and also had responsibilities for designs, materials, wages and book-keeping. Her reputation was such that in the 1870s she became a tutor of embroidery at the Royal School of Needlework. She died in 1924 aged eighty-two, remained unmarried, and continued to teach needlework at a school for young ladies in Surrey.

The completed altar frontal shows that the lamb and floral designs have been appliqued on a silk damask background with the inscription Ecce Agnus Dei, qui tollit peccata Mundi (Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world). The lamb represents Christ and his sacrifice, and the banner symbolises Jesus’s triumph over death through the Resurrection.

These original watercolour designs in the Society’s collection illustrate Webb’s talented draughtsmanship in embroidery design and his ability to communicate this to the embroideress.

Members wishing to view any aspect of the collection are welcome to do so, by contacting: curator@williammorrisociety.org
AMY P. GOLDMAN FELLOWSHIP IN PRE-RAPHAELITE STUDIES

The University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press and the Delaware Art Museum invite applications for the 2020 joint Fellowship in Pre-Raphaelite Studies. This one-month Fellowship is intended for scholars working on the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates. Up to $3,000 is available and housing is provided. Application deadline: November 1, 2019. For more information, visit delart.org or email fellowships@delart.org.

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