William Morris and the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction, 1881–84

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By the early 1880s, William Morris was a well-known and much respected figure. Morris & Company had entered its heyday, and Morris's public lectures ensured that his social criticism and views on design reached an ever-widening audience. One mark of his growing reputation was the development of a close and rewarding association with the South Kensington Museum, as the Victoria and Albert was known until the last year of the nineteenth century. The Museum had been set up with the proceeds of the 1851 Great Exhibition "for the express purpose of allying art and industry and improving design in manufactured goods." 1 Morris's relationship with the Museum dated from 1864 when the recently founded Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. contributed panels to an exhibition of contemporary stained glass. Three years later Henry Cole, South Kensington's first Director, and Francis Fowke, the architect of the museum buildings, commissioned the firm to decorate the Green Dining Room – one of its first major secular commissions.

By the early 1880s, William Morris was frequently consulted by the Museum on the acquisition of textiles, carpets, tapestries and embroidery. He was formally appointed as one of its Art Referees in 1884. 2 His work for the South Kensington Museum, which continued until the year of his death, is by no means the least of his legacies to succeeding generations. For, as Ray Watkinson has remarked, "it was on his advice, under the guidance of his enormous knowledge, practical as well as historic and aesthetic . . . that scores of objects were bought by, or given to, the Museum; and so, to us." 3

Morris regarded the collections as invaluable sources of reference for the designer. Barbara Morris and Linda Parry, amongst others, have demonstrated how critically Morris's maturing skills as a designer drew upon frequent visits to the Museum to study objects and the rare books in the library. 4 Additionally, he served, from the late 1870s, as an examiner for the South Kensington School of Design, where his own daughter May attended classes in embroidery. 5 In 1882, when the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction heard evidence at the Museum, Morris, not surprisingly, was called as an accomplished and well-informed witness.

The Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of Sir Bernhard Samuelson M.P., a Cleveland ironmaster, was one of several which examined the state of Britain's education system in the course of the nineteenth century. They were a response to rising concern over international competition and the apparent superiority of French, German and American scientific and technical training. Most concern was expressed about training in the applied sciences, but there were also recurrent scares about the lack of educational opportunities for artists and designers, and about the standards of industrial design.
Concern over the training of artists and designers first came to the fore in 1835, when the Liverpool M.P. William Ewart proposed a Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures “to inquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and of the principles of design among the people (especially the manufacturing population) of this country.” Ewart was heavily influenced by Benjamin Robert Haydon, one of the earliest advocates of schools of design, who was fiercely critical of the Royal Academy’s failure to develop its educational functions. In its Report, published in 1836, the Committee set out an alarming tale of the deficiencies of British workmanship. Whereas France and Germany had established art educational systems adapted to the needs of industry, in Britain it was largely true that “art education was still in the hands of the drawing master whose task it was to educate the sons and daughters of the rich.” The efforts of the Mechanics’ Institutes were singled out as a notable but limited exception to the rule.

The publicity generated by the Select Committee’s work spurred the government into action. A School of Design was established at Somerset House in 1837. William Dyce, appointed Superintendent in August 1838, was largely responsible for shaping its policies. A somewhat enigmatic figure, he was undeniably correct in asserting the need to make art education more widely available. He emphasised in his writings the importance of the relationship between the style of an object and the use to which it was put. He also “made the bold suggestion that the school should become an actual workshop for the production of patterns which would be supplied to manufacturers.” In practice, though, the School struggled under his leadership. His ideas on design itself were limited, his teachers concentrating upon ornament rather than design, and the emphasis was on paper and patterns rather than working with real materials. There was, nevertheless, some success in extending provision to the manufacturing towns. Between 1842 and 1852 twenty-one provincial schools of design were created, in Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and elsewhere.

Further state intervention came around mid-century, amidst concerns that the School of Design was not working well. Financial provision remained very limited, and in the provinces businessmen were not convinced of the benefits of their local schools of design. In 1852, the Duke of Aberdeen’s government promised a comprehensive scheme for art and science education. The outcome was the establishment of the Department of Science and Art. The main objectives of its Art Division were: “the promotion of elementary instruction in drawing and modelling; special instruction in the knowledge and practice of ornamental art; the practical application of such knowledge to the improvement of manufacturers.” Sir Henry Cole became the first Secretary for Art, taking sole charge of the Department of Science and Art in 1858. Under his leadership, the Department began by reorganising and granting aid to existing art schools, which became subject to regular inspection and payment by results. The Department set up training courses and examinations for those intending to teach its classes. By the time of Cole’s retirement in 1873, the Department could point to a record of substantial achievement. There were now 120 schools of art spread across the UK. In addition, 180,000 boys and girls were being taught drawing in elementary schools, and there were 500 night schools for teaching drawing to artisans.

Yet despite these efforts the spectre of foreign competition continued to threaten; and to some it grew more menacing as the years passed. Underlying this perception
was the undeniable fact that industrial growth rates in the UK in the last third of the nineteenth century compared badly with those of Germany and the United States. Whilst it was hardly surprising that Britain’s growth rate should have lagged behind those of newer industrialisers, the sharpening of foreign competition coupled with the onset of the ‘Great Depression’ in the early 1880s certainly did much to concentrate attention on the question of technical education in Britain.

The catalyst for renewed activity was the 1867 Paris Exhibition. Unlike the Great Exhibition of 1851, when Britain and her Empire had carried off the honours in all but a handful of the hundred or so departments, the Paris Exhibition provided highly disconcerting evidence of the success of her rivals. In only ten of the 90 categories of exhibit did British manufacturers prove triumphant. As John Scott Russell wrote in 1869, “by that Exhibition, we were rudely awakened and thoroughly alarmed. We then learnt, not that we were equalled, but that we were beaten – not on some points, but by some nation or other on nearly all those points on which we had prided ourselves.” The experience of 1867 led Russell and a growing number of like-minded individuals to conclude that a more systematic, state-led approach to technical instruction was required. The proselytisers included well-informed industrialists like Isaac Lowthian Bell and William Siemens with first-hand experience of conditions on the Continent. Other leading figures were Thomas Huxley, Lyon Playfair, first head of the Department of Science and Art, and Henry Roscoe, who graduated from the Universities of London and Heidelberg before becoming Professor of Chemistry at Owen’s College, Manchester in 1857. Their opposition to the anti-vocational liberal education advocated by J.S. Mill was so forceful and influential that “what they were saying rapidly became the banalities of almost any speech on university or industrial matters from the 1880s to the 1900s and now appears a kind of commonsense orthodoxy scarcely worth reiterating. Indeed, it is now the old orthodoxy of the liberal education that needs a special defence.”

Further recognition of the competitive dangers facing the United Kingdom came in the Reports of the Royal Commission on Scientific Instruction and the Advancement of Science, chaired by the Duke of Devonshire (1872–75), and when Samuelson’s Royal Commission on Technical Instruction followed at the beginning of the next decade (1881–84) its brief was explicitly a comparative one: “to inquire into the instruction of the industrial classes of certain foreign countries in technical and other subjects, for the purpose of comparison with that of the corresponding classes in this country.”

Apart from Samuelson himself, the other members of the Royal Commission were Swire Smith, a Bradford woollen manufacturer; John Slagg, an M.P. and cotton magnate; the pottery manufacturer and M.P. from Burslem, Staffordshire, William Woodall; Philip Magnus, the Director and Secretary of the City and Guilds of London Institute; and Henry Roscoe. It heard evidence from many of the leading industrialists and educationalists whose voices had been raised in the debates over technical instruction. Morris’s fellow-witnesses included William Siemens, the President of the Midland Institute; Godfrey Wedgwood, the senior partner in Wedgwood & Sons; the ironmaster Isaac Lowthian Bell; Philip Cunliffe-Owen, the Director of the South Kensington Museum; and T.H. Huxley, the Dean of the College of Science. Amongst the other witnesses were numerous artisans, and representatives of Mechanics’ Institutes, trade schools, the City and Guilds of London, and other institutions involved in technical education. Another expert who supplied information to the
Commission was Thomas Wardle, who had shared Morris's dyeing experiments of the mid-1870s. Wardle submitted a long and at times pessimistic written report on the silk textiles industry in Britain.²⁴

The Commission, like its predecessors, spent much of its time considering scientific education rather than instruction in art and design.¹⁵ But whilst the competitive threat in many areas seemed greatest from Germany, in the case of high quality textiles it was France which, since the early decades of the nineteenth century, had posed the greatest challenge. The lead established by English manufacturers in the later decades of the eighteenth century had been lost in the great trade recession which followed the Napoleonic Wars, and "Lancashire had to look to Lyons or to Paris for their inspiration."¹⁶ It was widely believed that the superiority of French designers in silk, printed cottons and lace was founded upon their Schools of Design. The Lyons school had been founded in the mid-eighteenth century, and was expressly intended to train those draughtsmen who prepared patterns for the region's silk industry. This in turn influenced printed cottons, which tended to follow trends in the more expensive silk. Later, in 1833, the Mulhouse printers, who constituted Manchester's main rivals, set up their own school of design.¹⁷ Concerns about foreign competition were not confined to silks and cottons. In hosiery, A.J. Mundella had acquired a firm in Chemnitz, the centre of the successful Saxon industry, in the 1860s. His English manager swiftly concluded that Saxony's advantage over Nottingham was primarily due to Chemnitz's polytechnic school, which trained the more skilled of its workmen. When the manager, H.M. Felkin, published his findings in a book, Technical Instruction in a Saxon Town (1881), it created widespread public interest, and was largely responsible for the appointment of the Samuelson Commission.¹⁸

William Morris was called as a witness because, besides acting as a valued consultant and assessor for the South Kensington Museum, he was regarded as a successful businessman and authority on the design and manufacture of high-class textiles. As a well-known and much-respected figure, Morris's views on art, design and manufacturing were taken very seriously by the members of the Commission, who questioned him at length on the deficiencies of domestic products, and the steps which might be taken to improve the competitive position of British manufacturers. The printed version of his evidence covers eleven closely printed pages.¹⁹

Morris began with the observation that English designs lacked the mastery of style exhibited by their French counterparts, especially in good-quality textiles. This was an increasingly important segment of the market in which French goods were generally presumed superior to British. However, he denied that the French necessarily had a better appreciation of beauty and colour than the English, adding that "so long as a thing is in a definite style, it seems to satisfy the ordinary French mind, even though it is obviously ugly." As regards wallpapers, for example, he asserted that "on the whole English designs were more original and better in design than the French, at any rate since the last 12 years." Likewise, he did not think that printed fabrics were a strong point of the French, although he conceded that "they have an enormous variety in the way of woven stuffs for furnitures, and their cleverness in adapting material and shifting things about is very great. . . . I do not much admire the goods myself, but they are clever things, and showy, and very cheap."

While Morris recognised the cleverness of French designs, he did not accept that emulation of the French approach to design was the best way for Britain to "establish
a trade and a reputation for goods of a high class." He thought it better "as a matter of competition . . . not to attack the French on their ground at all, but to try to produce our own styles." Moreover, he was highly critical of the fact that French designers, based in Paris, were not fully conversant with the manufacturing techniques and materials used in provincial industrial centres like Lyons:

I think it rather a thing to be deprecated that there should be a class of mere artists like some of these Paris designers, who furnish designs, as it were, ready made, to what you may call the technical designers, the technical designers having next to nothing to do with the drawing, but having what you may call the grinding work to do. The designer learns about as much as is necessary for his work from the weaver, in a perfunctory and dull sort of manner, and the result is not so satisfactory as it would be if a different system were adopted.

For Morris, the division of labour was a particular cause for concern since it was through this, and the deskilling that generally accompanied it, that work became joyless. Thus Morris, like Ruskin before him, looked back to the medieval period, when the labour of the artisan was a source of interest and pleasure, and resulted in products which were fitting and beautiful. The freedom to take full responsibility for the manufacturing process — and indeed, the freedom to make mistakes — ennobled the worker, and satisfied his creative needs. This was, of course, to become a central theme of much of Morris's socialist writings. In Commonweal, for instance, he wrote that in capitalist production, "the creation of surplus values being the one aim of the employers of labour, they cannot for a moment trouble themselves as to whether the work which creates the surplus value is pleasurable to the worker, or not."

But there was another reason why William Morris opposed the division of labour: unlike most of his socialist contemporaries, who concentrated their attention upon its effect on the workforce, Morris was also concerned about its impact on the quality of the product. Thus, in his evidence to the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction, Morris argued that "division of labour does a good deal to cheapen goods, but on the other hand I think it does a great deal to deteriorate them." He concluded that "it is not desirable to divide the labour between the artist and what is technically called the designer . . . I think it would be better, when it could be managed, that the man who actually goes through the technical work of counting the threads, and settling how the thing is to be woven, through and through, should do the drawing.

When Sir Bernhard Samuelson, seeking clarification, asked him whether he considered that the designer should acquaint himself with the exigencies of the machine and the material in which the design was executed, Morris replied: "yes, I speak as strongly as I can upon that. I think that is the very foundation of all design." Sterility in design might be avoided through a deep knowledge of the manufacturing process. Only in this way could the designer make a design which took full account of the nature of the material and the capabilities of the production process.

In his evidence, Morris also emphasised the commercial importance of originality and beauty. Originality was the linchpin of the Morris business; to a remarkable degree, the identity of the Firm was a reflection of his own personality, thought and aspirations. He very rarely employed outside designers because "it is so very difficult to get a due amount of originality out of them; the designs which one gets are so hackneyed, and there is the same sort of idea harped on about for ever and ever."
The emphasis on invention and originality was one which conferred competitive advantage in a fiercely contested market. That Morris understood the importance of a reputation for originality and quality is underlined by the observation that “beauty is a marketable quality, and ... the better the work is all round, both as a work of art and in its technique, the more likely it is to find favour with the public.”

Mere originality, however, was not enough; the designer should have an understanding of the best historical examples which might form a rich fund of ideas and inspiration. He believed that “however original a man may be, he cannot afford to disregard the works of art that have been produced in times past when design was flourishing.” Moreover,

he is also bound to supplement that by a careful study of nature, because if he does not he will certainly fall into a sort of cut and dried, conventional method of designing, which is the bane of most of these French designs that we are talking about, and the only way for a person to keep clear of that, especially one in the ordinary rank and file of designers, is to study nature along with the old examples. It takes a man of considerable originality, to deal with the old examples, and to get what is good out of them, without making a design which lays itself open distinctly to the charge of plagiarism. No doubt the only help out of that is for a man to be always drawing from nature, getting the habit of knowing what beautiful forms and lines are; that I think is a positive necessity.

Having set out very clearly his views on the foundations of good design, Morris went on to advise the Commission on how to meet the challenge of the French in markets for high-class goods. Most important of all, he believed, was “an education all round of the workmen, from the lowest to the highest.” This education should begin with elementary instruction in the three R's, which he believed had a considerable influence on the ultimate success of the workman: “I often have great difficulty in dealing with the workmen I employ in London, because of their general ignorance.” Training in drawing was important to give an understanding of form – Morris objected to what he called ‘mere mechanical finish’ – and he believed that “everybody ought to be taught to draw just as much as everybody be taught to read and write”. Thus he was in sympathy with the efforts of the Department of Science and Art to provide grants for elementary schools where they taught drawing in addition to the 3R's.

At a more advanced level, he was strongly supportive of the provincial schools of design which had been set up under the auspices of the Department of Science and Art. Like many contemporaries, he was firmly of the opinion that Britain's textile industries had suffered in competition with other countries from the absence of school training in the designing of patterns. Furthermore, this training “should be obtainable in the several centres of industry; that is, a man should not be obliged to have to come to London to learn his work, but should be able in some way or other to do all that was necessary in the way of study in his own town, wherever it might be.”

But, while in general he approved of the courses of instruction which the provincial schools provided, there were a number of areas in which improvements might be made. For example, he was concerned that the provincial schools of design should avoid training students as picture painters. He was induced to make the remark as a result of having visited a school where a great number of still lifes were exhibited.
Though some of them were very fair, “that sort of study certainly did not help the students very much in design.” This, though, he did not consider to be indicative of the general emphasis followed by the provincial schools, but “a matter of accident owing to the master having a turn in that direction.” He might perhaps have added that it was often as much a consequence of the students’ preference as their masters’. One of the perennial tensions experienced by the provincial schools was that the students often wanted to ‘become artists’ against the wishes of those who had founded the schools and saw for them a strictly vocational role.

Morris also suggested improvements in the conduct of national design competitions. Under the system established by Henry Cole, the work of the provincial school students was assessed by inspectors, and the assessments were used as the basis of a system of payment by results. The inspector awarded local medals, and all work was sent to London for examination. The best was selected to compete in national competitions for medallions and prizes. Morris, who had served as one of the national judges since the late 1870s, felt that not enough attention was given to the turning out of the actual goods themselves: “we cannot give prizes for the things started out, we can only give prizes for the designs. I think it would be a very good thing to give prizes for the goods themselves. Prizes ought to be given for general excellence and appropriateness of design, and for careful and artistic execution.” This, he believed, could easily be achieved.

Another theme taken up by Morris was the relative merits of practical training in schools of design versus the workplace. Clearly, something needed to be done, for “the old system of apprenticeship, by which workmen learned their craft, is a good deal broken down now, and nothing as yet has taken its place.” As the workshop training provided in most trades was insufficient, Morris suggested that the schools of design ought to afford opportunities for people to learn the practical side of designing. Students following courses of formal training should have ready access to workshops where they might become conversant with manufacturing methods. For example, it would be possible to introduce Jacquard looms for figure weaving, as they did not take up a vast amount of room: “it might seem that there would be no very great advantage in putting a Jacquard loom into an art school, but it would be a great advantage for one who was learning designing to see weaving going on. I think it essential that a designer should learn the practical way of carrying out the work for which he designs; he ought to be able to weave himself.”

Morris was far from dogmatic in his assertions, recognising that there might be operational difficulties in providing practical experience in the schools of design. Yet, if the difficulties could be overcome, the student was likely to benefit for two reasons. One lay in the fact that the learner would be not so much hurried over the work as he would be in the factory. The other was that “in workshops it is often the interest of these who have to teach him to keep him back instead of advancing him.” In calling for more practical training, Morris was highlighting one of the principal deficiencies of the schools of design. In the National Art Training School at South Kensington, for instance, no workshop training of any kind was provided between 1877 and 1886.22

Morris regretted the tendency for the designer to cease formal studies after entering employment. He agreed with Samuelson that general art instruction should be continued in night schools and the like; “it would be most desirable; I think that it is
Perhaps the most important of all Morris's recommendations to the Royal Commission concerned the educational role of museums. Since the training of designers should include the opportunity to examine very closely "good old examples," Morris insisted upon the importance of museum collections, not just in London, but in each of the manufacturing centres of the land. This he considered "a positive necessity . . . I do not see how they could get on without it." For example, in the case of the lace manufacture of Nottingham, the student certainly ought to have easy access to good old examples, or drawings, or prints of old lace. Morris emphasised that there were "many books printed between 1530 and 1630 full of designs of lace, and things of that sort." What was true for the lace industry was equally true for other trades. Moreover, the designer should have access not only to examples of his own craft, but also the other crafts which had a bearing upon it, "because a man must not be narrowed to studying only his own special manufacture; he would get too dull and mechanical if he did."

It is quite difficult for us to appreciate today exactly how hard it must have been in Victoria's reign to gain access to the best historical examples. A great deal of progress had of course been made. Early museums tended to be collections of curiosities, the products of travel, and so on. They were not meant for training, and the scholarship behind them was speculative, antiquarian, and non-scientific. All this was beginning to change as the nineteenth century unfolded, and so too were people's perceptions of what museums had to offer. The emerging concept of the museum as an educational tool was important, and the South Kensington Museum and the Natural History Museum were the great exemplars. Even so, one wonders how accessible good historical examples were to the average designer in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, especially those geographically distant from the metropolis.

Morris drew a clear distinction between metropolitan and provincial collections. The South Kensington Museum "should contain complete collections in all styles, and when an opportunity occurred for purchasing private collections, any gap in the metropolitan collection should be filled up at the expense of the nation." In the provincial museum, on the other hand, "you want types of good work, not a mere multiplication of articles." It did not matter if it were small, provided that its collections were representative, and appropriate to the needs of the locality. Morris did not think that the provincial museum "need set itself to what is called collecting, or need try the sort of things which a private man with a long purse may do. Here the things are only wanted for educational purposes, and not as curiosities."

Morris then turned to consider how these provincial museums might be provided for. Samuelson, from the chair, enquired whether he believed that the benefit to the nation would justify substantial state aid being given to the localities, for the formation of such collections. Morris was sceptical of this approach: "I would rather that the localities should establish such museums for themselves. I do not see why they should not; it concerns their own trades, and I think they might do it for themselves, more or less. At the same time I think national aid might be given to them to a reasonable extent, if they were seriously trying to make good museums of their own."

With regard to the provision of articles for provincial museums, Morris said that he would give all the aid to such museums that could be given without robbing "the
great existing museum” at South Kensington. “I must say, I think it would be a great mistake to do anything that was really like breaking up the collection here. People who want to study the objects, know that they are to be found here, and they can get at them... The things have a certain value in a great collection, which they would not have in a small one.”

Nor was he at all in favour of the system of circulation, which had been developed at South Kensington since the 1850s. The Circulation Department provided a selection of the collections, ranging from glass, ceramics and metalwork to textiles and wallpapers, supplemented by photographs and drawings of rare exhibits: special loans to exhibitions of industrial and fine art which were organised in various localities – mostly those centres of manufacturing which possessed design schools – and objects were available for copying by electrotyping, plaster casting, photography and other methods. The Circulation Department was undoubtedly successful – its exhibitions were popular, and helped to raise the necessary capital and local interest to establish a number of provincial museums. Morris’s remarks were prompted by the decision in 1880 to extend the loan scheme to municipal museums, especially those in manufacturing districts. This resulted in objects being removed from the collections displayed at South Kensington for a year at a time. Although it was generally felt at South Kensington that the advantages to the provinces outweighed the drawbacks, Morris did not agree, remarking that he could not help “looking upon the thing rather from a collector's point of view”:

I must confess I do not think it is a good plan. In the first place these things are extremely precious and if destroyed can never be replaced; the risk in transit, though it may not be absolutely great, still is a risk, and should only be run when there is a strong necessity for it. There is another objection to the system of circulation of these objects. A museum, to be of any great use to those who are studying in it as artists or as designers, must be arranged in a permanent manner, so that one can come day after day to see the same thing; so that a man who is a lecturer can take his class to see the museum and give a lecture on such and such an article, or that a manufacturer, like myself, can take a designer to the museum and say, I want a thing done in such and such a way.

Morris’s view was very different from many of his contemporaries. Thomas Wardle, for example, strongly supported the loan, for a year at a time, of objects from South Kensington, remarking that “a fixed collection soon becomes uninteresting. Nothing is more stupid than a local museum.” Here, of course, Wardle was expressing the frustrations of a man who had experienced the shortcomings of a small local museum; Morris, on the other hand, spoke as a man who had South Kensington at hand for study and reference, and as a source of pleasure.

Rather than expanding the circulating collections, Morris wanted towns to acquire their own. Whilst he did not want the metropolitan collections to be plundered of essential items and lose their claim to comprehensiveness, he firmly believed that any superfluous items might be transferred to the provinces on a permanent basis. “My experience in using the museum here, and perhaps I have used it as much as any living man, is that the museum has got rather more things than it knows what to do with... I know there are things stowed away in chests which might be sent to provincial museums.” Similarly, any items acquired by the nation from private collections that were not wanted to fill up gaps in the metropolitan collection might be sent to the provinces.
Taking a concrete instance, the Commissioners asked how he would deal with the large collection of Indian fabrics at South Kensington. Morris replied, “there are, I should think, a good many things amongst those Indian specimens which, though not perhaps actually and literally duplicates, may almost considered as duplicates, and I think there would be no harm in sending some of those things away. I think the museum might spare them.” Similarly, he noted that “there is an enormous quantity of blue pottery-ware in the Persian collection, and very fine it is, but it runs alike to a certain extent, and some of the specimens might be spared.”

Morris was also an emphatic supporter of copying important objects for provincial museums – this aspect of the Circulation Department’s work was one he approved of: “when any objects were acquired by the nation for the central museum, those objects ought, where possible, as a rule, to be copied, and the copies ought to be distributed amongst the provincial museums; in many cases they would be almost as valuable for study as the originals.” He did, however, recognise that accurate reproductions were easier to make in some media than others. In metalwork, for example, he had seen reproductions made at the museum, “and no doubt they are very good as far as they go, but they do not quite supply the place of originals as pieces of execution. Metal ware is so much a matter of execution” In such cases, a few good genuine examples, supported by drawings, might be better.

Finally, Morris asserted that such museums would not only benefit designers and workers; “certainly, I do not wish myself by any means to limit the technical education wholly to workmen and people of that sort.” The public also needed a technical education: “I think it is most desirable from my point of view, that the public should know something about it, so that you may get a market for excellence and not for appearance.” Just as Morris’s own firm, from its inception, had sought to ‘shape the market,’ so too schools of design and museums had a duty to educate the public.

The Royal Commission’s report was not particularly radical, and indeed in some respects it was distinctly complacent about British practice. In particular, it was hostile to the extension of state intervention, despite its prevalence on the Continent, arguing instead that local funds should be sought to finance a substantial increase in provision. Nevertheless, there were some highly critical comments. Samuelson’s report repeated many of the recommendations of the earlier Taunton and Devonshire Commissions, stressing “the need to improve primary and secondary education as the pre-requisite to a sound system of scientific and technical instruction,” and emphasising that there was an urgent need for a more substantial and widespread provision of technical instruction of all kinds. The report concluded by remarking that English entrepreneurs and educationalists had “yet to learn that an extended and systematic education up to and including the methods of original research is now a necessary preliminary to the fullest development of industry.”

The Royal Commission on Technical Instruction did much to publicise the cause of technical education in Britain and helped shape political opinion, paving the way for the 1889 Technical Instruction Act. This empowered local authorities to raise money for technical education. The 1890 Local Taxation (Customs and Excise) Act diverted funds (the so-called whisky money) for the same purpose. The process culminated in the Education Act of 1902, which placed all national education in the hands of county councils and county borough councils, and set up local education authorities with sub-committees for technical education.
Much of the Royal Commission’s General Report, as noted earlier, focussed upon the question of scientific education. Yet it did seek, too, to address the issues raised by Morris, such as the relationship between design and industry, the importance of practical experience, and the roles of the school of art and design – knotty problems which have remained the subject of intense debate down to the present day. The Commissioners’ conclusions and recommendations echoed many – but not all – of Morris’s arguments.

To ensure that there was a suitable foundation for higher level studies, the Commissioners accepted Morris’s plea that the rudiments of drawing should form part of everyone’s education, and recommended that drawing should be made compulsory in elementary schools along with reading, writing and arithmetic. Like Morris, too, they emphasised that “amongst the most important means of stimulating industrial art education and of spreading a knowledge and appreciation of art throughout the country, is the foundation of local museums of applied art of such a character as is best adapted to advance the industries of the districts in which they are situated ... We are of the opinion that the connection between these museums and the local schools of art should be of an intimate character.”

However, they did not agree with William Morris on the drawbacks of South Kensington’s Circulation Department. The Commissioners concluded that “we must express strong approval ... of the system of circulating amongst the local museums collections of works of art from the national collections at South Kensington.” Like Morris, however, they recognised the strength of the argument that state aid might best be applied to central institutions and their collections, while recommending that reproductions be supplied to the provincial museums gratis or at a low cost. They also recommended that “contributions be made provincial industrial museums of original examples tending to advance the industries of the districts in which such museums are situated.”

Another recommendation which resulted from a suggestion by Morris was that the Department of Science and Art should break with its principle of encouraging design per se. In future, it should pay more attention to the suitability of the design to the material in which it was to be executed, awarding grants “for specimens of applied art-workmanship in the materials themselves, as a test of the applicability of the design and as a reward for success in overcoming the technical difficulties of the manufacture.”

They welcomed this suggestion from Morris because, while the Commissioners had many positive things to say about the training available under the auspices of the Department of Science and Art, they were highly critical of the lack of attention paid to industrial design. They concluded that art teachers lacked an adequate knowledge of manufacturers, and proprietors of industrial works were unsympathetic to the work of the schools. As a result, industrial design “has not received sufficient attention in our schools and classes. In fact, there has been a great departure in this respect from the intention with which the Schools of Design were originally founded, viz., the practical application of a knowledge of ornamental Art to the improvement of manufactures. Large grants of public money for teaching art to artizans in such classes can scarcely be justified on any other ground than its industrial utility.”

One immediate result of this criticism was that the Director of the Art Division of the Department of Science and Art, Thomas Armstrong, set forth to reintroduce craft
work to the Art Training Schools. Armstrong, who was a friend of Morris, invited Walter Crane to give a series of lectures in 1886 at South Kensington. As Crane noted in his memoirs, "I undertook a series of lectures or demonstrations in various crafts allied to decorative design in which I had personal experience, such as gesso and plaster relief-work, sgraffito, tempera, painting, stencilling, designing for embroidery, repoussé metal work . . . I believe they were the first lectures of the kind at South Kensington - forerunners of the time when craft classes became part of the ordinary college course on design."

Thus Morris's views certainly were taken seriously by Samuelson and his fellow Commissioners, and they are reflected in the long and detailed General Report which resulted. Yet it is probably true to say that Morris's main influence on contemporary thought was not through official channels, but through the work of a younger generation of architects, designers and craftsmen which, from the 1880s onwards, sought to implement the principles enunciated in his lectures and confirmed by his example. The societies which they established, such as the Art Workers' Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, had clear educational goals. The Art Workers' Guild in particular was committed to public art education. Its members included Walter Crane, R. Catterton Smith and William Richard Lethaby. Crane was Director of the Manchester School of Art, later becoming the first Principal of the Royal School of Art in 1898. He never ceased to crusade on behalf of the decorative arts, design education and craft-work. R. Catterton Smith, who worked with Morris on illustrations for the Kelmscott Chaucer, went on to become headmaster of the Birmingham School of Arts and Crafts. Lethaby, as one of the motor forces behind the Technical Education Board and first Principal of the Central School of Arts and Crafts, was perhaps the most influential Morrisian standard-bearer. Morris's ideas on art, design and politics had a profound impact on the development of Lethaby's own thinking, which in turn inspired successive generations of students, including the likes of Eric Gill and Edward Johnston and many other leading twentieth-century designers.

NOTES

We are indebted to Ray Watkinson for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.


3 R. Watkinson, 'Introduction', in Morris, William Morris and the South Kensington Museum, p. 4.

4 See, for example, Morris, William Morris and the South Kensington Museum, pp. 7–15; Parry, William Morris Textiles, pp. 53–4, 64–5, 126.


Calendar and General Directory of the Science and Art Department, being a Supplement to the Thirty-Second Report (P.P. c.4254, 1884/85 XXIX), p.19.


Roscoe was the most important link between industry and the provisional colleges which were to become the new civic universities; as Sanderson has remarked, “it is quite impossible to do justice to or to exaggerate the importance of Roscoe as the new model of the English industrially orientated scientific professor, as a conceiver of the idea of a civic university serving local industry, and as a founder of modern chemical education in this country.” M. Sanderson, *The Universities and British Industry, 1850-1970* (London, 1972), p.84.

Ibid., p.7. On J.S. Mill’s views, see his *Inaugural Address delivered to the University of St. Andrews, 1 February 1867* (London, 1867).

Second Report of the Royal Commissioners on Technical Instruction (P.P. c.3981, 1884 XXXI), passim. Wardle’s report, in which he refers to ‘the steady growth of the silk industry abroad, and its unhappy decadence in England,’ is on pp.29-106.

This is an emphasis which is also reflected in the historical literature relating to technical instruction in Britain. See, for example, G.W. Roderick and M.D. Stephens, *Education and Industry in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1978); idem (eds.), *Where Did We Go Wrong? Industrial Performance, Education and the Economy in Victorian Britain* (Lewes, Sussex, 1981); Sanderson, *The Universities and British Industry*; M. Argles, *South Kensington to Robbins: An Account of English Technical and Scientific Instruction since 1851* (London, 1964). Nevertheless, these sources do provide valuable introductions to the topics considered here.


Ibid.

Ibid., p.135.

Morris’s evidence is in P.P. c.3981, 1884 XXXI, pp.150-161. All subsequent quotations come from here unless otherwise stated.

*Commonweal*, June supplement, 1885.

As always, Morris practised what he preached. Thus his textile designs, which at first were naturalistic and free-flowing, underwent a radical change in 1876 as a result of his discovery of medieval woven textiles at the South Kensington Museum. Subsequent designs, with a few exceptions, tended to be more formal and symmetrical – such as his ‘Mohair Damask’ of 1876, a design for woven wool and mohair which was based on a linen fabric believed to have been printed in the


On the Circulation Department, see B. Morris, *Inspiration for Design*, pp.56–64.

P.P. c.3981, 1884 XXXI, p.79.


P.P. c.3981, 1884 XXIX, p.525.


The following paragraphs are based upon P.P. c.3981, 1884 XXIX, pp.519–38.

