

Journal of William Morris Studies - Special Issue on Design Call for Papers

William Morris and the History, Theory and Practice of Design.

The concept of design has been subject to different interpretations and definitions overtime. A product or artefact, building, fabric, a system or process, an organisation or institution can all be 'designed'. William Morris has often been referred to as a designer but some people view him largely as a pattern maker rather than a designer. Nikolaus Pevsner argued that Morris was a pioneer of modern design although Harvey, Press and Maclean suggest that far from standing against the C19th Morris & Co was actually instrumental in shaping it. It may be interest to compare Morris's achievements and ideas with those of Christopher Dresser, Owen Jones, Charles Eastlake or entrepreneurs such as Gustav Stickley, Louis Comfort Tiffany, etc. in the USA. Morris didn't systematically theorise design although he certainly thought very deeply about art and the nature of capitalist commodity production. He was open to design ideas from the Islamic world, Japan and elsewhere. He once said that 'beauty is a marketable quality' but in 1960 Peter Floud wrote that only two Morris wallpapers were regularly being produced and the marketability of Morris's designs certainly fluctuated during the C20th. The heritage industry has stimulated interest in Morris but it might also have ghettoised or even devalued him in some ways. Morris designs now seem to symbolise off-the-peg good (commercialised) taste. Sainsbury's and Habitat are currently promoting a range of Morris-style designs - bed linens, cushions, lamps, towels, etc. There is also considerable amount of Morris kitsch. From a material culture perspective, it is likely that some Morris 'kitsch' may well be imbued with significant personal meaning by its owners. Paul Thompson noted that most Morris designs were readily compatible with machine printing and machine production may be seen as democratising Morris and the arts and crafts. Today, there is little impediment to AI and digital technology generally being adopted in contemporary craft practice. Finally, Morris was an 'environmentalist' and often serves as an inspiration to contemporary designers concerned with sustainability, resilience and the transition to more localised production.

- How did Morris's design ideas and practice compare with those of his contemporaries?
- What fields best exemplify Morris's enduring influence, or lack of influence, textiles, book design, domestic interiors,...
- How have changes in consumer taste, and academic interest, affected the assessment or appreciation of Morris?
- Why did Morris's designs, and the designs of those who worked for him, create economic and cultural value, social and personal meaning, in his time and ours?
- What do Morris artefacts mean to the purchaser/possessor?
- To what extent have Morris & Co designs, and products, been subsumed within capitalist market processes? Or, do they somehow stand outside?
- What were Morris's views on workplace and job design and does this relate to the current revival of interest in craft design and production?
- What is Morris's place in global design history?
- What has Morris to say to those involved in sustainable design?

If you have a proposal and would like to run it by the editor, John Blewitt, please send an email to journal@williammorrisociety.org

Articles should be in the region of 5-6000words. Copy deadline is 22 September 2025. Guidelines for contributors can be found at: <https://williammorrisociety.org/guidelines-for-contributors/>