

A Reviewer Reviewed

by R. S. Smith

BARBARA Dunlap's *Reviewers Reviewed*, recently reprinted by the Society, drew attention to the misunderstanding and sometimes plain misinformation often purveyed by reviewers of books on Morris or his period. A notable example not mentioned by Mrs Dunlap was Ian Fletcher's review of John Dixon Hunt's *Pre-Raphaelite Imagination* in the *New Statesman* of 10 January 1969. Morris' work receives only passing, and not very felicitous, treatment in Dixon Hunt's book, but this did not deter Mr Fletcher from placing Morris in the dock and wagging a strongly disapproving finger at him. I wrote to the *New Statesman* at the time, but as my letter was not printed I welcome the opportunity of placing Mr Fletcher's misrepresentations on record in *The Journal*. They all seem to arise from a failure to understand Peter Floud's important re-assessment of Morris' work as a designer, but whilst Floud's profound respect for

Morris underlay his reappraisal, Mr Fletcher had no such inhibition. I consider his charges in order.

1. 'Morris' models for tapestries were not infrequently precisely that decadent *settecento* he so derided, one of many contradictions in a man who contained multitudes.' This is quite simply nonsense. Morris of necessity used an *Arts et Métiers* booklet of the period to re-establish *techniques*, but there is no evidence that he used eighteenth-century *models* for his tapestries. Or was Mr Fletcher vaguely remembering the Italian cut velvet in the Victoria and Albert Museum which so considerably influenced Morris' designs for chintzes, and which dates from the *quattrocento*, three centuries before 'that decadent *settecento*'?

2. 'And as Peter Floud long ago pointed out, far from abolishing the middleman and sweated labour, Morris actually encouraged them.' Peter Floud did no such thing, of course. He was concerned with the paradox that the most influential protagonist of the handicrafts was outstandingly a designer of repetitive patterns which lent themselves especially to machine production. He incidentally pointed out that Morris had several designs printed by outside firms, mostly by Thomas Wardle of Leek, and Jeffrey & Co. of Islington. These well-known firms were thus sub-contractors, not middlemen, and no-one has ever accused them of using sweated labour. Perhaps Mr Fletcher had new evidence, or perhaps he believed that Morris used sweated labour in his own firm? Morris wore himself out attacking the system which permitted sweated labour. The claim that he 'actually encouraged' it is as false as it is deplorable.

3. 'In what sense did Morris himself practise the arts? There is Max's reassuring image of the great man humped at the loom, solacing his habit of early waking, but his habit with other arts was to try them once, and turn them over to someone else.' This again was very wide of the mark. Morris was a designer, whose practice it was to master a craft thoroughly before putting it into production. He continued to design for and to be involved in all aspects of the craftwork associated with his name as far as was humanly possible throughout his busy career. The range of his achievements is a tribute to his many-sidedness, not a criticism. Incidentally, the reference to 'Max's reassuring image of the great man (is irony intended here?) humped at the loom' is on a par with Mr Fletcher's general understanding of Morris. The cartoon in question was, of course, by Burne-Jones, and not Beerbohm.