William Morris: Art and Life

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William Morris died on October 3rd, 1896 leaving us a window into a more beautiful world. Throughout his life he labored through his creative endeavors to beautify the earth and the lives of those who dwell upon it. Through his lectures and writings he tried to convince others to do the same. Has the world become a more beautiful place in the century since his death? In many ways the past century embodies the worst fears that Morris held out for an age driven by commerce. Morris’s vision of a more beautiful world encompassed aesthetic, physical, emotional, social and economic aspects of human existence. It is mainly our material culture that has evolved with the advent of the age of technology (a great quantity of and more technology-driven goods). Though the access to possessions may have expanded, the basic structures of society and the economic policies that underlie it have gone largely unchanged. Perhaps worst of all ‘art’ has become an intellectual toy, not the uplifting element of every aspect of human endeavor that Morris strove to make it. The article that follows seeks to lay out the ideas on art put forth in the cumulative work of William Morris and show their relevance to the coming age. I will try to elucidate concepts that in today’s terms would make Morris a bio-regionalist, a ‘simple life advocate’, and a proponent of a new urbanism that would keep the scale of communities small. These are concepts that are current, perhaps at the cutting edge of community development and social theory. To Morris they amounted to no more than components of a framework for the art of living.

In envisioning a better future Morris calls for certain key elements of life for all individuals: health, education and art. Central to his views on health are physical strength, clean and beautiful surroundings, and the freedom to roam about the countryside. Though Morris despised conventional school-based education, his more rational society would provide access to the tools of handicraft and agriculture as well as libraries and museums, and adequate time to make use of them. Morris would today be seen as an advocate for home schooling, with the stipulation that children grow up in close-knit communities and have considerable social interaction with adults and other children. Most important to Morris and the most encompassing of his elements of human existence was ‘art’. To Morris there is no better term than ‘art’ for describing the aspect of human existence that makes us a unique species. His concept of art and the impact of art upon the environment are what make his ideas so relevant today. ‘Art’, in Morris’s view had two distinct definitions, somewhat analogous to what we today would term ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. Morris believed that the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art was essentially a matter of meaning. He saw the lesser artisan as striving to infuse his work with the greater meaning of the artist. ‘You may be sure that any decoration is futile . . . when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol’. What is today called ‘high’ art Morris would understand as the culmination of aesthetic experiments and
accumulated knowledge yielding a lucid, coherent, eloquent statement on the human condition. However, in Morris's view there are no lesser arts, only lesser attempts at art. It is the class distinctions implied in the terms 'high' and 'low' art that Morris would find objectionable:

... every work of a man which has beauty in it must have some meaning in it also... the mind of the man who made it... was lifted somewhat above the commonplace; that he had something to communicate to his fellows which they did not know or feel before, and which they would never have known or felt if he had not been there to force them to it.  

For Morris work and art, even society and art, are synonymous:

I must ask you to extend the word art beyond those works that are consciously works of art, to take in not only painting, and sculpture, and architecture, but the shapes and colours of all household goods, nay, even the arrangements of fields for tillage and pasture, the management of towns and of our highways of all kinds; in a word, to extend it to the aspect of all the externals of our life. For I must ask you to believe that every one of the things that goes to make up the surroundings among which we live must be either... elevating or degrading to us, either a torment and burden to the maker of it to make, or a pleasure and a solace to him.

One should not be driven to work by social forces, one should be compelled to work by an innate desire for beauty and knowledge. Society should be a construct that allows one to do so. The distance between 'high' and 'low' art (the art of everyday life) has grown steadily throughout the twentieth century. The useful art that Morris and his predecessor John Ruskin recognized as having pervaded medieval society is what he believed was being lost in the nineteenth century. He believed that it should become the foundation of the twentieth:

I mean that side of art which is, or ought to be, done by the ordinary workman while he is about his ordinary work... from the beginning of man's contest with nature till the rise of the present capitalistic system, it was alive, and generally flourished. While it lasted, everything that was made by man was adorned by man, just as everything made by nature is adorned by her. The craftsman, as he fashioned the thing under his hand, ornamented it so naturally and so entirely without conscious effort, that it is often difficult to distinguish where the mere utilitarian part of his work ended and the ornamental began. Now the origin of this art was the necessity that the workman felt for variety in his work... it stamped all labour with the impress of pleasure. All this has now quite disappeared from the work of civilization. If you wish to have ornament, you must specially pay for it, and the workman is compelled to produce ornament, as he is to produce other wares.

Instead of a Renaissance of the type of art Morris refers to above, what is recognized as art in contemporary society is the work of an elite class of artists.
Their art is driven and sustained by the economics of the so-called art world. Art movements throughout the twentieth century have shifted the focus and meaning of art. The Dadaist art movement elevated the mundane industrial item to the status of 'high' art. The Pop Art movement appropriated the commercial or advertising artifact for the art world. Art became an obscure concept unintelligible to the uninitiated called 'significant form' during the reign of Abstract Expressionism. More recently 'high' art was embodied in a mere concept and need take no actual form for practitioners of Conceptual Art. Rarely is art recognized as a fundamental part of every human life. In many public schools in the United States, programs in the arts and the related handicrafts have been removed from school curricula or downsized. However, at the close of the century there is something of a stir in the art world to rediscover craft and a quest for meaning in ‘outsider’ art. The term ‘outsider’ is used to note the distinction between the elite class of ‘high’ artists and art made by art therapy/psychiatric patients or working-class self-taught artists:

... in all times when the arts were in a healthy condition there was an intimate connection between the two kinds of art... The highest intellectual art was meant to please the eye... as well as excite the emotions and train the intellect. It appealed to all men, and to all the faculties of a man. On the other hand, the humblest of the ornamental art shared in the meaning and emotion of the intellectual... the best artist was a workman still, the humblest workman was an artist.5

The distance between the workman and the design of the thing being fashioned under his hand has grown with the burgeoning of the industrial system. Occupations such as Art Director, Creative Director, Industrial Designer, Stylist, etc. having virtually eliminated the need for craftsmanship in the industrial worker. Computer-aided manufacturing has further eroded the need for craft, as even highly skilled tool and die-makers become obsolete. Morris and certain of his contemporaries noted the toll that the factory system had taken of the working class, not only through exploitation but also by artistic and emotional deprivation:

The wonderful machines that in the hands of just and foreseeing men would have been used to minimize repulsive labour and to give pleasure... to the human race, have been used so on the contrary... they have, instead of lightening the labour of our workmen, intensified it...6

The economic system and class structure that predominated in Morris's day continue largely unabated today. For a child laboring in the carpet industry of the Near East and for other children laboring in Asian factories, the glory of the machine age must have a hollow ring. The work of laborers in industrialized countries is exported to nations with low wages, few safety standards and poor working conditions. The workers left behind are pushed into standardized service sector careers with no element of creativity in their work. The art and craft of making a rug or a shoe are the purview of a rug designer or a shoe stylist. These professional 'creatives' are removed by class and privilege from the work involved in the daily production of rugs or shoes.
In his fiction as well as his essays, Morris called for a return to a simpler way of life. This is made quite clear in his utopian novel News from Nowhere. The quest for simplicity in daily life and the relationship of the individual to his or her work is seen by many of Morris's critics as a romantic view of the medieval era. But it is not Feudalism and its hierarchy that Morris exalted, rather it was the infusion of everyday life with craft and nature:

Unless something or other is done to give all men some pleasure for their eyes and rest for the mind in the aspect of their own and their neighbours' houses, until the contrast is less disgraceful between the fields where the beasts live and the streets where men live, I suppose that the practice of the arts must be mainly kept in the hands of a few highly cultivated men, who can go often to beautiful places, whose education enables them, in the contemplation of the past glories of the world, to shut from their view the everyday squalors that the most of men move in . . . I protest that it would be a shame to an honest artist to enjoy what he had huddled up to himself of such art, as it would be for a rich man to sit and eat dainty food amongst starving soldiers in a beleaguered fort.

In Morris's view a just society would not have class distinctions or a system of currency. Trade would be based on need, not a mercantile system. Communities would be designed to be largely self-sustaining, producing their own agricultural and household goods. Markets would be centers for barter or a place to dispense surplus production or simply to display and share one's skill at a given trade. The makers of rugs or shoes would be different from the professional 'creatives' described above because each rug or shoe made would be both designed by and crafted, or at least partially crafted, by an artisan. The process of crafting items would in turn influence the design of them, so that being a rug- or shoe-maker would be a life-long journey of creative endeavor. Morris had studied the guild system of the Middle Ages and a Morrisian society would have similar methods of regulating trade. Tradesmen would take on apprentices and journeymen as well as collectively set standards and practices for a given craft. The civilization envisioned by Morris is composed of small agriculture and craft-based communities that are designed to have the most delicate relationship with the natural world. What makes contemporary civilization so devoid of 'art' is the enormous scale of our industries and the waste of energy and materials inherent in mass production. Millions of 'imperfect' or 'obsolete' items are discarded as unmarketable by modern industry. The tailoring of objects to individual needs or preferences is not really possible in a mass production system. The average person must accept what is designed for the mass-market consumer and suffer the likelihood of built-in obsolescence.

It is precisely the small scale suggested by Morris that makes the society he envisions a model for contemporary community development and social planning. It is the huge scale of contemporary agriculture that causes the need for petroleum-based fertilizers and insecticides. It is the large scale of contemporary cities that causes sewage treatment and landfill problems. What Morris sought to address in News from Nowhere is the 'art' of social planning or environmental design. These areas have been addressed from primarily an engineering point of view throughout
the twentieth century and it is the art of living in harmony with nature that we must turn our eyes to in the coming age:

I want neither towns to be appendages of the country, nor the country of the town; I want the town to be impregnated with the beauty of the country, and the country with the intelligence and vivid life of the town. I want every homestead to be clean, orderly, and tidy; a lovely house surrounded by acres and acres of garden. On the other hand, I want the town to be clean, orderly, and tidy; in short, a garden with beautiful houses in it. Clearly, if I don't wish this, I am either a fool or a dullard; but I do more . . . I claim it as the due heritage of the latter ages of the world which have subdued nature, and can have for the asking.9

It is clear from the model of life that Morris portrays in his writings that the stabilization of human population levels would be necessary to create the society he envisions. The experience of developed nations suggests that the sexually and socially independent role of women portrayed in Morris's writings, if universally adopted, would bring about the stabilization of population growth.

Morris, reflecting on the history of mankind, describes how the neglect of the art of social planning has affected the earth:

No one of you can fail to know what neglect of Art has done to this great treasure of mankind: the Earth, which was beautiful before man lived on it, which, for many ages grew in beauty as men grew in numbers and power, is now growing, uglier day by day, and there the swiftest where civilization is the mightiest . . .10

Here Morris shows his affinities with what is today the environmental movement. In the late twentieth century the sprawl of asphalt, impermanent architecture and landfill composed of the refuse of planned obsolescences are sure signs of the neglect of the art to which Morris referred. Perhaps the most compelling example of the contrast between what Morris envisioned for the future and the reality we confront is the state of the Thames river. In *News from Nowhere* the river has a park like shoreline on either bank. The waterway itself is used as a pleasant means of transportation and exercise, powered vessels are reserved for only the heaviest loads. All efforts are made to keep the waterway clean and vital from the Oxfordshire stream to the ocean's edge. The Thames as well as the Danube, Hudson, Rhine, Seine, Tiber and the rivers of other industrialized nations at the start of the nineteenth century were full of aquatic life and utilized as a source of food. These rivers today are in striking contrast to the waterway in *News from Nowhere*. All of the rivers listed above are today hemmed in with concrete and asphalt in their urban sections. They have been exploited and polluted as an industrial resource. All have come close to the complete destruction of aquatic life. The same process of environmental degradation continues largely unabated in nations with urban centers that are 'modernizing', or 'developing' today. Morris saw clearly the problems caused by the onslaught of the industrial age and called for a more rational, planned, environmentally benign society:
To keep the air pure and the rivers clean, to take some pains to keep the meadows and tillage as pleasant as reasonable use will allow them to be; to allow peaceable citizens freedom to wander where they will, so they do no hurt to garden or cornfield; nay, even to leave here and there some piece of waste or mountain sacredly free from fence or tillage as a memory of man’s ruder struggles with nature in his earlier days: is it too much to ask civilization to be so far thoughtful of man’s pleasure and rest, and to help so far as this her children to whom she has most often set such heavy tasks of grinding labour? Surely not an unreasonable asking. But not a whit of it shall we get under the present system of society. That loss of the instinct for beauty which has involved us in the loss of popular art is also busy in depriving us of the only compensation possible for that loss, by surely and not slowly destroying the beauty of the very face of the earth.11

Once again Morris shows us his prescience by calling for the creation of nature reserves and public footpaths. He goes on to point out that the scientific and monetary costs of war could best be put to use toward solving the most daunting of society’s problems:

As to its being impossible, I do not believe it. The men of this generation even have accomplished matters that but a very little while ago would have been thought impossible. They conquered their difficulties because their faces were set in that direction; and what was done once can be done again. Why even the money and the science that we expend in devices for killing and maiming our enemies present and future would make a good nest-egg towards the promotion of decency of life if we could make-up our minds to that tremendous sacrifice.12

The costs of military aircraft, armaments, vehicles and vessels are at the expense of useful and needed civilian projects. The real dividend of the military industrial complex is the loss of human life. One needs only to compare the bloodiest wars of the nineteenth century, the Napoleonic wars, with a death toll of approximately three million lives, to the forty to fifty million dead during the Second World War. More recently, American President Ronald Reagan spent the astronomical figure of two thousand billion dollars on Cold War armaments. The realization that this was done in a nation with the highest infant mortality rate in the industrialized world points up the social implications of Morris’s suggestion. Not until the time of Buckminster Fuller did another prominent designer suggest that the effort used in the creation of weaponry be put to the creation of ‘livingry’.

Morris’s legacy is a clarion call to reform society, to insure that the future of mankind will be one of peaceful association, natural beauty and art in all its manifestations:

Civilization . . . has let one wrong and tyranny grow and swell into this, that a few have no work to do, and are therefore unhappy, the many have degrading work to do, and are therefore unhappy . . . Of all our countries ours is . . . the most masterful, the most remorseless, in pushing forward this blind civilization . . . the remedy is to be found in the simplification of life, and the
curbing of luxury and the desires for tyranny and mastery that it gives birth to...\(^\text{13}\)

The center of world power has shifted from Great Britain to the United States, and may soon pass to the Asian Pacific nations. The basis of modern civilization remains unchanged, however, and industrial development continues to be foisted upon developing nations as the paragon of social structure.

I had thought that civilization meant the attainment of peace and order and freedom, of goodwill between man and man, of the love of truth and the hatred of injustice... a life free from craven fear, but full of incident: that was what I thought it meant, not more stuffed chairs and more cushions, and more carpets and gas, and more dainty meat and drink— and therewithal more and sharper differences between class and class.\(^\text{14}\)

I can see no better statement on the twentieth century, its promise and its failure than a statement made by Morris himself on the nineteenth century. The freshness of the words that follow point out that the twentieth century was an extension of the flaws of the nineteenth century in regards to commerce, economics, and social planning. In the passage below Morris could have been describing the abolition of slavery, the civil-rights movement, the antiwar activism of the 1960s and the environmental damage the world has begun to address. He was, however, writing of an earlier age:

The century that is now beginning to draw to an end, if people were to take to nicknaming centuries, it would be called the Century of Commerce; and I do not think I undervalue the work that it has done: it has broken down many a prejudice and taught many a lesson that the world has been hitherto slow to learn: it has made it possible for many a man to live free, who would in other times have been a slave, body or soul, or both: if it has not quite spread peace and justice through the world, as at the end of its first half we fondly hoped it would, it has at least stirred up in many fresh cravings for peace and justice: its work has been good and plenteous, but much of it was roughly done, as needs was; recklessness has commonly gone with its energy, blindness too often with its haste: so that perhaps it may be work enough for the next century to repair the blunders of that recklessness, to clear away the rubbish which that hurried work has piled up. ...\(^\text{15}\)

Over one hundred years have passed since William Morris put his ideas to paper yet they remain lucid and timely. They amount to a sound framework upon which contemporary society could be based. Perhaps a future generation will be able to look back upon our time like the character Hammond in *News from Nowhere*, astonished at the ignorance of the ages that preceded them.
NOTES

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2 ibid., XXII, pp. 179–180.
3 ibid., XXIII, pp. 164–165.
4 ibid., XXIII, pp. 113–114.
5 ibid., XXIII, p. 166.
6 ibid., XXIII, p. 193.
8 ibid., XXII, p. 25.
11 ibid., XXIII, p. 170.
12 ibid., XXII, p. 173.
14 The Collected Works of William Morris, op. cit., XXII, pp. 75–76.
15 ibid., XXII, p. 61.