Morris loved the past, and understood it, but he never made the mistake of trying to return to it. He looked back to the Middle Ages for an integration of taste, style, and social purpose, but he was no mere revivalist. His critical examination of the past enabled him to criticise his own time by standing in the pre-capitalist sphere of the Middle Ages and observing his society from a new position. It is on this notion of the past, to medievalism, as it is manifested in Morris, that I wish, for the most part, to concentrate in this article. I want to observe how medievalism helped Morris along the line of transforming artistic concern about architecture and design into a complex view of aesthetics related to social and political action.

Morris was always learning, always deepening his understanding of the world. It could be said that at each stage his present was the fulfilment of his past: his life and work represent an unbroken whole — from his early romantic days to the socialist beliefs of his maturity. He has learned to regard art, in the widest sense, not as a special activity but as an essential part of the entire life of man. Art was anything made by individuals and groups who were free and who found pleasure in their work — anything made with joy and not under compulsion. Such a view led, inevitably, to a critique of existing society. In accordance with principles shared with Ruskin, Morris insisted that all those who executed the work should be given opportunity to employ
their own creative abilities. While deeply concerned about the quality of the art products, Morris was equally interested in the way in which these products were made, and in the people who made them. He took the decisive step, based on Ruskin’s ideas, to demonstrate that the quality of design is closely connected with the moral and intellectual attitude of the designer and the maker, and with the social organisation that conditions their relationship.

In his lectures, Morris was moved by his growing understanding of the movement of history. In truth, he was less concerned with a close observation and criticism of the arts than with a synthetic view of life itself — the art of living — as seen in the perspective of history. This is art in the Ruskinian sense which Morris developed in more comprehensive ways; art revealed by the evidence of the organisation and the variety of life — past, present and future; not a mere incidental thing which human beings can do without, “but the necessary and indispensable instrument of human happiness”. In his first public lecture, Morris sets out the thesis that art is something involved with life at every point, with all the moments of living:

... I have not undertaken to talk to you of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting, in the narrower sense of those words ... Our subject is that great body of art, by means of which men have at all times more or less striven to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life: a wide subject, a great industry; both a great part of the history of the world, and a most helpful instrument to the study of that history.

In Morris’s view, the effort to educate is essential; it will create new needs which, in turn, will create a new art. But this educative effort will only reach its full meaning in a new society, where this newly created art will define a quality of living which indeed, it was the whole purpose of social and political change to make possible:

... how ... can you really educate men who lead the life of machines, who only think for a few hours during which they are not at work, who in short spend almost their whole lives in doing work which is not proper for developing them body and mind in
some worthy way? You cannot educate, you cannot civilise men, unless you can give them a share in art. Yes, and it is hard indeed as things go to give most men that share; for they do not miss it, or ask for it, and it is impossible as things are that they should either miss or ask for it. Nevertheless, everything has a beginning...

When Morris attempted to rouse public opinion against mid-Victorian ugliness and philistinism, he largely followed the most important elements in social thinking of the nineteenth century. Trying to revive a genuine spirit of craftsmanship and its relationship to architecture and the decorative arts, he understood, as Pugin had done, that the vitality had gone from everyday design because those who designed things no longer made them. Like Ruskin, he understood that labour must be *creative* labour, bringing together the moral and intellectual — and not merely mechanical and physical — powers of the craftsman. In his maturity, however, Morris helped to elevate this understanding to a new plane; he helped to transform the horror at the results of industrial production — a horror widespread among intellectuals of the nineteenth century — from negative into positive channels. The conviction that the art of a period can be used to judge the quality of the society that was producing it led him to a direct contrast between medieval and nineteenth-century society. The rejection of the artistic consequences of industrial capitalism led to the rejection of the system itself as harmful to social as well as aesthetic values, which he, in any case, saw as inseparable. This extension from an artistic to a social and moral judgement spread the dominant aspects of medievalism far beyond the spheres of romance and mere escape, filled with nostalgia and a vain longing for values which capitalism had rejected and destroyed.

While Morris may occasionally have fallen into the fault of sentimentality towards medieval themes and settings, the essence of his own love of the communal and craft elements in medieval life lay in this concern with the very process and the manner of work. Within the prevailing romantic disposition to impose a superficial style based on copying interesting medieval features and forms, Morris was trying to understand the true nature of
the medieval builder and craftsman; he was attempting to see beyond the limiting aspects and to comprehend their relationship to their society and tradition. This endeavour enabled Morris gradually to crystallise and express some of his most significant ideas:

... a man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body. Memory and imagination help him as he works. Not only his own thoughts, but the thoughts of the men of past ages guide his hands; and, as a part of the human race, he creates. If we work thus we shall be men, and our days will be happy and eventful. Thus worthy work carries with it the hope of pleasure in rest, the hope of the pleasure in our using what it makes, and the hope of pleasure in our daily creative skill. All other work but this is worthless ....

Observing the medieval world as the time when, through the act of self-realisation in labour, man achieved his identity and humanity, Morris was inclined to see a kind of total contrast between the capitalist present and its division of labour and the medieval past and its integrated craft. The medieval system of handiwork used the whole of a man for the production of a piece of goods, and not small portions of many men; it developed the workman’s whole intelligence according to his capacity, instead of concentrating his energy on one-sided dealing with a trifling piece of work. It was this system, which had not learned the lesson that man was made for commerce, but supposed in its simplicity that commerce was made for man, which produced the art of the Middle Ages, wherein the harmonious co-operation of free intelligence was carried to the furthest point which has yet been attained, and which alone of all art can claim to be called Free.

Medieval bonds were personal rights and personal duties and not the impersonal bonds of the commercial market. In this climate, shaped by a co-operative ethic, the labour of the builder and craftsman was a source of personal interest and pleasure, and its product was fitting and beautiful.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to declare that Morris’s vision of the Middle Ages — his medievalism — was inspired by
a constant and systematic idealisation. Despite his affection and enthusiasm, he knew perfectly well that there had been exploitation of an evil kind in medieval as well as in nineteenth-century capitalist society. He did not hesitate to recognise that the climate of the Middle Ages did not resemble paradise.

Writing about the “rough side of the Middle Ages”, he pointed out that

the shortcomings of the life of the Middle Ages resolve themselves in the main, firstly, to the rudeness of life and absence of material comforts; secondly, to the element of oppression and violence in which men lived; and thirdly, to the ignorance and superstition which veiled so much of our truth from their minds.

In its developed stage, Morris’s medievalism was based upon a thorough study of the Middle Ages and, most importantly, upon a striking sense of history. On the basis of this understanding of history developed a remarkable complexity and intricacy of thought: though convinced that the system, crowned by the industrial revolution destroyed both the attractiveness of labour for the craftsman and the beauty of the product, Morris did not deny the qualities of the new age, nor the progress it had initiated:

... amidst all the ugliness and confusion which it brought with it, it was a necessary instrument for the development of freedom of thought and the capacities of man ... This Great Change ... was necessary and inevitable, and on this side, the side of commerce and commercial science and politics, was a genuine new birth. On this side it did not look backward but forward ...

Fundamental to Morris’s outlook was his view that the new system marked a decisive turning-point in history: the Renaissance presented itself to Morris as the line of separation, being at one and the same time a period of blossoming of individual genius from the tradition of the past, and the beginning of the disintegration of that tradition in the arts. His belief in the infinite importance of the arts assured him that they must be made again the possession of common people, and that common people must be presented with, or if necessary must take for themselves, the means of expressing their creative abilities and desires in their daily work.
Morris’s belief that the art had again to become the overmastering element of labour brought him against the machine-system of production. He wanted people to enjoy, as he enjoyed, creating things; to have the opportunity of making beautiful things, and by making them to learn to identify and value beauty. He realised that this opportunity had been widely destroyed by the industrial system of production which turned the process of work into a dead monotony of tedious routine. It is of considerable importance to note, however, that Morris was not in any way hostile to machines as such; he was hostile only to the way in which they were used in an alienated environment. He realised that machines could be used when the nature of the product made them necessary or where the elimination of the unpleasant and repetitive aspects of work was desirable.

When we emphasise, in Morris, the rejection of the machine-system of production, we are, to a large extent, trying to rationalise an agitation generated by the scale and the intrinsic nature of his social and aesthetic criticism. Morris wanted the abolition of the capitalist system, and the establishment of socialism, so that people could decide for themselves how their lives, their work, and the use of machinery should be arranged. It was the system of production and social relations, rather than machines as such, which had to be censured:

... I am forced to speak from the way we live to the way we might live ... I know that to some cultivated people, people of the artistic turn of mind, machinery is particularly distasteful, and they will be apt to say you will never get your surroundings pleasant so long as you are surrounded by machinery. I don't quite admit that; it is the allowing machines to be our masters and not our servants that so injures the beauty of life nowadays. In other words, it is the token of the terrible crime we have fallen into of using our control of the powers of Nature for the purpose of enslaving people, we care less meantime of how much happiness we rob their lives of.

Morris’s study of the centuries gone by was pursued less in terms of that past than in those of the future. For the reason that his eyes were turned towards the future as much as towards the past, his critical consideration of the Middle Ages was
certainly not aimless; he was seeking what he needed to find: positive aspects worthy of inspiring his vision of the future. Writing about the importance of the Middle Ages, Morris declared:

... it must be understood that we do not stand forward as apologists for them except in relation to modern times.

The social structure of the Middle Ages was not possible or desirable in the capitalist nineteenth century, any more than the forms of medieval art could be restored or simply imitated in the conditions of modern life. Morris occasionally took a firm stand against the Gothic revival and the 'restorers' who, in his words,

"think that any clever architect to-day can deal off-hand successfully with the ancient work; that while all things else have changed about us since (say) the thirteenth century, art has not changed, and that our workmen can turn out work identical with that of the thirteenth century ... ."

Morris's medievalism was not a romantic, past-seeking and nostalgic medievalism, but the basic inspiring material for a positive social and aesthetic criticism. As his love and enthusiasm for art became blended with an awareness of social and political realities, past and future mixed together in his thought in an ever more intimate and meaningful way. The escapist and arbitrary medievalism of Morris's Pre-Raphaelite phase was followed by the more defined medievalism of the work related to experimenting and managing in the sphere of the decorative arts, and after that by the militant medievalism of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. From then on, Morris's medievalism, incorporated in his social and aesthetic outlook, was no longer an end itself. It was no longer in relation to the present, but in relation to the future that he looked to medieval values and the spirit of earlier centuries.

I love art, and I love history; but it is living art and living history that I love. If we have no hope for the future, I do not see how we can look back on the past with pleasure ... It is in the interest of living art and living history that I oppose so-called restoration.

As we have pointed out, Morris did not observe the Middle Ages as a golden period; he recognised the 'rough side of the
Middle Ages”, their inadequacies and defects; but when he looked at history he saw the values of the medieval period as the only possible historical inspiration. Moreover, this choice was defined, not by romantic love of the picturesque or nostalgic sentimentality, but by an examination of social, ethical and aesthetic aspects, based on a highly developed sense of the continuity of history. Morris’s medievalism, as well as his historical and aesthetic thinking, developed into a higher, dialectical, concept; the idea which is at the heart of his historical, critical, utopian, and aesthetic thought defined the very movement of history as a sequence of ever-changing contradictory events: nothing can remain still and it inevitably directs us towards the search for new questions and changes:

The hopes for the social life of the future are involved in its struggles in the past; which indeed, since they have built up the present system, and created us out of its conflict towards fresh change, have really forced us, whether we will it or not, into our present position of seeking still further change.

That Morris saw labour without pleasure as a curse was not a pathetic sophism of the artist, but a clear vision of the truth. Nevertheless, I do not suggest that Morris prescribed clearly and authoritatively how to bring pleasure, joy and creative purpose into the life and work of the majority of people. He shows considerable sagacity and caution in refraining from dogmatically anticipating the art forms of the future; he prefers to leave the whole sphere open to human imagination and inventiveness, suggesting that the observation of the past ought to provide a framework which is possible, but by no means imperative and binding:

... the Aim of Art is to increase the happiness of men, by giving them beauty and interest of incident to amuse their leisure, and prevent them wearying even of rest, and by giving them hope and bodily pleasure in their work; or, shortly, to make man’s work happy and his rest fruitful ... But ... art is and must be, either in its abundance or its bareness, in its sincerity or its hollowness, the expression of the society amongst which it exists.

While he believed that the art of the future would reflect the best aspects of medieval tradition, Morris never claimed that the future context of life would be a direct reproduction of
the style prevailing in the Middle Ages. In his view, the key to the problem of aesthetic creation lies not in deciding what the art forms of the future will be, a development whose outcome is obscure, but in the sense of history and in the historical inspiration of the art of the future which will be adapted to and shaped by the way of life, the needs and the desires of the new age.

The source of Morris's greatness lies not in any single contribution, not in one field only, be it his work in the decorative arts, his activity as a political organiser, or his aesthetic and social theories; Morris's claim to greatness must be based on the qualities which enabled him to integrate his aesthetic, moral, social, and political thought and action — to unite every aspect of his life and work. I think Morris is alive because of the practical moral example of his life and his immediate, natural response to his social and physical environment. As a genuine creative artist, he felt the surrounding world directly, drawing together the most vital elements and giving them new force and significance. Thoroughly aware of the quality of man's life in the past, particularly in the medieval period, reacting powerfully on the situation generated by the growth of industrial capitalism, Morris threw a rich and heartening light into the human future. His concept of work and life, based on natural clarity and a taste for simplicity, which by no means excluded artistic richness and creativity, provided his revolutionary fervour. His deeply cultured mind, his temperament and the stature of his personality created a powerful and imaginative vision of the future which played such an important part in his approach to the Middle Ages.