Morris, it will surprise nobody to learn, held professional art critics in low esteem. He thought most of them were toadies, forced to pander alike to the taste of editors, public, and art market. Rare was the critic capable of independent judgement, and the sort of perceptive and sympathetic insight which can bring a painting, an exhibition, alive for the reader; the generality settled for an easy life, knowing which artists to praise, and in what terms, and tending to ignore the difficult or the controversial. Above all, as Morris had discovered, the British art critic has a particular aversion to ideas.

Morris first brushed with a critic in 1856 when, responding to a hostile review of Modern Painters (Vol. 3) published that year, he sprang to Ruskin’s defence in the June issue of the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. The issue was a crucial one for Morris, involving two contrasting views of art. Ruskin had contended that paintings must have meaning; that an artist’s work however competent or beautiful has to be judged primarily on its intellectual and imaginative content, a view which the anonymous reviewer of The Quarterly had taken some pains to demolish. Morris wrote: ‘Judiciously has the reviewer (asserted) ... that the function of art is not to express thought but to make pretty things, for herein lies the whole quarrel between Ruskin and the pedants who have opposed him.’ Morris also took exception to the critic’s tone: ‘I wish he were not so unfair, so bitter. It is a miserable thing to read, an unkind, spiteful review, though more miserable to write, if one only knew it.’ By 1884, Morris had grown more robust. Reviewing that year’s Academy Summer show (as A Rare Visitor) he made reference to ‘that body of unfortunates, forced to frequent exhibitions and studios without caring for the pictures and often without looking at them’, a body ‘bound to make the best of a bad job whatever happens ... for the general opinion is that the fine arts are in a flourishing and progressive condition, and this impression they are bound to share’.
I have been looking through about forty reviews of the William Morris Today Exhibition at the ICA, an exercise simultaneously intriguing and depressing. Of course, the modern context of art criticism differs in some ways from that of the 1880s. Today’s critic addresses a smaller but much more sophisticated art-going public. The range of art covered is more diverse, the venues more numerous. The umbrella of state patronage and the existence of a world-wide ‘art industry’ are important factors. Yet the critic’s role hasn’t essentially altered. He must still toe the editorial line of his paper and promote the establishment’s ideology of art. Of this ideology, the primary cultural form, then as now, is the gallery exhibition.

We who worked to make the exhibition at the ICA would all have welcomed constructive criticism: nor would any of us deny that in some things our presentation of Morris—though not the conception—was flawed. But I suggest that the remarkable hostility it aroused in the press stemmed from our flouting accepted conventions—formal and ideological—within an establishment context. We presented Morris in an unacceptable way.

What, in fact, was an exhibition about William Morris doing at the ICA—according to some, the very citadel of ‘élitism and trendiness’? The answer has to do with the genesis of the exhibition and its eventual form. Back in the later 1970s, when Sandy Nairne and I were curators in the Tate’s Modern Collection, the debate about visual art and its relation to the wider culture was in full swing (popular v. fine, figurative v. abstract, art v. craft). It was the era of bricks, nappies, and a discredited modernism. Coming at that time almost accidentally on Morris, I was struck by the extraordinary force of his cultural analysis and the questions it compelled one to ask. Why, for instance, did the Tate’s hierarchy of media exclude all those lesser arts from the collection? Who decided, and on what criteria, which available works of art should be acquired for posterity? Why, in displays, did chronology with its narrow emphasis on developments in style and iconography take precedence over all other modes, and by the same token, why was art invariably isolated from its social context? This was just a beginning.

Similar disquiets, aroused over the years by the shunting of Morris into an irrelevant Arts and Crafts siding on one hand, and the bland claiming of him for the Modern Movement on the other, had set Ian Tod, practising as an architect in Leeds, writing to urge that the 150th anniversary of Morris’s birth ought to be used to rescue him from these alternative confusions and present him as the real and revolutionary
figure he was in life. All active members of the William Morris Society, this common concern drew us together in 1980.

By that year, Sandy Nairne was in charge of exhibitions at the ICA, and persuaded his colleagues that Morris was a fitting subject for an exhibition there, with the 150th anniversary in the offing. This was an imaginative, even a courageous decision on their part (though not without its own ironies) and the ICA gave us complete support thereafter. At the beginning, a much more ambitious project was mooted, involving a joint celebration with the Whitechapel Art Gallery, where a ‘life, work and influences survey’ would have been mounted, with a complementary ‘ideas’ show at the ICA. This formed the basis of our first proposal document. In the event, the Whitechapel had to be closed throughout 1984, leaving us to reconsider the possibilities but bearing in mind that no London gallery had ever attempted an exhibition showing Morris ‘in the round’. This of course is scarcely surprising. Morris has never been acceptable to the academic art establishment which dominates the Arts Council sponsorship. Politics apart, his painted œuvre is considered too insignificant to rate, and unlike, say Burne-Jones, he cannot easily be assimilated to Pre-Raphaelit- or any other ‘ism’. Culturally Morris was long ago consigned to the academic limbo of handicrafts and interior decoration, though Pevsner partially ‘rescued’ him for scholarship by making him a pioneer of modern design. Even in this capacity, Morris has not rated one serious exhibition. The ICA’s invitation to Ian Tod, Ray Watkinson and myself provided, therefore, a unique opportunity not only to explore many aspects of Morris’s thought, but to make a case for the inseparability of art, culture and politics in the heart of the London artworld. Further, it assured us a new, and predominantly young audience.

The challenge was formidable. Politically, Labour was at a low ebb, especially following the Falklands War. Yet has there been, will there ever be a ‘right’ time to show Morris’s radical alternative vision of society? We felt that in any re-appraisal of socialism’s goals and strategies, the voice of Morris should be heard. It was agreed that a didactic show was necessary, one based on Morris’s own writings, and set off as far as possible by a lively imaginative presentation. We wanted a New Look exhibition, active in its emphasis, and not an exhibition about artefacts however beautiful in themselves or potent in their associations. Morris hated academicism, and our aims, in summary, were to inform, to evoke and to provoke in about equal measure.

Work started, on the basic chronology-cum-themes format, in January 1983. The task proved formidably complex, the detailed scheme only
emerging slowly after many hours of discussion during which we tried to distil the essentials of Morris’s thought and, having done so, to find precise visual realisations. This generated considerable research, and we were all doing other jobs in different parts of the country!

More important was money. We started on the basis of the very small ICA exhibition budget, and for much of the year the project was hampered by lack of funds. As ideas developed, it became urgent to commission material and installations which had to be paid for: yet not until the late summer was our first grant, from the Eva Reckitt Trust, followed by major funding from the GLC and John Lewis Partnership: too late, unfortunately, to obtain some crucial items—a cartoon realisation of A Factory as it Might Be, for example, to set the keynote for the Work section: and a witty miniature survey of 20th century art styles which might have linked fashion and high commerce more subtly and effectively. Lastly there was the frustration of the Tate’s inability to lend—because of their own exhibition—any suitable Pre-Raphaelite works (including the ‘Belle Iseult’, Morris’s only surviving easel painting), and the V & A’s refusal of the Saint George Cabinet. On the other hand, the Frith ‘Royal Academy’, rarely seen, proved a real winner, and as time went on we received great help from many people.

All in all, if we fell short of our ambitions, we still achieved a fine exhibition, which said what we meant it to say. The last days were hectic, and the show was still being put up as the critics, pens poised, arrived—to demolish it!

Some criticism was certainly justified. The show was rather too dense and could have been more evenly paced. I found that the introductory texts and captions were often too small for ease of reading, and overall there was too much to read. In places too the layout was confusing. But surely there were enormous plusses—from the ambitious overall conception to the many imaginative details which illuminated it. For those willing to spend a little time and effort—as few critics were but as hundreds of young people did—there was a lot on offer.

The art press, in lieu of constructive criticism, indulged in a veritable orgy of prejudice. For many it was a dislike of ‘socialism’—a blanket term of abuse. Roger Scruton of The Times found ‘insulting and half-baked criticism’ and ‘semi-literate abuse’ on the walls. Careless of the implied critique of all modern ‘politics’ he tried to score points by citing the abysmal pollution record of industry in Eastern Europe. So too, in a vintage edition of Radio 4’s Critics’ Forum, Brian Magee denounced Morris as ‘a socialist of the most naive and unreconstructed kind, with
nothing at all to say to us today'; while the liberal Guardian's Waldemar Janszczak dismissed Morris as 'a Pre-Raphaelite dreamer, preaching a brand of escapist fantasy'. Nor were the organs of the Left—at whom indeed this exhibition was partly aimed—any more perceptive. The New Statesman, for instance (John Spurling) dismissed it in two lines. 'Disappointing', he wrote, and 'more of a sermon than a visual experience', while the leftish Art Monthly critic, Peter Smith, accused the organisers of 'political quietism'. Why, he wanted to know, hadn't we urged visitors to join one of the Parties? None of them, incidentally, took the trouble to describe what was there to be seen.

The best and most thoughtful review, because based on motives in the exhibition itself, came from Gavin Stamp in the Spectator. Confirming that 'another exhibition of wallpapers and fabrics would have been intolerable', he felt that this 'often annoying and unorthodox exhibition does succeed in being a tribute to the sheer bigness and diversity of Morris'. He approved of the attempt to link past and present. Morris was a major and continuing influence in the fields of environmental conservation and ecology, and lay behind the current revival of interest in architectural decoration. His influence on modern socialism had however been negligible. If the Thatcherites reminded him of Morris's description of the Burghers of Bournemouth ('ignorant, purse-proud digesting machines'), Labour had failed to pursue Morris's great ideals—most notably in the area of work and industrial production. And the realisation of Utopia contained built-in moral conflicts. Was nuclear power (pollution and conflict-free) the answer?

But let me return to the artworld context of the exhibition and the cultural expectations that were disappointed. The loudest complaint was about the lack of original art. It is true that for the reasons given earlier, Morris artefacts and original paintings were not numerous. But, had they looked, it was there, in the patterns and not less in Morris's literary art, in the many quotations and in the recorded poetry in the Palace of Art. The Golden type, designed by Morris, was strongly in evidence. And considerable 'art' had gone into many of the installations. Ignoring this, Art Monthly found the Morris imagery 'of poor quality', while Scruton (op. cit.) was furious at the price demanded for 'every life giving glimpse of Morris wallpaper'. Emmanuel Cooper of Tribune was relieved to discover that 'the few original art works included still burst with life ... the painted designs of flowers and plants for fabrics demonstrate the skills and imagination involved as no reproduction could'. (Well, that was the point of The Activity of Art.) As for Nicholas Shrimpton, writing in the TLS, we were wasting our time by abstracting
Morris’s ‘not very original or interesting ideas’ from practical demonstrations of his art. What would have been interesting would have been an art-historical investigation into how many of Morris’s ‘original’ designs were in fact by Dearle or May Morris! Art apart, it was the form of the exhibition which annoyed most critics. Didacticism was attacked generally, but at least Bill Packer of the Financial Times took pains to spell out for his readers what kind of exhibition it was: ‘an exhibition of ideas rather than “art”’. As he acknowledged, this kind of exhibition can be a powerful influence in an artworld context, and he went on to identify Morris’s position vis-à-vis the artworld. Morris’s ‘dislike and distrust of the fine arts, so narrow and special in their appeal’ stemmed, he said, from the fact that Morris was a failed and thus frustrated artist. He had therefore ‘embraced the élitist critique of art, which is potent, wrongheaded and damaging still’. In this arena there was one sign of second thoughts: Waldemar Januszcak, in the edition of Critics’ Forum mentioned earlier, emphasised for the first time that the ICA exhibition was trying to break new ground in finding visual ways to express ideas. ‘I admire them for it’ he admitted.

But the most potent line of attack stemmed from Peter Fuller, whose catalogue article was plagiarised by several critics. Fuller supplies the neatest possible answer to the problem of Morris’s unpopular socialism by returning ‘radicalism’ to the aesthetic sphere as if this is the only arena that counts. Thus, in a key phrase much quoted, Morris becomes ‘a radical aesthetic conservative’, and his most significant political tracts’ the Willow Boughs paper or Honeysuckle chintz. Fuller is of course a long-time critic of ‘modernism’ in art, who also aligns himself, politically, with the Left. Yet in using Morris, as he has done on platforms up and down the country, as a stick to beat the avant garde, he perpetuates assumptions built into the ‘progressive’ model of contemporary art, and in so doing reinforces the cultural separateness of the artworld. Indeed, so far from doing any justice to Morris, he is part of a renewed tendency to deny Morris’s marxism as a temporary aberration, an error into which the essential disciple of Ruskin fell. Ruskin of course was, amongst other things, an aesthete and a High Tory.

A major irony of the whole Morris Today venture was for me its co-incidence with the Tate Gallery’s Pre-Raphaelite show. Here was an institution, an ‘ism’, a set of familiar images, a galaxy of famous names, and the critics rejoiced in it. I found it predictable and boring. We were offered a set of well-known pictures laid out in chronological order with
apparent indifference not only to the contexts, but to the visual diversities within this long-lived English tradition. In one room, one found a heraldic Rossetti (Dantis Amor) confronting a wall of realist landscapes and portraits. Morris was thrown in somewhere about 1857. There were a few scoops from private collections, but this, surely, was not 'the exhibition of the decade' claimed by Anthony Thwaite in Critics' Forum? I'd paid £2 to go in—and would have liked a lot more information from the walls—without having to pay £10.95 for it. Was it really for this that we had had to sacrifice that group of fine paintings which in Morris's youth had inspired his so much greater enterprise?