

Book Reviews

William Morris Textiles

Linda Parry, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1983 ISBN 0 297 78196 0 price £9.95

As Linda Parry states in her introduction, William Morris 'comes to mind instantly as the single most important figure in British textile production'. Some of his designs have been continuously available since they were designed over a century ago, remaining a constant source of inspiration to textile designers, while original lengths and samples are eagerly sought by museums and private collectors. With this continuing interest it is surprising that apart from the catalogue of the recent Birmingham exhibition we have had to wait until now for a scholarly, comprehensive study. Peter Floud's article *Dating Morris Patterns* (Architectural Review, July, 1959) which sought, by examining the designs in chronological order, to demonstrate definite stylistic developments, was the first serious analysis of the subject. While many of Peter Floud's conclusions are still valid, further research by Linda Parry has brought new light on the subject and produced a definitive study that will surely remain a standard work for years to come. The categories of textiles are dealt with in the order that Morris himself took them up—firstly embroidery, then printed followed by woven textiles, carpets and, finally, tapestry.

The chapter on embroidery covers Morris's early work, the 'If I Can' hanging of 1857 (now at Kelmscott Manor), the Red House embroideries, ecclesiastical embroideries, designs for special commissions and the embroideries produced by the firm. Of particular interest is the account of May Morris's involvement with the firm's embroidery section, firstly at Oxford Street and from 1890 at her home in Hammersmith Terrace where a team of girls and women, including Lily Yeats (sister of the poet W.B. Yeats), Mary de Morgan (sister of the potter) and Mrs. George Jack, the wife of the firm's chief furniture designer, worked under her supervision.

The section on printed textiles contains much new material including information of the early textiles adapted by Morris from traditional English chintzes of the 1830's and printed by Thomas Clarkson, together with a considerable amount of technical detail on the method of printing and the dyes used. The woven fabrics are probably less familiar as, for technical reasons, they have never been successfully reproduced, although such was the quality of the original productions that many curtains have survived virtually intact and unfaded. The machine woven carpets and the hand-woven Hammersmith rugs and large carpets are dealt with in detail, as are the tapestries produced at Merton Abbey from 1881 to 1940.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Linda Parry's book is that as a result of her research a large number of designs hitherto thought to be by Morris himself, must now be attributed to J. H. Dearle, his chief assistant. In fact Morris

produced virtually no designs for textiles or wallpapers after about 1885. Many of these, however, were attributed to Morris even in his lifetime—in contemporary periodicals, in the firm's own advertisements, and by May Morris. This is perhaps not surprising since it was the practice in the 19th century to send out designs in the name of the head of the studio and attaching Dearle's name would not have made for such good business. The fact that all the designs for textiles with repeating patterns are reproduced in chronological order in Linda Parry's book means that one can quickly see which are Dearle's designs and discern the difference between his and those of his master. Dearle's designs are flatter, less intricate, more widely spaced and broadly treated, with less intertwining of the elements of the design. But Dearle emerges as a more original designer than had hitherto been realised, and some of his most masterly designs such as the 'Compton' of 1896, previously thought to be Morris's last design, show that he was no mere imitator.

It is a pity that, owing to the exigencies of the production, all the blocks in the visual catalogue have been made the same size whether the illustration is of a large piece or a small fragment. Although measurements are given, visually there is no sense of scale. Again some patterns have been reproduced sideways, and although an arrow indicates the direction, this is visually disturbing. But this in no way detracts from the real value of the book.

As well as the chapters devoted to textiles, there is an important section on the use of them in interior design with illustrations of a number of contemporary interiors. The book contains invaluable reference material including the identifying marks found on the actual textiles or on the attached labels, and a checklist of public collections containing Morris textiles in Europe, the U.S.A., Canada and Australia.

There is no doubt that Linda Parry's book forms a major contribution to Morris scholarship and will remain so for many years to come.

Barbara Morris

The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book by William Morris
edited by William S. Peterson University of California Press, 1982
ISBN 0 520 04563 7 £38.00 or \$58.50.

If I were asked to say what is at once the most important product of Art, and the thing most to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful House; and if I were further asked to name the production next in importance and the thing next to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful Book. To enjoy good houses and good books in self-respect and decent comfort, seems to me to be the pleasurable end towards which all societies of human beings ought now to struggle.

These are the opening words of what seems to be a draft of the lecture *On the Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages*, given in 1894, when the Kelmscott Press

was in full activity, already exerting a powerful influence, and surprising the world with yet another revelation of Morris's extraordinary variety. To that last of his enterprises his friend, neighbour, and fellow-socialist Emery Walker contributed much; and Morris was as ever, quick to learn, impatient to do. It was the well-remembered lecture given by Walker in November 1888 that finally spurred Morris to print; but his interest, even his active interest, was by no means new; and during the weeks preceding that lecture he had been meddling very positively in the production of his romance, *The House of the Wolfings*, no doubt with advice from Walker, at the Chiswick Press—choosing the type for text and display, settling paper and page sizes and margins to the harrassment of Charles Jacobi. In preparing his lecture, Walker had likewise consulted with Morris; the lantern-slide illustrations had been made by Walker from books, ms and early printed both, in Morris's great collection. The two men were quietly preparing a revolution in printing.

What was specifically sparked off by Walker's lecture in Morris, and by their talk as they walked home afterwards, was a deep urge to go beyond the arrangement of type on page to the roots of typography in the design of actual letters. As always with Morris, it was the physical, not the abstract, that stirred him; and the sight of those early-formed letters, so long familiar in their combination into words in his precious books, the insights Emery Walker offered as he directed the attention of his audience to the strengths and subtleties of the construction and mutual relations of letter-forms, moved Morris to a new engagement with an old interest.

So the Kelmscott Press—in which we know he invited Walker's partnership, sensibly declined—came into being on no sudden impulse, but out of forty years of interest in 'the book beautiful'—not out of an intellectual decision, but stimulated by a close friendship.

Professor Peterson, who has so ably brought together in this book what is recorded of Morris's sense and sensibility on printing, explains the considerations of design (he has designed the volume as well as edited) which in the light of Morris's own practice have guided him, even while—as in the matter of leading—he departs from them. Such departures are now often inevitable. Books printed, as most now are, by some form of photolithography, and on papers designed to facilitate that form of printing, simply cannot have the same character as those printed by letterpress on more traditional papers. This affects the present book, unavoidably. However faithfully, for instance, the marks fall in the exact places to print a facsimile, it is not just visual, but kinetic and tactile responses that are involved; shape and form are supported and in part created by texture and colour: the grey inks and neutral surface of photolitho can only be *correct*, as a literal translation is correct; they cannot achieve the life of the older process.

These defects are nowhere more distressing than in the admirable illustrations—chosen to take up specific points in Morris's lectures but including fine portraits

of Morris and Walker on facing pages: Walker's is a much less familiar face than Morris's, and so specially welcome: what a true touch is given by the little cat in his arms, the pencil in top pocket, the sprig of jasmine in the buttonhole: but all the depth of contrast, all the luminosity of transparent shadow is swallowed up and flattened out. This said, a necessary reminder of limitations of our contemporary press, the choice of illustrations is worthy of the texts offered. And to round off the book, we have two appendices: first, the invaluable account of the Kelmscott Press completed by Cockerell on January 4th 1898 as the last of the books was being finished; second, four press interviews with Morris which in spite of one or two journalist's howlers and the fulsome style of the first one, are welcome as contemporary pictures of Morris as printer. They illuminate the man as much as the work.

There are of course some small niggles—to speak of presswork in the printing of the wallpapers is mistaken; and among the 'silent corrections' which any editor permits him/herself, the rewriting of Morris's English *practise* as a verb, into the North American *practice*, is not quite decent. But notes have been kept to a useful minimum, and here we have Morris on printing as well and completely presented as can well be. Professor Peterson, has done us a great service in bringing together the known utterances of this master printer on the last of his great concerns in such worthy dress, and has some good words of his own with which this review may end.

One cannot understand the moral intensity of Morris's typographical writings, without realising that he does not merely wish to improve the printing of books; in fact (as was true throughout his career) he wants to alter the course of Western history Deeply though he desires to create books that are works of art, Morris is even more deeply pre-occupied with the loss of humane values generally in the modern world It is possible . . . to concentrate entirely upon Morris's sensitive analysis of the medieval book and his wonderfully perceptive advice about typographical design. But we will hear only half of what he is telling us if we ever forget that lending order to the printed page is, for Morris, ultimately one way of lending meaning to human existence.

Ray Watkinson