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WILLIAM MORRIS AND HIS INFLUENCE ON THE ARTS AND CRAFTS

Translated from the French of Charles Ricketts

By Richard K. Kellenberger

William Morris's untimely death is the occasion for our writing a few pages of criticism concerning his work and his influence. The full extent of his influence is, of course, still undetermined both because it has been vast and because it has been so recent.

There are two elements in his accomplishment, one of which is properly his own and is derived from the fact that he was a poet and an artist, and the other is more common and open to all. I am not speaking here of the specific patterns that he invented (which are only too commonly imitated today) for which the initial idea, however, is clearly related to the conditions of a thoroughly understood craft. There is in such work only the usefulness of example. Rather do we recognize him for having re-established hard work and integrity in the crafts. At a period of artistic indifference and of self-sufficiency he insisted that the requirements and the restrictions of each substance be carefully observed.

Although he was an admirable worker in ornament, he preferred the structural simplicity and the sobriety of the

*This essay appears in the sixteenth book on the Vale Press list, only five copies of which were located by Mr. Humphry in the course of his investigations prior to the writing of his article in our last issue. Three of these copies are in Massachusetts, one in Connecticut (at Yale), and one here at Colby. Even in its French form this essay is therefore not likely to have come to the attention of many readers, and so far as we know it has never received publication in English until now.
well-worked materials themselves to the use of ornament. In a period that was characterized by careless work and a taste for the showy, he required refinement in work and a sort of mental absorption in the understanding and appreciation of the artistic thing. The barren and the conventional were as distasteful to him as the bombastic. He has often been blamed for stressing too much the art of the Middle Ages. He suspected that there was in mediaeval art a latent strength that would rise from the ashes of the false classicism that the Renaissance bequeathed us. Through rank obstinacy he was against everything Latin, although we should see in this, to be sure, a certain element of pose. All artistic periods are alike at one point of their development or of their decline; and there are, surely, even in mediaeval art, precise moments of artistic sterility and falsification. When we recall the striking originality of William Morris's work, we must conclude that the Middle Ages appeared to him as a very happy age to which he longed to return or as a dreamy spot from which he could draw strength. It was obvious that the contemporary style with its feverish and blatant commercializing could not follow in that path. Morris would speak of the Middle Ages, simply, when he wanted to express something that was admirable, something that was distant—he was like the man of the Renaissance who spoke of Italy or of Antiquity. Morris, however, gave good reasons for this preference, for this "madness for the mediaeval," as it might be called. For him, the Renaissance, taken in its entirety, was not so much a highly vaunted discovery of Antiquity as it was a bursting forth of profound and liberal ideas whose seeds had been maturing as early as the twelfth century in many songs and romances such as the Tristan and Tannhäuser. It was a movement which was concerned, under a rhythmic exterior, with beauty, passion, and energy and which
brought about the total rehabilitation of the human being. In support of such an argument one has only to examine the august statuary at Rheims or at Amiens, where the movement produced marvels such as these in France even before the Italian revival.

The concept of such an intellectual outburst is not well accepted even today, and especially is this true in France. It is worth while recalling in this connection that Heine pointed out, in a most delightful story and in strict conformity with the mediaeval idea, that there is the temptation of the devil himself in the song of the nightingale.

One May day in 1433, at the time of the meeting of the Council, a group of churchmen were taking a walk in the woods near Basel. Among them were prelates, doctors, monks of all shades, who were discussing various points of difficulty in theology, making distinctions, arguing, and getting quite worked up over the annates, expectations and restrictions, trying to find out if Thomas Aquinas had been a greater philosopher than Bonaventura or whoever you will. Suddenly, in the midst of their learned and abstract discussion, they became silent and were as if transfixed as they stopped under a linden-tree in full bloom, in which a concealed nightingale warbled and breathed out the gentlest and softest of melodies. All these learned people were moved in a marvelous way, and their scholastic and monastic hearts opened up to these warm emanations of the spring. They awoke from the wintry torpor in which they had been lost. They looked at each other with surprise and delight. And then one of them observed with subtlety that all this music did not seem to him to be very canonical, that this nightingale might very well be a demon, that this demon was distracting them from their Christian conversation by its charming singing, that it was actually leading them along the pleasant path of desire and sin. Whereupon, he began to exorcise the nightingale with the formula then used for such occasions: Adjuvo te per eum qui venturas est judicare vivos et mortuos, etc. It is said that the bird answered this exorcism by saying: "Yes, I am an evil spirit, indeed." It then flew away, laughing at them. "Now," the story concludes, "those who heard the bird sing so beautifully that day fell sick and soon died."

Such utter boredom, such disillusionment must have seemed to Morris as something derived from an early Asiatic or Roman feeling of despair, and it is itself clearly
contradicted in the decorative borders of the Missals and of the roofs of the old cathedrals. On the contrary, in the thirteenth century, art and thought had come forth in a radiant fashion never again to disappear. There had appeared on neighboring soil, at a period which for us was darkened with wars, the pure gothic painting of Flanders which was both profound and detailed. In Italy, personal poetry, the offspring of the romance, had already burst forth before the era of peace. And finally we come to Giotto,* and with him we have the conscientious and original revival which we call the Renaissance. This movement in turn was corrupted by the residue of the antique, like a subtle miasma coming out from the old soil.

As a theory, it seemed logical to William Morris that a revival in modern industrial art ought to be related to the early artistic movement of the northern races of Europe, classical art allowing no roofs, windows or chimneys. Let us admit, however, that there remained elements of the antique in mediaeval architecture, for nothing is ever done completely new. Morris's insistence on the architectural element was the point of departure for the basic decorative arts which have no relation to the light arts, to the pretty or to the bibelot.

Persian-Arabic art, which was the basis of Byzantine art, also influenced mediaeval art. William Morris's research in Persian art in which he pointed out this relationship is generally unknown, an influence which corrected any archaeological dryness in the manner of Viollet-le-Duc. The familiar art of the Middle Ages having disappeared, he was obliged to create something new, since cotton prints and hand-painted wall papers are of quite modern usage. To the rhythmical scrolls of gray and white arabesques he successfully added the motif of the hawthorne, the honeysuckle, and the wild rose. To the efforts at refinement in

* The history of the influence of thirteenth-century French art upon Italy is still to be done.
the structural form (the importance of the wall, of the roof, or the solid back of a chair), he succeeded in giving either a sober or a gay color. In place of the glaucous and dark interiors of the fifteenth century, in place of the lugubrious tones of prune color and of "tobacco-spit-brown" of French and German hangings of today, in place of positive shades which would detract from the impromptu combinations of pictures and incidental ornaments and which would take away the light, he invented harmonious patterns of mosses, of willow leaves, or combinations of old gold and white. In houses which he decorated, the structural woodwork is painted in brighter colors such as blue, white and green; in these houses the draperies contribute the gaiety of their surfaces which blossom out in blue, in salmon pink, in white with copper-red spots, colors typical of vegetable dyes which fade harmoniously. Nowhere are there ceilings painted like a sky, nowhere are gilded garlands or loving doves used in place of projections, surfaces and lines.

We have said that the pure colors have been improved by an exquisite and learned use of white. This might seem to have a rather harsh effect, especially when seen as swatches in stores; but let us remember that pure tones become gray from the optical point of view on large surfaces instead of losing their color like the candy-like yellows of English commercial dyes which are too often confused with the real productions of an aesthetic movement.

The work of William Morris in the art of tapestry design and of stained glass windows is particularly worthy of merit through the sketches of Burne-Jones, modern material having neither the brilliance nor the subtlety of ancient surfaces. In the treatment of the stained glass window, however, there is an experimental phase that is interesting to study: one finds therein an excessive use of sea-green and of colors which border on the olive. These, however, he tactfully contrasted with the dominating
Towards the end of his life, in collaboration with his friend Burne-Jones, Morris recast the art of bookmaking on such a logical basis that no original effort can in the future be made without conditions of care and technique of at least equal importance, and what he has done will surely remain as the initial effort in this movement.

He has been blamed in his treatment of the book, as in everything he did, for having been too much under the influence of the Middle Ages; but this accusation applies only to one part, to a secondary part of his work, to his publications by the Kelmscott Press. He published several long-winded mediaeval works, and these few efforts, although quite majestic in effect, created a prejudice in France where his more personal, more charming books printed with the “Golden Type” are still almost unknown. The recasting of these gothic books along gothic lines is basically quite logical. There was also some advantage in seeking to revive his energy by returning to an ancient source, at a time when popular taste and speculation were ruling out all personal efforts, especially in America, land of artistic and literary piracy, whose influence in the direction of popularizing had spread to Paris and even to London. Let us say it quite frankly: most of his works show much originality, and are rich and gay in effect, as well as modern. Let us say “modern” although this word is usually not applied to a beautiful, decorative thing, for the conditions which he had to meet were fulfilled perhaps for the very first time. His work appears to be gothic and that means that it is endowed with a style in contrast with things which have none. There is no resemblance—even in the retrospective part of his work which we have treated—to the gothic books of Germany, France, England or Italy (which are, in turn, different each from the other).
Colby Library Quarterly

The ailing Morris did not participate in the most recent exhibition of the “Arts and Crafts,” for he died the very day the exhibition opened. But it already showed the razzle-dazzle that any public exhibition is bound to have. It must be understood that, in order to create or propagate a movement in decorative art, it is not enough to organize expositions, to open stores and auditoriums: what is needed, since this is a matter of a constructive effort, is the presence of a guiding spirit.

With William Morris England lost not only the creative influence which brought about the revival in decoration but it lost also, for the moment, the particular element of concentration which was its very strength.*

London, March 2, 1897.

THREE SUMPTUOUS "MICROCOSM" VOLUMES

By James Carpenter

The Colby College Library has recently received from Mr. Roscoe H. Hupper a rare and interesting set of illustrated books which record in words and pictures some of the most characteristic sights of London in the early years of the nineteenth century. The Microcosm of London, in three quarto volumes, was published by R. Ackermann about 1807 and is profusely illustrated with hand-colored aquatints by Rowlandson and Pugin. The great illustrator Rowlandson, working in the almost caricature-like tradition stemming from Hogarth, is chiefly responsible for making the volumes lively records of the period. His simplified but convincing figures populate the accurately drawn architectural scenes of Pugin and have been sympathetically transposed into etching and aquatint by the en-

* [Note by Charles Ricketts:] This book was begun by Lucien Pissarro in April of 1897 and was finished at the Ballantyne Press under the direction of Charles Ricketts, January 2, 1898.