

The Artist as a Revolutionary  
A Portrait of the Life of William Morris

Bethany McDonald

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Monique Maloney, M.F.A.  
Thesis Chair

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Paul Reynolds, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

---

Stephen Kerr, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.  
Honors Director

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Date

### Abstract

William Morris became an artistic revolutionary, reacting against the academic views of art held in the Victorian Era and the Industrial Revolution. This thesis will deal with his reaction against the expectations of his family and the events of his childhood, showing their effect upon his future role as a revolutionary. This thesis will then cover his response against the Royal Academy's academic art, the Industrial Revolution, and how his art ideologies clashed against the common norm of his time. Finally, this thesis will look at how each of his reactions led to his influential role in the Arts and Crafts Movement. The object of this study is to discover how William Morris was considered an artist of influence in the progression of art history and the extent of his position against the common views of society so the reader may understand his historic role.

### The Artist as a Revolutionary: A Portrait of the Life of William Morris

On October 3, 1896, William Morris died at the age of 62, his death caused by “simply being William Morris and having done more work than most ten men” (Henderson xl). Morris left an incredible legacy in the history of art, impacting the meaning and function of art in more ways than most men. He opposed the social expectations of his family, the academic art standards found in the Victorian Era and the on-going effects of the Industrial Age. Morris designed against the common social norms and beliefs of what defined art during his time, and revolutionized the world of art as was known in nineteenth-century England, reacting against expectations and values upheld by academic society. Family expectations, Victorian academic art, and the Industrial Revolution caused William Morris, to become an artist revolutionary.

#### **Against Family Expectations**

William Morris’ first reaction against the norm was seen through the defiance of his family’s social conventions. Morris was born on March 24, 1834 in Clay Hill, Walthamstow, England. Morris’ Father was a partner in a bill and discount broking firm, Sanderson and Company, producing a simple family of the bourgeois class (Mackail 4). As a comfortably wealthy middle class family, Morris had the opportunity to further his educational growth by studying at school away from home. During his first academic studies, Morris’ reactive nature against his parent’s wishes was evident.

When Morris reached nine years of age, he began his academic studies and was sent to a preparatory school for young gentleman in Walthamstow, England. He attended the school until his father’s death in 1847, with Morris only thirteen years old. Before his father died, however, he had bought Morris a nomination to Marlborough College. At

fourteen years of age, Morris entered Marlborough College in 1848, where he attended until 1851 (15). Throughout his years there, he never participated in sports or school games, unlike many of his peers. Instead, he loved to explore the countryside. Morris enjoyed roaming the property of Marlborough College, either by himself or with his classmates by his side. Along with collecting bird eggs, Morris delighted in conjuring stories about knights, fairies and adventures and he read many books on archeology and English Gothic architecture (19).

Morris' father expected him to enter into the family business, yet he had no interest in it. He was then expected by his parents to pursue gentlemanly status. With refusal of the family firm, Morris was left with only a few respectable options; for England society during the nineteenth century held certain standards for a gentleman of means. The status and degree of achieving recognition as a gentleman was fascinating to many bourgeois Victorians, as many aspired to become part of the gentleman class. As the middle-class increased in wealth, the esteemed rank of the leisurely class was no longer so far out of reach (Gilmour 4). There were three main acceptable professions a gentleman could enter: medicine, the law and the church (4). Morris' sister, Emma, held a strong interest in the Church, with a love for church festivals and music, and married a young clergyman in 1850. Emma and Morris were "closely intimate in all their thoughts and enthusiasm; and it was to some degree under her influence that the Church was settled on as his own destined profession" (Mackail 1: 25). As he grew, an inclination toward joining the clergy was continually cultivated and he soon planned to attend the university in Oxford. However, as he explored what Oxford had to offer, Morris was sorely disappointed, and his interests moved away from the church (Mackail 10). In 1855,

Morris came of age and abandoned his wish for joining the Church. He was instead full of his new affections for art and poetry, born from his trip to the Lourve where he viewed medieval art (44). This desertion of his pursuit of the church was highly uncommon for an up-and-coming gentleman such as Morris, and quite risky, since he also had no desire for medicine or the law:

Membership of these 'old' professions was often taken to confer gentlemanly status, partly because of the requirement of formal education, and partly because giving advice or service for a fee carried little of the commercial taint attached to buying and selling in the market-place. (Tosh 11)

Morris' uncommon character was further seen as his time at Oxford lengthened. He spent the vast majority of his time with kindred-spirit Edward Burne-Jones. Both Morris and Burne-Jones were heavily influenced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who embodied the views of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, of which he was a principle founder. The Pre-Raphaelites were a "group of high-minded and idealistic young men, united by their enthusiasm for poetry, the Middle Ages, and gothic architecture, and by their hatred of the industrial revolution [and] materialism" (Wood 109). Also among this group of medieval revivalists were mathematician Charles Faulkner, poet Richard Watson Dixon, literature enthusiast William Fulford and Cornell Price. The group spent their time discussing the poetry of Keats and Tennyson, observing architecture, hosting Shakespearean readings and musing over their unconventional views of art (Watkinson 30). The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood greatly impacted Morris' choice of occupation. By the end of 1865 he abandoned all thoughts of a "respectable gentleman's career" and poured all his efforts and thoughts towards painting. This thoroughly shocked his mother

– how could her son not enter into the Church? His Mother “had cherished a hope that he would become a bishop” (Clutton-Brock 17). Morris’s disregard and antipathy for the commonly pursued gentleman’s lifestyle displayed his reactive nature. He did not seem to care about the wishes of his parents, nor the norms held by Victorian society. Instead, Morris pursued a career which was poorly respected by the influential, fashionable class. The less socially acceptable occupations among gentlemen included clerks, shopkeepers and “small workshop masters because they got their hands dirty” (Tosh 12). Forsaking societal fashions, Morris’ hands inevitably became dirty, for a workshop master he became. 1861 marked the official formation of the firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company, and by 1875, settled into the title Morris and Company (Mackail 148). Morris toiled as a common workman and was so incessant in his work he preferred to conduct business in the same house in which he lived. This, too, became contradictory to the life he was raised, where his Father conducted business in a townhouse far from his manor home (43). Morris’ choice of occupation and lifestyle differed from the life of his family, where he abandoned their expectations in pursuit of his love of medieval art, his fierce desire to better the popular views of art, and the overall life of the common workman,

### **Against Academic Art Ideals**

#### **English Academic Art; Background, Development, and Criticism**

The Royal Academy of Art, founded by popular portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds in the late eighteenth century, was instrumental in propagating this academic concept of artistic beauty. Reflective of the Academy, Reynolds “considered that the prime exemplar of the correct [art study] method was Raphael, the great Renaissance master” (Kemp 78). The Academy and various artists, supported by the general academic

art community, sought to represent their subjects through the lens of classical beauty, emulating the Renaissance ideal. Later, towards the middle of the nineteenth century at the height of the Victorian period, paintings would be criticized as communicating “sentimentality, nostalgia, and a canon of idealized beauty... expressed through printed images of children, maidens, puppies, and flowers” (Meggs 146). Initially, under the guidance of Reynolds, the Academy aspired to ennoble British art by rooting it firmly in an artistic style known as “the grand manner” of the Italian Renaissance. Selwyn Image, for example, as a designer and illustrator with passion for the medieval, rebuked the Academy in their adherence to the rules of academic art, suggesting “that its name be changed to the Royal Academy of Oil Painting because it was so limited relative to the total range of art and design forms” (166). The Academy seemed to care more for the appearance of the painting’s subject and its sentimental value rather than depicting the reality in which it resided, creating paintings “in which the really important issues are left untouched because they involve controversy” (Greenberg 4).

The academic art of the Victorian Era has been characterized as a “nineteenth century fascination with illusion as an important avenue to truth” (Voskuil 2). A full representation of truth can be defined as an “authentic self-maintain[ed] essential integrity, that it not be attenuated, fractured, or otherwise compromised by the necessity of making itself presentable to and for others” (5). While Victorians sought to present themselves genuinely, they also desired to create a “presentable” appearance to those who viewed them. This desire conflicted against an illustration of complete visual accuracy and truth. In this conflict, a certain irony was found in Victorian academic art, where the patron and painter wished to exhibit a spiritual authenticity in the subject’s



depiction, while simultaneously veiling the accurate portrayal of the subject behind a mask of utopian beauty and sentimentality (Teukolsky 716). This academic art presented a conflict of interest:

[There were] conflicting value systems emerging from their moment, whose contradictions include a strong spiritualism unhinged from Christianity, a democratic ethos combined with an elitist preference for exceptional individuals, a placing of empirical body-oriented knowledges alongside Romantic subjectivities, and a love of visual pleasure accompanying anxieties about the desiring body. (713)

Portraits had the greater desire to classicize, rather than represent the subjects as contemporary and sincere individuals. The art created during this time period tended to exist in tension between a wish for genuine expression and sentimental beauty founded on a utopian perspective. This tension became problematic, “result[ing] in a theory of visual symbols that is profoundly artificial, human-centered, and relative – even when it invokes its own authenticity and universal spiritual validity” (713). Charles Baudelaire, French poet and author of “The Painter of Modern Life”, defines this artistic paradox in his theory of *correspondences* (716). This theory is described as follows:

Beauty is that which remains true to its essential nature only when veiled. This *correspondence* tells us what is meant by such a veil. We may call it, in somewhat daring abbreviation, the “reproducing aspect” of the work of art. The *correspondences* constitute the court of judgement before which the object of art is found to be a faithful reproduction – which, to be sure, makes it entirely problematic. If one attempted to reproduce the *aporia* through language, one

would define beauty as the object of experience in the state of resemblance...Beauty may require the servile imitation of what is indefinable in objects. (716)

In reaction, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, by which William Morris was influenced, responded dialectically to the academic art establishment. The Brotherhood, formed in 1848, was assembled by three young Royal Academy students: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millias. The society was a “close-knit, secret band of brothers, dedicated to the pursuit of art” (Wood 10). They joined together with the common mission to resurrect the simplicity and authentic beauty found in the Medieval Age, seeking to imitate the early Italian painting masters, who existed before the time of Raphael (Cooper 409). While admiration for early Italian painters was not uncommon before the Brotherhood, the paintings they exhibited and the way they communicated their beliefs, with a high level of tenacity and intensity, became controversial (Wood 10).

Reacting against their time spent in the Academy Schools, the Brotherhood disliked the Academy’s “academic tricks and conventional techniques” (10). Inspired by writer and artist John Ruskin, they instead sought to create a faithful and natural depiction of their subjects, painting “every facet of nature with complete honesty” (10). By 1850, the secret behind the initials PRB, which was signed in the corners of the Brotherhood’s paintings, was discovered, and “the art establishment reacted angrily to what it regarded as a presumptuous and provocative secret society, formed by rebellious young art students” (15). With medieval art as their stylistic guide, they were criticized for their primitive revivalist art, displaying “flat, clear colors; shallow perspective; well-

defined contours; even lighting; frames shaped like altarpieces; emphasis on symbolic detail” (Cooper 411). Paintings produced by the Brotherhood after the discovery attracted a greater amount of criticism, shocking Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt by its severity. Supporters of academic art also attacked the stark realism by which the Brotherhood depicted religious figures. In Millais’ painting *Christ in the House of His Parents*, critics condemned his depiction of Christ’s family, shown as plain, realistically depicted people, set in a simple carpenter’s shop (Wood 17). *The Times* expressed an extreme distaste for the painting:

Mr. Millias’ principle picture is, to speak plainly, revolting. The attempt to associate the Holy Family with the meanest details of a carpenter’s shop, with no conceivable omission of misery, of dirt, of even disease, all finished with the same loathsome minuteness, is disgusting. (17)

Despite disparagement, the Brotherhood strived to create art that presented more than just beauty or pleasing aesthetics, but reflected a depth of meaning and symbolic sincerity. They were “reformers seeking to elevate and purify English art by a return to the inspiration of the earlier masters,” and in turn were seen as a “band of revolutionaries, defiant of the most sacred name in art and conspiring the overthrow of all advances made since Raphael” (Cooper 413).

Seen contrary to the Brotherhood and William Morris, popular society often held the purpose of art in a different light:

Not everyone could accept the idea that beauty and fine work could communicate morality or that art could therefore be a beneficial force in society. Moreover, as we will see, elites’ traditional uses of art for display of wealth, power, and

prestige often came into conflict with the drive to make art accessible to all.

(Woodson-Boulton 49)

Many among the Victorian elite wished to use art as a method to communicate their fortune and greater success, relying on artistic conventions of representation in a veil of sentimentalized beauty. To achieve this wish, often “money was lavished by people without taste upon artists whose work we no longer believe to be of enduring worth” (Hooper 415).

In 1856, with the original members of the Brotherhood disbanded, Rossetti met William Morris, and Morris’ good friend Edward Burne-Jones, during their studies at Oxford (Wood 29). As Rossetti’s ardent follower, Morris was highly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite style, which underscored his pre-existing love for medieval art. The meeting of Rossetti and Morris marked the opening of the second chapter of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, “and is in its way almost more significant than the formation of the original Brotherhood” (29). This second chapter can be described as such:

Rossetti’s friends and followers William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones defined a style that was to influence the young generation of the 1890s, real aesthetics, enemies of positivism and its dehumanizing science, enemies of the machine age, longing for spirituality, beauty and a new way of life. (Rookmaaker 98)

Morris, along with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, shared a common desire for authenticity and a medieval stylistic approach. He sought to be rid of utopian ideals of ‘perfect’ beauty, and instead pursued a greater veracity of depiction of his subjects in his art. This pursuit, bred out of a reaction against the common academic paintings, would highly influence the future of art and design.

**Royal Academy Painters and Ideologies**

A better understanding of William Morris' response against artistic norms requires exploration of common ideologies held by the Royal Academy of Art's leading painters. Sir Joshua Reynolds was the first President of the Academy and had a "polished veneer or emollient manner of a man of leisure" (Hook 6). Portraiture was elevated during the Victorian Era, with the desire among the upper class for permanent likenesses documented by strokes of paint. Molding the Academy's trajectory, Reynolds strived to propound a classical vision of reality, to make something which was less than perfect into an idealized reflection of beauty (Kemp 78). Reynolds asserted in his discourses that "even in portraits, the grace, and we may add, the likeness, consists more in taking the general air, than in observing the exact similitude of every feature" (81). He thought that real art was created by righting the accidental imperfections found in nature, with imagination used to make the subject visually perfect. The subject matter being painted was not to be merely an unedited treatment of nature, for what place do such things have in true art? Reynolds pursued his definition of sentimental beauty, believing that "nature herself is not to be too closely copied. There are excellencies in art beyond what is commonly called the imitation of nature... The students...must now be told, that a mere copier of nature can never produce anything great" (82).

Ultimately, Reynolds sought to correct nature by removing the subject's imperfections in pursuit of a flawless ideal. As president of the Royal Academy of Arts, he had great influence over the progression and purpose of academic art throughout England and the Victorian Age.

Thomas Gainsborough was another prominent painter and member of the Royal Academy. Gainsborough was a highly regarded portrait artist, and, like Reynolds, was not concerned with recording every realistic detail of his subjects, preferring to paint “not merely the map of the face, but the character, the soul of the original” (Junod 158). Yet, how often was the “soul of the original” defined by the contents of the patron’s purse rather than reality? The journalists of the day reported that Gainsborough’s “ideas and expression discovered a mind full of rich fancies and elegant truths” (160). Reflective of the Academy, Gainsborough preferred to paint the subject in an idealized manner, screening the true reflection of the subject with what current society found elegant and acceptably pleasing. Both Reynolds and Gainsborough represent the overall thoughts and views popular academic artists held, preferring to cater to the ideology of utopian reality and sentimentality rather than depicting the full truth of what is seen. The art produced by both men “served the nobility and gentry of England, the ruling class that as such was not yet deeply touched by the new spirit” (Rookmaaker 62).

### **In Reaction: William Morris’ Ideology**

William Morris’ views of art contrasted with those of Reynolds and Gainsborough. He preferred simplicity of design and reality over the sentimental masking of visual truth that was pervasively popular in academic art. Morris strongly believed “that any decoration is futile, and has fallen into at least the first stage of degradation, when it does not remind you of something beyond itself” (Watkinson 48). His revolutionary belief, shared with Pre-Raphaelite artists—that beauty must exist with a depth of meaning or it was no beauty at all—was manifested throughout the various

aspects of Morris' art. Unlike academic painters, Morris looked to medieval art as his ultimate inspiration.

The color choices Morris used throughout his art also differed from contemporary trends. He discouraged high contrast, preferring bright colors paired with light grays, aiming for a tenderness of color. He resisted producing dull grays and dirty shades, which had become common throughout houses in the Victorian Era (56).

When developing his wallpapers, Morris' designs were naturalistic and contrasted sharply with wallpapers already on the market. Competitors, such as A. W. Pugin and Owen Jones, leaned towards the abstract and geometric, while Morris sought after a naturalistic look and took an organic approach to his patterning (48). Instead of following the current trends of the abstract, Morris impacted the influence of wallpaper designs with his unpretentious and genuine depictions of nature.

His reaction against common designs extended into the fields of typography, printing, and publishing through his activities at the Kelmscott Press. He commented on the purpose behind his endeavors:

I began printing books with the hope of producing some which should have a definite claim to beauty, while at the same time they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters. (7)

Through the typefaces printed with the Kelmscott Press, Morris sought to pair function with beauty. He fervently held that art needed to reflect not only pleasing elegance and sentimentality, as was maintained by certain academic ideals, but also communicate function. In order for art "to be raised above the contempt of reasonable man, [it] must

possess three qualities: beauty, imagination and order” (Watkinson 49). This line of thought was revolutionary during the Victorian era, asserting the idea that beauty cannot exist without depth of meaning, depth of meaning cannot exist without beauty, and the two can only function together with order as their constant companion.

### **In Reaction: William Morris’ Love for Medieval Art**

William Morris fostered a strong affection for art of the Medieval Age, which conflicted with the progression of the academic artistic style taught in the Royal Academy of Art. He saw the Medieval Ages as a “design utopia” in which beauty was perfectly melded with function (Alfoldy 103). While at Oxford, Morris expressed his view through the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood-created magazine *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, writing articles on architecture, which displayed his love for the Middle Ages and French Gothic churches (Mackail 88). He had a passion for Gothic buildings and regarded them as “the crown and flower of the whole world’s architecture” (96). Morris steadily preferred the styles of the past rather than the current trends of the academic society. Striving to bring his medieval utopia to life, Morris reflected the medieval style in every aspect of his art, such as his furniture designs, embroidery, poetry, the Kelmscott Press, and the interior décor of his homes.

Morris first embarked on furniture design when he moved into the empty rooms of Red Lion Square while in Oxford. He found the current furniture in the shops ugly and vulgar, and so decided to design his own furniture, hiring a carpenter for construction. The rooms soon looked decidedly medieval in nature, with painted panels covered with “very Pre-Raphaelite-looking damsels, one who is playing on a lute” (Henderson xxxiii). He designed chairs that embodied “honesty of construction” and that were “painted with



chevron motifs, stylized flowers and medieval scenes from the tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table” (Blakesley 30). Morris’ distaste for industrially manufactured furniture were once again countered by a return to mediievally inspired handcraftsmanship.

Along with furniture, Morris closely studied Medieval illuminated manuscripts and early Renaissance incunabula, which provided the inspiration for his Kelmscott typefaces. His Golden typeface was modeled after the work of Nicholas Jenson, a fifteenth century French engraver credited with the creation of one of the finest early Roman typefaces. Morris’ medieval-inspired designs printed by the press greatly affected the fine printing press movement, proving that not all typefaces needed to be bland and devoid of meaningful design (Horowitz 60).

Morris’ home, the Red House, also greatly exemplified his love for the Medieval Age. The house was modeled in fifteenth-century design and was a perfect marriage of Gothic architecture and nature. The house contained various paintings, with installed murals based on themes from the medieval legend of King Arthur, depicting Arthurian characters and their various romances (Mancoff 60). Even his furniture was decorated with panels illustrating the medieval stories of the Prioress’s Tale from Chaucer and the story of Sir Degrevaunt. Morris steered clear of common and shoddy design in the making of his home, the Red House, “it is only here and there that you can find in a well-to-do house things that are of any use at all” (Henderson xxxv).

Morris believed that the Medieval Age epitomized the ideal of the usefulness art should possess, differing from the aims of academic art. His love and fascination with the design of the Middle Ages, where everything had a purpose in its beauty, contrasted with

the design aspects of the Academy's art, where beauty was used as mask of reality rather than an instrument of truth.

### **In Reaction: Artist as a Workman**

During the Victorian Age, the traditional academic artist was esteemed as a more refined sort of human being. The public had a "voracious appetite for hero worship" (Codell 283). The Victorian society became highly fascinated with artists, wanting to know the details of their lives and a glimpse into the functioning's of their souls. To appease the masses and gain popularity, artists began writing biographies to pair with their paintings. Due to the biographies' success, advertisements for cheap books and prints were added with the writings, since the advertiser hoped to rise "into the realm of high culture, imparting good taste or reputation" (288). The period became replete with artists who "exploited their networks, including each other, to gain economic security and social recognition" (284). This Victorian societal view of the artist was staunchly countered by Morris, believing that the artist was not a "god" or an unreachable, lofty form of human, but was "a mediator of the natural world, who translates a personal vision for contemporary viewership" (Teukolsky 724). To Morris, the artist was "simply a workman, and every workman a different sort of artist" (Henderson xxxv). This was a revolutionary outlook and view of the artist, since it differed highly from academic ideals, fostered since the time of Sir Joshua Reynolds.

### **In Opposition: Hatred of London**

Throughout William Morris' life, he held a steady disregard for London society of. In 1865, Morris moved into a roomy Queen Anne House in London, but soon left the house in 1872, seeking a "release from that incubus of middle class London life"

(Mackail 225). He soon found his ideal home in Kelmscott Manor House, “an old stone Elizabethan house like Water Eaton, and such a garden! Close down on the river, a boat house and all things handy” (225). He much preferred the countryside to London, due to his wish to remove himself from the “historic moral laxness of the traditional aristocracy and the more frightening lack of civilized standards among the new urban masses,” as well as the resistance of change, even in a place like Kelmscott (Seaman 12). While the majority of society reveled in the opportunities of London, Morris eschewed against popularity and preferred the simplicity and quiet nature of the countryside.

### **Against Industrial Age Ideals**

#### **Industrial Age Definition**

Occurring during the Victorian Era was the rapid rise of the Industrial Age, which emerged in England during the last third of the eighteenth century. This revolutionist age was characterized by swift technological developments and drastic changes felt throughout society. The factory-system of industrialism created a new process in the production of goods, resulting in a remarkable increase in quantity and decrease in price (26). Merchandise soon became more affordable and accessible to the lower classes, heightening the demand and thus growing the booming industries. Cities rapidly grew, and, from 1750 to 1801, the population in England and Wales increased by 50 percent, from 6 million to 9 million people (Hopkins 6). The cities’ horizons were marked by buildings and smoke, with “great factories on the outskirts of our cities, the tall chimney’s smoking by day and glowing by night, the incessant hum of machinery [and] the bustle of crowds of workmen” (Mantoux 25). The Industrial Revolution brought various drastic changes to the functioning of society. While it created many benefits in

efficiency of production, it also produced a series of negative effects, for “few political revolutions have ever had such far-reaching consequences” (25). Master craftsmen who once thrived in their art were replaced with machinery, which produced inferior and shoddy work in high quantities (Huntley 127). As the factories grew, not only was poor craftsmanship generated, but also an increased concern of the factory working conditions, especially for women and children. Laws were passed to bring about positive change, but were badly enforced and seemed to have little, if any, effect (Hopkins 4). Workshop laborers were working over ten hours a day, and legislation was soon passed to limit the amount of hours children could work, yet the legislation was highly inefficient to remedy this problem. In order for the laws to take effect, they needed to be enforced by locally appointed officials. However, many officials were in the pocket of the influential factory owners, and the excessively long hours continued to persist (11). Along with the concern for the workers, the most pressing issue became the state of the towns. In England’s finest cities “side by side with a great increase of wealth was...an enormous increase of pauperism; and production on a vast scale, the result of free competition, led to a rapid alienation of classes and to the degradation of a large body of producers” (Hartwell 231). The simple workman of the lower classes led “a mean and groveling existence” (Hopkins 7).

### **In Opposition: William Morris’ Childhood**

William Morris’ childhood greatly impacted his view of the Industrial Age. As a young boy, Morris and his family moved to Woodford Hall—a mansion surrounded by fifty acres of land adjacent to Epping Forest. He spent the majority of his time outdoors, learning the names of local fauna. Later in life, Morris used the surrounding valley in his

writings *News from Nowhere*, describing it as an “all flat pasture, once marsh, except for a few gardens ... it does not make a bad holiday to get a quiet pony and ride about there on a sunny afternoon of autumn, and look over the river and craft passing up and down...the sun shining down in one flood of peaceful light over the long distance” (Mackail 6). He relished his times home from school, spending his vacations listening to “all the songs of birds ringing through the hedges and about the willows; all the sweet colors of the sky, and the clouds that floated in the blue of it; of the tender fresh grass, and the sweet young shoots of flowering things” (19).

As a young boy, Morris also participated in old traditions and celebrations. He grew up partaking in the “old habits,” such as homemade bread and butter, brewing beer and celebrating traditional English festivals. From those first interests “the love of the Middle Ages was born in him (10). He enjoyed exploring old Gothic churches and “he understood Gothic art as the child Mozart understood music, seeming to recognize in it a language which he knew by nature” (Clutton-Brock 29).

As he grew and his affection for Gothic art deepened, he was saddened by visits to the old places of his youth, seeing many buildings in bad repair, some torn down and replaced with new. In a letter to the wife of his dear friend Edward Burne-Jones, Morris expressed that “we can do nothing to help it or mend it. The world had better say ‘Let us be through with it and see what will come after it!’ ... Now that I am grown old and see that nothing can be done, I half wish that I had not been born with a sense of romance and beauty in this accursed age” (Henderson lxvi).

Due to Morris’ childhood fancies of nature, old traditions and out-of-date Gothic architecture, he was raised to dislike the factories of the Industrial Age. He had a passion

for the past and the old ways and the factory era threatened that, since “the old forms of industry have vanished” from England (Mantoux 47). His distaste for change was uncommonly held by him in opposition to the majority of Industrial society.

### **In Reaction: Love of Nature**

William Morris sustained an intense passion for all things natural, in contrast to the ideology of the Industrial Age. His love of nature was seen throughout his lyrical floral creations. Morris’ tendency toward floral designs was evident in his border and ornament creations with the Kelmscott Press, where “fresh designs were constantly added, the tendency being always towards larger foliage and lighter backgrounds” (Morris 21). Naturalistic layouts are also seen in his many wallpaper designs. Morris’ first wallpaper design was a pattern known as Pomegranate, which proved to be one of his simpler creations, created in a tile pattern. His wallpaper creations were naturalistic and contrasted with the geometric and straight design that frequented the industries (Watkinson 48). Instead of keeping with the strict structure and uninteresting lines of current wallpapers, Morris strayed from the common norms. He made use of meandering lines, forming the natural growth found throughout flowers and plants. His patterns became pieces of living nature, “enabling the designer’s hand to move over the geometric grid with as much freedom as discipline ... constant reference to nature was vital: among other things, it was the only real protection against mere imitation of historic forms” (Watkinson 50). This new take on pattern design revolutionized the method in which patterns were created, and was also due to Morris’ refusal to follow the popular views held by Industrialism.

**In Reaction: Craftsmanship**

William Morris also reacted against the Industrial Age in his disdain for factory produced art. The mass production of art was not natural in Morris' eyes, who instead called for the end of machinery and advocated handicraft production, ultimately wishing all his works to be created in the medieval fashion (Alfoldy 105). He preferred to make his create by hand, reflective of the Medieval Age. This was out of the norm, especially at the height of the Industrial Revolution, when making cheap products in large quantities at a fast past was common.

Morris practiced high standards of craftsmanship in all his various artistic endeavors. His primary concern in the creation of his goods was the quality of their production. When Morris first began his wallpaper venture, he sent his papers to be printed by a local printer, Thomas Clarkson of Preston, but Morris was dissatisfied with the result; the colors were muddy in character and faded quickly. Rather than relying upon machinery to create his art, like many factory owners, he instead created goods by his own hand. He began to experiment with dye recipes on silks and wool, desiring to enhance the quality of color. In 1876, Morris set up a dye house at Queen Square and trained his assistants in the art of hand-dying (Watkinson 46). Morris took the creations of his inks very seriously and kept a careful eye on every step of production:

I am most deeply impressed with the importance of our having all our dyes the soundest and best that can be, and am prepared to give up all that part of my business which depends on textiles if I fail in getting them so. (Watkinson 47)

As Morris' wallpapers became increasingly popular, imitations of his work began to appear. However, he was able to warn his patrons to pay close attention to the differences

in quality, since Morris only adhered to the highest standards throughout the wallpapers' production (Alfoldy 104). While the industry continued to produce shoddy craftsmanship, Morris contrasted against them with his superior, although slower, methods of production.

When developing the Kelmscott Press, Morris was highly involved in every aspect of production, securing only the highest-quality paper and inks for his publications (Mancoff 63). Morris would only use hand-made, laid linen paper in order to preserve the quality and life of the books (Morris 2). His level of involvement was highly atypical during the Industrial Age, with many craftsmen handing over their hand-made work to those of machines (Alfoldy 105). His insistence on being involved in the production of the books in a hands-on manner differed from the norms of the factory age.

Morris was also concerned by not just the function of type, but also its beauty and aesthetic value. Collecting various medieval manuscripts and works, he began studying their type and layout. Morris then designed the 'Golden', 'Troy' and 'Chaucer' typefaces, all which were monumental in the world of type. Before Morris, creators of type were simply concerned with the function of type rather than its visual appeal (Watkinson 57). Many thought the beauty of a letterform would distract the reader from the content and prevent an ease in reading. However, this concerned Morris very little, since he did not care for typography as a stand-alone art, but rather as a piece of the architecture of book creation (58). His concern for the visual appeal of the type, and not just its function, contrasted against the common trends and revolutionized the world of type. Lewis F. Day, a member of the Art Worker's Guild and a designer who worked closely with Morris, commented on his monumental impact on type:



In devising his types, Morris did a real service to typography. Printers generally will no doubt persist in wanting rather lighter type than his; but they cannot help learning from him: he has demonstrated not only the poverty of modern type, but how much better it can be easily made. (58)

To Morris, making letterforms attractive to the eye was a natural part of the process that had been sorely overlooked in the Industrial Age. He commented that “it was only natural that I, a decorator by profession, should attempt to ornament my books suitably: about this matter, I will only say that I have always tried to keep in mind the necessity for making my decoration a part of the page of type” (5). Through designs created through the Kelmscott Press, Morris inspired future designers, such as master calligrapher Edward Johnston and printer Elbert Hubbard, proving that beauty has a place in type (Meggs 172). He believed books were not simply words on a page, but could be incredibly detailed and finely designed pieces of art.

### **In Reaction: Morris and Company**

Throughout Morris’ various endeavors, he thoroughly believed that function cannot exist without beauty, even as the Industrial Age insisted that beauty had no place in function. So in 1860, as Morris began to look for furniture to fill his newly constructed home, the Red House, he discovered the “appalling state of Victorian product and furniture design” (163). In line with his desire to create beautiful things, Morris decided to fill his home with furniture and décor of his own designs, and with this decision his art-decorating career began (163).

In 1861, along with six fellow artists, Morris founded the art-decorating firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company, and by 1875, the firm restructured as Morris

and Company (165). With Morris as sole owner, the firm's purpose was to provide furniture and décor that offered a loveliness which many products at this time lacked, with designs in stain glass, architecture, mural decorations, pattern-tiles, tapestry and wallpaper. He sought to "reform a philistine age by means of decorative arts and, as a first step, to reform the arts themselves" (Alfoldy 105). Through each creation of wallpaper, book or furniture, Morris took a stand against the factory productions he found unacceptable and instead upheld a superior craftsmanship only to be found welded by a craftsman's hand. He reacted against the factories of the Industrial Revolution, and with his passion and standards for quality production, he revolutionized the world of textiles and valuable goods.

### **In Reaction: The Creation of the Arts and Crafts Movement**

As William Morris responded against academic art and the Industrial Age, he emerged as an art revolutionist. He was unfazed by the pressures of utopian beauty art ideals and the compelling allurements of fame many artists of the Academy sought, seeking instead to find meaning in beauty. Along with Pre-Raphaelite artists and those who shared Morris' beliefs, "design and a return to handicraft were advocated, and the "cheap and nasty" mass-produced goods of the Victorian era were abhorred" (Meggs 162). With this wish the Arts and Crafts movement was born.

Foremost in this movement's philosophical thought was writer and artist John Ruskin, who believed "beautiful things were valuable and useful precisely because they were beautiful" (162). He wished for the people of society to live happily and held concern "for social justice, advocating improved housing for industrial workers, a national education system, and retired benefits for the elderly" (162). Sharing Ruskin's

thoughts, Morris believed that “the tastelessness of mass-produced goods and a lack of honest craftsmanship could be addressed by a reunion of art with craft” (165). As a leading figure in the movement, and with the influence of Ruskin’s philosophy, Morris “called for a fitness of purpose, truth to the nature of materials and methods of production, and individual expression by both designer and worker” (162). The Arts and Crafts movement became characterized by three main ideologies, all of which Morris held: make art more accessible, create art with meaning, and improve craftsmanship.

### **Make Art More Accessible**

As discovered previously, art created through various artists in the Royal Academy of Art was commonly reserved for the upper class, for those who could afford to have their likeness depicted in the imitation of perfection rather than true reality. Found among the upper crust of Victorian society was “the general desire among our Nobility to be distinguished as lovers and judges of the Arts; there is a greater superfluity of wealth among the people” (Hook 1). The Academy’s artists, such as Reynolds and Gainsborough, were “less involved with the realities of life and took much less interest in the problems of the majority of the people” and held a certain amount of “frivolity and lack of real concern” towards the lower classes (Rookmaaker 62). However, Morris had passion for making art accessible to all classes of society, especially to those most poor:

I know by my own feelings and desires what these men want, what would have saved them from this lowest depth of savagery: employment which would foster their self-respect and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows... There is only one thing that can give them this, and that is art. (Alfoldy 106)

He hated the machinery of industrial factories not because of the line of progress it presented, but because of how it affected the lives those who operated it. Continually inspired by Ruskin, Morris desired for industrial workers to discover joy in creating their craft and called for an improvement in living conditions for those in “squalid, dismal tenements filled with tacky manufactured goods—could be revitalized” (Meggs 165).

Morris also was an active member of the Socialist Party, even though he was not fond of politics and never thought of himself as a politician by any means. His views were formed by the “Christian-ethical approach to social questions” (Henderson liv) he took, evaluating a State by taking the poorest and lowliest man’s perspective and imagining oneself in the poor man’s place. He gave many lectures, calling people to stand and cure the issue of social inequality, and to remedy the depraved gap between the lowliest poor and loftiest wealthy (Alfoldy 107). Henry Hyndman, the leader of the Social League, of which Morris himself was apart, commented on the effectiveness of Morris’ speech, believing that when Morris spoke he “impressed you with the truth and importance of what he was saying, every hair of his head and in his rough shaggy beard appearing to enter into the subject as a living part of himself” (Henderson lix). Always, Morris’ greatest motivation for championing the cause was to restore the dignity of man that seemed lost in the current industrial progress, or lost in purely academic art. As Morris famously stated in 1877: “I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few” (Blakesley 9).

### **Create Art with Meaning**

As revealed by Morris’ actions throughout his life, one can see he believed that only in rediscovering a fervor for life, as what existed in the Medieval Age, could art

experience a rebirth. This rebirth was seen through the Arts and Crafts Movement, bred out of disgust towards the unrealistic perfection pursued in the various conventional art forms of the Victorian era and the destruction of domestic environments. Morris desired to improve the quality of life for the modern Englishmen (Alfoldy 105). The primary concern of the Arts and Crafts movement was the overwhelming need to “produce furnishings and household goods which were both practical and aesthetically pleasing” (Blakesley 7). Making good design accessible to the general public was one of the primary goals of the movement. The ideology behind this revolution was instigated by author and artist John Ruskin, who believed that nature alone inspired good art, along with the honesty displayed throughout Gothic Art. He was among the first to voice a need for a social standard for meaningful art (Teukolsky 712). In his well-known chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” Ruskin “contrasts the bold, free medieval artisans with the oppressed laborer of the Victorian workshop” (712). Like Ruskin, Morris sought to create not just beautiful art, as seen in academic art, but art with both function and a depth of meaning, for he upheld that “at the center of the notion of function is the human activity or pleasure which design must serve; a design may be generous and exuberant, or trim and austere – and in each case functional” (Watkinson 78). Morris strongly believed in art that possessed both function and beauty, contra popular opinion. He believed emphatically that art, “to be raised above the contempt of reasonable man, must possess three qualities: beauty, imagination and order” (49). Morris revolutionized the world of art during the Victorian Era by advocating art with meaning, which became emblematic of the Arts and Crafts movement.

**Improve Craftsmanship**

Morris held a fierce adoration of the medieval methods of craftsmanship and found the present repulsive, objecting “to our cities being made into infernos of noise and dirt...object[ing] to the progressive ruination of the countryside by the creeping fungus of suburban growth” (Henderson xxxvii). While Morris in no way opposed industrial progress of machines, he did oppose the negative effects it had upon the production of art. He held quality craftsmanship to the highest standard and saw too much shoddy craftsmanship in the new technologies of the day. Sympathetic to John Ruskin’s opinions, Morris believed that “the tastelessness of mass-produced goods and a lack of honest craftsmanship could be addressed by a reunion of art with craft” (Meggs 165).

As previously discussed, Morris aspired to higher quality in what he created, using only the best inks and papers for his printing and wallpapers. His books were printed only on “very fine vellum obtained from Rome” (Morris 19). His insistence on procuring and producing the highest quality goods stood in marked relief against the lack of craftsmanship displayed throughout the Industrial Age. Morris believed that if one “concentrate[d] on making anything well, then Beauty will look after herself” (Henderson xxxvii). His insistence on high standards in production revolutionized the world of art in the Industrial Age.

**In Conclusion: The Revolutionary**

William Morris was an artistic revolutionary, opposing the expectations of his family, the standards of academic art in the Victorian Era, and the aesthetic ills of the Industrial Age. Morris reacted against the social norms and beliefs of what defined art during his time. He countered what he saw as the stale conventions the Royal Academy

of Art, which upheld idealized beauty over complete authenticity, and instead advocated for purpose and definition behind paintings. He stood against the demoralizing and inhumane factory systems of the Industrial Age, advocating for a depth of beauty and meaningful aesthetics in a world of pure function. Morris was an unlikely hero, always motivated by his love for art above any personal vendetta. The resilience and lasting influence of the Arts and Crafts movement so deeply influenced by Morris greatly impacted the artistic milieu of his time and has left an echoing legacy across design today. As William Morris affirmed, “history has remembered the kings and warriors, because they destroyed; art has remembered the people, because they created” (Bloomfield 1119).

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