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William Morris Arts & Crafts Aesthetic Rhetoric

Andrew King

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For forty years William Morris attempted to realize John Ruskin's vision of the citizen-artist through his famous Arts & Crafts movement. Morris was after more than the unity of high art and everyday craft. He promised the moral reformation of the worker and the transformation of society through the institutionalization of the craft aesthetic.

Andrew King, PhD is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Louisiana State University. Correspondence to: 136 Coates Hall Louisiana State University Baton Rouge, LA 70803
Email: andyk@lsu.edu

Significance of the Movement

Postindustrial society is haunted by the fading artifacts of the Victorian Arts & Crafts Movement. It is also haunted by its aesthetic vision and its communal ethic. The Arts & Crafts Movement promised a new dignity for labor, an aesthetically beautiful environment, a gradual abolition of caste and class, and a moral and spiritual improvement of human character.

The movement's founding leader, William Morris, promised that utilitarian objects would become works of art thus transforming bored and benighted laborers into inspired craftsmen. Morris said that to practice one's craft was to become enlightened and ennobled. Like Jefferson's yeoman farmers or St. Francis' mendicants, the artist-craft workers were destined to serve as a cadre for the regeneration of nations. As all members of a given community became either producers or consumers of unique individually produced objects of art, a profound social healing would result. [1]

Moreover, the centrality of all the arts from pottery to architecture would be restored. Morals and manners would be improved. Under the pursuit of a craft aesthetic, social unity might be strengthened. The movement even fostered a common sense of ownership of the national landscape. Morris foresaw the rise of a kind of land ethic. A new sense of accountability would emerge to rescue green England from under the bleak carcass of the industrial wasteland. Arts & Crafts celebrated the braided strength of art, virtue, and work. Even imperialism and mass production would be abandoned with the advance of homo aestheticus. A full exposition of Morris's techniques, works and vision can be seen at the William Morris Society site. http://www.morrissociety.org

Of course, William Morris and his followers failed to achieve these Utopian aims. His stained glass, medieval murals, wallpapers and fabric designs turned out to be so labor intensive that only wealthy cultured voluptuary could afford them. His beautifully crafted household utensils were too expensive to compete with cheap mass produced goods. Etched against the immense squalor of industrial Britain and North America, the buildings of Morris and his mentor, John Ruskin, were little more than a scattering of sunbeams in an architectural midnight. But while Morris died bankrupt and bitterly disappointed, his legacy lived on in the Roycroft of North America, in the craft communes of the 1960's and in the booming Modern Arts Crafts Movement on five continents. The style, if not the social ethic, of Arts & Crafts is alive and well in millions of homes and businesses around the world. [2] A gallery of William Morris Works can be seen here. http://www1.walthamforest.gov.uk/wmg/

Yet, whatever the fate of the 19th century Arts & Crafts aesthetic adventure, we continue to be obsessed with its ideas. While Arts & Crafts wallpaper, design and book graphics are experiencing a renaissance, it is Morris's ideas of human character and community that continue to haunt us. The idea that the inculcation of craft art on a society wide scale might build an engaged and enlightened citizenry remains immensely attractive in the 21st century. Morris argued that the pursuit of beauty would eventually produce a just moral order.

Morris's emphasis on character and community was a reaction to the arrival of mass society and to the loss of a sense of transcendent order in Victorian England. A sharp decline of belief in the eternal verities during the crepuscular decades of the 19th century produced the same turning inward that we find in the present era of atomized individualism and spiritual homelessness. The deskilling of workers (industrial workers in Morris's day and professionals in our own) and the slovenly ugliness of contemporary landscapes-- so very like the hideous noveau riche mansions of 1880's Highgate--has historicized Morris's rhetoric. A new age of alienation has renewed the poignancy of his message. Finally, Morris's rhetoric has relevance for modern agrarians and ecologists, providing a poetic and visionary power that may allow them to break out of the confrontational standoff of developers and consumers. Accordingly, the remainder of this essay will explore Morris's Rhetoric of Aesthetics.

The Intellectual Milieu of Arts & Crafts

The Arts and Crafts Movement was a reaction against the ugliness and despair of British industrial society. Born in the early decades of the Industrial Revolution, Morris saw the green and pleasant land of England changed to a land of 'satanic mills' during his boyhood and early manhood. Ancient handcrafts gave way to shoddy factory produced products. Together with his mentor John Ruskin, Morris decried the hideous mansions of the nouveau riche, and the garish pseudo-Gothic buildings at Oxford so richly lampooned in Thomas Hardy's Jude *the Obscure*. [3]

Like most revolutionaries, Morris backed into the future. Just as many French revolutionary leaders idolized Cicero and proclaimed that they were restoring a version of the Roman Republic, Morris's central figure, *the independent craftsman* was drawn from a highly idealized version of the Middle Ages (Faulkner, 1992, p. 12). The idea of the contented guild crafts worker was very old; the idea that this worker would serve as the new social template and as the agent of revolutionary social change was very new.

But in a broad sense, Morris's movement was a reaction to the generic fears of his generation. The obsession with Gemeinschaft and Gessellschaft, with the loss of community, with the decline of connectedness, with the alienation of workers from their work; with the seeming separation of art and science, and the widening gulf between mass production and handicraft were common themes of British reform from Carlyle to Marx to John Bright [4]. Morris feared that the scientists and industrialists who dominated the nation were indifferent to his humanistic objectives: (1) the fullest development of the cultivated individual and, (2) the creation of a society that was beautiful and livable because it was guided by a practical aesthetic code. Sensing that science rejected the idea of intrinsic values, and viewed artistic creation and the ideal of an organic community as purely normative and temporary states (to be surpassed) Morris came to the conclusion that the core value of science was nothing more than intellectual curiosity.

Morris believed in an idea – later so powerfully advanced by Max Weber - that while both art and science were born in the workshops of the Renaissance artists, science eventually undermined humanism as a measure of human worth and created social tensions that remain unresolved to this day. Although Weber offered Sociology as a fusion of Science, Humanism and Art, his late writings blamed science for the disenchantment of the world. In positing that all questions were in principle answerable, Science changed Nature from a magic garden into a world without ultimate mysteries. (Weber, 1946, p. 137) Morris's beliefs were in line with Weber's critique of disenchantment: He felt that from the viewpoint of Science, human life offers no measure of ultimate fulfillment. At the root of Morris's fear and ambivalence of the machine was the belief that as science penetrated one sphere after another all traditional means of assigning significance (including aesthetics, social order, and the fulfilled life) would be smashed utterly or (as we might say today) be viewed as merely temporary and normative conceptions.

Morris retreated to the era of pre-science, the mature craft guilds of the late middle ages. His fascination with the pre-scientific era of medieval organicism was common if not exactly commonplace in his time. The middle and late decades of the 19th century were halcyon days for the European formation of medieval jousting societies, festivals, and literary revivals.

By the late 19th and early 20th century no one doubted that the method and outlook of science brought it into conflict with traditional ethical and social values. Julian Benda saw a disjuncture between science and public virtues turning the intellectual into a technician instead of a citizen (Benda, 1953, Chapter Two). Thorstein Veblen worried that science with its great mastery of the material conditions of life, social control and mastery of nature gravitated to centers of power. Thus science took on the agenda of whoever was paying the fiddler, generally large corporations or national governments (Veblen, 1957, pp. 162-164). And while Weber and his pupil, Pitrim Sorokin, lamented the disjuncture between science and humanism, other thinkers worried about the effect upon the arts. As early as the 1860's William Morris and John Ruskin began to wonder if science and technology were not antithetical to art. Ruskin believed that science might liquidate not only aesthetic values but would eventually destroy all human values that were not purely instrumental (Ruskin, 1964, p. 124). Morris worried that science had become the lamp genie of powerful industrialists who would systematically debase art through the mass production process.

While Morris's original Arts & Crafts Movement died after a single incandescent generation it created a rhetorical aesthetic that still inspires craft communities today. His arguments for the uniqueness of the art object, against the mechanical (and now electric) fragmentation of the aesthetic experience and for the practice of art by ordinary people as a morally transforming experience were the foundation of the later aesthetic critiques by Walter Benjamin, Jacques Barzun and Wendell Berry. Morris lamented that the rise of science and technology had removed the artist from direct contact with the materials of art. It had turned the artist into a theorist while delegating to the craft worker the practice of art in the ordinary occupations of life. He argued that since science has jettisoned the

claim to establish ultimate verities or values, a huge liquidation of traditional wisdom and social lore was occurring in England as Science became the norm for what he called 'correct thinking.' In restoring craft art, Morris hoped to restore dignity and autonomy to ordinary workers even if Science might argue that such terms have no ultimate meaning.

This paper will revisit Morris's Arts and Crafts aesthetic with special emphasis on its visionary and prophetic dimensions. For example, Morris predicted that if unchecked the scientific values such as instrumentalism, pragmatism, operationalism and other forms of positivism would remove serious art form the national cultural life and restrict it to cultic spaces. With the segregation and marginalization of 'High Art' ordinary people would be trained to prefer mass-produced decorative art that had no relationship to their working lives.

Life and Aspirations of Morris

Morris was a polymath. He was a gifted translator of Northern mythology, a hugely popular Victorian poet, author, painter, publisher, actor, lecturer, craftsman, inventor and entrepreneur. The scion of a wealthy business family, the young artist-rebel attended Oxford at the height of the British medieval revival. In a mid-century carnival of sentimental escapism, industrialists were buying buckram-bound sets of Chaucer. Impetuous youths were donning chain mail in clumsy midwinter tourneys, pledging young women who stood just beyond the touch lines, their wine-colored flags vivid against the stony-crop and bleached grass of the fields of honor. Morris joined a literary club called *The Set* at a time when the reading group was obsessed with Arthurian legend. He and the future painter, Alan Burne-Jones, recited the works of Tennyson, Southey and other medieval-minded poets at meetings of the society (Boos, 1996, p. 32). Like the great Daniel Webster, young Morris was deeply stirred by the Waverly novels and may have actually contracted what Mark Twain would call the Sir Walter Scott disease, an obsession with all things romantic, medieval and mythological.

In his final year at Oxford (1855), Morris began writing Arthurian poetry. His passion for all things Arthurian and medieval never abated, and in even in old age as an angry socialist he remained strongly cathected to courtly murals and Brythonic designs. In the twilight of his Oxford career (early 1856) he underwrote The Set's famous literary periodical, *The Oxford and Cambridge Review*. Here Morris published his popular Arthurian poem, "The Chapel of Lyonesse." Working with Burne-Jones, Morris executed a series of Arthurian murals on the ceilings of the Oxford Union. Despite Burne-Jones's wunderkind palate neither painter knew how to preserve the murals either from the famous Oxford humidity or from the acrid smoke of the infamous Oxford kerosene lamps. The general opinion of the time was that the mural burst into being like the Sun in the heavens, but quickly muddied in hue and began to blister and fade in a few months. After leaving Oxford Morris and his friends continued their Cathedral tours of the British Isles and the Continent. These beautiful buildings took hold of Morris's dreams and days. He had fallen under Ruskin's spell, a great builder who taught that cathedrals were among the noblest European achievement because they had allowed for the unleashing of the creative power of the individual craftsman (Poulson, 2001, p. 9).

Ruskin taught that art must not be a monopoly of the intellectual elite. Artistic greatness must be communal greatness, the result of a large multitude of ordinary people expressing their personal artistic visions, often in commonplace tasks and practical objects. The measure of a civilization was the degree to which the intelligence and passion of ordinary people went into the making of tools, furniture, houses, and routine public adornment. For Morris the Arts & Crafts Movement made Ruskin's idea into a practical program.

In 1858 Morris produced a volume of Arthurian poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere*. Thirty poems dealt with spiritual crisis, violence, lost love, betrayal, willful destruction and murderous jealousy. The unresolved quality of the book and the meteoric success of Tennyson's rival book, *Idylls of the King*, may explain the rather tepid public response. The book had a long run, but early sales discouraged Morris from writing literature of any kind for another eight years (Shaw, 1996, p. 301-302). In later years the book was admired by Eliot, Pound, Auden and Yeats. The Russian Imagists admired Morris and his brilliant commentary on Chaucer, and his translations of the Odyssey and many Icelandic sagas brought the offer of a professorship at Oxford. He refused the offer just as he refused to stand for Poet Laureate on the grounds that these were distractions from his life mission. In 1859 he created the famous Red House, a home in which every detail was drawn from medieval prototypes. The next year Morris launched his famous textile company Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company. It created numerous stained glass windows, public murals, furniture and decorative art.

Morris the Orator

In 1877 Morris helped to found and to fund the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and also began to speak on its behalf. A timid orator at the outset he was soon striding the platform like a confident panther. [5] With John Ruskin he was one of a cadre of speakers dedicated to the new art movement. He enlisted Oscar Wilde to speak on behalf of the movement during the young Wilde's famous North American tour in the 1880's. For a full account of Wilde's tour one might look at http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde. And www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/wildeov.html . American versions of the Arts & Crafts Movement grew up in Boston, Buffalo and Cincinnati. Morris established the Kelmscott Press and made beautifully bound and decorated books that remain a sort of gold standard in publishing to this day. (Dreyfus, 1989, p. 3). Late in life Morris became a Socialist orator in the belief that the only way to empower the worker as a craft-artist was through public ownership of workplaces. Internationally famous, he died bankrupt and bitter. In a late work, *News From Nowhere*, he envisioned a world without dull and degrading labor, without mindless standardization and commercial exploitation, but the aging Morris feared that his new world would not come peacefully. For the workers "it was war from beginning to end; bitter war" before the Utopia could be won. (Morris, 1893, Art, Wealth and Riches, p. 428)

Morris's speeches are Ciceronian in the sense that a few themes are endlessly developed. They could also be called Ciceronian in that every question is framed in the

larger context of the manners and morals of the age and the impact upon the fate of the larger community. Every scene is historicized and interpreted as a moral lesson. Thus on speaking of the prospect of London as seen by a traveler:

You see, sirs, we cannot quite imagine it, any more perhaps than our forefathers of ancient London living in the pretty, carefully whitened houses, with the famous church and its huge spire rising above them – than they passing about the fair gardens running down to the broad river, could have imagined a whole country covered over with hideous hovels, big, middle-sized and little, which should one day be called London (Morris, 1877, The Decorative Arts p. 5). Not only England, but also the world was nearing a crisis point in the "dead blank of the arts." Morris lived in the flood tide of British Imperialism and he worried that the anarchy and disorganization of the arts were being spread worldwide by beef-eating Englishmen to every part of the Globe. (Morris, p. 6) He laments those parts of the underdeveloped world that "are subject to commercial accident through the arrival of a few shiploads of European dye stuffs or a few dozen orders from European merchants." (Morris, p. 6) The same deep pessimism was being echoed by the immensely popular writer Joseph Conrad in his worry about pre-imperial areas that lie beyond "the telegraph cables and mail boat lines" that transmit "the haggard utilitarian lies of our civilization" and will destroy "the deep hidden truthfulness" of their "works of art (Conrad, Lord Jim, p. 227)." At home the very landscape itself is being destroyed by industrialism. He speaks of "the burying of Lancashire" and of the "huge castles of Essex and Kent: that "are buried mountains deep under fantastic folly and hideous squalor, and no one has the courage to say 'Let us seek a remedy while any of our wealth is left us…Riches has made a strange home for you (Morris, Art Wealth and Riches, p. 433)." Thus industrialism has destroyed the very character of the land. The exploitation of the work is even responsible for the linguistic divide in Britain, a result of that "vulgarity …the blossoming of competitive commerce."

> Just think of the significance of one fact, that here in England, in the 19th century, among all the shouts of progress that have been raised for many years, the greater number of people are doomed by accident of their birth to misplace their aitches, that there are two languages talked in England: gentlemen's English and workman's English. (Morris, 430)."

His central claim is that the most important benefit of the application of guild art to the production process will be the salvation of the worker. He speaks on behalf of "work with a mind" and for "intelligent versus unintelligent labor." Morris would reunite the head and the hand, a union that industrial production had torn asunder. Craft's workers must become artists who are "the designers and the manufacturers of products." (Morris, p. 428) We must eschew the suede-wealth of the great industrialists for "true wealth is mental wealth" (Morris, p 432). And while the "possession of beauty " is "an eager desire" among all people, the most important thing is the internal character formation and spiritual development of the artist-worker practicing a communally valued craft. Morris prizes "the development of the faculty that creates beauty." (Morris, The Decorative arts, p. 7)

Moreover, the worker is not simply one factor in the recovery of the arts and the just society. The worker is the central figure, the key to it. "The only real help must come from those who work in them, {*the arts*} nor must they be led, they must lead. (Morris, The Decorative Arts, 1877)." In *Kunst Und Socialisme*, Bruno Burkhardt said of Morris: "Romanticism never satisfied Morris. It was about aesthetes dreaming of a sensual fantasy world. Morris was about horny-handed workers thinking, working, re-working, designing, and rediscovering forgotten techniques (Burkhardt, p. 44)." Morris asked, "What business have we with art unless all can share it? Only from the life of the people could there come a living art." (Nineham, April 1996, p. 2)

Conclusion

Morris is being rediscovered as a spokesman for the arts because of his broad appeal. His unflagging belief in the relationship between artistic practice and character development is being voiced again. He argued that the arts are not peripheral in any sense; they are of central importance to human life. While the Pre-Raphaelites are forgotten and his fellow reformers are dim memories, Morris touches us deeply. A new visually minded generation has rediscovered his art, and a new legion of Morrisites is spreading his ideas on five continents [6]. Like Jeffersonian agrarianism, Arts & Crafts is a way of life, praxis. Furthermore, it is a visible praxis, one that transforms one's surroundings and builds character and community. Years ago Kenneth Burke explained to a group of disputing professors that Identity was a much better word than persuasion. Identity was not so much about intellectual assent, but about a group of people acting together. Through engagement civic and communal structures come into being and people transcend individual and parochial interests. That is the enduring power of the idea of Arts & Crafts; it points beyond the mastery of craft or the creation of beauty and toward a Utopian vision of an engaged and enlightened citizenry.

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Notes:

[1] The best biography of Morris is William Eshleman's 1949 biography, *William Morris, Prophet of England's New Order,* published by London's Camden Press in 1949. More than other biographies it gives a sense of the enormous magnetism that Morris

exuded in every area of human endeavor that he touched. His stormy enthusiasm infected others and gave them the missionary spirit.

[2] Paul Thomas traces the influence of Morris's ideas on areas far beyond the arena of design. Morris's ideas have much to say to ecologists, architects, city planners, and economists. See Paul Thompson's *Why William Morris Matters Today: Human Creativity and the Future World Environment*. UK: William Morris Society Publications (1991).

[3] Hardy lampoons the 19th century obsession at both Oxford and Cambridge (it extended to Yale's wrapping of its lovely 18th century buildings with rubble) with medieval fortress building. The pseudo-Gothic filled people like Ruskin and Morris with despair.

[4] The bridging concept among all these writers is the British worker's alienation from the job at hand. Engels' famous description of the British worker as "a creature dead from the neck upward" indicated not native stupidity, but the idea that the mass production process had deskilled the worker.

[5] George Bernard Shaw gives some insights about Morris as a speaker. Shaw was his companion in a number of meetings and public lectures and a comrade on the Socialist circuit in the 1890's. See Shaw's *William Morris as I knew Him*. London: Knightsbridge Press, 1936.

[6] *The Journal of William Morris Studies* contains more than forty years of scholarship about Morris. Back copies can be obtained at The William Morris Society in London. All information about the journal and the Society can be obtained at uk@morrissociety.org.