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William Morris and the ‘Ruskinian’ Crafts Revival

Chiaki Yokoyama

It has been long said that the moral teachings of John Ruskin were most influential to William Morris’s idea of handicrafts and the Victorian Arts and Crafts theory itself. ‘The Nature of Gothic’, Chapter VI of *The Stones of Venice* II (1853) by Ruskin, taught young Morris the most important element of art: ‘art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour.’(1) Morris asserts that this moral teaching showed ‘a new road’ for him to take. Still, in practice, many sources from his predecessors and contemporaries influenced Morris. A Victorian architect and designer, J.D. Sedding (1838–91) maintained at the Art Congress in Liverpool in 1888 that ‘[they] should have had no Morris, no Street, no Burges, no Shaw, no Webb, no Bodley, no Rossetti, no Burne-Jones, no Crane, but for Pugin’. (2) Also Morris’s theory of design shared many ideas with other leading designers of the time. According to Paul Thompson, ‘Morris added nothing significant to their ideas, nor did he solve the essential problem that they had failed to answer: where should the balance be drawn between natural and conventional form, between tradition and originality?’(3)

But is it true? This essay examines Morris’s practice in design in relation with Ruskin’s theory and the design by his contemporaries.(4)

(1) William Morris as a Pattern Designer

Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites
Even though William Morris’s theory of lesser arts was holy writ to the Arts and Crafts Movement and was to influence a whole range of craft works including three-dimensional as well as two-dimensional ones, Morris himself was a two-dimensional designer, basically working on a flat surface. In the production of the Firm, three-dimensional crafts were executed by others.

But even the three-dimensional furniture of the Firm was sometimes designed to stand for two-dimensional ornament. Ray Watkinson points out that the simple forms of furniture for the Red House provided large flat areas for the pictorial decoration by Morris and his friends. Watkinson adds that this pictorial decoration of three-dimensional crafts was not particularly invented by Morris and the Pre-Raphaelite artists, but I would say that this narrative quality of furniture decoration of the early days of Morris and his company was highly original and important in the relation with his later pattern design.\(^5\) Morris, like Ruskin, always asks ‘meaning’ for pattern design to be understood and shared with the user. The story-telling expression to be ‘read’ in the early products is the origin of his pattern design, which must have been influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites as well as by Ruskin who demanded of architectural ornament to be read and understood.

This joint project of the painter and the architect in the Firm also gave the Pre-Raphaelite artists the opportunity to fulfil their original aim of influencing all branches of art. William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) recollects the first aspiration of the Brotherhood as follows:

I still linger in the joint studio to explain the nature of the talk we had there on the subject of our future operations and influence. We spoke of the improvement of design in
household objects, furniture, curtains, and interior decorations, and dress; of how we would exercise our skill, as the early painters had done, not in one branch of art only, but in all.\(^6\)

One of their attempts was the furniture designed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1928–82) for Morris and Co., which was exhibited in the International Exhibition of 1862. A surviving sketch of one of his exhibits shows Rossetti’s rather constructional than pictorial furniture which reveals the strong influence of Egypt and Japan.\(^7\)

![Sketch of settle designed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti](image)

This example supports the following passage from Hunt’s recollection: ‘Architecture also [Rossetti] recognized as the proper work of the painter, who, learning the principles of construction from...
Nature herself, could apply them to the forming and decoration of the stone, iron and wood he had to deal with. Another Pre-Raphaelite, John Everett Millais (1829-96), already had made many designs for churches and other architectural ornaments under the influence and encouragement of Ruskin as early as 1853. Millais designed the window for Camden Chapel with Ruskin’s support, which was not executed due to the end of Ruskin’s marriage with Effie and Millais’s usurpation of his master’s position as her new husband. Even in this precarious relation, Ruskin still encouraged Millais to complete his design for the chapel.

I believe that this Pre-Raphaelite interest in crafts in general prompted the shift of Morris’s intended career from a painter to a handicraftsman, while he was under the strong spell of Rossetti. Even in his pattern design, he continually kept the painter’s viewpoint which may have prevented him from accepting totally geometrical treatment of subjects. Ruskin supported the symbolism combined with realism in the Pre-Raphaelites’ expression. It conveys the hidden meaning and story. In pattern-designing, Morris asks for ‘meaning’ to be shared with and understood by the beholder. Hence, ‘without meaning, [your work] were better not to exist.’ (Morris, 22. 106)

The Firm’s success in business depended on the emphasis on two-dimensional productions such as printed textiles and wallpapers. They were easy to be produced in quantity to meet consumer demand. Consequently two-dimensional design engaged Morris and established him as a pattern-designer.

Morris and his Contemporary Designers

All through his craftsmanship, however, pattern design and pattern choosing were ‘architectural art’ for Morris: ‘A pattern is but
part of any scheme of decoration, and its value will be derived in great part from its surroundings."(12) In this sense, Morris clearly shared the idea of ornament as a part of architectural construction with his precursors, and with nineteenth-century designers such as A.W.N. Pugin, Owen Jones and Christopher Dresser. Also Morris shared their rejection of realism in two-dimensional ornament and their conventional treatment of subject-matter. Owen Jones’s *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) influenced Morris as a pattern designer.

Still the similarity of their perspectives as craftsmen ends here. As the designers who shared popularity in the market, Morris and Dresser did not have any communication and interaction; since their goals for the promotion of crafts were fundamentally different.

For Henry Cole’s group and for Dresser, good design by manufacturers and good taste among the public were the keys to stimulating British industry. They looked at their new craftsmanship as a means of adding profit to a mere material. At the beginning of *Principles of Decorative Design* (1873), Dresser clearly announces this point:

Art-knowledge is of value to the individual and to the country at large. To the individual it is riches and wealth, and to the nation it saves impoverishment. Take, for example, clay as a natural material: in the hands of one man this material becomes flower-pots, worth eighteen-pence a ‘cast’ (a number varying from sixty to twelve according to size); in the hands of another it becomes a tazza, or a vase, worth five pounds, or perhaps fifty. It is the art which gives the value, and not the material. To the nation it saves impoverishment. (13)
Incorporating crafts into industry, Dresser as well as Cole group were willing to use machinery for mass-production. Their teaching was directed to improve Victorian taste as general but not to the quality of labour involved. Henry Cole rejected three-dimensional realism for the flat surface on the ground that it is not appropriate for mass-production.\(^{14}\)

For Morris, the expression of man’s pleasure of labour through handicrafts should be the kernel of the re-evaluation of crafts.

This difference in stance also explains Morris’s reaction towards Orientalism which strongly influenced his contemporaries; Moorish influence on Jones and Japanese on Dresser and E.W.Godwin. As a craftsman, Morris appreciated the arts of India and Persia, and Japanese art also fascinated him. He was one of the customers of those London dealers, such as Liberty and Murray Marks & Company, importing Japanese art. While adopting oriental methods and using oriental crafts as his model, however, Morris himself never took part in the strong cult of Orientalism which was the most influential for the art of the latter half of nineteenth century. The quintessence of Morris’s craftsmanship is his ability to create something of his own out of a variety of methods by digesting and, sometimes, combining them. Nikolaus Pevsner refers to this fact as follows: ‘Morris was so far from inventing decorative forms for invention’s sake, that if he found models however remote in space or time which met his purpose, he made use of them or at least came under their spell, even if this happened against his own will.’\(^{15}\)

As Pevsner’s comment suggests, even if he got the creative hints from Oriental art, Orientalism was against Morris’s own will because it failed to look at art in its social context. John M. MacKenzie
succinctly points out this difference in *Orientalism* as follows:

[T]here was a tension between the valuation of oriental art and design, its power to inspire western artists, and the political and racial contexts from which it emerged. Some commentators, notably Jones and Dresser, seemed to ignore these relationships, while for others, like Ruskin, they were insuperable.\(^{(16)}\)

For Ruskin, it was humanity and moral in society and culture that should beget the right ornament. Thus his imperialistic belief that Western culture is civilized and Indian society is barbarous brushed aside the art of India, and criticized the ornament of the Alhambra, the inspiration of Jones's design, as 'detestable' (Ruskin, 16. 311) and 'fit for nothing but to be transferred to patterns of carpets or bindings of books' sarcastically. (Ruskin, 9.469)\(^{(17)}\) The latter pejorative comment obviously hinted at the regular and symmetrical interior designs created by Jones and his followers. He expounds on this point by pointing out the lack of ability of those uncivilized people to interpret nature as follows:

All ornamentation of that lower kind is pre-eminently the gift of cruel persons, of Indians, Saracens, Byzantians, and is the delight of the worst and cruellest nations, Moorish, Indian, Chinese, South Sea Islanders, and so on. I say it is their peculiar gift; not, observe, that they are only capable of doing this, while other nations are capable of doing more; but that they are capable of doing this in a way which civilized nations cannot equal. The fancy and
delicacy of eye in interweaving lines and arranging colours -- mere line and colour, observe, without natural form -- seems to be somehow an inheritance of ignorance and cruelty, belonging to men as spots to the tiger or hues to the snake. (Ruskin, 16.307nl)

Even though he did not reject the achievement of oriental art, Morris shared Ruskin’s ‘civilized’ Western eye. While praising the pattern-designing art of Persia, Morris continues:

But, you see, its whole soul was given up to producing matters of subsidiary art, as people call it; its carpets were of more importance than its pictures; nay, properly speaking, they were its pictures. And it may be that such an art never has a future of change before it, save the change of death, which has now certainly come over that Eastern art; while the more impatient, more aspiring, less sensuous art which belongs to Western civilization may bear many a change and not die utterly. (Morris, 22.105)

This is why he tried to distance himself from the contemporary artists working under the banner of Orientalism. In a paper read before the Trade’s Guild of Learning and the Birmingham Society of Artists, ‘Making the Best of It’, Morris clearly denies the relation with them in his advice on colour applied to the wall:

[D]o not fall into the trap of a dingy bilious-looking yellow-green, a colour to which I have a special and personal hatred, because (if you will excuse my
mentioning personal matters) I have been supposed to have somewhat brought it into vogue. I assure you I am not really responsible for it. (Morris, 22.100)

Yellow-green, or 'greenery-yallery', was accepted as Anglo-Japanese colour at the time and so popular as to invite its usage to satirize this 'aesthetic' cult.

Another reason for Morris's attempt to disconnect himself from mere Oriental fad must have come from his strong scepticism concerning the quality of production in commercialism. Morris understood the system that this European enthusiasm led to mass-production and promoted the degeneration of quality of Oriental works which had already been deteriorated for quite a long time by then.

Still Morris's own remark above reveals the irony that, for the Victorian general public, Morris's name was an easy label to put on anything popular in the field of interior design. The public was quite heedless of the creed and principles of individual artist's creation.

(2) Pattern Design of William Morris -- the Meaning of Growth

The 'Power' of Growth in Dresser's Design

Before the appearance of William Morris's pattern design, geometrical arrangement of pattern design formed the main trend. After the accurate studies of nature, both Jones and Dresser chose the rigid geometrical treatment of plants, as Owen Jones's Proposition 8 in *The Grammar of Ornament* instructs that '[a] ll ornament should be based upon a geometrical construction'.

That is why Dresser received and conveyed the growth of plants in straight lines. Both for Morris and Dresser, the feeling of 'growth'
was the essence of design, but their patterns respectively embody their workmanship. For Dresser, who accepted the industrial age as his own and tried to create designs for mass-production and machinery, 'now'
was the start of golden age. The power of plants to burst out expresses his belief in the Victorian age best. In the explanation of his motto of decorative art, ‘Truth, Beauty, Power’, Dresser urges as follows:

With what power do the plants burst from the earth in spring! With what power do the buds develop into branches! The powerful orator is a man to be admired, the powerful thinker a man we esteem. [...] Power also manifests earnestness; power means energy; power implies a conqueror. Our compositions, then, must be powerful.

But besides all this, we, the professors of decorative art, must manifest power in our works, for we are teachers sent forth to instruct, and ennoble, and elevate our fellow-creatures. We shall not be believed if we do not utter our truths with power; let truth, then, be uttered with power, and in the form of beauty. (19)

Thus his design is filled with angular and straight lines with the power to break through the obstacles.

The Process of Growth in Morris's Design

Morris never made any comments upon Dresser's theory and designs. They shared quite a few points in practical theory, but their difference in design is obvious if we compare Dresser's design with Morris's. Morris disliked the geometrical treatment of plants into harsh lines. (20) In ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’ (1881), Morris urges students to avoid making ‘accidental lines’: ‘As to such lines, vertical lines are the worst; diagonal ones are pretty bad, and horizontal
ones do not so much matter.’ (Morris, 22.191) His treatment of ‘growth’ in curvature represents slow but vigorous development of structure, and conveys the impression of eternity of progress.

Morris’s attitude as a craftsman with his belief that we should look upon ‘History’ and ‘Nature’ as our great teachers is embodied here. Morris rejected the art which was not rooted in tradition, but still, which was not possibly passed down to next generation as legacy of our particular age. We have to learn from the past, but at the same time we have to add the expression of our time on it. Morris extends Ruskin’s idea and proceeds one step further from The Lamp of Memory and The Lamp of Obedience explained in The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849) in this encouragement of ‘moving forward’:

No pattern should be without some sort of meaning. True it is that that meaning may have come down to us traditionally, and not be our own invention, yet we must at heart understand it, or we can neither receive it, nor hand it down to our successors. It is no longer tradition if it is servilely copied, without change, the token of life. You may be sure that the softest and loveliest of patterns will weary the steadiest admirers of their school as soon as they see that here is no hope of growth in them. For you know all art is compact of effort, of failure and of hope, and we cannot but think that somewhere perfection lies ahead, as we look anxiously for the better thing that is to come from the good. (Morris, 22.111)

Tradition should have its own life and should be growing, too. This remark is reminiscent of what Morris learned from ‘On the Nature of
Gothic and the Function of the Workman therein' by Ruskin 'that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life, and that the social life of the Middle Ages allowed the workman freedom of individual expression, which on the other hand our social life forbids him' (Morris, 22.323). Morris's attempt was to put Victorian crafts in the steady growth of tradition by following the model of this healthy past.

In every lecture on ideal design and architecture, Morris always traces and delineates the history of development and decline of art, and tries to found our position in that long history. He inherited this attitude from Ruskin through *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*. Through them, Ruskin explores the foundation, development and decline of architecture in the course of history. He traces this history through phases of 'Greek', 'Romanesque', 'Gothic' and 'Renaissance' in styles.

In lecturing about the history of pattern-design, Morris follows Ruskin's argument referring to the development of architectural styles. As Ruskin emphasizes the detailed surface ornament of building, Morris attributes the origin of each pattern design to architecture of individual age. Starting with ancient Egyptian architecture, Morris shows the gradual growth of design by underlying the reciprocal influence among different styles, and especially recognizes the value of the transitional period from one style to another. This method gives more an impression of continuous growth than a mere comparison of different styles. Morris eulogizes the feat of the Romans because their architecture possessed the seminal power to grow, which enabled the style to be 'fit for one purpose as for another -- church, house, aqueduct, market-place, or castle', and fit 'to north or south, snow-storm or sand-storm alike', while Greek sculpture had 'no elasticity or
power of growth about the style' (Morris, 22.221). Morris attributes this embryonic power of Roman style to their invention of the arch, whose practicality allowed the flexibility of style and which, in itself, was the sign of growth in the future Gothic style. Like Ruskin, Morris enthrones the Gothic which not only developed the power of the arch but also gave life to the pattern design 'where one member grows naturally and necessarily out of another, where the whole thing is alive as a real tree or flower is' (Morris, 22.222).

Morris's design revives this tradition of Gothic ornament. While Dresser's pattern suddenly bursts from 'now' as an origin to future, Morris's pattern expresses the whole process of growth -- past, present and future -- in its eternal curve. All stages of growth -- bud, a flower which is about to bloom, and a flower in full bloom -- are depicted in the same pattern. The nucleus of the pattern is the thick stem drawing strong curve from which each element springs out elegantly and vigorously. Morris advocates as follows:

Rational growth is necessary to all patterns, or at least the hint of such growth; and in recurring patterns, at least, the noblest are those where one thing grows visibly and necessarily from another. Take heed in this growth that each member of it be strong and crisp, that the lines do not get thready or flabby or too far from their stock to sprout firmly and vigorously; even where a line ends it should look as if it had plenty of capacity for more growth if so it would. (Morris, 22.199)

While filling the ground evenly to the full, his pattern hardly confuses the beholder, since there is always 'a major pattern playing over a
minor one’ as Watkinson rightly asserts.\(^{(21)}\) The minor part beautifully supports the major flow and emphasizes the energy of growth.

Through his experience in garden and his study of plants, Morris had been impressed with the life cycle of plants. As Ruskin sensed mysterious forces and eternity in the renewal of life in vegetation,\(^{(22)}\) Morris also stresses the importance for pattern designing to carry the sense of ‘mystery’ as an essential character. Designers should not allow their designs to be traced line after line. That kind of restless curiosity should not impose on beholders. The construction of growth
should be expressed in ‘satisfying mystery’ which gives repose to beholders (Morris, 22.109 and 22.191).

Another character of Morris’s design, which cannot be found in contemporary geometrical design, is this sense of repose. Morris always advocates the duty of interior design to give the human soul a feeling of relaxation and rest. To illustrate this, his pattern stands on the balance of rhythm and repose of growth. The arrangement of the blooming flower suggests the fruit and the goal of growth. Its mellow richness works as an eye-catcher, and the beholder takes rest there in the middle of the curvaceous movement. Also while stylized, Morris’s plants keep the familiar characteristics which remind the beholder of the pleasure in an English garden. Thus, compared with the contemporary geometrical patterns, Morris’s design impresses the beholder as highly architectural by abiding by Ruskin’s ‘law of help’ (*Modern Painters V* [1860]) of each element. Ruskin insists that every element in a picture should be ‘consistent with all things else, and helpful to all else’ as a ‘composition’. (Ruskin, 7. 209)\(^{(23)}\)

The foundation of Morris’s concept of the ‘growth’ of tradition clearly comes from Ruskin. Ruskin’s anthropocentric definition of architecture as living organic form, not only as the expression of builder and nation but also as the embodiment of the imperfect human soul, reprehended ‘restoration’ of the time in the chapter of ‘the Lamp of Memory’. Architecture is a great record of time and of people which we should pass down to following generations. Also we should not interfere with its cycle of life as we should not meddle with human mortality and life’s mystery. For Ruskin, the ‘ruin’ of architecture was still a part of organic entity as death was accompanied by the hope of salvation for human beings. As Michael Wheeler rightly points out, an architecture comes from Nature and, in the end, is ‘assimilated’ back
Later Morris carried this warning of his mental master into action with the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. The reason that both Ruskin and Morris repudiated the Crystal Palace, the building of the Great Exhibition in 1851, is its total lack of this cycle of life in architecture. Iron and glass never accept the delicate human touch of the chisel. They do not decay. And they never accrete or grow from mass of hands of working men. The Crystal Palace is prefabricated, which could be put together as easily as taken to pieces. It accepts light, but there is no place for enigmatic shadow; therefore the effect of light and shadow is not expected. It is the embodiment of new enlightenment; the enlightenment of industrialism. Proudly it exhibits all the marvels of industrial triumph in its transparent immortality.

Thus growth in Morris's pattern also symbolizes the growth of craftsmanship which cannot be expressed in the industrialized and mass-produced goods that the Crystal Palace stands for. The process of fostering design out of a sketch from nature and making it into handicraft itself suggests 'growth' to a craftsman. This is why Morris rejected the division of labour as Ruskin did and was reluctant to use machinery. He eschewed both of them whenever possible in the operation of Morris and Co.. Division of labour induces prefabrication of process and deprives craftsmen of witnessing the growth of their products. Thus Morris promoted and exemplified taking responsibility for the whole process of completing a piece of work; learning new methods, conceiving the design for it, choosing the materials and putting them into the product. He spared no time and no energy to mastering the methods and discovering new materials. Once again, 'History' and 'Nature' were two inspirations for him. When he found

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out that chemical dyes faded away too quickly, he did not hesitate to discover new dyes from natural ingredients following the knowledge of past craftsmen. Each process of creation signified the growth of himself as a craftsman as much as the development of design and piece of crafts.

Ruskin and Morris have been often called 'pessimistic' in their scepticism about machinery and scientific progress, compared with Dresser's delight and trust in them. Thing might not be so much clear cut. Both designers, Morris and Dresser, were in fact influenced by Ruskin, as well as earlier designers such as Pugin and Owen Jones; but their paths led them in totally different directions, and both of them attempted to express their delight and hope of 'growth' in their creeds.

Obviously, as a craftsman, Morris was to depart from the introspective and medievalistic idea of his master, Ruskin. While Ruskin ended with bitter disappointment in his age and its art, Morris, as a craftsman who had to fight with the current system of Victorian England, and whose products were in a way responsible for Victorian fashion, eventually had to compromise with machinery and commercialism. But he never compromised with the system of society itself and his vitality and sense of morality were never encumbered. It was not long before he launched into Socialism, which represented to him a dynamic social theory. Morris always believed in the progress and rebirth of art and society. His design with full of action is the best proof of that.

NOTES
York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), x (1908), 460. Hereafter all quotations from this series will be cited in the text by author's name, volume and page number(s).


(8) Hunt, p. 741.


(11) See Watkinson, p. 46.

(12) Quoted in Watkinson, p. 56.


(15) Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris*


(19) Dresser, p. 17.


(21) Watkinson, p. 52.


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