

V&A spurns Morris treasures

- [Christopher Reed](#), Los Angeles and [Vanessa Thorpe](#), London
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Britain has lost the chance to own the world's most important private collection of works by William Morris, the Victorian designer and utopian socialist. The collection - including textiles, wallpaper, carpets, tapestries, stained glass, pottery, drawings, 2,000 books, poems and scores of political pamphlets written by Morris and his associates - was offered first to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, but all the pieces have now been acquired by a museum in California for an estimated \$5 million. Art historians in Britain have greeted news of the sale with dismay. They believe unique work by one of the country's most influential thinkers and artists should have found a home on these shores at all costs. 'It is a great shame,' said David Bush, a Morris enthusiast and expert on the artist's stained-glass windows. 'There is not that much of his work in England.' Morris is remembered more for his wallpaper designs than his socialist writings. He was also a talented typographer, setting up the Kelmscott Press in Hammersmith, and founded the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. His circle included the pre-Raphaelite painters Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Early in December, the Huntington Library and Art Collections in Los Angeles moved to buy the collection, put together over many years by Sanford and Helen Berger. The most spectacular object is an 18ft by 11ft stained-glass window displaying 10 figures with symbolic titles such as Justice and Mercy. There is also a ceramic tile panel illustrating the Cinderella story. Sanford Berger told The Observer that he first offered the collection to the V&A in 1996 to supplement an it own Morris exhibition. The museum agreed to buy the collection for three-quarters of a price estimated at £2.5-£3 million, using a combination of National Lottery money and private funds. It was two years before he heard from the museum again, in a telephone call to say the lottery money had been withdrawn and the sale was off. 'I was deeply disappointed,' said Berger. 'The V&A was my first choice because our collection fitted in wonderfully with theirs. I think Britain lost an opportunity here.' A spokeswoman for the V&A said the museum's curators were 'delighted that the Berger collection had found such a wonderful home and that it will stay together'. She added: 'Given the many other commitments the museum has, we felt unable to produce the funds for a collection that would cost at least £5m.' The Bergers were both educated at Harvard, where they studied with the Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius. They have collected Morris artefacts since 1965. In 1968 they bought the archive of the Morris & Co business from 1875 to 1940. The Bergers' 1966 Modernist house overlooking the Pacific was stuffed with Morris's work. The archive included a register of stained-glass church windows in Britain that led the couple to photograph and catalogue the windows in 360 of the churches. This work also goes to the Huntington Museum, a large mansion set in exotic botanical gardens in the suburb of San Marino. It was built by railway magnate Henry Huntington, who donated it to the nation in 1922.