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William Morris at the Huntington

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With this beautiful and intelligently curated exhibition the Huntington Library celebrates both the design career of William Morris and its own good fortune in now housing one of the world's largest collection of Morris materials. In 1999 the Huntington acquired the Sandy and Helen Berger collection, the nucleus of which was the archive of Morris & Co, the design company that executed Morris's patterns and most literally applied his dreams of social reform to contemporary reality. Including over 1000 sketch designs and full-scale cartoons for stained glass, and hundreds of designs for wallpaper, textiles, carpets, tapestry and embroidery, the Berger collection complements and completes the Huntington's already rich holdings of Morris books, manuscripts and letters. Curator Diane Waggoner has drawn on these two extraordinary repositories to present a fresh portrait of this eminent Victorian, not merely as the towering personality he undoubtedly was, but more broadly - and rewardingly - as member of a community of artists and craftsmen and of a world of ideas and images embodied in books.

It is a central tenet of Morris lore that the great design revolutionary found his ideal model for creating 'an earthly paradise' in the guilds and workshops of the Middle Ages. One of the exhibition's great successes is the way it breathes life into this now sadly clichéd notion, deploying the cream of the Berger collection to instruct and delight an audience even more alienated from the joy of labor and the bonds of community than was Morris's own. While the larger-than-life 'Topsy' is naturally the star this is not in any real sense a one-man show. We are made aware from the very first room that Morris was most true to his own ideals as a member of Morris & Co. Created in 1861 as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co, a high-minded brotherhood of 'Fine Art Workmen' that included Philip Webb and Edward Burne-Jones, in 1875 'the Firm' became Morris & Co under Morris's sole direction, producing a wide range of furnishings for houses and churches that revolutionized the art of design. The exhibition opens with a rather daring visual statement: a stunning but oddly blank expanse of Morris & Co wallpaper. Seen

not as a 'picture' in a book but in its proper mural scale, deployed to bring beauty into daily life, the diagonal repeat pattern reminds us that the Morris designs we know so well were not the work of one man. Their realization required the combined skills of artist, woodblock-cutter, printer, embroiderer, glass-maker, and dyer, making the means of production an inseparable component of Morris's design process. That Morris himself never lost sight of this fact - that indeed it embodied his most cherished ideals of the medieval joy in labor resurrected - is brought home throughout the entire exhibition.

The section entitled 'The Decoration of Houses' explores the pattern side of Morris & Co's work. Generous and apt labels provide invaluable commentary on arcane processes such as indigo-discharge dyeing and double-cloth weaving on Jacquard looms. Thanks to the riches of the Berger collection, we can follow the many steps by which a Morris pattern sketch became a Morris & Co tapestry, chintz, or wallpaper and acknowledge the central importance to Morris's success of the often anonymous craftsmen and women with whom he worked. The struggle of machine- against hand-work, that so often mires Morris's legacy in sweeping abstractions, becomes instead a fascinating question of how the designer dealt with his clientele's varied financial resources. The hierarchy of techniques for introducing pattern into the home - from labour-intensive tapestry and hand-knotted carpets to block-printed chintz and wall-paper - is presented in rich detail. A pendant to this section is 'The Decoration of Churches,' in which the firm's prolific production of stained-glass windows is illustrated, from the figure-drawings and cartoons of Morris and Edward Burne-Jones to the modest ornamental designs for quarries by unknown craftsmen. Of particular interest is the pragmatic 'mix and match' approach that allowed Morris & Co to effect what was almost a revolution in ecclesiastical stained-glass design. The wealth of drawings preserved in the firm's archive takes us behind the scenes of its spectacular success, revealing the cunning way its signature artists' designs were recycled. This is brilliantly brought home in the stunning stained-glass window that is the exhibition's visual heart. Taken from a demolished Unitarian Chapel in Lancashire, the window is flanked by two of Burne-Jones' cartoons for angels that recur in this and many other window commissions in the exhibition.

Just as the myriad swatches and sketches from the Berger collection so effectively evoke the collaborative nature of Morris's design, the array of books from the Huntington Library show him not simply as a precocious polymath, but as someone bound to a rich intellectual tradition. In the section 'The Art of the Book' Morris's own contributions to book design and typography are richly represented, but so too is the way his imaginative life, his exceptional visual memory, and his view of history were formed by reading. Close by his celebrated Kelmscott Chaucer and his early efforts at illumination are books by printers he revered, such as Nicolaus Jenson's Latin Pliny (1476), the source of Morris's roman Golden type design. A particular pleasure is the pairing of the dye-book from the Merton Abbey workshops containing recipes and fabric swatches using natural dyestuffs, with John Gerard's Herbal (1633), a copy of which Morris's family owned and which was part of his childhood reading. Opened to the page on pinks, the herbal helps one understand in a single image Morris's crusade for natural dyes, his love of nature and of an idealized past. The exhibition offers many such illuminating and delightful juxtapositions, and it is icing on the cake that it is often the books Morris himself owned that we see. The last rooms of the exhibition are devoted to the pattern work of John Henry Dearie, whom Morris chose to succeed him at the Firm. From 1896, the year of Morris's death, until his own death in 1932, Dearie faithfully perpetuated the Morris ethos and aesthetic, continuing to design in his mentor's manner. Rather than dismiss his patterns as 'weakly' imitations of Morris's vitality, Waggoner convincingly suggests that Dearie's lighter and more delicate designs of the early 1900s represent his efforts to adapt the classic Morris style to the changing tastes of early modernism. There is, all the same, something elegiac in this spectacle of a robust and self-confident style's diffident attempts to survive. (These issues are developed in greater depth by Gillian Naylor and Diane Waggoner in the book that accompanies the exhibition.)

The last small alcove of the exhibition serves as an invitation to explore Morris's legacy, especially in the context of the American Arts and Crafts movement. Like the patriarch of a large extended family, his influence is seen transposed to the foothills of southern California itself. We are reminded of Greene & Greene's Gamble house in nearby Pasadena and the Judson Studios in Highland Park,

founded in 1897 and still producing stained glass. While this splendid exhibition promotes a richer appreciation of Morris himself, it also underscores the Huntington's new stature as an international centre for studying the origins of the Arts and Crafts as an international phenomenon. As the director puts it in his introduction to the accompanying book *The Beauty of Life*, 'It is much easier to understand the originality of Charles and Henry Greene if we can see from where they started'.

'The Beauty of Life: William Morris & the Art of Design ' The Huntington Library and Gardens, San Marino, California, 8 November 2003-4 April 2004. The exhibition travels to the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven