

The Beauty of Life by William Morris (1880)

HAVE NOTHING IN YOUR HOUSES WHICH YOU DO NOT KNOW TO BE USEFUL OR BELIEVE TO BE BEAUTIFUL.

A lecture delivered to the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, February 19, 1880. Reading around the subject I discover that the Birmingham school was in fact the first municipal school of art in the country and that Birmingham, through Burne-Jones and his circle, played a leading role in the Arts & Crafts movement.

Repetition

Morris apologises for repeating himself and this is, indeed, the most obvious feature of this lecture, that it is made up of the same ideas as the previous lectures:

- current civilisation in the Century of Commerce is degraded
- the arts have become split between a high art of demoralised artists working only for the super-rich or just for their own small coterie (art for art's sake)...
- ...while the popular arts, the decoration and ornamentation of the everyday objects most people see most of their lives, have become crude and cheap
- this reflects the unfair nature of Victorian class society ie a small number of parasite rich leading a life of luxury paid for by the wealth extracted from a vast class of slave labourers condemned to lives of servitude and ugliness
- whereas everything we know about history and prehistory suggests that decorating and ornamenting everyday objects is a central element of human nature; preventing men doing that is cruel and stupid
- thus, an ideal society would remove the parasite rich and, by doing so, liberate workers to work shorter hours and take more care over what they make – the *pleasure* of and pride in their work would be restored to everyone who works
- it may seem a long way off but we handicraftsmen must set the tone and aim for this goal and have **hope** of better things to come

To be fair there are new sections here: the recap of the history of civilisation which takes in the Romans and Greeks and noticeably downplays the Renaissance; a short passage about how his friends the Pre-Raphaelites have saved English art; a section on the **Environment** and a plea not to litter, not to cut down trees; a section on the contents of the Ideal Home.

Sermon

I read that Morris and Burne-Jones at Oxford earnestly wanted to become priests, ambitions that took some time to die, and only when they transferred their zeal and passion to Art, as practised by the new Pre-Raphaelites and expounded by John 'the Baptist' Ruskin. These Morris lectures, in their high-minded but vague phraseology, their uplifting vision of the New Jerusalem, and their call for moral reform, are much more like sermons than any factual and informative lecture I've ever heard.

A young socialist, Bruce Glasier, has left his impression of hearing Morris lecture in 1884:

On the lecture itself I only remember that it seemed to me something more than a lecture, a kind of parable or prediction, in which art and labour were held forth, not as mere circumstances or incidents to life, but as life or the act of living itself.

Quotes

I must once again call the faithful of art to a battle wider and more distracting than that kindly struggle with nature, to which all true craftsmen are born...

Most people live as if the beauty of life were irrelevant or an unaffordable luxury, whereas art and beauty in the widest sense, are **vital elements** in the life Nature intended us to lead. The lack of art, or rather the **murder of art**, that curses our streets from the sordidness of the surroundings of the lower classes, has its exact counterpart in the dullness and vulgarity of those of the middle classes, and the double-distilled dullness, and scarcely less vulgarity of those of the upper classes.

Once more I say that the greatest foe to art is **luxury**, art cannot live in its atmosphere. The danger is that the present course of civilisation will destroy the beauty of life...

My message is, in short, to call on you to face the latest danger which civilisation is threatened with, a danger of her own breeding: that men in struggling towards the complete attainment of all the luxuries of life for the strongest portion of their race should deprive their whole race of all the beauty of life: a danger that the strongest and wisest of mankind, in striving to attain to a complete mastery over nature, should destroy her simplest and widest-spread gifts, and thereby enslave simple people to them, and themselves to themselves, and so at last drag the world into a second barbarism more ignoble, and a thousandfold more hopeless, than the first.

So much is now known of the periods of art that have left abundant examples of their work behind them, that we can judge of the art of all periods by comparing these with the remains of times of which less has been left us; and we cannot fail to come to the conclusion that **down to very recent days everything that the hand of man touched was more or less beautiful**: so that in those days all people who made anything shared in art, as well as all people who used the things so made: that is, ALL people shared in art. It is strange and perplexing that from those days forward the lapse of time, which, through plenteous confusion and failure, has on the whole been steadily destroying privilege and exclusiveness in other matters, **has delivered up art to be the exclusive privilege of a few**, and has taken from the people their birthright; while both wronged and wrongers have been wholly unconscious of what they were doing.

I believe that art made by the people and for the people as a joy both to the maker and the user would further progress in other matters rather than hinder it, so also I firmly believe that that higher art produced only by great brains and miraculously gifted hands cannot exist without it.

We must work towards an art MADE BY THE PEOPLE FOR THE PEOPLE AS A JOY FOR THE MAKER AND THE USER.

To be a man is to understand and create and appreciate art. Men in these degraded times have shut down that feeling in themselves, and so acquiesce in the squalor of the times. If men were whole again, it would inspire them to want to reform and change society. A feeling for art would prompt feelings for reform if not revolution!

Well, people will not take the trouble or spend the money necessary to beginning this sort of reforms, because they do not feel the evils they live amongst, because they have degraded

themselves into something less than men; they are unmanly because they have ceased to have their due share of art.

You cannot educate, you cannot civilise men, unless you can give them a share in art.

He has a good passage describing the subtlety of the influences by which the system has ensnared us, by making the lives of so many people so much more comfortable in so many ways – but at the price of new forms of slavery for the oppressed.

If civilisation is to go no further than this, it had better not have gone so far: if it does not aim at getting rid of this misery and giving some share in the happiness and dignity of life to ALL the people that it has created, and which it spends such unwearied energy in creating, it is simply **an organised injustice**, a mere **instrument for oppression**, so much the worse than that which has gone before it, as its pretensions are higher, its slavery subtler, its mastery harder to overthrow, because supported by such a dense mass of commonplace well-being and comfort.

And Art, far from being the irrelevant luxury that the people in power believe it to be, can play a vital role in restoring to slaves their humanity.

... that evil of the greater part of the population being engaged for by far the most part of their lives in work, which at the best cannot interest them, or develop their best faculties, and at the worst (and that is the commonest, too) is mere **unmitigated slavish toil**, only to be wrung out of them by the sternest compulsion, a toil which they shirk all they can – small blame to them. And this toil degrades them into less than men: and they will some day come to know it, and cry out to be made men again, and **art only can do it**, and redeem them from this slavery; and I say once more that this is her highest and most glorious end and aim; and it is in her struggle to attain to it that she will most surely purify herself, and quicken her own aspirations towards perfection.

This is what we should set ourselves to aim for, a true and noble goal of creating a free, just society, not the continuation of our crass materialistic culture.

I had thought that civilisation meant the attainment of peace and order and freedom, of goodwill between man and man, of the love of truth and the hatred of injustice, and by consequence the attainment of the good life which these things breed, a life free from craven fear, but full of incident: that was what I thought it meant, not more stuffed chairs and more cushions, and more carpets and gas, and more dainty meat and drink – and therewithal more and sharper differences between class and class.

What I want to do to-night is to put definitely before you a cause for which to strive. That cause is the Democracy of Art, the ennobling of daily and common work, which will one day put hope and pleasure in the place of fear and pain, as the forces which move men to labour and keep the world a-going.

The Pre-Raphaelites

There is an unblushing passage about the role of his friends (and himself) in restoring art to England.

You know well that one of the master-arts, the art of painting, has been revolutionised. I have a genuine difficulty in speaking to you of men who are my own personal friends, nay my masters: still, since I cannot quite say nothing of them I must say the plain truth, which is this; never in the whole history of art did any set of men come nearer to the feat of making something out of nothing than that little knot of painters who have raised English art from what it was, when as a boy I used to go to the Royal Academy Exhibition, to what it is now.

It is amusingly revealing that later in the lecture, in his brief historical overview of western history, he uses the same phraseology to describe the founders of Christianity.

Therefore no tyrant was too base, no pretext too hollow, for enslaving the grandsons of the men of Salamis and Thermopylae: therefore did the descendants of those stern and self-restrained Romans, who were ready to give up everything, and life as the least of things, to the glory of their commonweal, produce monsters of license and reckless folly. Therefore did **a little knot** of Galilean peasants overthrow the Roman Empire.

The Pre-Raphaelite mindset of a small group of high-minded men determined to change the world morphs seamlessly into Morris's vision of a small group of artists who can bring about a transformation of society, a vision still in the loose and open phase in these early lectures but which crystallises into the notion of a vanguard political party in his later political phase.



Detail of Woodpecker tapestry designed by William Morris (1885)