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William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement in Great Britain

Fundación Juan March / Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya

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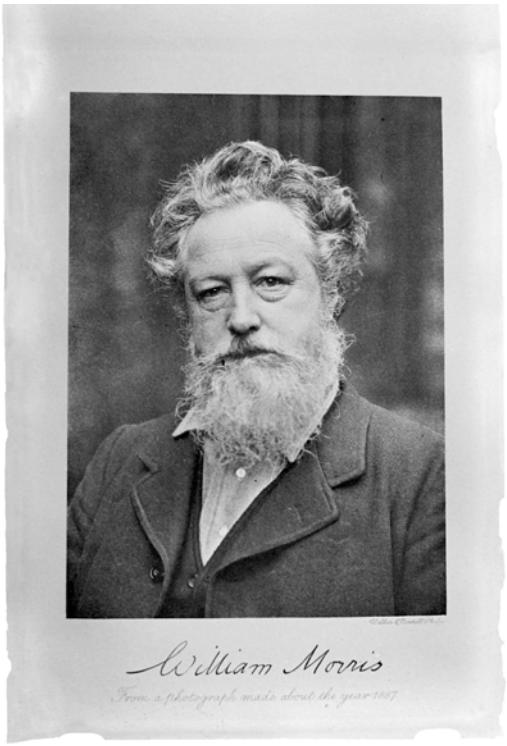
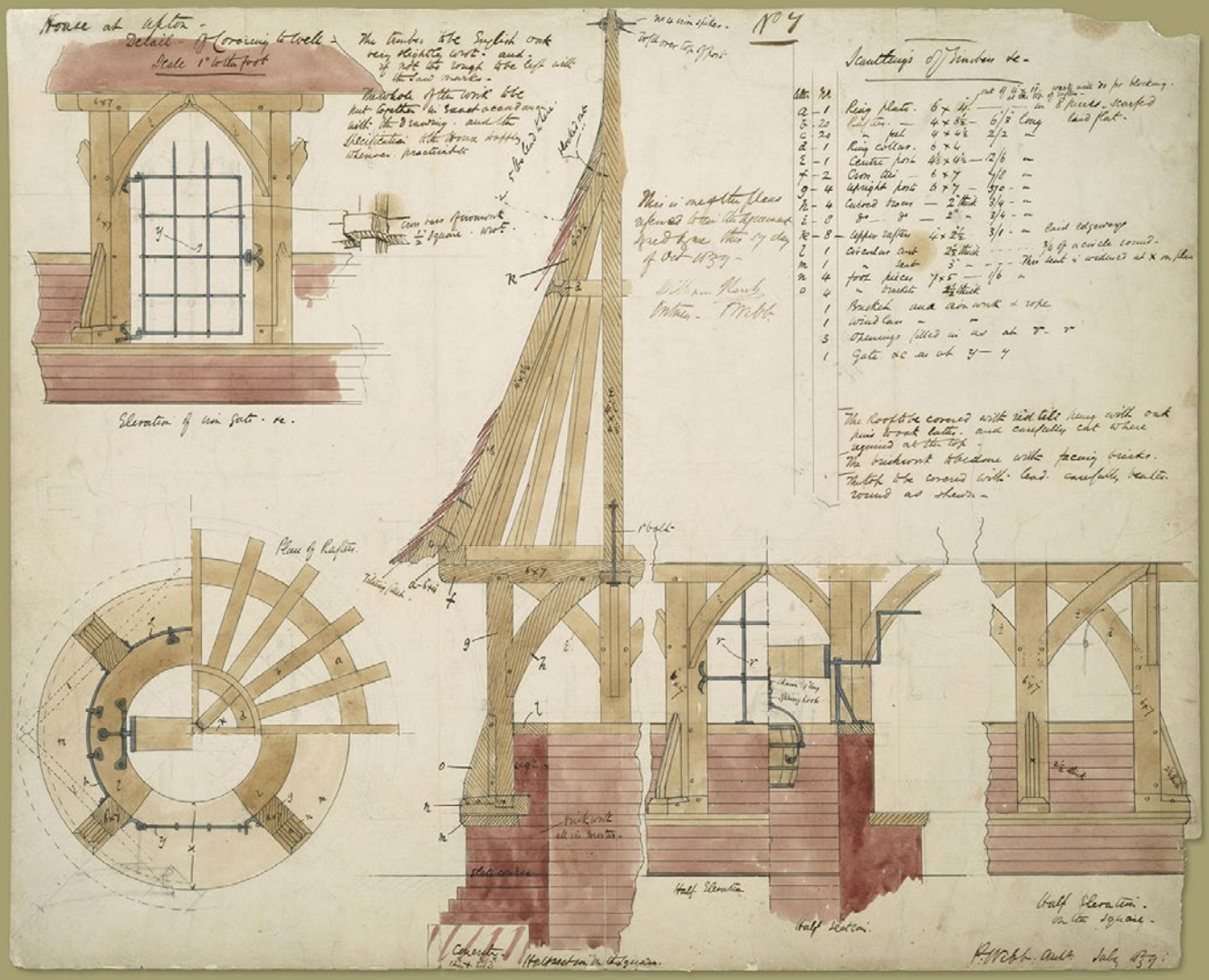
The exhibition William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement in Great Britain features nearly three-hundred pieces from 50 different sources at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya. This museum is home to a multi-faceted collection that touches on a mosaic of specialisations and moments in history, from Medieval times (which William Morris extolled) through the splendour of modern decorative arts, which despite their idiosyncrasies express reflections of the former. Some creations like furniture, jewellery, stained-glass windows, gates, doors, rugs, lamps and ceramics that were made for everyday life are now on display for all to see, as Morris believed: art is for everyone to enjoy.

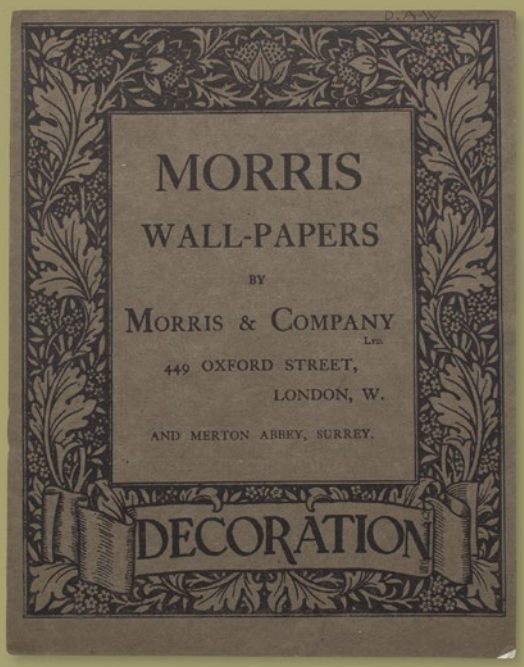


Photograph of William Morris taken by Emery Walker, *c.* 1887. © Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas, Madrid.



Philip Webb. Architectural details for the cover of the well at Red House (Upton, Bexleyheath). Pencil, ink and gouache on paper. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Morris & Co. London. Morris Wall-Papers sales catalogue. Lithograph on paper. © William Morris Society, London.



William Morris. Embroidery by Jane and Jenny Morris. Drapery "Honeysuckle", 1876. Printed linen with silk embroidery. © William Morris Gallery, London. © Borough of Waltham Forest, London.

The exhibition presents keys to understanding this fascinating artist, a multi-talented rebel, whose legacy is still current today. Likewise, it also covers his influence on a whole generation of British and European artists who celebrated the art of life, even blurring the lines of what is considered art. A figure and a movement that have been the focus of numerous exhibitions in England, America, and Europe, but in our country (except for an exhibition at the Museu d'Art Modern de la Ciutadella in 1984) had not been seen in the depth it deserved. However, this exhibition wanted to go further than just presenting a grouping of decorative arts that Morris redeemed from their status as 'lesser arts'. So, a mural by British artist Jeremy Deller, representing William Morris throwing the magnate Roman Abramóvich's luxury yacht into the lagoon in Venice (a testimony to the beauty of Medieval building and the work of the artisans that created them), acted as the frontispiece. And it reminded visitors that Morris's ideas on social inequality, protecting heritage and the environment are still current today.

The first section of the exhibition focused on his aesthetic references: John Ruskin, Pugin, the Pre-Raphaelites, neo-Gothic revival and, also, eloquent images of the Victorian age. An industrialised England, with tall chimneys vomiting smoke, with a mechanised system that subjected children, men and

William Morris. Wallpaper patern, "Fruit" (or "Pomegranate") for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., 1864. Block-printed. © William Morris Society, London.

Morris, William, for Morris & Co. Drapery, "Strawberry Thief", 1883. Indigo-discharged and block-printed cotton. © The Whitworth. The University of Manchester.

women to contemptible conditions and a wave of poor taste without precedent. And, as Morris shared Ruskin's disgust for modern Western civilisation and began a movement to humanise the work conditions that mechanisation had degraded, he created the firm that put into practice their ideals of beauty and justice, as the guilds had in the Middle Ages. The precedent was the Red House, a neo-Gothic home that Morris commissioned architect Philip Webb to build for his wedding to a young Victorian beauty and muse to the Pre-Raphaelites, Jane Burden. A palace of art procured with help from his friends, Pre-Raphaelite painters, who in this case contributed some of the most representative works.

After that, came stained-glass windows, ceramics, furniture, wallpaper, prints, tapestries, rugs, and published papers from his firm. They excelled at splendid tapestries with Arthurian legends, inspired by Medieval tapestries; furniture with a certain extravagant flair and other simpler pieces, like the Sussex chairs in varnished wood with a rush seat; their painted and printed wallpaper, some of which were on loan from the Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas in Madrid whose former director acquired them on a trip to London at the turn of the century. Works, on the other hand, that Morris was able to create thanks to the financial stability afforded him by his father's

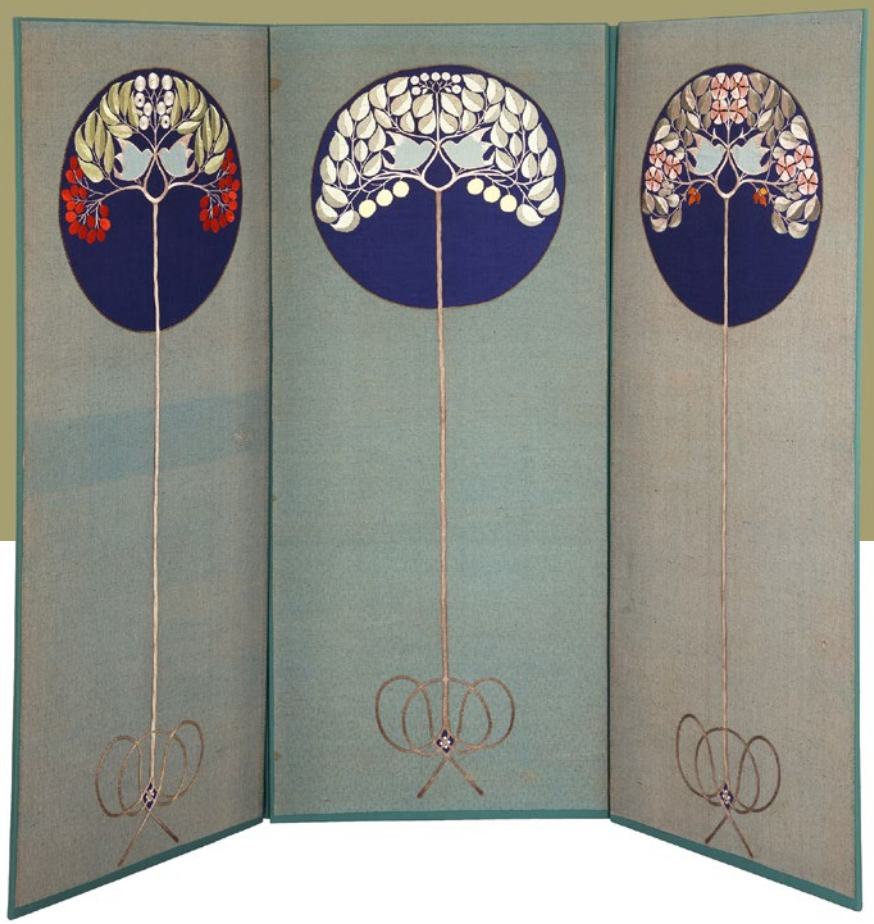
William Morris, for Morris & Co. "The Orchard" (or "The Seasons"), 1890. Tapestry woven in wool, silk and mohair on a cotton warp. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

fortune, amassed from copper mining, meaning exactly the sort of moral slavery he dreamt of eradicating. It is well known that William Morris's idea of reliving the simplicity and beauty of artisan objects useful to everyone was inviable as a result of the high prices of the objects his firm made, which became popular among the upper classes, an extreme that led them to reconsider their attitude to artistic creation and embrace the socialist cause. In 1884, he founded the Socialist League based on the belief that socialism was the only hope, as a society based on exploitation and profit would never be able to create good art.

Morris inspired the Arts and Crafts movement in Great Britain, which brought together architects, designers and artisans who shared a deep concern over the negative impact of industrialisation on traditional trades, joined by many female artists, including his daughter, May Morris, director of

Walter Crane. Membership card for the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League issued to William Morris. Printed on paper, 1885. © William Morris Society, London.

William Morris. Design for membership card of the Social Democratic Federation. Printed on paper, 1883. © William Morris Society, London.



M.H. Baillie Scott. Three-panel screen, 1896. Embroidery by Baillie Scott, Florence. Cotton and hemp with silk, silk and linen appliqué, silver braid. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

the embroidery department at her father's firm. It was an urban movement sustained by a network of schools, guilds and exhibitions that revitalised the pre-industrial trades, such as wallpaper, enamel, leather wallpaper, fabrics and furniture, which are now on display in the final section of the exhibition. Finally, the exhibition finished up with a summary of Morris's influence in Europe.

In Catalonia, it must be said that Morris's influence arrived two decades late to Barcelona, and extreme dealt with in depth by design historian Anna Calvera. His Pre-Raphaelite precursors were known here years after the constitution of this collective of Victorian artists. Their influence, tinged with French symbolism and especially that of Puvis de Chavannes, arrived during the 1890s with the decorative paintings of Tamburini, Gual, Brull and some fabrics by Santiago Rusiñol. Painters of a later generation, including Néstor Martín Fernández de la Torre, Julio Romero de Torres and Miquel Viladrich, profoundly admired the Pre-Raphaelites and spent long stretches in England to study their legacy. However, it is well-known that Paris was the cultural hub for Catalan artists at the end of the century, so England was not a popular destination. It has been said that the bohemian artists of Catalan Modernisme who met at Els Quatre Gats were avid readers of the French satirical magazines that could be purchased at the news stands on the Rambla. These magazines, according to Ricard Opisso, brightened up the end-of-the-century artistic life

William Morris. Wallpaper pattern, "Willow Bough", 1887. Pencil and watercolour on paper. © The Whitworth, The University of Manchester.

William Morris, for Morris & Co.
Textile fragment "Rose", 1883.
Block-printed cotton taffeta.
© Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas, Madrid.

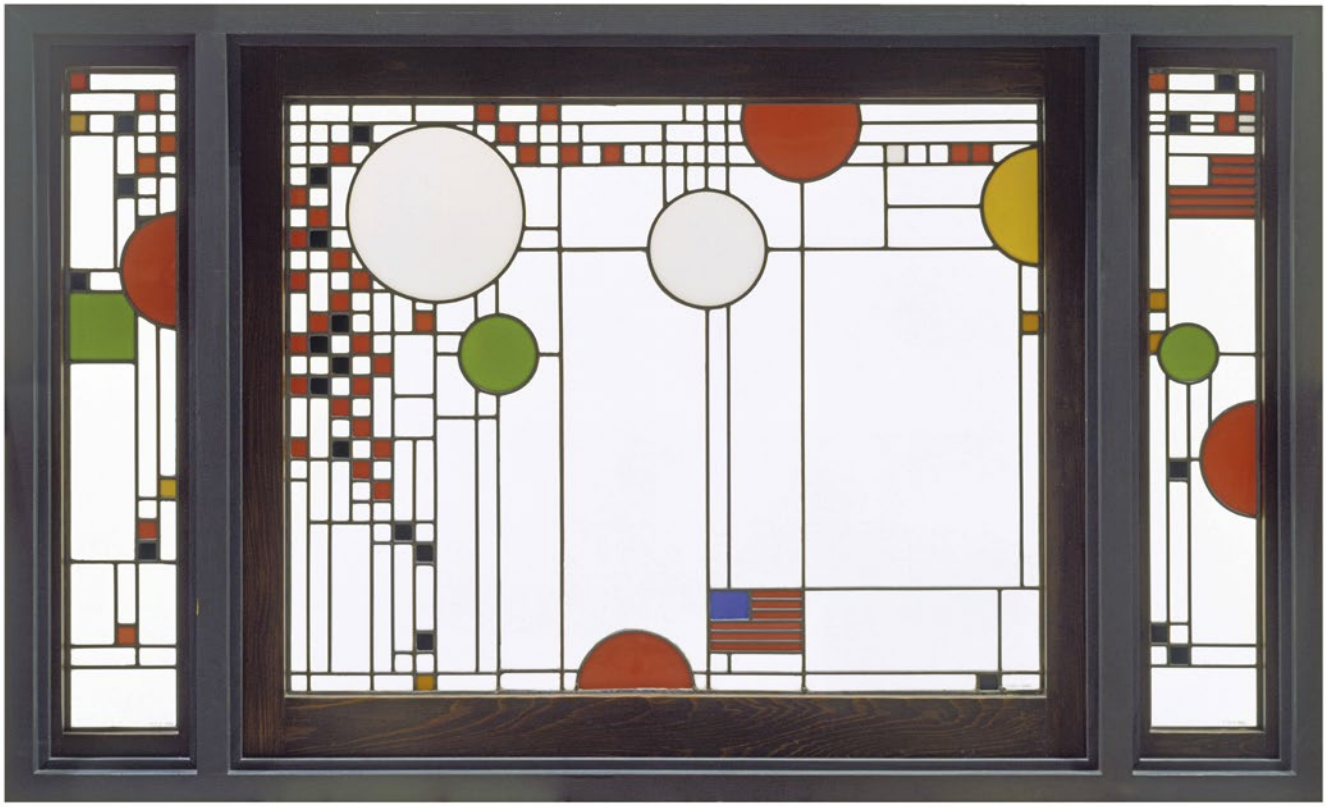
amidst the academic torture and routine of the La Llotja art school: "they were trophies we carried in our pockets." Ramon Casas followed Whistler, one of the public enemies of John Ruskin, who he even took to court. But one day things changed, when an English magazine arrived that fascinated a whole generation of designers and decorators: The Studio. Alexandre de Riquer, ambassador of British artistic culture, brought it back with him after a stay in England in 1894. This awoke a devotion to English culture that also made its way to the province of Girona, with architect and designer Rafel Masó. However, what brought British art in direct contact with Barcelona was the International Expo of 1907, as highlighted by historian Eliseu Trenc. The aforementioned poet/artist/artisan Alexandre de Riquer was the curator of the English section at the Expo and handled loans and acquisitions to the Museu Municipal, including the creations of Edward Burne-Jones, A. Rackham, A. Woodward, Brangwyn, León Solon and Arts and Crafts designer and enameller Alexander Fisher. Enamelling that inspired Marià Andreu, who trained in London, to create his giant enamelled pieces like the triptych L'orb, which is now at the Mataró Museum.

The spirit of Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement also reached the workshops of ceramicists, glaziers and cabinetmakers in Catalonia. Although without the same zeal, our decorative arts, too, advocated for a nostalgic renaissance of the trades, as can be seen in the carvings, marquetry, stained-

Charles Francis Annesley Voysey, for Essex & Co. Wallpaper design, "Glade", 1897. Woodblock-printed. © Morris & Co.

glass windows, grisailles, enamels, metalwork, tapestries, jewellery and interior design, poetic tributes to the beauty of every-day items or new golden cages to protect against the flogging of society. But it is also true that Catalan Modernisme found a way to reconcile the ideals of beauty with new technology and mass production in order to optimise and make the results profitable. The new civil and religious architecture built on the immense plot of land that is Barcelona and the growing cities nearby offered a unique opportunity

Godfrey Blount, made at the Haslemere Peasant Industries. Damask, 1896. Linen with linen appliqué and satin stitch edging in linen thread. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Frank Lloyd Wright. Kindersymphony (window), 1912. Clear, opaque and coloured flashed glass. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

for trades and techniques to come together. A moment of splendour that did not go unnoticed by English author of Brideshead Revisited, Evelyn Waugh. The writer came to Barcelona and was fascinated by Gaudí's ceramic cladding on Casa Batlló, among others. Also worth mentioning is the successful formula of architect Rafael Guastavino (nothing to do with the socialisation of art Morris proposed, which was totally unsustainable), who lived in New York from 1881 and popularised the flat brick vault, an old local building technique, in America. As well as the work of Evel·lí Dòria, who used *duroxilia* (an affordable, industrial replica of mosaic tiling); the decorative uses given to cheap tiles, plaster and papier-mâché tiles patented by Ermenegild Miralles, who decorated interiors like the smoking room at Gaudí's Casa Vicens and the now-defunct Bar Torino. To go no further, the workshops of '*ensemblier*' Francesc Vidal, a contemporary of the Arts and Crafts movement and meeting point for the most eminent figures of Modernisme, brought swarms of operators using cutting-edge technology. The workshops were well equipped with power saws and an English steam engine (Alexandre), which made it possible to create low-cost veneers for cladding or siding, manufacture moulding and, as a result, mass produce items. These workshops were inseparable from the din of noise, in the heart of Barcelona's Eixample district, while at the Merton Abbey Mills, the former silk and textile factory along the river where Morris had his workshops, calm silence reigned.

With the turn of the century, English art became popular in interior design. Minton ceramics, sold by furniture designer Francesc Vidal in his shop, filled sideboards and hutches in Barcelona. And, above all, England had a huge impact on the textile world, as was further made apparent during the recent restoration of Puig i Cadafalch's Casa Amatller, which uncovered Harry Napper's designs for Liberty velvet in the music room. ●