

# Art, Craft, and Life. A Chat with Mr. William Morris

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It was in front of his own great tapestry at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in the New Gallery (writes a member of *The Chronicle* staff) that I found Mr. William Morris. Of the people crowding around this magnificent resurrection of the art of the fifteenth century a few knew the great craftsman by sight, and even those who had not seen him before felt sure that the curious and old world figure before them was "somebody." The flat and very battered soft hat, the worn suit of blue serge, the bright blue shirt, the huge walking-stick, and above all, the round and genial thirteenth-century face – it is clear to most people that anybody who by nature and choice presents this appearance among the smart men and women of a fashionable art show has something inside as well as outside to differentiate him from the rest.

"I don't know what I can tell you about this," began Mr. Morris, modestly; "the show speaks for itself."

"Well, since we meet at this point, suppose you tell me something of the origin and methods of what is in front of us. How long is it, for instance, since such a piece of work as this has been produced in England?"

"I believe the last like this was made in England at Mortlake and bought by Charles I – though you had better verify that point. The Mortlake tapestry production was abolished by Cromwell, but there is a pretty complete set of them at Ford Abbey. You can always tell the Mortlake Tapestry by the Cross of St. George on it. There was nothing very original, however, about them, and you would have to go further back still to find a true parallel. As for the method, your art-critic was quite right the other day in saying that I used to get up at daylight to puzzle out the tricks of the loom for myself." And Mr. Morris launched into a technical description of the two kinds of tapestry looms, the "haute lisse" and the "basse lisse" (the present work having been produced by the former), the bobbins and "broches" and "high warp" and the rest. "It is, in fact," he summed up, "a piece of coloured mosaic, practically everlasting."

"Who made it, and how long did it take, and what did it cost? – that is the kind of thing people would like to know."

"It occupied three persons – as many as can comfortably sit across the warp – for two years. This is about a third of the whole decoration of Mr. D'Arcy's room, and it will cost him altogether about" – and Mr. Morris mentioned a respectable number of thousands of pounds – "but you had better not repeat the figure, because that is a private matter. But it is little enough. The people who made it are boys – at least they're grown up by this time – entirely trained in our own shop. It is really freehand work, remember, not slavishly copying a pattern, like the "basse lisse" method, and they came to us with no knowledge of drawing whatever, and have learnt every single thing they know under our training. And most beautifully they have done it! I don't

think you could want a better example than this of the value of apprenticeship. Our superintendent, Mr. Dearle, has of course been closely watching the work all the time, and perhaps he has put in a few bits, like the hands and faces, with his own hands; but with this exception every bit has been done by these boys. We have had no working drawings, we don't believe in doing the same thing twice over. You see Mr. Burne-Jones's drawings hung underneath; they have no colour and no detail. These we have added, subject to his supervision."

Having got this interesting information and expressed my admiration, I ventured to put a ticklish question. "Is there never to be any inspiration from modern life?"

"What do you mean! What inspiration could there be from modern life?"

"I mean that to the people who painted the adventures of Sir Galahad seeking and finding the Holy Grail, the story was true. The Grail was a fact; to 'achieve the Sancgreall' was the supreme spiritual reality – ("Quite true," interposed Mr. Morris) – the angels guarding it, and accompanying the knight, were even more than typical. Therefore all this fell naturally and inevitably upon their looms and their pages. But to our age it is a fairy-tale – a myth at the best; the grail is of most interest from a philological point of view, and Sir Galahad is a 'picture-book boy.' Why don't you turn your art and your great influence to the production of something which corresponds to our beliefs and our needs as these things did to those of the people for whom they were made?"

"Good gracious!" replied Mr. Morris, "what is there in modern life for the man who seeks beauty? Nothing – you know it quite well. To begin with, if you want to make beautiful people you've got to drop modern costume. How on earth can you make anything beautiful out of people like these?" – and Mr. Morris waved his hand with a fine gesture of contempt round the circle of men and women gathered in front of his great arras (some of whom were furtively watching him from the corner of their eyes), "with their stove-pipe hats, their tight coats and cut-throat collars, their wasp-waists, puffed sleeves, and microscopic bonnets falling off their heads behind, their artificially draped skirts and pointed toes?" The retort was most effective, as far as it went.

"Besides, the line of tradition is broken, and you must work in some skin. Here are people with high art interests – what are they to do? 'Make a new style,' you say? But that takes a thousand years! The Holy Grail people were working in a straight line of tradition – that line is broken; we have nothing like a stream of inspiration to carry us on. The age is ugly – to find anything beautiful we must 'look before and after.' Of course, if you don't want to make it beautiful, you may deal with modern incident, but you will get a mere statement of fact – that is, science. The present days are non-artistic and scientific – that is at the bottom of the whole question, and we are not to be blamed. For science I haven't a grain of respect. It is not – except in a very few instances – science for science' sake, and that is the only kind of science that's worth a rap, whatever you may say about art. Science is only interesting as showing the frame of mind of the person who devotes himself to it, but 'applied science' doesn't interest me in the very least. The Huxley-mathematical sort of thing I look on with the deepest contempt. Besides, it is probably all wrong, and the next generation will only regard us as a pack of ninnies for having believed such rubbish. No, if a man nowadays wants to do anything beautiful he must just choose the epoch

which suits him and identify himself with that – he must be a thirteenth-century man, for instance. Though, mind you, it isn't fair to call us copyists, for in all this work here, which you complain of as being deficient of a particle of modern inspiration, there is no slavish imitation. It is all good, new, original work, though in the style of a different time."

I changed the subject to the present exhibition. "What is there to say about this year's 'Arts and Crafts'?"

"The object of the 'Arts and Crafts' is to give people an opportunity of showing what they could do apart from the mere names of firms. No, I don't think we are drifting away from the original intention. The executant generally gets in. It is impossible, besides, to give the name of everybody concerned in the production. A work of art is always a matter of co-operation. After all, the name is not the important matter. If I had my way there should be no names given at all. As for what is novel here, there isn't much, and that's the truth. There is a large quantity of excellent art, but the only thing that is new, strictly speaking, is the rise of the Birmingham school of book-decorators. My own printing, too, is among the novelties. But these young men of the Birmingham School of Art – Mr. Gaskin, Mr. Gere, and Mr. New – have given a new start to the art of book-decorating." And Mr. Morris walked round the room where his own printing-press is at work turning out his lecture on Gothic Architecture, admiring and descanting on the charming little drawings hung on the walls.

I asked him if he had read Mr. Howells's article in the new *Scribner's*, declaring that no man ought to live by an art. "No," he replied, "but with certain limitations that is quite true. Some arts, of course, monopolise a man's energies, and for these therefore, he must be paid. Take the painter, for instance. A man cannot be a painter and anything else. Literature is quite different – a man's literature will be all the better for his having some other occupation. A painter, also, is not always drawing his guts into fiddle-strings, like a man producing imaginative literary work or a poet. He has a good lot of hard hand-labour to do. Certainly, of all men a poet ought not to be paid."

"Who is going to support the artist under your ideal Socialist society?"

"I presume art work will then be done by guilds, and everybody will have leisure to do such as he feels inclined to do. Things like my big tapestry will of course be public property, and will hang in town-halls and such-like places. The community will always be glad to see that people who are producing objects for the public delight do not want for food and clothing. All masterpieces, indeed, should be public property. Why, even in this age we are coming to think hardly of a man who takes exclusive possession of a great work of art and hides it away. Moreover, no man should make a work of art common by staring at it all the time. If I had a beautiful picture I should put curtains over it."

"Then pending the arrival of the socialistic millennium, the Australian millionaire must take the place of the enlightened community?"

"Yes, I suppose he must. That, by the way, is one advantage of a book. The individual can obtain possession of a beautiful book, and he can put it away and take it out again only when he wishes to enjoy its print and illustrations. Indeed, a book is nowadays perhaps the most satisfactory work of art one can make or have. The best work of art of all to create is a house, which will prove, to my way of thinking, a

Gothic house. A book comes next, and between a house and a book a man can do very well.”

“Surely a third ought to be added?”

“What is that?”

“One’s own character and life – in Mill’s words.”

“That,” said Mr. Morris with decision, “is metaphor. A character cannot be a work of art. Above all things let us avoid metaphor.”

This interview was selected by Nicholas Salmon.

William Knox D’Arcy, the Australian mining engineer, commissioned the San Graal tapestries for Stanmore Hall, Middlesex.