Taking Our Eyes Out of Our Pockets

Teaching William Morris’s Ideal Book

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Whatever the subject-matter of the book may be, and however bare it may be of decoration, it can still be a work of art. ... In fact a book, printed or written, has a tendency to be a beautiful object, and that we of this age should generally produce ugly books, shows, I fear, something like malice prepense – a determination to put our eyes in our pockets whenever we can.

William Morris, ‘The Ideal Book’. A Lecture Delivered in 1893.¹

The danger of literary study is that we often focus on words alone: while paying precise, professional attention to textual language, we overlook the physical books in which it appears. It has long been my goal as a teacher of Victorian literature to bring books as objects back into the classroom, and teaching William Morris provides the perfect means. His work is not easily appreciated on the page of an anthology using only words; even the most common literature anthologies increasingly include images of Morris’s works, and many of us use images in the classroom to convey the beauty and usefulness of his art. But, as teachers of Morris, we can do more than show images: we can use books to create an experience that approaches his belief in the public and transformative role of art in culture. Morris’s aesthetic, visionary, and material goals as a writer, designer, and producer cohere in the ideal book, which bridges his socialist idealism and his consumer savvy. Studying Morris’s theories about art and poet-
ry by examining rare books, my students can hold art, history, and literature in their hands.

I admit, I am lucky: my small liberal arts college has an excellent rare books collection, and the Special Collections librarian generously makes the collection available to faculty and students as a teaching and research tool. But we as teachers of Morris are lucky: Victorian texts are generally available and quite inexpensive, some of Morris’s work is available in high-quality facsimiles, and Morris’s influence on book design and illustration is both broad and ongoing, so related texts are plentiful. It is not difficult to find fine, affordable examples of books that embody Morris’s ideals, often within our own libraries, even if most of us can only imagine holding an original *Kelmscott Chaucer* in our hands.

For several years, I have been learning how to teach Morris with the help of beautiful books. When I first taught an advanced course in Victorian Poetry in 2000, I brought the students to our library’s Special Collections for a single session to examine a number of gorgeously printed books from the period. Our Special Collections librarian gave a brief lecture on Victorian developments in fine press editions, mentioning the Kelmscott Press, the Doves Press, and the American Roycroft Press. Students examined the library’s small collection of these beautiful books, and they were moved indeed. Here are two students’ written responses to the visit:

To be able to handle these artworks was almost surreal ... to think that Morris himself could have leafed through these pages! Their historical value aside, the care with which these books were assembled reflects the great value placed in them as objects to be treasured ... To the English major, these are almost holy books! The pages and text unite with synergy, in a way Keats and others reprinted in [an anthology] cannot. Handwritten and hand-printed original editions almost pulse with the authors’ spirit.

(Mikki Unson, 2002)

At first I thought it would be a somewhat silly exercise, going and looking at old books. After all, a book is a book and I’m not really
that into old artifacts and pieces from lost times. And of course what is really important about a book is the story, the text, not the cover or the feel of the pages, and certainly not the smell. But I quickly realised that I was wrong. Holding some of the older books in my hands, feeling their solid covers and textured designs, I began to realise that really a book is not just about the printed words on the page. There is something different about holding a hardback, even leather, sensing the hefty weight and its solid construction that makes the book more than a text, but an object, a possession, to be owned and treasured. Even the feel of the paper made the words on the page somehow more vibrant, more powerful. These books are what the authors envisioned ... I came to realise that these 'old artifacts' and 'pieces from lost times' really are treasures, and that they do affect the ways in which we read our poetry, novels, and texts, transforming words into experience. (Kartik Hansen, 2000)

As delightful as their experience was, I wanted more – more than this single aesthetic moment, more intellectual and curricular engagement with the books, and more collaboration among the students. In 2002, I developed an interdisciplinary senior seminar on the poetry and art of the Pre-Raphaelites. The class visit to Special Collections included a more detailed lecture about books as objects, demonstrating the continuing impact of William Morris’s ideas on printing and book design, and a selection of books from the library collection from which the students created a library exhibit that taught the community about the Pre-Raphaelites. The result was extraordinary. The students designed the standing exhibit, first working in groups to select more than forty items to display in locked cabinets and on the walls, including rare books, art reproductions, and other relevant materials. They devised a visually-appealing layout for the display, researched the selected objects and wrote precise, attractive exhibit labels, created posters to advertise the exhibit, and gave a well-attended public lecture in which each student explained his or her contribution to the project. For this small group of stu-
dents, the books in the library became central aspects of their intellectual and aesthetic understanding of the period, and the exhibit gave them a way to teach what they knew.

I still felt, however, that the library exhibit assignment – as exciting and successful as it was – could be improved. In spring 2006, I taught the course again, this time focused overtly on the Pre-Raphaelite juxtaposition of words and images, and Morris’s practical and visionary work was at the centre of our study. The timing was ideal: our campus – like many – is engaged in conversations about ‘visuality’ and questions about how we can teach ‘visual literacy’, which we define as the ability to comprehend, critique, and create images. I wanted to test my belief that Morris can provide an exemplary means to teach students about words and images. Students could explore his theory and practice of visual arts, comprehend his ideals and their material embodiment in books and in illustrations, and gain an aesthetic and historic background to our own cultural concerns with consumerism, art, and the visual. I wanted, this time, for the sheer beauty of the rare books to resonate with the course’s intellectual focus on Victorian consumer culture and Morris’s contributions to both shaping and resisting it.

Using our newly-acquired facsimile of Morris’s *Kelmcott Chaucer* (Folio Society, 2002) as the centrepiece, I asked my students to design a library exhibit of Special Collections texts whose binding, print, typeface or illustrations demonstrated Morris’s concept of the ideal book and its material realisation. I admit that the students were initially very uncertain about the assignment. Several had never been to Special Collections; several thought, like the students in the earlier course, that these would be just ‘old books’. To prepare the students to use the books deeply and thoughtfully, I selected a more limited number of relevant books (not showing books merely for their beauty, although that is tempting indeed), and I prepared the class with readings from Morris, Thomas Cobden-Sanderson and others that described the concept, purpose and history of the ideal book. Students examined the books during one class period, testing Morris’s aesthetic theories and assessing the books’ effec-
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tiveness as art and as literature in a sort of hands-on library lab. Their responses to the *Kelmscott Chaucer* as Morris’s ideal book were particularly passionate, from theoretical to practical concerns: they debated how ‘readable’ the book was and, alternatively, whether ease in reading words was a virtue or an invitation to skim; they noticed Morris’s influences on other illustrated books; and they compared physical details of paper, fonts and layout.

The students met outside class to form small groups, select topics and texts for the exhibit, and create their exhibit labels. The final topics were the *Kelmscott Chaucer*, illustrated editions of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (including an 1879 edition with Dante Rossetti’s original drawings, 1893 and 1909 editions illustrated by Laurence Housman, Arthur Rackham’s 1933 illustrations, a 1975 edition by Joyce Carol Oates illustrated with Dante Rossetti paintings, and a 2003 fine press edition); illustrated editions of Dante Rossetti’s *Blessed Damozel*, mostly early 20th century small formal gift books; Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* and Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*), and *The Yellow Book*. The topics were shaped, in large part, by what we own, but because I had considered the purpose of the assignment so carefully this time, the connections drawn by the students were both logical and insightful – for example, they were able to recognise the medievalism and Japanese influences in the illustrations, and the contrast between Morris’s page and Beardsley’s.

Writing the labels for the exhibit, limited to 150 words, students had to consider how to convey their complex information in concise, compelling ways. One student considered it the most challenging writing she had ever done, and she called it ‘poetic information’ because it was so compressed. In addition, students had to think about the topics in relation to one another, and consider how they might all work together to demonstrate Morris’s ideal concept of the juxtaposition of words and images. They had to select what page of an illustrated edition would be displayed; in a few cases, the group members wanted to show different pages, so they scanned additional illustrations and had them
mounted and displayed. Working in groups, struggling to incorporate their individual wishes with both the group goals and the limitations imposed by the exhibit itself – limited display space in the two available secure cabinets, for example, as well as a small display area – the students experienced the inevitable challenges in the journey from idea to object, and I like to believe that consequently they understood more directly what Morris faced as a visionary and a producer (Fig. 1).

One student, frustrated by the exhibit’s space limitations and inspired to demonstrate a more contemporary approach to the idea of the ‘page’, created a website that could provide further information about the Pre-Raphaelites. His site, ‘The Book Beautiful’, presented an overview of the Pre-Raphaelites with links to information that he collected from the other students, relevant websites, and Pre-Raphaelite images to provide a deeper vision of the work of Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites. The
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library set up a computer running this program in the centre of the exhibit. For our students, learning is often computer-based, and this student’s project—which I had not anticipated—bridged the visual, historical impact of the rare books and the students’ daily experiences with computers, teaching students to see the implications of Morris’s design philosophy in their own world.

The course went one step farther: students were invited to design a final research project that demonstrated their discoveries throughout the term. Because the course had emphasised the juxtaposition of words and images in the varied arts of the Pre-Raphaelites, I wanted the students to be conscious about the physical form of their projects. They had to consider the design as well as the intellectual content of their work. I left the possibilities open, suggesting that they might create a web page (since one of their classmates had shown us all how effective that could be), produce an annotated bibliography on one of the poets, research the publication history of a book, illustrate some Pre-Raphaelite poetry and analyse their own work, or apply Morris’s ideals to other texts. Many of the results were extraordinary, and two projects used Morris’s definition of the ideal book as their foundation. One student designed a PowerPoint presentation to study the form and content of Lewis Carroll’s handwritten first edition of Alice in Wonderland, which I happened to own in an inexpensive facsimile. Her ability to weave together her comprehension of the visual images in Carroll, critique those images through the aesthetics of Morris, and create a beautiful, thoughtful research project showed that she had learned the lessons of Morris well (Fig. 2). A project done by a double major in computer science and English involved a PowerPoint exploration of how one might create the ‘ideal website’ using Morris’s ideals. Knowledgeable about computers (unlike me), she grappled with the challenges of font and layout, scans and screen quality, and—in a delightful conclusion—the difference between the ideal screen as designed by the designer and the real user’s screen, covered with multiple programs, pop-up windows, and reminders (Fig. 3).

What I learned is that teaching Morris indeed brings the book
In writing and illustrating *Alice in Wonderland*, Carroll demonstrated an interest in many of the same details that so obsessed Pre-Raphaelite artist William Morris.

"Dodgson gave very specific instructions as to the shape, dimension, and content of each illustration and its exact place on the page in relation to his text...in producing his own illustrations for *Alice's Adventures Underground* he had seen exactly how text and picture could be most effectively integrated."
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Fig. 3 Margaret Gibbs, slide from ‘Adapting the Ideal Book to the Web: A Visual Essay’, unpublished final project for ‘English 395: The Pre-Raphaelites’, Carleton College, June 2006.

as object back into the classroom. Given the opportunity to study the aesthetics and history of Morris’s ideal book, to examine material books critically and carefully, and to respond innovatively, students can enact Morris’s ideals and make the objects of everyday academic life useful and beautiful. Taking their eyes out of their pockets, they are able to create work that might make Morris himself proud.
NOTES


2 I am deeply and constantly grateful for my ongoing collaborations with Kristi Wermager, Bibliographer and Special Collections curator at Carleton College. And I thank the keen students in my Victorian courses who have shared this process of learning with me.