

Reviews

David Mabb, with essays by Caroline Arscott and Steve Edwards, *William Morris* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2004), 75 pp., £7.50 + £1.50 p&ap, ISBN 09032 61537.

This catalogue accompanies ‘William Morris: “Ministering to the Swinish Luxury of the Rich”’, an exhibition staged by the contemporary artist David Mabb at Manchester’s Whitworth Art Gallery (until 23 December 2004). While covering paintings and installations shown by Mabb, the volume also develops and extends the exhibition’s principal themes. This is achieved primarily through the inclusion of two lengthy essays on the subject of utopia: the first by Steve Edwards and the second by Caroline Arscott.

As with so many publications in this area, an attempt is made to match presentation and subject-matter by employing one of Morris’s typefaces. In this case, ‘True Golden’ is used. And yet such details are rather misleading when considered in isolation. They do nothing to convey the sheer oddity of this brightly coloured offering. The front cover combines Morrisian typography with a peculiar, air-brushed application of the red used in the marginalia to Kelmscott editions. The design ethic in evidence on the front cover has been employed consistently throughout. Severe shades of brown, violet, and red take turns to combine with white in colouring the text and the series of strange and distorted patterns that run down the margins. At the back of the book, we are informed that Kapitza is responsible for the ‘visual concept and design’, and that the graphics were ‘digitally adapted from original William Morris designs’. Motifs familiar from *Acanthus* and *Garden Tulip* are indeed relied upon in places, though the graphics reject the rhythm, symmetry and restfulness characteristic of Morris’s best pattern work.

Mabb’s intention was clearly never to revive an authentic Morrisian aesthetic. One must therefore ask whether the design succeeds on its own terms, either as a quirky homage, or as an attempt to shock the

eyes with a view to prompting productive speculation. The latter programme is certainly in evidence in the photographed exhibits, as well as in the foreword by Jennifer Harris, in which she explains that the 'project is a hybrid creature which "wobbles" the boundaries between an exhibition of historical artefacts and a contemporary art installation, a display without a clear narrative voice which leaves the visitor uncertain about the status of the spectacle on offer' (p. 7).

Perhaps the most striking example of a work that attempts to 'wobble boundaries' is Mabb's *Rodchenko Production Suit made from William Morris 'Fruit' fabric* (pp. 44–45). This piece is shown suspended above a gallery staircase on a coat hanger. One is struck first by its iconoclastic overtones. *Fruit*, after all, is a pattern one might more ordinarily see hanging in the former home of some wealthy Arts and Crafts patron. There is also an undeniable sense of aesthetic indiscretion. While Morris's designs were always tailored to their final use, we see here a pattern intended for the adornment of a flat surface employed in a context where folds and rounded edges interrupt its built-in telos. The juxtaposition is thus singularly unfitting, even when one registers the social meanings that attach to the exhibit.

While such 'indiscretions' may be taken as part of the artistic scheme, this display is also problematic in an unplanned way. Morris's own self-image was not so far removed from the 'artist as engineer' outlook that Mabb's Soviet era boiler suit seems calculated to evoke. He himself wore a similar garment, which he knew as his working smock. This garment was kept deliberately plain and unpatterned. Although Mabb may well have intended to play on the tension between Morris's trade in patterns and his own preference for a simple whitewashed aesthetic, the use of an extraneous design from the Soviet era invites the unfortunate and unfair inference that Morris could not have appreciated the irony.

Other works by Mabb include the two oil and fabric paintings, *Head of a Peasant* (p. 50) and *Modern Men's Shop* (p. 51). The first sees Morris's *Garden Tulip* repeat-pattern weaving its way across Kazimir Malevich's constructivist landscape of peasants working in the shadow of aircraft. *Modern Men's Shop* applies a similar technique, this time superimposing *Bird & Anemone* on to the consumerist spectacle of a shop window full of men's business attire. Neither work manages to offer much beyond a confusing and trite juxtaposition of aestheticist

Victoriana and modernist angst.

More interesting are those exhibits which investigate the meaning of Morris's designs in new contexts. Mabb is clearly fascinated by the concept of the 'sample' as employed by Morris the businessman. On one page of the catalogue, a wall hung with strips of *Willow Bough* in different colour-ways is disrupted by the insertion of framed samples of the same pattern. There is also a marked emphasis on the infinite reproducibility of Morris's work: wallpaper produced by Morris & Company, before and after the founder's death, hangs alongside papers produced more recently by Sanderson. On another wall, 14 framed samples of Morris's most famous patterns appear against blocks of colour, apparently applied using paint manufactured for use by Sanderson. Both exhibits bring Morris-derived objects into conflict. The imperious repeat-pattern is unnaturally confined and frustrated by aesthetic objects outside the frame. Elsewhere, artefacts from Morris's time as a socialist activist are exhibited. A banner of the Hammersmith Socialist Society hangs on the wall (described erroneously in the catalogue as a 'Hammersmith Socialist League' banner). Inside several glass cases there are arranged political pamphlets, wallpaper samples, Kelmscott books and design treatises. On another wall, the *Pomona* and *Flora* silk tapestries sit strangely against more clean blocks of colour. The aim throughout seems to be to denaturalise the processes of curation, whilst commenting on the stark obsolescence of these once lively and politically engaged artefacts.

Perhaps most indicative of this agenda is the presence of a tall case that contains 'A selection of contemporary "heritage" products from the 1990s and early 2000s using designs by William Morris' (pp. 56–57). Inside there is a *Willow Bough* wastepaper basket, a Morris box of tissues and a *News from Nowhere* tea towel, as well as a tray, a cushion and an oven glove similarly adorned. No one seriously interested in Morris could fail to recognise the absurdity of such items when considered in the context of his mature political and aesthetic beliefs. Mabb's exhibition might lead us to note some continuity between Morris's own need to compromise in servicing 'the swinish luxury of the rich' and the reality of the 'heritage' merchandising machine. But the message falls flat, first because it is obvious, and second because it is somewhat po-faced. How many people require this satirical-scientific arrangement of objects to appreciate the unfortunate ten-

sion between the integrity of a legacy and its uncontrolled uses?

The two essays included in this catalogue also deserve comment. 'The Colonisation of Utopia' by Steve Edwards represents a wide-ranging and politically strident defence of the Morrisian utopia against what he sees as its capitalist and Marxist rivals and detractors. Although Morris's "infantile disorder" of ultra-leftism' (p. 24) does not escape criticism, the author of *News from Nowhere* attracts praise for 'combining the pastoral utopia with an emphasis on labour' (p. 26). Caroline Arscott's article follows a familiar pattern of attacks on E. P. Thompson's political downgrading of the 'ornamental aspects of Morris's designs' (p. 64). She analyses Morris's fascination with the 'dance of the wodehouses' which he found depicted on a manuscript of Froissart's *Chronicles*, reaching the conclusion that 'the idea of the penetration of flesh by ornamental vegetation in those dancing green men' (p. 68) expresses the will to defy and celebrate the binary relations between plant and animal. Both essays are a little wilful and eccentric in their frames of reference, but each nevertheless reaches interesting conclusions.

A new attempt to interpret Morris's work critically in the context of contemporary British life is always to be welcomed. The efforts to which Mabb and the Whitworth Gallery have gone demonstrate a sincere and laudable wish to advance this cause. They have attracted sponsorship from such prestigious bodies as the Arts Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Board. And they have made efforts to secure the involvement of Sanderson and the Little Greene Paint Company. But a celebration which assumes the virtues of 're-presentation' without justifying them rigorously; or which deliberately flouts established aesthetic principles without supplying something meaningful in their place, can achieve little in exploring the peculiar challenges faced by artists who feel they must come to terms with society in order to make a living. All the same, this catalogue undoubtedly has something to offer readers who are interested in the continuing development of Morris's reputation.

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