A Brief Biography of William Morris

William Morris (March 24, 1834-October 3, 1896) was one of the most important figures in 19th century England. As a writer, designer, pioneering socialist, and environmental activist, he wrote poetry, essays, and historical romances; stumped Britain for the Socialist League; and designed textiles, tapestries, magnificent stained glass windows, and beautifully crafted books. He was one of the principal founders of the British Arts & Crafts movement.

As an undergraduate at Exeter College in the 1850s, Morris met the artists Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the architect Philip Webb, the mathematician Charles Faulkner, and several other life-long friends and collaborators. He also met his future wife, Jane Burden, a hostler's daughter whose beauty served to inspire several of his poems. She later was the subject of many of Rossetti's paintings.

Morris and his friends continued to aspire to the ideals of the earlier Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. They disdained the cheap and shoddy decorative arts and architecture resulting from the changes brought by the industrial revolution, and sought to bring a return to beautiful and high quality handicraftsmanship.

In 1861, at the age of twenty-seven, Morris founded the “Firm” (Morris and Co. after 1875) to create and market innovative designs by working artisans. He also helped to bring Britain’s fledgling Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings into existence in 1877. He believed that both of these undertakings were imperfect efforts to reform “material culture” and to create counterweights to a system which subordinated human fellowship to profit and mass production.

In his other identity as a brilliant poet, essayist, and writer of prose romances, Morris published The Defence of Guenevere in 1858, The Life and Death of Jason in 1867, The Earthly Paradise in 1870, and Pilgrims of Hope in 1886. He wrote many essays and his best known prose works, A Dream of John Ball, and the utopian News from Nowhere, as contributions to “Commonweal,” the newspaper of the Socialist League he founded in 1884.

In 1891, Morris founded the Kelmscott Press as the embodiment of his personal ideals for book design and printing. He concerned himself with every aspect of the work of the press, from the choices for paper and ink, to the design of typefaces, borders, and decorations. The press became the most famous of the private presses of its time, and served as a model and inspiration for later fine presses throughout the world. Its most renowned work, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, is considered a milestone in the history of printing.

About the Society

The life, work, and ideas of William Morris are as important today as they were in his lifetime. The William Morris Society, founded in 1955, exists to make them as widely known as possible.

The many-sidedness of Morris and the variety of his activities bring together in the Society those who are interested in him as designer, craftsman, businessman, poet, and socialist, as well as those who admire his robust and generous personality and his creative energy and courage. Morris aimed for a state of affairs in which all might enjoy the potential richness of human life. His thoughts on how we might live, on creative work, leisure and machinery, on ecology and conservation, on the place of the arts in our lives and their relation to politics, as on much else, remain as relevant and challenging now as they were in his time. He provides a focus for those who deplore the progressive dehumanization of the world in the twenty-first century and who believe, like him, that this trend is not inevitable.

The U.S. Society provides information on topics of interest to its members and arranges lectures, visits, exhibitions, and other events. It encourages the reprinting of his works and the continued manufacture of his textile and wallpaper designs. It publishes a Journal twice a year, free to members, which carries articles across the range of Morris scholarship. It also publishes a Newsletter giving details of its programs, new publications, and other matters of interest concerning Morris and his circle. Members are invited to contribute items both to the Journal and the Newsletter. The William Morris Society has a worldwide membership and offers the opportunity to make contact with fellow Morrisians in the UK, Canada, and other countries.

Benefits of Membership

Worldwide Involvement

Members of the William Morris Society in the U.S. are automatically members of the William Morris Society in the U.K. and are welcome to participate in events and meetings abroad. Membership enables one to meet others sharing similar interests and thoughts.

Annual Meeting

Members are invited to attend the Society’s annual meeting which is usually held at the end of December in conjunction with the Modern Language Association convention. The location of the event varies yearly. The business meeting is accompanied by Society sponsored panels and social events.

Publications

Members will receive the following publications annually:

- 2 newsletters from the William Morris Society in the U.S.
- 4 newsletters from the William Morris Society in the U.K.
- 2 issues of The Journal of William Morris Studies

Both newsletters provide notifications of upcoming events relating to Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, meetings, and relevant book releases. They also feature articles, illustrations, book reviews, and short works of fiction. The Journal is a scholarly publication which features articles, editorials, and reviews.

In addition the Society publishes and distributes books relating to William Morris which are available to members at a discounted price. A listing of these publications can be viewed online at: www.morrissociety.org.

Events

Members are also invited to a number of special events. Events from past years have included seminars, lectures, tours, and gatherings. A discounted rate for many of these events is extended to members.
The Joseph R. Dunlap Memorial Fellowship supports scholarly, creative, and translation projects about William Morris and his designs, writings, and other work. Up to $1,000 per year is granted to individuals (there can be multiple or partial awards) for research and other expenses, including travel to conferences.

Also, at the Committee’s discretion one or two William Morris Society Awards may be offered each year for a total of up to $1000.

For application instructions and to view a list of previous recipients, please visit our website at: www.morrissociety.org.