



Left: *May Morris: Art and Life* exhibition © William Morris Gallery, London Borough of Waltham Forest
Below: *Spring and Summer* panel, design and probably embroidered by May Morris, coloured silks on silk damask, 130.8 x 71.9cm, 1895-1900 © William Morris Gallery, London Borough of Waltham Forest

May Morris: Art & Life

David Mabb relishes the recent William Morris Gallery exhibition

On entering *May Morris: Art & Life* in the William Morris Gallery, one is struck by two embroideries, *Spring and Summer* and *Autumn and Winter*, dating from 1895 to 1900. They are almost identical, but for two different roundels in each panel that run along the tops and together represent the four seasons. Each panel has a pair of parakeets stitched in coloured silks and metal threads onto silk damask, whose size and beauty far surpass anything William Morris ever produced (he couldn't draw birds anyhow, so it's not really a fair comparison). This double whammy sets the pace for the rest of the downstairs exhibition space. This includes *Lotus*, a subtly designed panel or curtain credited for both design and embroidery to May Morris, whose stitches, on peach coloured silk, pick out the design through reflected light as much as through the contrast of colours. Similarly, *Maid of Honour*, which presents a central rose bush with two flowers surrounded by a ring of violets with a flying bird in each corner, is stitched onto a fine silk net, the embroidery seeming to float in space. Only on close viewing does the grid of the net which supports the embroidery become apparent.

The exhibition is split over two floors. The main gallery, which is dominated by embroideries, also introduces May Morris's early life – we are shown a young May Morris painted by Rossetti in 1871 – and professional life at Morris & Co. A brief mention of her commitment to Socialism is evidenced by the well-known photo of the Hammersmith Socialist Society in which she appears in the centre of the front row.

An upstairs room, *May Morris: Arts & Crafts Artist*, deals with her central role in the Arts & Crafts movement: May Morris founded the

Women's Guild of Arts in 1907. *The Homestead and the Forest*, a cot quilt designed by May and stitched by her mother Jane Morris (1889-90), has cuddly representations of animals and birds and is surrounded by stitched text quotations from different sources including one in Farsi, from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, which seems to give the work an international significance, transforming it into more than a design for a child.



May edited and introduced William's collected works, represented here by a shelf containing all 24 volumes, published between 1910 and 1915. A massive project, for which May Morris wrote significant introductions, they count as one of both William and May's enduring legacies. They are presented in a final room which tells the narrative of the later part of May Morris's life which she shared with her companion Mary Lobb at Kelmscott Manor. There's a touching photo of Mary Lobb and May Morris on holiday in Wales. This relationship seems to project May Morris into the present by suggesting the possibilities of a different sort of life, although the relationship isn't explored in any depth in the exhibition.

Alongside the exhibition there are two publications. The larger one, the hardback *May Morris: Arts & Crafts Designer*, is published by Thames and Hudson, the V&A and the William Morris Gallery, and is not a catalogue but a book in its own right that acts as an extension of the exhibition. A second publication, *May Morris: Art & Life – New Perspectives*, published by the Friends of the William Morris Gallery, is based on the 2016 conference related to the exhibition. The exhibition and both publications seek to establish May Morris's place as one of the 'most important designer craftswomen', continuing the work of feminist art history, begun in the 1970s, of historical recovery of women excluded from the history of art, craft and design, and extending what was, and still is, a male-dominated history. Although our knowledge of May Morris cannot avoid reference to her father, she made her own contribution to embroidery, taking William Morris's design tradition and developing it into something distinctly her own, and the exhibition spectacularly proves this.