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Business in the Creative Life of William Morris

By

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Introduction

Business is perhaps the least studied and, for many, least interesting facet of the multi-faceted career of William Morris. Wikipedia (2018) is typical in describing him as “an English textile designer, poet, novelist, translator and socialist activist”, omitting from this litany one of the most salient facts of his life: that for 35 years he was an entrepreneur, the ‘managing director’ of a socially prominent and commercially successful business venture. It is wrong to conceive the business dimension of Morris’s career simply as a means of earning a living. His firm was a pioneering vehicle for creative expression in the decorative arts, whose products and practices continue to inspire designers, craft workers, consumers and art lovers across the world (Fiell and Fiell 2017; Todd 2012). In this chapter, we suggest that business, contrary to the impression conveyed in much of the literature, was fundamental to the creative life of William Morris. It was through business that Morris, “an entrepreneur of unusual creativity”, imparted his most important messages with respect to the decorative arts, simultaneously shaping tastes and professional practice (Ormiston and Wells 2010, 8).

The contrary viewpoint, portraying Morris as a reluctant business leader who succeeded mainly by virtue of creative talent rather than entrepreneurial ability, stems from his first biographer, J.W. Mackail (1899). Mackail, the son-in-law of Morris’s closest friends, Georgiana and Edward Burne-Jones, was an insider. He wrote a celebratory account glossing over potentially sensitive issues, like Morris’s deep commitment to socialism and the unhappiness of his marriage. He dealt with business matters cursorily, conveying the impression that Morris was an amateur in matters of

business, a view that has echoed down the years (Henderson 1967; Stansky 1983). Mackail was aware of the bias within his narrative, remarking in a letter to Sydney Cockerell, who became Morris's secretary at the Kelmscott Press in 1894, "how extraordinarily interesting one could make the story if one were going to die the day before it was published" (cited in Harvey and Press 1996, 2). In failing to tackle sensitive issues, however, Mackail contributed to what Fiona MacCarthy (1994, x) calls a "conspiracy of memory" about his subject. He was not alone in this. Cockerell, when serving as Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, discouraged Morris's daughter May from including unpublished socialist lectures in her edition of the *Collected Works* (Morris 1910-15). May was complicit. In 1938, shortly before her death, she wrote in a letter to Cockerell of the acrimony surrounding the reconstitution of the Morris enterprise in 1874-75 that she "would never want gossip-mongers to pick up anything in the future, so I always took care to write nothing counter to Mackail's statements."¹ Her portrayal of her father as a man whose life was "unhindered by disappointments and enriched by generous and unclouded friendships"² has progressively given way to more realistic assessments recognizing "the full extent of his unhappiness, and his fortitude and generosity in facing it" (MacCarthy 1994, xii).

Research by the authors of this chapter on the business career of William Morris has helped, together with that of other researchers, to see Morris more completely and in context, not as a singularity, but as an innovative leader within the interrelated fields in which he operated (Harvey and Press 1991a, 1996). This is not to deflate completely the Morris myth. His combination of talents was truly remarkable. It is, however, to recognize his immersion in the political, economic, social and cultural currents of Victorian Britain. On this view, for example, he was not the 'creator' of the Arts & Crafts Movement, but an inspirational figure within it (Greensted 2010), just as he was one amongst many voices, however distinctive, within the early socialist movement (Yeo 1977).

Likewise, we do not claim that the business Morris created was alone in responding to changing tastes and market opportunities. His was one of many design-driven, lightly mechanized, craft enterprises formed to satisfy the burgeoning demand for decorative art products and services in mid-Victorian Britain. Our purpose, then, is not to lionize the business achievements of William Morris, but rather to show how his business dealings informed and enabled other parts of his life and with what consequence.

The Morris Family in Business

Morris was born into a solidly middle class commercial family whose financial fortunes were on the rise during his youth. At the time of his birth in 1834, his father, William Morris Snr, was a partner in Sanderson & Co., a successful firm of discount brokers with an office in Lombard Street in the heart of the City of London. Discount broking played a vital role in the development of the national economy of nineteenth-century Britain (King 1936). Sanderson & Co. assembled portfolios of bills of exchange, facilitating trade by creating liquidity, and derived its profits from the margin between buying and selling prices. William Morris Snr became a partner in 1826 when just 28 years old and shortly thereafter married Emma Shelton, initially living above the office in Lombard Street where Morris's elder sisters, Emma and Henrietta, were born. In 1834, the family moved to Elm House, Walthamstow, where Morris was born, followed by four brothers and another two sisters (MacCarthy 1994). Walthamstow was then a suburban village on London's northeast periphery, close to Epping Forest, and popular with wealthy financiers who travelled daily to the City by stagecoach.

The reward for success in business was an affluent lifestyle. In 1840, the family moved to Woodford Hall, a large Georgian mansion in the Palladian style, which stood on the edge of Epping Forest in its own 50-acre grounds and surrounding farmland (MacCarthy 1994). William Morris Snr

had assembled an extensive network of business connections and began to invest in new ventures together with his brothers, Thomas and Francis, who were active in the coal trade. In 1845, they became principal investors in a new copper mining enterprise known as Devon Great Consols with Morris Snr taking up 272 of the 1,024 £10 shares issued. The venture was an immediate success, exceeding all expectations, following location of a thick seam of rich copper ore (Boos and O'Sullivan 2012, 13). Devon Great Consols paid a dividend of £71 per share in its first year of operation and before 1861 regularly paid out between £43 and £62 per share annually (Harvey and Press 1990). The share price escalated, providing the Morris family with financial security even after the premature death of Morris Snr in 1847 on the eve of the financial crisis of 1847-48 that led to the collapse of Sanderson & Co., then the second ranking discount house in Britain behind Overend, Gurney & Co. (King 1935, 322-323). Loss of income meant forfeiting Woodford Hall. In the autumn of 1848, when Morris was aged 14, the family moved to a smaller but still luxurious home, Water House, in Walthamstow. It was then decided to safeguard the futures of the nine Morris children by distributing 13 Devon Great Consols shares to each when aged 21, still leaving Morris's mother Emma with sufficient funds to maintain a comfortable lifestyle.

The significance for Morris's future career of coming from a family grounded in business is threefold. First, we might reasonably conjecture that he was never naive financially or completely disinterested in commerce. That he went on as a young man to serve as family representative on the board of Devon Great Consols between 1871 and 1875 supports this view (Boos and O'Sullivan 2012, 22). Second, his 'inheritance' of 13 valuable mining company shares gave him the confidence and wherewithal needed to launch his own business career. Third, it meant that he acquired at an early age an appreciation of the rewards of success in business. In 1855, following receipt of his shares in Devon Great Consols, he was paid £741 in dividends; his income from that source peaking

at £819 in 1857. This was a substantial income when compared to those of his friends, affording him pleasures unavailable to them. He built up a personal library and bought the works of Pre-Raphaelite artists, including in 1856 alone five works by Rossetti for £200, Ford Madox Brown's 'Hayfield' for £40 and Arthur Hughes' 'April Love' for £30 (Henderson 1967, 37).

Morris and the Firm

Morris, as we have seen, was acquainted with the realities of business success and failure at an early age. He also acquired during his childhood and at school, Marlborough College, a profound love of art, architecture and literature, especially that of the medieval period (Richardson 1990). It is likely that his taste for the medieval drew him for a time to contemplate a career in the Anglican Church before realizing during his time at Exeter College, Oxford, that a love of beautiful artefacts is not the same as belief in God (MacCarthy 1994). His intellectual journey at Oxford, which involved reading aloud with friends like Edward Burne-Jones works such as Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Bulwer Lytton's popular tales of *King Arthur* and Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, eventually took him away from the spiritual toward the more practical creative worlds of art and architecture (MacCarthy 2011, 26-57; Salmon 1998). At first, he considered a career as an architect, and, in 1856, he became articled to G.E. Street, one of the leading figures of the Gothic Revival. Then, at the instigation of the charismatic Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he tried his hand at painting before turning finally to a career in the decorative arts (Harvey and Press 1991a, 5-37); this long process of self-discovery made easier by his personal wealth.

The prestige of the decorative arts was then growing rapidly. Street himself insisted that a good architect should understand the principles of decoration, and have a knowledge of relevant crafts, particularly stained glass, metalwork and embroidery (Hitchcock 1960). However, the most influential advocate of the decorative arts was John Ruskin. In *The Two Paths*, he rejected the idea

that decoration was an inferior form of art, arguing that every aspect of a building should form “a great and harmonious whole” (Cook and Wedderburn [2009] 1905, 320). One principle, which made a lasting impression on Morris, was that designers should be entirely familiar with the processes and materials involved in decorative work (Harvey and Press 1995). Morris was swift to put what he learned from Street and Ruskin into practice, beginning with the building and decoration of Red House at Bexleyheath, Kent. His friend, the architect Philip Webb, designed Red House for Morris and his wife Jane, whom he married in 1859, and members of his circle executed a rich variety of decorative art works (Marsh 2010; Wild 2018). The project directly inspired the formation in 1861 of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (MMF & Co.), a partnership comprising Morris, Webb, the Pre-Raphaelite artists Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown and Burne-Jones, the engineer and amateur painter Peter Paul Marshall, and Charles Faulkner, a mathematician and friend from Oxford (Harvey and Press 1986).

‘The firm’, as partners and supporters called MMF & Co., launched with the issue of a prospectus to potential clients (Harvey and Press 1991a, 41-43). This asserted that the partners “having been for many years deeply attached to the study of the Decorative Arts” had been unable to “obtain or get produced work of a genuine and beautiful character” and so had entered the market as suppliers of mural decoration, carving, stained glass, metalwork, furniture, embroidery and jewellery. They proposed that the time had come for “artists of reputation” to enter the field in the service of like-minded architects, dismissing the efforts of established suppliers as “crude and fragmentary”; an appropriately subversive market entry strategy designed to curry favour with Gothic Revival architects like Scott, Butterfield and Street (Finkelstein, Harvey and Lawton 2006, 39-42). These men had gained in power and influence consequent upon the dramatic increase in church building to cater for the rapidly growing

population, fuelled by philanthropic funding and intense competition between different sects, especially during the boom decade, 1865-75 (Brooks and Saint, 1-50). Their quest for historic and symbolic accuracy meant that churches had become more elaborate and costly, requiring a wide range of decorative work, including wall-painting, stained glass, carving in wood and stone, brass and iron work, church plate and embroidery (Hall 2000).

This development had its counterpart in the domestic arena. Sustained economic growth went hand-in-hand with urbanization and the rise of the middle classes – professional, industrial and administrative (Gunn and Bell 2002). Rising living standards in turn created new markets and new possibilities for the formation of specialist fields of economic activity. The Victorian upper and upper-middle classes attached enormous importance to the symbols and trappings of prosperity (Thompson 1988). Houses and the decorative arts were an important concern and a focal point for conspicuous consumption (Richards 1991, 17-72). Even amongst those of relatively modest means, the maintenance of a respectable household in the third quarter of the nineteenth century required expenditure on a broad range of items, including furniture, wall coverings, carpets and rugs, paintings and musical instruments. However, while much of the demand for original decorative artwork was metropolitan or centred on the major provincial cities, it is noteworthy that close to 2,000 country houses were built or completely rebuilt between 1835 and 1914. Until mid-century, members of the old landed classes built most, but this proportion declined sharply as the century progressed, and the patronage of ‘new money’ became more important (Wilson and Mackley 2000).

Morris & Co. was not alone in responding to the opportunities presented by market growth and changing tastes (Harvey and Press 1986). In the early years, for example, when most commissions came through supportive architects, stained glass was the firm’s staple product.

Rossetti, Madox Brown and Burne-Jones had already designed biblical figures and scenes for leading makers like Powell & Sons of Whitefriars, which had learned how to manufacture coloured glass near equal in quality to the best medieval examples. Powell & Sons and other competitors like Lavers & Barraud and Clayton & Bell, perhaps six firms in all, were in tune with the standards and artistic requirements of the Gothic Revival (Cheshire 2004, 155-178). Morris & Co., at its inception, did not have a unique value proposition nor was it the first in the field; it was part of a more general entrepreneurial response to escalating demand. Its immediate trading advantage stemmed from the depth of the cultural, social and symbolic capital possessed by the partners (Harvey, Press and Maclean 2011, 256-59). Romanticism, combined with a deep familiarity with ecclesiology, medieval architecture, history, myths and legends, infused the look, feel and subject matter of their work. Artistic substance and a distinctive (pre-Raphaelite) style set Morris & Co. apart from its rivals, confirming Morris's belief that "beauty is a marketable quality, and ... the better the work is all round, both as a work of art and in its technique, the more likely it is to find favour with the public" (Harvey and Press 1994b, 36).

Morris's role in establishing the firm as a serious player in the decorative art market was principally that of business organizer. He had the capital needed to rent premises and hire craftspeople, but more importantly, as business manager at an initial salary of £150 per year, he had the dedication and skills needed to make the business work (Harvey and Press 1991a, 38-40). While Rossetti, Madox Brown, Burne-Jones, Marshall and Webb supplied many of the designs needed to fulfil commissions, Morris took responsibility for the entirety of decorative schemes and project management. He was the dedicated presence at the heart of the business, which for the other partners was but one strand of a portfolio career. Yet the established reputations of Rossetti and Madox Brown were an indispensable form of symbolic capital during

the early years. Higher design fees served as recognition and reward, and the same increasingly applied to Burne-Jones and Webb as they rose in status within their respective fields of art and architecture.

Each of the partners, though in differing degrees, brought the cultural capital needed to win business from leading architects and their patrons. At the time, the Cambridge Camden Society, later known as the Ecclesiological Society, and the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, were having a profound impact on British architecture and decorative art (Eastlake 1872). They demanded a more imposing, spiritual and symbolic form of worship within the Church of England, and “dreamt of converting England by repeating the architectural triumphs of the Middle Ages and by placing the Prayer Book services in a setting of medieval ceremonial” (Addleshaw and Etchells 1948, 203-04). No detail of church buildings escaped their attention. For those who wished to supply the market, it was important to have a deep understanding of religious iconography and symbolism (Hall 2014). This was something that MMF & Co. could readily demonstrate. Morris and Webb won commissions from Street, Bodley and other architects of their acquaintance. Rossetti, with his wide social circle and ready charm, helped win contracts in the secular market. His greatest coup came in 1866 when he persuaded William Cowper, First Commissioner of Public Works, to engage the firm to carry out redecorations at St. James’s Palace in preference to Crace & Co., which had previously carried out decorative work at the Palace (Harvey and Press 1991a, 57-60).

Morris the Business Leader

Within a few years of its formation, however, the firm ran into trouble. Its dependence on stained glass and other large commissions led to financial problems when the market slumped in the later 1860s (Harvey & Press 1991a, 62-63). For some partners this hardly mattered. Faulkner took up a

fellowship in mathematics at University College, Oxford, in 1864. Marshall continued to earn his living as a civil engineer (Gibeling 1996). For Madox Brown and Rossetti, the firm was never more than a modest source of income. Burne-Jones and Webb, however, depended more heavily on their earnings from the firm and were hard hit by the downturn. In 1867, Burne-Jones actually ended the year with a deficit of £91 on his partnership account, having withdrawn more than he had earned. In May of the same year, Webb, who typically worked for scant return, became 'consulting manager' at £80 per annum to relieve his financial plight.

The downturn hit Morris particularly hard because his unearned income from Devon Great Consols was rapidly shrinking, falling from £682 in 1865 to £396 in 1869 and just £187 in 1870 (Harvey and Press 1991a, 77-80). He had little choice but to turn MMF & Co. around. This meant opening up new markets and the creation of an improved range of domestic products to underpin its interior decorating service. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, Morris worked hard, producing new designs for wallpapers and chintzes, and spent a good deal of time getting suppliers to meet his needs. He was sometimes disappointed with the results, but nonetheless, according to his general manager, George Wardle, he managed to impart a distinctive style to his interiors (Harvey and Press 1996, 88-94). His customers responded with enthusiasm, and, once again, Morris took advantage of his social capital. Webb, as architect, introduced important clients, like the fashionable George and Rosalind Howard, and friends like the Ionides family, wealthy members of the Greek merchant community in London, spread the word that MMF & Co. was the only truly artistic design firm in London (Harvey and Press 1994a). Within the space of a few years, Morris succeeded in creating a new template for the business, reviving its financial fortunes in the process.

Business recovery brought with it interpersonal difficulties. For though the firm was legally a partnership, meaning that each partner was entitled to an equal share of the profits, almost all the

industry came from Morris. Now that the firm was his main source of income and set fair to grow in scale and scope, he became dissatisfied with existing business arrangements (Harvey and Press 1991a, 87-89). In August 1874, he declared his intention to reconstitute the firm under his sole ownership. The result was a prolonged and acrimonious argument. Madox Brown, Rossetti and Marshall demanded compensation. Morris considered their demands unreasonable, perhaps undervaluing prior contributions (Gibeling 1996). As risk-sharers, the aggrieved partners felt entitled to an equal share of the rewards, just as formerly they had accepted, in theory at least, responsibility for potential losses.

Morris made the mistake of not acting sooner, before the decorating business had really taken off and profits were flowing in (Harvey and Press 1991a, 90-92). Even so, the balance of sympathy must lie with him, for while the other partners had been building their own careers, he had devoted much of his time to MMF & Co. In the end, however, fearing the damage an all-out legal battle might cause, Morris agreed in March 1875 to buy out the partners for £1,000 each, although his close friends, Burne-Jones, Faulkner and Webb, declined the payoffs. The firm now traded as Morris & Co. with Morris as sole owner-manager. Liberation from the shackles of partnership unleashed in Morris a remarkable burst of creative energy as he strove to realize his commercial and artistic visions, the two inseparable and intertwined. Within a decade, his designs and products had become widely admired throughout the western world. The strenuous efforts made during these years to master new techniques in dyeing (Davis 1995), block printing, weaving and tapestry making set the firm apart from its rivals, yielding a formidable competitive advantage; its textiles, carpets and tapestries in particular sought after for their exquisite design, vibrant colouring and exceptional quality (Parry 2005, 2013; Thompson 1993; Watkinson 1967).

Morris produced many of his finest flat-pattern designs during the late 1870s and early 1880s, securing his reputation as master designer of wallpapers, printed and woven fabrics, carpets and tapestries (Harvey and Press 1991a, 95-127). He opened a fashionable shop in Oxford Street in 1877, and another in Manchester in 1883 (Harvey and Press 1991b). His market reach extended further through the appointment of agents in fashionable cities such as Boston and New York. From a base of stained glass, hand-painted tiles, furniture, and wallpapers in the 1860s, he added block printed fabrics, woven fabrics, handmade carpets and machine-made carpets in the 1870s, and tapestries in the early 1880s (Fairclough and Leary 1981). There were six Morris designs for wallpaper and just one for fabric in 1868, growing to 25 for wallpaper and 29 for fabric in 1880. In 1881, he began to manufacture directly on a larger scale at Merton Abbey in Surrey, in premises described as idyllic by many visitors (Harvey and Press 1991a, 128-157). By 1894, he had 52 designs for wallpaper and 62 for fabric in regular production. Sales grew from £3,000 in 1868 to £140,000 in 1894, and net profits increased from £200 to £9,750 over the same period.

At the heart of the growth of Morris & Co. after 1875 was the pursuit of a dual commercial strategy (Harvey, Press and Maclean 2011, 262-66). On the one hand, Morris continued to supply elite clients with exclusive goods and services at the juncture of the fine and decorative arts. On the other, he actively sought to promote sales of less exclusive products – wallpapers, printed fabrics, less elaborate woven fabrics, serially-produced furniture, painted tiles, machine-made carpets, linoleum and embroidery sets – to aspiring members of the middle classes. These were families headed by salaried professionals, company executives, public servants and the owners of smaller enterprises (Thompson 1988). Market segmentation along these lines made financial and reputational sense. By increasing the reach of the business, at

home and abroad, he could extend production runs for standard items, increasing cash flow while reducing unit costs.

The middle-class market was growing apace (Thompson 1988). By investing in tasteful home decoration, the upwardly mobile legitimized their hard-won social position. Morris took advantage by writing evocative brochures describing his products, methods of manufacture and principles of design. The firm continued to emphasize the ‘luxury of taste’ rather than the ‘luxury of costliness’ (Harvey and Press 1991a, 95-127). The sought-after qualities of originality, beautiful design and colouring, hand manufacture and the use of natural, high-quality materials attached themselves to all Morris products whatever the cost. Hence the enduring attraction of Morris wallpapers and fabrics. At the lower end of the printed fabric range designs like Brother Rabbit and Iris sold for as little as £0.07 per yard, while at the upper end of the spectrum silk fabrics like Oak and St James sold for £2.25 per yard, beyond reach of all but the wealthiest customers (Parry 2013). Morris recommended combining lower-priced goods like wallpapers and printed fabrics with simple furniture to create harmonious interiors. He sought to educate customers as a means of inspiring customer confidence and loyalty. This extract from the Morris & Co. brochure for the Boston Foreign Fair of 1883 is illustrative:

“In the Decorative Arts, nothing is finally successful which does not satisfy the mind as well as the eye. A pattern may have beautiful parts and be good in certain relations; but, unless it be suitable for the purpose assigned, it will not be a decoration. Unfitness is so far a want of naturalness; and with that defect, ornamentation can never satisfy the craving which is part of nature” (Harvey and Press 1996, 132).

The need for commercial success became even more important with the move to Merton Abbey in 1881. Though an essential step if Morris was to take full advantage of his years of experimentation, this was a bold move for a small firm (Harvey and Press 1991a, 131-36). There is no record of what it cost to renovate the Merton Abbey works, but the outlay must have been

substantial. The old buildings had to be thoroughly overhauled and modified, and new tools and equipment acquired (Saxby 1995). Many months were to pass before the works were operational and block printing did not begin in earnest until late in 1882 (Kelvin 1987, 143). George Wardle, Morris's general manager from 1870 to 1890, then took control of operations at Merton; meticulously enforcing manufacturing standards. J.H. Dearle supervised the tapestry, weaving, and fabric printing departments. He also became proficient in design under Morris's tutelage. By the end of the 1880s, designs made by Dearle had begun to enter production, and following Morris's death in 1896, he became the firm's principal designer (Parry 1986).

Though Morris may have looked to past ages for technology and artistic inspiration, the commercial side of his business was very much of the present. Morris knew his markets, and he knew how to arrest the attention of those who could afford to purchase his goods. The shop in Oxford Street, not the factory at Merton, was the strategic hub of his operations, his creations displayed there in a tastefully fashionable setting. Apart from Wardle, his best-paid employees were Robert and Frank Smith, the commercial managers based at Oxford Street. In 1884, when Morris himself drew £1,800 from the business and Wardle £1,200, the Smiths earned £600 each (Harvey and Press 1991a, 142). These high salaries were paid in recognition of the critical importance of the functions controlled by them: advertising; sales; liaison with clients for internal decoration; stock control; scheduling of production; showroom displays; handling customer accounts; dealings with overseas agents and shipping; purchasing from outside suppliers; warehousing; supervision of embroidery, upholstery and cabinet making activities; book-keeping, and general financial management. That Morris fully recognised the importance of the Smiths became clear in the late 1880s, when he decided to bring them in as partners, thus ensuring that his income from the firm would continue unabated, whilst leaving day-to-day management in the hands of others. The deed

of partnership signed by Morris and the Smiths enabled the brothers to buy into the business on very favourable terms, and the firm continued to develop in the 1890s under their leadership, despite Morris's withdrawal from active management.³

The Smiths managed the business in a prudent and professional manner. Due attention was paid to costs, prices, profit margins, and the preparation of detailed estimates (Harvey and Press 1991a, 167-70). If an estimate exceeded £500, advances were required as the work progressed, to ease the problem of cash flow. Additional charges applied “for attendance to view such buildings or rooms as are proposed for us to decorate.”⁴ Terms of business were plainly stated. Morris & Co. never sold at discount prices, and prompt payment was demanded of all customers, whatever their rank or social standing. Prices were “for ready-money payments,” and the warning was issued that “all sums unpaid after one month from the delivery of the account will be charged with interest at the rate of 5 per cent per annum” (Kelvin 1987, 591). These terms broke with the extended periods of no interest credit to which wealthy patrons had become accustomed. Another break with convention was to label the names, dimensions and prices of all items sold at the shop in Oxford Street. At the time, it was still the practice in high-class shops to avoid labelling, although the Morris approach was shared by the newer types of retailers, like the multiples and department stores established during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Masset 2010).

Morris & Co. made the most of its symbolic capital, exploiting the reputations of its principal designers, Burne-Jones and Morris. Originally, when the main task had been to establish the identity of the firm, the partners had agreed to keep secret the names of individual designers, a policy later reversed. In the 1880s and early 1890s, Burne-Jones' reputation was at its peak, and his work commanded high prices (Fitzgerald 2014, 203-26). Morris & Co. announced in 1882 “Mr Burne-Jones entrusts us alone with the execution of his cartoons for stained glass.”⁵ Morris likewise

had become famous, and his celebrity drew people to take an interest in his work, whether or not they agreed with his political ideas. His conversion to socialism appears to have done little to deter customers. Nor did his lofty attitude and forthright opinions. Rossetti was surely correct in observing that Morris's "very eccentricities and independent attitude towards his patrons seems to have drawn [them] around him" (Thompson 1993, 109). Morris personally advised wealthy customers on big decorative schemes and expensive purchases. In a brochure of the early 1880s, the firm announced that interior design would henceforth "be under the special supervision of Mr WILLIAM MORRIS, who will personally advise Customers as to the best method and style of Decoration to be used in each case."⁶ In the later 1880s he rationed his time by charging fees for personal visits to the homes of clients — five guineas (£5.25) in London, and £20 elsewhere, though charges did not apply to "well known and useful customers ... [it was] only to stop fools and impertinent" (Kelvin 1987, 622).

Establishing the Morrisian Community of Taste

Morris moved confidently in high society in London and at the country retreats of wealthy landowners, industrialists and financiers, extending the social network that underpinned the commercial success of the business (Maclean, Harvey and Kling 2017). A typical example stems from the firm's dealings with George Howard, later ninth Earl of Carlisle. Howard, and his wife, Rosalind, who visited the MMF & Co. workshops in 1866 and became regular customers for the next 20 years, furnishing their homes at Castle Howard and Naworth Castle in Cumbria. Morris wallpapers and fabrics adorned their London home at Palace Green serving as a showcase for the firm. One of the Howards' first guests was HRH Princess Louise, who had married Howard's cousin, the Marquis of Lorne. She especially liked the wallpapers and subsequently visited the firm's showrooms to select papers for her rooms at Kensington Palace (Surtees 1988).

The Howards' close friendship with Percy and Madeleine Wyndham further extended Morris's sphere of influence. Percy Wyndham was the younger son of George Wyndham, first Baron Leconfield. He and his wife were members of the intellectual and aesthetically minded aristocratic set known as the Souls (Abdy and Gere 1985, 82-101). Their admiration for Morris's work at Palace Green led them to draw up ambitious plans for their country house, Clouds, in Wiltshire. Work started in 1876, though it was nine years before the house was ready for occupation. It was an important commission for Morris & Co. As Girouard (1979, 80-81) observes, Clouds set the style for country house life: "political entertaining combined with artistic discrimination. The style, sensibility and relative informality with which the two were pursued made Clouds one of the most famous country houses of its era." Morris supplied fabrics for curtains, chair covers, tablecloths and screens, and manufactured two large custom-designed hand-woven carpets. That for the drawing room, renowned as the *Clouds* carpet, featured an arabesque floral design on a blue ground with a grey border and was the largest carpet Morris & Co. ever manufactured (Dakers 1993, 63-64).

It is possible through scrutiny of surviving diaries, memorials, social reports and other sources to trace further the Morris client network stemming from the Howards, who were just one node within a complex web of social interaction that reached beyond the aristocracy to elite members of society from all quarters (Harvey, Press and Maclean 2011, 259). Morris clients included the iron and steel magnate Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell (Rounton Grange in Yorkshire), the illustrator Myles Birket Foster (The Hill in Surrey), the financier Edward Charles Baring (Membland Hall in Devon), and the shipping magnate Frederick Leyland (Speke Hall in Liverpool). In the majority of cases down to 1890, Morris himself took charge of major decorative schemes, working closely with collaborators like Webb as architect, Burne-Jones as

figure designer, and William De Morgan as tile maker. Many of the products used – fabrics, wallpapers, carpets, tapestries and stained glass – came directly from Morris & Co.’s own workshops. Personal visits from Morris became social talking points; Walter Bagehot, the lawyer and constitutionalist, remarking in 1875 “the great man himself, William Morris, is composing [my] drawing room, as he would an ode” (Barrington 1915, 412).

Once established as an arbiter of legitimate good taste amongst the more intellectual, artistically minded sections of the upper classes, Morris had the cultural authority needed to orchestrate the market (Bourdieu 1986, 230-232). Morris products never became ubiquitous, universally accepted or appreciated; but for leading-edge consumers within the ruling class they spoke of distinction, understood as symbolic of high status and refined good taste. Only through the activities of market makers can decorative art products become entirely legitimate, whose possession is a true mark of distinction. Within the cultural field, as Bourdieu (1993, 75) observes, “the only legitimate accumulation consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects.” Morris had the power to consecrate objects as beautiful (or not), tasteful (or not), making the case for distinctive designs in harmony with nature, use of the best materials, alignment of form and function, and use of appropriate production methods. Morris’s brand identity spoke of integrity, boldness, originality, naturalness and lack of pretension, qualities valued then as now by the Morrisian community of taste (Harvey, Press and Maclean 2011).

Morris & Co., in cultivating the rich and powerful, can be seen to have traded cultural capital (in which it was rich) for social capital (prospective clients) and economic capital (commissions) (Harvey and Maclean 2008). From the client perspective, identification with cultural leaders like Morris offered a number of powerful yet subtle advantages. Within the

Morrisian community of taste, appreciation of the decorative arts was a signifier of belonging; as Bourdieu remarks, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 1986, 6). It was a neutral topic of conversation, shared by men and women, industrialists and bankers, landowners and city dwellers. When, for example, Walter Bagehot visited the Earl of Carnarvon at his country house, Highclere in Berkshire, he noted “they are doing a heap of improvements, and among others have gone into Morrisianism ... They are much amused here at *my* knowing anything about it” (St John-Stevas 1986, 640). This snippet, unimportant in itself, is revealing because Highclere was a pioneering venue for weekend house parties, which became a distinctive feature of upper-class life in late Victorian Britain (Hardinge, 1925, 323-324). Conversation about art, architecture and literature, as expressions of common cultural dispositions, served as a mechanism for elite cohesion, reinforcing its legitimacy and separation from the lower orders (DiMaggio, 1987). It did not matter whether members actually liked what they saw; what mattered was whether they knew about what they saw (Erickson 1991, 275-276). As Calhoun and Wacquant assert (2002, 7), it is knowledge that determines all forms of judgement and “buttresses the hierarchies of the social world.”

In a various ways, the growing reputation of Morris within the decorative arts resembled the spreading of a cult. Morris certainly had some of the qualities of a prophet. His literary works, especially *The Earthly Paradise*, made him famous as an author (Boos 1984). He was an educator and interpreter of complex social ideas, as his later writings on socialism confirm (Thompson 1993). In the decorative arts, his views on design and craftsmanship were the subject of public lectures. The first, “The Decorative Arts”, given before the Trades Guild of Learning in 1877, reprinted in the *Architect* and as a pamphlet with a print run of 2,000 copies in 1878.

Others, such as “Making the Best of It” (c.1879), were collected and published as a book under the title *Hopes and Fears for Art* (Morris 1882).

Morris’s admirers were quick in spreading further his beliefs and artistic principles. Numerous writers took up the theme of excellence in interior design, frequently citing Morris as a model to follow. Longmans published Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste* in 1869: it became a long-running best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Rhoda and Agnes Garrett’s *Suggestions for Home Decoration in Painting, Woodwork and Furniture* followed in 1876. Both books offered advice along Morrisian lines and targeted “the cultivated middle class, able to enjoy leisure, refinement and luxury in moderation (Garrett and Garrett 1876, 7-8). The Garretts emphasized simplicity and the avoidance of cheap imitations, as did Lucy Faulkner Orrin Smith (1877, 1), who castigated the solid comfort of the early Victorian period as “the very headquarters of commonplace, with its strict symmetry of ornament and its pretentious uselessness.” The trend was away from ostentation and display in favour of “art furnishing”, which favoured decluttering rooms by having less and lighter furniture, lighter colours and an air of casualness in the choice of patterns and objects (Forty 1986, 111-112). Robert Edis (1881) pursued the theme in *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*, as did Moncure Conway (1882) in *Travels in South Kensington*. Conway (199-210) noted that possession of something from Morris & Co. was *de rigueur* for every “artistic” middle-class household in London. Articles about Morris & Co. in *The Art Journal*, *The Studio*, *The Spectator*, *The Architectural Review* and other periodicals, often featuring photographs by photographer Bedford Lemere, equated the firm with decorative art at its best (Harvey and Press, 1994a).

The Morrisian community of taste, inspired dialogically and discursively by the media, spread progressively from the upper classes to the middle classes during the 1880s and 1890s. In

producing lower priced goods, ‘lesser emblems of distinction’, alongside expensive luxury goods, Morris & Co. brought large numbers of additional customers within its reach. The elevation of taste over costliness resonated with aspirational people educated in the decorative arts, confirming the argument made by Trigg (2001, 113) that “lifestyles can vary horizontally, cutting across the social hierarchy.” The wealthy continued to patronize Morris & Co. because it supplied exclusive goods at the top of the market, unavailable to the vast majority of the population and a continuing source of distinction. Those from the aspiring middle classes, meanwhile, equally could identify with the firm and its ideals in pursuing a lifestyle giving practical and symbolic expression to the exercise of discernment.

Morris as Cultural Icon

The elevation of Morris to the status of cultural icon began in the 1880s when a broad cross-section of architects, designers and craft workers, collectively known today as the Arts and Crafts Movement, began selectively to champion his ideas on design and manufacture. Amongst the most important were the Century Guild, the Art Workers’ Guild, the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, and the Guild of Handicraft. Each, in different ways, acknowledged Morris as a source of inspiration, actively propagating his ideas and working methods (Naylor 1971; Stansky 1985; Cumming and Kaplan 1991). One of the staunchest advocates of Morrisian principles was the architect and designer W.R. Lethaby, who became Head of the London Central School of Arts and Crafts in 1894, infusing the curriculum with Morris’s beliefs and working methods, and in turn influencing the thinking of future generations of designers (MacDonald 1970, 292-293; Rubens 1986, 173-198). Lethaby’s influence on design education spread throughout Britain to mainland Europe where the Central School provided “if not the

model, certainly the inspiration of much continental teaching and training in design and the crafts” (Watkinson 1967, 173-198).

This process of cultural diffusion was not one that Morris sought to control. He was neither founder nor moving spirit of any organization formed to promote the arts and crafts, and aspects of his own practice – serial manufacture, sub-contracting and the use of machines – did not conform to stricter principles of craft manufacture, attracting criticism from some quarters (Blakesley 2009). What was crucial was the agency of cultural actors like Lethaby for whom he satisfied a continuing need. Each of these actors was in one way or another involved in codifying and simplifying, deriving historical categories of artistic perception (Bourdieu 1996, 466-484), with respect to Morris himself or the movements he symbolized. Such simplifications do not serve history well, expunging other actors and their achievements from popular memory, only recalled in specialist texts as characters of substance. This is structuration in action within the cultural field (Giddens 1984. 16-28; DiMaggio and Powell 1983), through which a natural order emerges, with its own mythology kept fresh by cultural authorities such as museum curators, designers and architects, media arts gurus and historians (DiMaggio 1987). Morris thus found his place in history, as the inspiration and leading figure of the Arts and Crafts Movement; the main reference point in conversations about the decorative arts in Victorian Britain (Pevsner 2005, 12-57; Todd 2012).

Through the processes of cultural reproduction, the Morrisian community of taste has reached across generations. Biographers and historians of art and design have revered his memory since his death in 1896 (MacCarthy 1994). Television and radio broadcasters have joined in more recently (Akhtar 2009). Others in the heritage industry have projected Morris as a cultural icon, notably the keepers of Morris collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum and

elsewhere (V&A 1996). There is a William Morris Society for the true *cognoscenti*.⁷ Meanwhile, at the commercial level, it is remarkable that many of Morris's best-loved designs for wallpapers and fabrics have remained in near continuous production. After his death in 1896, the business was taken over by his partners, Frank and Robert Smith, continuing under their management, and from 1905 that of Henry Marillier, without any "deviation whatsoever in the traditions and methods of manufacture ... as in William Morris's lifetime (Morris & Co. 1911). However, with the loss of creative force so implied, without fresh designs from Morris or Burne-Jones, at a time when tastes in the decorative arts had moved on, the business went into gentle decline, entering liquidation in 1940 (Parry, 1986). The commercial rights to Morris's original designs passed in due course to Sanderson & Co., which has maintained production of his wallpapers and fabrics. The designs remain in use not only for their original purpose, but also as images for the decoration of scarves, ties, cushion covers, mugs, bags, diaries and all manner of paraphernalia – the 'sentimentally evocative goods' found in museum shops and other cultural venues (The Met 2018; V&A 2018). These products, however derivative, serve symbolically to make a direct connection in the minds of purchasers between themselves and William Morris. Thus, in keeping his designs in the public eye, educators, cultural professionals and entrepreneurs have together maintained widespread appreciation of the essential character of Morrisian design.

The Kelmscott Press

The reorganisation of the firm in 1890 left Morris free to concentrate on the final achievement of his life, the establishment of his second business, the Kelmscott Press. As decorative artist, he designed elegant fonts, page layouts, borders, title pages and special lettering. As scholar and man of letters, Morris was the author of 23 of the 66 Kelmscott volumes, the editor of one, and the translator of another four. It was he, moreover, who determined what books the Press should produce. Indeed, his

personality so dominated the enterprise that following his death his executors decided that it should close following completion of work in hand (Peterson, 1991).

Morris's literary and artistic achievements at the Kelmscott Press depended in considerable part on his talent as an entrepreneur. In his final venture, he naturally took same methodical approach, including preparatory research and mastery of relevant techniques, which had elevated the fortunes of Morris & Co. His offerings, moreover, appealed to the same middle and upper-class constituencies. Just as the firm sold goods at a range of prices and qualities, from high works of art down to simple domestic articles, so too the Kelmscott Press produced books of differing sizes, lavishness of illustration, and price. The average price of a paper volume was £2.19, with considerable variation, such that 36 titles went on sale at £1.50 or less. A few – 11 volumes printed on paper – cost more than £5, with the *Chaucer* in a league of its own at £20. A vellum edition of any work cost between five and six times its paper counterpart, appealing to wealthy collectors.

In his book on *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris* (1924, 75-78), Sparling suggested that Morris never intended the Kelmscott Press to make money: stating that “he [Morris] had never contemplated the sale of any book whatever at any price, until *forced* to do so by finding that there was a real and widespread demand for his books.” The idea that the Kelmscott Press was in essence non-profit-making has been reiterated by later writers, most notably by William Peterson, whose *Bibliography of the Kelmscott Press* (1982) contains a wealth of detail on all aspects of the books produced by Morris. Peterson (1982, xi) states that the Press “was in effect an amusing diversion for Morris” that he expected would cost him money. Its commercial success accordingly is seen as an incidental consequence of artistic genius rather than something which Morris may have striven for as a matter of course. There is some evidence to support this interpretation. Morris himself rejected any suggestion that high prices meant large profits: “if the people who go about talking of my

profits could see my balance sheet, they would speak quite differently.” In the case of the *Chaucer*, the “cost will hardly be covered by the subscriptions,” and with the *Beowulf* the effect of several sheets having spoiled in the printing was to convert a profit into a loss so that “the book is sold at less than what it cost me to produce it” (Peterson 1984, 111).

The Kelmscott Press, it is quite clear, was no ordinary commercial venture. Morris’s primary objectives were artistic, not financial. This said, it is hard to believe that Morris, with all his experience of marketing high-quality goods and services, set up this complex and costly enterprise in entire innocence of the notion that the books would find a ready market. All Morris’s creative endeavours gave him pleasure, but this did not relegate them to the status of amusing diversions. His was a serious purpose, and that purpose demanded that he stay in business. To do this he had to trade at a profit. To trade at a profit, he had to keep down costs, stimulate demand, and fix his prices at a remunerative level. The Kelmscott Press was a remarkable creative adventure; but it was also a commercial concern with orthodox financial aspirations (Faulkner, 1986, 53).

All the signs are that the business operated on sound commercial lines, notwithstanding significant risks. Morris invariably followed the achievement of one ambitious goal with another yet more ambitious; and in this case, ambition dictated the production of an edition of Chaucer that would rank amongst the finest books of all time. After two financially successful years, in 1892 and 1893, a large part of the resources of the Kelmscott Press was turned over to the project. Morris, as ever, was prepared to invest heavily in projects about which he cared deeply. No expense was spared. The direct cost of producing 425 paper copies and 13 vellum copies was a staggering £7,217, expended over three years. The books had a gross value of £10,128, trimmed by 25 per cent to cover costs of distribution, making £7,596. Morris was not exaggerating when in 1895 he claimed that the *Chaucer* would yield little or no profit. The reason for this is almost certainly that Morris

announced his prices and took orders at too early a stage, before the full costs of the project were known. Its instant success suggests he may readily have made a good profit simply by charging more or printing more copies. The steep rise in prices in the second-hand market immediately following release of Kelmscott Press editions to subscribers, with prices quickly doubling or trebling, supports this view (Franklin 1968).

In the main, however, most Kelmscott books were profitable even if under-priced. The surviving data provide detailed information of only half the Press's titles, but this does permit us to calculate the ratio of gross income to operating costs for 33 Kelmscott books, both individually and collectively. The weighted average ratio for all 33 titles is 1.94 to 1. In other words, gross income from sales was almost double the sum needed to meet costs of production. Even factoring in overheads and distribution expenses, including trade discounts, there was still a fair margin for profit. Of course, there was considerable variation between titles. At the upper end of the profit range were some of Morris's own works. *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* had gross income to cost ratios of 3.47 to 1 and 3.46 to 1 respectively, compared to 1.4 to 1 for the *Chaucer* and 1.46 to 1 for *Beowulf*. The highest income to cost differential, with a ratio of 12.79 to 1, was that of the 26-page *Syr Isambrace*; the lowest ratio, at 1.31 to 1, was that of the three volume *Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, which cost £832 to produce (Sparling 1924, 148-174).

The overall picture is that of a financially healthy business with considerable scope to charge premium prices for its products. The only surviving financial statement for the Kelmscott Press, a balance sheet drawn up at 31 December 1895, confirms this assessment. It shows a firm in a very solid financial position, with plant and machinery written down to a low figure, and sufficient liquid assets to cover its debts many times over.⁸ For Morris, the success of the Kelmscott Press may

have been the most satisfying aspect of his whole career — notably, an achievement that depended on his entrepreneurial flair just as much as it did on his artistic expertise.

Conclusion

The success of Morris & Co. in advancing the cause of the decorative arts owed much to the sagacity of Morris's business ideas and the aptness of his methods. Morris fully appreciated that if the firm was to succeed in meeting its wider objectives, then it must trade profitably and secure a strong position in the marketplace. From the late 1860s onwards, when Morris really began to take its affairs in hand, the firm was consistently profitable, and after the mid-1880s it was very lucrative indeed. Morris knew his markets, and he knew how to exploit them. He kept the name of the firm before the public, winning and maintaining a reputation for the highest standards of design and manufacture. Equally, he knew his costs, and he was vigilant in keeping them down. Neither suppliers nor workers found Morris an easy touch, though he was always willing to pay well for work of the highest standard. He was obsessive about quality, and he turned his obsession into a business asset. The firm became known for its use of traditional methods, machinery, and processes. Its hand-woven fabrics and carpets, and its hand-printed textiles and wallpapers, all fetched premium prices. Vegetable dyeing was not an easy craft to master, but it helped give the Morris range of goods a distinctive quality for which the firm's customers showed no hesitation in paying.

Morris & Co. was a highly innovative small business, which, if its owner had so desired, could have grown into a much larger concern. More designs could have been turned over for machine production; more shops could have been opened; more agents could have been appointed overseas. All these were possibilities that Morris recognised and rejected. He was never interested in growth for its own sake. When the firm did grow, it was not through

increasing the scale of production *per se*, but through widening its activities to control quality or extend the range of products. Growth beyond this point would have required changes that Morris could not have tolerated. Drawing in capital and professional management from outside would have reduced his personal freedom, and, worse still, would have made even heavier demands upon his time. Detachment from the everyday realities of design and manufacture would have followed, leaving him in a position no different from the ordinary commercial manufacturer.

Living small but certain was a far more enticing prospect, made manifest in business strategy. His customers were privileged members of society with relatively high and secure incomes. They could afford the prices needed to cover the costs of producing high-quality goods in limited quantities, or in providing labour intensive decorative art services. Thus, while Morris cut himself off from the much bigger markets served by mass production suppliers, he had the compensation of never having to reduce his standards below a level acceptable to himself. Furthermore, his markets, except for stained glass, were relatively free from the regular fluctuations in demand that characterised the lower end of the luxury trades. This was certainly comforting to him; he was throughout anxious to maintain his income at a level that kept him in the upper reaches of Victorian society. He was far from being an avaricious man, but from his earliest days had enjoyed a high standard of material wellbeing, and he had no wish to lower his sights, either for himself or his wife and children. This explains the sheer effort Morris put in to building up his business between the late 1860s and mid-1880s.

How does this square with Morris's championing of revolutionary socialism after 1883? Was he disingenuous when writing to Charles Maurice (Kelvin 1987, 199) that "the contrasts of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor"? The answer emphatically is no. Morris was utterly sincere in his political quest for social justice. His

personal knowledge of the demands and constraints of capitalist enterprise – gained on the front line at MMF & Co., Devon Great Consols and Morris & Co. – led him to the conclusion that system change demanded systemic, political action. Voluntarily redistributing his personal wealth to workers or good causes could only be a futile gesture, making, as he wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones, “a very small knot of working-people ... somewhat better off amidst the great ocean of economic slavery” (Kelvin 1987, 283). Better by far, he reasoned, was to apply his time, creativity and financial resources in support of the political struggle for socialism.

Morris & Co., in remaining small and independent, enabled him to do just that. Morris delegated routine administrative and supervisory matters to George Wardle, the Smith brothers, and later J.H. Dearle, dividing his time during the 1880s between higher value-adding business activities and politics, and focusing during the 1890s on the Kelmscott Press. The firm offered support, in one way or another, for all his artistic, cultural, literary and political ventures, for the greater part of his adult life. It was, indeed, part of the weave of his life; the overarching project which of necessity consumed a large part of his waking hours. It provided him with a vehicle for his researches in the history and methods of the decorative arts. It gave him a clear sense of direction; making demands, setting challenges, and offering tangible rewards. It represented security; a base from which he could step out and engage with the world without threatening his livelihood. He could use his resources – his money and his time – as he saw fit. The independent spirit that pervaded all his work is that of a man in command of his own destiny. Business was foundational to the creative life of William Morris.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Hammersmith and Fulham Archives, DD348/14, letter from May Morris to Sydney Cockerell, 11 May 1838.
- ² William Morris Gallery (WMG), Walthamstow, J191, speech delivered by May Morris in 1934 celebrating the centenary of her father's birth.
- ³ PRO (Public Record Office), IR59/173, Morris & Co., Articles of Partnership, 19 March 1890.
- ⁴ WMG, Walthamstow, File 11a, Morris & Co. circular, 9 April 1877.
- ⁵ Victoria and Albert Museum, Box 126a, Morris & Co. brochure, 1882.
- ⁶ WMG, Walthamstow, File 11a, Morris & Co. undated circular, c1881.
- ⁷ WMS (William Morris Society, website, <https://williammorrissociety.org/>).
- ⁸ PRO, IR59/173, Kelmscott Press, Balance Sheet, 31 December 1895.