

# Kent Academic Repository

## Full text document (pdf)

### Citation for published version

Parkins, Wendy J. (2015) "Feeling for Beauty". *The Senses and Society*, 10 (1). pp. 26-38. ISSN 1745-8927.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.2752/174589315X14161614601646>

### Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/62014/>

### Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

#### Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

#### Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

#### Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

[researchsupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:researchsupport@kent.ac.uk)

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

# “Feeling for beauty”: Tactile aesthetics & the childhood of May Morris

Wendy Parkins

[w.j.parkins@kent.ac.uk](mailto:w.j.parkins@kent.ac.uk)

**Biographical Note:** Wendy Parkins, Professor of Victorian Literature at the University of Kent, has published widely on the Morris family, including *Jane Morris: The Burden of History* (2013) and *William Morris and the Art of Everyday Life* (2010).

**Keywords:** tactile aesthetics, emotions, embroidery, habitus, Arts & Crafts movement.

**Abstract:** May Morris (1862-1938), renowned craftswoman and daughter of William Morris, had an unconventional Victorian childhood in a home where all the members of the family were engaged in various forms of aesthetic labour, either as amateurs or professionals, and shared an aesthetic philosophy that blended the artisanal and the experimental from which would develop the Arts and Crafts movement. This article will examine the fragmentary recollections of her childhood recorded by May Morris in the introductions she wrote for the twenty-four volume edition of *The Collected Works of William Morris* as a rich resource for Victorian sensory history because of the emphasis she places on the development of the child’s sensorium, especially in relation to touch as the vital sense that linked family intimacy with creative activity. Employing the term “tactile aesthetics,” I show how, in the Morris household, the pleasurable sensual apprehension of the objects or materials worked by the hands of the craftsperson was inseparable from the complex feelings of connection with others. In such an environment, a feeling for beauty comprised a vital component of habitus, the embodied knowledges and aptitudes that, according to Pierre Bourdieu, are acquired from earliest childhood through the practices of everyday life within a specific social setting.

## **“Feeling for beauty”: Tactile aesthetics & the childhood of May Morris**

I have tried to show that executive skill and the desire of and feeling for beauty, realized in a work of definite utility, are the vital and essential elements of this as of all other branches of art, and that no one of these elements can the embroideress neglect or overlook if her work is to have life and meaning. If she pursues her craft with due care, and one might even say with enthusiasm, however, she will not only taste that keen pleasure which every one feels in creative work, however unpretending, but the product will be such as others will be careful to preserve: this in itself being an incentive to good work.

In the Dedicatory Note to her *Decorative Needlework* (1893), May Morris – a renowned craftswoman for Morris & Co. and the daughter of William Morris – encouraged amateur needlewomen to view their handiwork as meaningful creative labour in terms that emphasized the sensory: a “feeling for beauty” is vital if one is to “taste that keen pleasure” which such work can produce. Images of taste and touch may be a conventional idiom for conveying a passionate intensity of experience but May Morris’s aesthetic was shaped from childhood by an emphasis on sensory experience. I will focus here on May’s anecdotal accounts of childhood which she incorporated into the introductions she wrote for *The Collected Works of William Morris*, a monumental undertaking she began in 1906 that was published in twenty four volumes between 1910 and 1915. These introductions, intended to provide the biographical background for her father’s extraordinary productivity in literature, design and political activism, constitute a form of covert autobiography at times as May recalls significant moments of her own early life and situates them in relation to her father’s career. A striking feature of these childhood recollections is their rendering as vivid sense memories: the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and, above all, feel of the phenomena of daily life that May experienced growing up in the 1860s and 1870s. In this article, then, I will show how a focus on the child’s sensorium, as it responded to the rich sensory environment of a home steeped in the aesthetic labour of both her parents, shaped the adult for whom tactile aesthetics and a “feeling for beauty” remained a guiding principle. As a young woman of 23 (and after studying textile design at the South Kensington School of Design), May Morris took on the

management of the embroidery section of Morris & Co., a position she held until her father's death in 1896. For the remainder of her life, May Morris taught and lectured on embroidery, textiles and pattern design, as well as continuing to exhibit her own work (in textile design and embroidery) internationally.<sup>1</sup>

Before turning to May's anecdotes of childhood, however, it is necessary to describe briefly the homes where she grew up, beginning with Red House – the home built for the newly-wed Morrises at Bexleyheath in 1859 and where both Jenny and May Morris were born (in 1861 and 1862, respectively). In this first family home, shared creative projects were a part of everyday life for the Morris family. May describes the vague impressions she retained of the first few years of her life as “dream-pictures” but uses imagery of contact – even contact that painfully permeates the boundaries of the self – to convey how affect was powerfully transmitted through her earliest memories that “impressed on an unconcerned tiny brain ... till in later days ... their beauty at last pierce[d] the heart” (Vol. I: xiv). Red House had a formative influence on everything that followed in the Morris family history: the family's interest in diverse arts and crafts, the development of the family business, and the connections forged there with a wider network of creative people (artists, illustrators, architects, ceramicists, poets, embroiderers) who remained close to the family thereafter. The decoration and furnishing of Red House was carried out by William and Jane Morris and their circle of friends and associates, men and women, providing the impetus for the establishment of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company (later, simply Morris & Co., or – to friends and family – “the Firm”), a company that designed, produced and sold everything from stained-glass windows and glassware to furniture, tiles, wallpapers and fabrics in a style that embodied the popularization of Aestheticism and the rise of the Arts and Crafts movement. May Morris recalled how many striking objects from these early years had “been unconsciously part of my external life” (Vol. II: xii) as an enduring, material legacy of this early aesthetic experimentation in the Morris home. As I have argued elsewhere, the decoration of Red House was not simply a statement of aesthetic style but said something about the nature of home life as a space where exuberance and playful experimentation – in art and life – could be encouraged (Parkins 2010).

While the marital estrangement of William and Jane Morris has become the

stuff of legend,<sup>2</sup> it is easy to overlook the many ways in which William Morris's design principles were shared by his wife, with both parents comprising a united front for their daughters in their passion for interior design, literature and handicrafts (from embroidery to book-making). As May makes clear, Jane Morris put into practice a Morrisian philosophy of the home as a space of beauty, utility and hospitality where creative labour was always at hand. Mother and daughters worked together on beautiful textiles for their own home and for friends, as well as embroidery commissions for Morris & Co. (sometimes in collaboration with Jane's sister Elizabeth Burden, who became a professional needlewoman and teacher of embroidery).<sup>3</sup> From May's earliest memories, then, we see all the members of the family working with fabrics and fibres, colours and designs, across different media in a richly sensory domestic environment.

After the family left Red House in 1865 (due to financial reversals), and moved to live above the new workroom and showroom for Morris & Co. in Red Lion Square, the domestic space they inhabited may have been less utopian than the idyllic Red House but it marked an integration of aesthetics at home and at work that made the home seem a magical space for the young May Morris where she could observe stained-glass production, hear the glass-painters at work and mess about with dyes and paints of her own. When the family subsequently moved to Hammersmith in 1878, the business premises were no longer shared with the domestic space (although this home would accommodate William Morris's socialist activities, providing a meeting space for the Hammersmith Socialist League, of which May was an active member as a young adult) but both here and in the country home the Morrises leased from the early 1870s, Kelmscott Manor near Lechlade, domestic and creative practices were thoroughly imbricated in daily life. From May Morris as well as some of the Morrises' contemporaries, we are given an insight into the sometimes volatile daily life of the Morris family in their various homes,<sup>4</sup> where the features of Morrisian style (rich textiles, simple furnishings, and restrained ornamentation) combined with unstinting hospitality and provided the background for exuberant games, heated debates and creative productivity to an extraordinary degree.

The domestic, then, was always a space of creative collaboration for the Morrises where what I will call tactile aesthetics – practices of creative making in

which the senses, especially touch, were given a priority – were in evidence. While the term “haptic aesthetics” has been used to describe an approach in which a “felt proximity” as well as “actual physical contact” with the aesthetic object is valued (Paterson 2007: 84; see also Fisher 1997: 6), I prefer the term tactile aesthetics, to emphasize the more cutaneous aspect of the sense of touch – relating to the skin as receptive to pressure and texture – and the motor skills of the hand, to think about the many creative practices using paper, fabric or thread in which the Morrisises engaged. Tactile aesthetics were associated with the pleasurable sensual apprehension of the objects or materials worked by the craftsperson and with the feelings of connection with others of like mind and skill arising from collaboration – in which objects were passed from hand to hand, worked on simultaneously or sequentially, or produced in the social settings of the studio or drawing room. Eve Sedgwick’s account of touch is relevant here, as it emphasizes the relational dimension between toucher and touched that speaks to the processes involved in making the “textured objects” that filled the Morrisises’ home:

Even more immediately than other perceptual systems, it seems, the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object. (Sedgwick 2003: 14)

In this context, every touched object has been touched before – by the hands of the maker, the co-worker, the giver, the admirer, or the user – and carries with it a tactile history, embedded and embodied, as a result.

In this way, tactile aesthetics were also directly related to – and derived from – William Morris’s critique of the instrumentality of capitalist production that he articulated from the late 1870s onwards. Not only did such a mode of production rely on an alienated and exploited labour force, Morris argued, it produced inferior goods that did not even enhance the life of the leisured minority who consumed them (see Morris 1915). Insisting on the value of touch and tactility in domestic practices and objects was a form of resistance to the sensory deprivation or impoverishment Morris associated with the mass-produced commodity, or what he called “sham art” (1914), intended for domestic decoration. Morris’s tactile aesthetics, then, premised on a

conscious adaptation to the temporality of the body rather than the machine, acknowledged both the duration needed to make beautiful objects by hand and the “longing to set [our] hand” to objects and materials that could offer sensory gratification in the process of making as well as in the final product (1914).

In a not dissimilar vein, Pierre Bourdieu (2002) described a kind of resistance which he saw as a “dynamic friction” that occurs between art and the everyday. Bourdieu speculated that aesthetic practices could become the means by which habitus – our internalized predispositions and aptitudes acquired through the social environment we inhabit, from earliest childhood onwards – was transformed (2002: 31-2). Our capacities and habits, that is, could be altered through the processes and skills associated with art (or crafts) because such practices foster a sense of heightened awareness, a self-conscious shaping of intention and agency. Allowing that habitus manifests both in the habitual ways in which we engage with the world as well as in our more creative improvisations or adaptations to circumstances, Bourdieu’s idea of the “dynamic friction” that results from the contiguity of art and everyday life provides a useful means to understand the importance of tactile aesthetics in the Morris family: more than a hobby or even a business, their attention to tactile aesthetics was a way of understanding – and re-shaping – the relation between self and other, between intimacy and resistance, that creative practices associated with touch foregrounded.

While the Morrises often collaborated on aesthetic projects –William and Jane taught themselves traditional embroidery practices together at Red House; Jane and her daughters worked on embroidery pieces for each of their homes as well as for Morris & Co.<sup>5</sup> – they also engaged in individual projects while sharing the same space. The illustrator Edmund New, for instance, described these parallel creative practices during his stay with the Morrises at Kelmscott Manor in 1895. While New worked on his sketches of the Manor in the drawing room, “Mr Morris was designing some cretonnes and Miss [May] Morris knitted; Mrs M[orris] joined us during the morning and continued embroidering a book cover on which she was engaged” (Cox 1974: 6). Such a model of shared creativity may reflect the social practices associated with the feminine handiwork of leisured gentlewomen (see Classen 2012: 133) rather than the cultural paradigm of the solitary artist working alone in a studio but it re-frames such

practices to blur the boundary between amateur and professional, masculine and feminine, and – equally as important – brings such practices into a new kind of visibility: observing others at work in close proximity (whether family or friends) allowed for the sharing of ideas, the influence of one practice or design on another, or the potential to pass the work from hand to hand for advice, admiration, or collaboration.

In May Morris's introductions to her father's *Collected Works*, we also gain glimpses into the shared aesthetic practices within the Morris home but these introductions necessarily cover William's entire career and as such presented May with the problem of describing events before her birth or when she was too young to properly observe or understand them.<sup>6</sup> In the opening paragraph of the Introduction to Volume I, May addresses this issue and makes explicit the narrative strategy she has chosen to adopt in response to this potential problem. What will follow, she writes, is "the child's picture of 'things as they seem' [which] may help to bring the reality before older eyes" (Vol. 1: x), a position she reiterates at the start of Volume VIII when she reminds the reader, "I am still telling my story from the child's point of view" (Vol. VIII: xxvii). May's emphasis on her status as a child in the early volumes, however, goes beyond the problem of chronology and instead serves a number of other functions. The narrator-as-child strategy firstly gives a strong sense of immediacy to her recollections, stressing their value as "personal impressions" (Vol. I 1910: ix), while also mobilizing the Romantic myth of the child's acuity of perception, the capacity of children to feel deeply and experience a sense of wonder as they encounter phenomena – both natural and social – for the first time. The child's perspective can thus create an estranging effect for adult readers, an effect that is similar to the sense of cognitive estrangement often associated with the aesthetic, which offers the potential to re-present the everyday in a new or challenging light to unsettle our assumptions. The narrator-as-child strategy also makes an implicit claim for authenticity, as when May excuses the "want of art" in her telling of these recollections to emphasize their raw, unprocessed quality in which memories are offered without regard to sifting the profound from the more trivial (Vol. I: ix). At the same time, this narrative strategy justifies the partial perspective offered and thus rather disingenuously allows the narrator to avoid confronting any awkward adult realities of her parents' lives (such as her father's unreliable temperament or her



mother's infidelity) and therefore enables May to maintain an often idealized perspective on her father in particular by refusing to re-evaluate her childhood experiences in the light of later wisdom or subsequent revelations.

It is in this context, then, that the dominance of sense memories in recalling childhood events and places emerges in May's account. The child's sensorium is depicted as acutely responsive to the smell, touch or taste of distinctive locations and the adult May often describes how she is still imaginatively transported by a sensory cue in the present – “the taste of angelica on a cake” or the “smell of a glass-painter's shop” – to what she calls “memory-pictures” of her past (Vol. III: xxiv, xxv). The past remains a tangible presence to the narrator and even a recollection which begins by recalling a prohibition of touch strongly evokes the tactility of substances and materials through which the relationship between parent and child was enacted in the Morris home. Describing her father's work table at Horrington House (where the Morrises lived from 1872 to 1878), May paints a scene of familial intimacy grounded in a shared love of beautiful objects and creative processes:

It was a wonderfully interesting table to explore – with the eye, for of course one never dreamt of disarranging or touching a single paint-brush; there were sticks of Chinese ink of a special quality (which I was often allowed to grind when wanted), there was precious ultramarine in a slim cake, there was pale gold in shells, and gold-leaf in books, which we were shown standing in ceremonial attitude of respect and drawing in our breath, lest the fragile glitter should break asunder in the least disturbance of the air. And in passing, let me note one picture I retain of this time: we were shown how the gold was laid, and my father would pass the broad badger-hair brush used for taking up the leaf through his forest of thick curls in the orthodox way, before laying it gently on the leaf of gold. That made us laugh: then the brush, ever so slightly greased by this simple means, took even hold of the leaf and laid it delicately on the cushion where it was dexterously cut. I have seen the same process many times enough since, but never without my thoughts going back to the little house in Chiswick – the bare light room, the plain work-table; the splendid head bending over the gold, and the two young heads laid close, and the curly locks all mingling ... (Vol. IX: xvii, ellipsis in original)

Here, where even a breath can have a haptic dimension, with its capacity to make

contact with – and disperse – the gold-leaf, the fragility of the exotic materials and the need for gentleness of touch underpins the reverence for the creative process shared by the father and his daughters. William Morris is linked indexically with his work materials – as he touches his brush to his hair before picking up the leaf – and he becomes the means by which all three Morrises present are connected through contact, in the “mingling” of their curly hair as they intently attend to the work at hand. William Morris was not, however, always so protective of his materials, often keen to share his new discoveries of craft processes or materials with his daughters, as when he turned his attention to dyeing fibres and fabrics, setting up a dye-shop in the basement of the family home in 1875. “The air at home was saturated with dye-ing,” May Morris recalled,

bits of madder and indigo lay about, papers of the kermes insect brought home and its habits and customs explained.... Even we children were presented with a set of dye-stuffs – how well I remember the look of the broad-stoppered bottles filled with queer powders and lumps and grains that stood in an inviting row on a shelf in the schoolroom, and what distressing messes we made with them!

(Vol. XI: xvi)

While there is no explicit mention of touch in this passage, it again evokes a sense of palpable contact between the child and the craft materials: the “saturated” air suggests the extent to which the Morris home was permeated by the aesthetic, while the “distressing messes” made with the dye-stuffs implies a ‘hands-on’ approach typical of child’s play and artistic creativity alike.

May Morris’s lifelong devotion to her father’s ideals in both art and politics is evident throughout her Introductions to his *Collected Works* but, perhaps as a result, her relationship to her mother is often overlooked. As an accomplished needlewoman carrying out and supervising commissions for Morris & Co., as well as making and embellishing decorative objects and items of clothing for personal use or for friends and family, Jane Morris exemplifies Christine Bayles Kortsch’s contention that textile literacy became a form of feminine cultural capital in this period (2009: 13). A working-class woman by birth, Jane Morris had entered a radically different environment on her marriage to William Morris: not only did she acquire a new level of social status and affluence but she entered a social network in which creativity was the *modus operandi* for men and women alike and where she became a full participant

in the aesthetic experimentation that characterized the Morris circle. Within this group, Jane Morris's closest female friends were creative women who supported themselves (and sometimes their families) through their work, like the artist Marie Spartali Stillman, the author and embroiderer Mary de Morgan, and the illustrator Olive Cockerell. Creative women like this looked to historical models of art or craft to express their creativity but not in a kind of anti-modern or retrograde way such as Talia Schaffer (2011) has recently associated with an Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Schaffer's account underestimates both William Morris's impact on progressively-minded female craftswomen and interior designers in this period and also the ways in which women like Jane Morris and her friends negotiated their work and identity in relation to new and emerging theories of art, work and the domestic, as Pamela Gerrish Nunn (2010) has argued. The example of Jane Morris complicates the historical narrative offered by Schaffer, of women's domestic handicrafts superseded by the masculine cultural authority of designers and practitioners of the Arts and Crafts movement. Jane Morris was neither simply a "leisured female producer" (Schaffer 2011: 183) nor a professional craftswoman to the same degree as her daughter May. The work she carried out, however, exemplified an ethos of aesthetic production that was not defined against modernity but squarely positioned within it: as a socially-mobile woman, she had painstakingly acquired the skills to produce accomplished work – from needlework commissions for Morris and Co. to ornamented dresses worn to model for the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As such, she had more in common with her daughter May than has often been acknowledged.

It is perhaps puzzling, then, that May does not emphasize Jane Morris's creative labour in the Introductions to her father's *Collected Works* but, in the context of May's almost synaesthetic evocation of the past, the association she draws between her mother and the tactile is nonetheless a striking one. In the midst of her account of life in Queen Square, for instance, May interrupts her memories of the Firm's stained-glass commissions and her father's woodcuts with a single-sentence paragraph: "And in all these pictures comes and goes the figure of my mother, in soft silk gowns that we loved and stroked" (Vol. III: xxv). The pleasure of stroking silk is so strongly bound up with May's childhood memories of her mother that it is repeated more than once in these Introductions. In another volume, May recalled that Rossetti's portrait of Jane Morris (also known as *The Blue Silk Gown*)

perpetuates a delicious, simple silk gown of shot blue and brown that was a great favourite with the little girls. It had some fragile ornament of gold thread at the throat and wrists, and was of a delicate, faintly-rustling texture, that we never tired of stroking. The merest glance at the Indian chain and bracelet in the picture bring back vividly the fragrance of the painted cedar-wood casket where mother's lovely ornaments were kept. We were allowed to play with it sometimes on Sunday afternoons, with reverent adoring fingers that did no damage to the treasures it contained. (Vol. II: xxxv)

The sensory elements May describes – the look, feel and sound of the garment, the handling of precious objects, the smell of the wooden casket – underline the inextricable association between such rich sense impressions and her mother. The treasured preservation of the elements that appeared in this portrait – the dress and jewellery – also symbolizes the complex set of emotional identifications and affective connections present in the Morris home. Rossetti's painting, the casket decorated by Elizabeth Siddall (Rossetti's wife, who died tragically in 1862) where the bracelet designed by Rossetti was kept, the dress made and embroidered by Jane, each in turn is strongly cathected by May as precious and meaningful. Object and creator are indissoluble from the feelings (in both senses of the word) that are recalled through this recollection. The memory, that is, is not simply that of a child's play at 'dressing up' but of beautiful objects highly valued for their connection with beloved people and places, forming the fabric of daily life for a child in the Morris household. While the reverence with which May recalls the dress and jewellery suggest these were not 'everyday' items, it places them within the parameters of domestic life, connecting mother and daughters with the portrait, the jewellery and the casket in a way that assumes the imbrication of creativity, emotions and senses.

Another striking aspect in these memories of touching silk, however, is the way the silk both represents and displaces the mother. Does this mark an emotional distance between mother and daughter, where the desired contact with the mother is absent but displaced onto the mother's possession, the dress? Or is the silk dress a form of transitional object, which allowed the satisfaction of the desire for intimate contact while also marking the child's awareness of her separation from the mother, a stage necessary for a child's development of independence and creativity? In D. W. Winnicott's account, the "transitional object" serves a vital role in a child's transition

from absolute dependence on the mother towards relative independence, through the adoption of a special object to which the child attaches significance and affection. In Winnicott's words: "sooner or later in an infant's development there comes a tendency on the part of the infant to weave other-than-me objects into the personal pattern" (1953: 231). The metaphor of weaving aptly picks up on the craft and aesthetic practices associated with the Morris household, as does Winnicott's description of the characteristics of the types of objects which may commonly be co-opted by the child in this way: such an object, Winnicott conjectures, "must seem to the infant to give warmth, or move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own" (1953: 233 emphasis added). The "faintly-rustling texture" of the silk gown May recalls captures precisely the dimension Winnicott emphasizes: "rustling" implies not only sound but movement, a quality also evident in the "shot" silk which seems to change colour from blue to brown only as the garment moves to pick up different aspects of the light. The gown, alive but fragile, draws the touch of the child, an image that embodies a desire for contact with the beautiful in which the mother and the aesthetic become merged.

May's tactile recollections of childhood in fact described a number of transitional objects through which the child enacted and mediated desires for both the mother and the father at the same time as she tested the boundaries of her relationship with her parents and her growing sense of independence from them. On another occasion, she recalled:

My best beloved doll was a discarded little jointed lay-figure of father's, whose name was John. When mother was specially unwell and lay abed, I used to bring him down wrapped in a ragged piece of green baize (he had no wardrobe) to pay her a visit. She had to kiss the dint on his gaunt nose, much to my father's amusement, and I thought my treasure would surely comfort her. (Vol. IV 1911: xiii)

May's doll ritual allowed the child to express her love for her mother while also momentarily reversing the roles of parent and child, carer and patient. The masculine-gendered doll – named "John" and described as belonging to May's father – also situates the transitional object within a triangular relationship between child, father and mother, where the child effectively orders the mother to love the father (by kissing the father's doll) while bestowing the 'gift' of the father upon the mother.

May had previously described other more typical dolls she had possessed as a child so her choice of “John” as a gift was a meaningful one.<sup>7</sup> As a “lay-figure,” an articulated figure used by artists to copy the proportion and posture of the body, John was squarely located within the aesthetic domain of family life, his function and context undisguised because John “had no wardrobe.” Even here, however, the tactile is evoked, through the contrast described between John’s only covering, a “ragged piece of green baize,” where the adjective “ragged” connotes the rough feel of the fabric compared to the smoothness of his “gaunt nose.” Recalled in a light-hearted tone as part of a narrative sequence May designates “gossip about dolls and things,” the story of John nonetheless represents a powerfully resonant, if largely non-verbal, emotional transaction within the Morris family in which touch connects what is loved – parents, dolls – with a broader context of aesthetic production. In her memories of her parents, May’s emphasis on touch renders love a profoundly sensory experience where to love is to touch and to touch is to love.

Tactile aesthetics, then, were an expression of both art and intimacy for the Morrises, articulating family values that were first put into practice in the home and then carried over into the family business, Morris & Co. The daughter’s lifelong fascination for, and cultivation of, sensory aesthetic experience in the form of embroidery and textile design can be understood as a significant weaving together of family affection with shared practices and objects. Within the uniquely creative environment of the Morris household, May Morris’s upbringing both stimulated her sensory capacity as a child and shaped the re-telling of her memories in strongly sensual terms. When, in *Decorative Needlework*, May urged that an embroideress must have a “desire of and feeling for beauty” if “her work is to have life and meaning,” she could well have been articulating her own experience of the vital imbrication of all these elements – life, work, meaning, beauty, desire – in a “personal pattern” (Winnicott 1953: 231) that began with an awareness of texture and the impression of affect, and touched every aspect of family life from childhood onwards.

## References:

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2002. "Habitus." In Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds), *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, pp. 27-34. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Classen, Constance. 2012. *The Deepest Touch: A Cultural History of Touch*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Cox, David. 1974. "Edmund New's 'Diary of a Visit to Kelmscott Manor House.'" *Journal of William Morris Studies* 3 (1): 3-7.
- Fisher, Jennifer. 1997. "Relational Touch: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics." *Parachute* 87 (1): 4-11.
- Kortsch, Christine Bayles. 2009. *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles and Activism*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Morris, May. 1893. *Decorative Needlework*. London: Joseph Hughes & Co.
- Morris, May. 1911. *Introductions to the Collected Works of William Morris*. Vols. II, III, IV, IX, XI. London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Morris, William. 1914. "The Prospects of Architecture [1881]." In May Morris (ed), *The Collected Works of William Morris*, Vol. XXII, p. 119-153. London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Morris, William. 1915. "How We Live and How We Might Live [1885]." In May Morris (ed), *The Collected Works of William Morris*, Vol. XXIII, p. 3-26. London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Nunn, Pamela Gerrish. 2010. "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered by the Beauty of Life." In Wendy Parkins (ed), *William Morris and the Art of Everyday Life*, pp. 109-132. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Parkins, Wendy. 2010. "Feeling at Home: Gender and Creative Agency at Red House." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15 (1): 61-81.
- Parkins, Wendy. 2013. *Jane Morris: The Burden of History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Paterson, Mark. 2007. *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies*. Oxford: Berg.
- Schaffer, Talia. 2011. *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Shaw, George Bernard. 1936. "William Morris as I Knew Him." In May Morris (ed),

William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist. Vol. 2. Oxford: Blackwell.

Winnicott, D. W. 1953. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (2): 89-97.

---

<sup>1</sup> In addition to exhibiting work regularly at Arts and Crafts exhibitions in Britain, May Morris also exhibited at the Universal Exhibition in Ghent in 1913 and the Exposition d'Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1914.

<sup>2</sup> For an examination of the scandals attached to the Morris marriage, see Parkins (2013: 21-56).

<sup>3</sup> In her teenage years, Jenny Morris was diagnosed with epilepsy and lived the remainder of her life as an invalid, subject to repeated seizures which were relatively untreatable by Victorian medicine. While Jenny, who outlived both her parents, continued to read widely, travel, engage in amateur craftwork and take an active interest in her father's politics, she had no significant involvement in the family business.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Shaw (1936).

<sup>5</sup> For accounts by Jane Morris of these shared projects, see William Morris Papers, British Library, Add 45341 (on her work with William Morris) and the Cockerell Papers, National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, MSL/1958/692/54 (on her work with May).

<sup>6</sup> While, on occasion in later volumes, May will acknowledge that she is indebted to her mother's memory for some information, the Introductions also contain many extracts from the correspondence of her father and his friends and colleagues to provide detail and to assure her readers of the accuracy of her account.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, a doll she had "named Lady Audley because of her yellow hair," after Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensational heroine of the same name, May buried in the garden one day, to the distraction of the employees in the Morris & Co. workshop who observed the uncanny scene (Vol. VI: xxxi).