

William Morris— Victorian Era Renaissance Man

by Nancy Claflin Blood

William Morris was born March 15, 1834, in Walthamstow, England. He was the third child and oldest son of William and Emma (Shelton) Morris, Sr., who would eventually have nine children. They were affluent with some pretensions: Morris, Sr. would be granted his own coat-of-arms—an honor Morris, Jr. would never use. Copper mining speculations in the 1840s provided the basis for Morris' inheritance and enabled him to live most comfortably—he was well sheltered from life's adversities.

Although he was close to his two oldest sisters, he spent much time with the popular books of the day including Sir Walter Scott's swashbuckling, heroic novels. He often enacted these stories while on his solitary pony rides in the forest near his home. At the same time he began visiting local churches and other local buildings. These sojourns led to an early affinity with historic romance, landscapes, and buildings—his first sight of Canterbury Cathedral was like “the gates of heaven opening”—he was eight years old.

He began his first formal education when he was nine at a local preparatory school, but when his father died in 1847 he was boarded to Marlborough College which he attended from 1848 to 1851. He was considered of average intellect and even though he claimed to have learned nothing from his tenure at school, it was probably at this time that his love for classical languages and literature developed. He continued to roam the countryside and on viewing the prehistoric sites like Avebury, his passion for history was kindled.

After he left school, he returned to the family home in Walthamstow and was privately tutored for entry into Oxford. His teacher furthered his interest in history and the classics. By the time he went to Oxford in 1853, he was well read and confident in his abilities. The strong personal views that would set him apart in his later years began at school. He refused a trip to the 1851 International Exhibition since he *knew* he wouldn't like what he would see in the glass building so beloved by Prince Albert.

Soon after arriving at the University, he met Edward Jones (later Burne-Jones), the first of a number of friendships he maintained throughout his life. Burne-Jones gives us a vivid picture of Morris as he must have been in those days: “*From the first I knew how different he was from all the men I ever met. He talked*

with vehemence, and sometimes with violence. I never knew him languid or tired. He was slight in frame in those days; his hair was dark brown and very thick, his nose straight, his eyes hazel-coloured, (sic) his mouth exceedingly delicate and beautiful.” It was at this time that Morris earned the nickname “Topsy”—a reference to the character from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which had been published that year (1852).

Burne-Jones introduced Morris to men who were students at Pembroke College; the bond for these friends was poetry although they all read widely. Some favorites were romances and stories of chivalry, conscience, and self-sacrifice. Morris and Burne-Jones even had visions of forming a monastic order. The group not only explored classic English writers like Shakespeare, Milton, and Tennyson, but also contemporary reformers. The latter gave Morris his first awareness of the deep chasm between England's social classes. How clearly he saw this division is unknown since his early manners and tastes were definitely aristocratic. Nonetheless, he did not want to be separated because of his wealth and proved to be a generous and giving person.

Burne-Jones and Morris soon developed an interest in all things medieval. Visits to French cathedrals made a huge impression on Morris who was able to closely study paintings, sculpture, tapestries, and other forms of early medieval Northern European decorations. This study would become his greatest artistic influence. He also became interested in Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante

Have
nothing in your
house which you do
not know
it be useful or believe
to be beautiful.—
William Morris

MASTERFUL MORRIS, 36" x 55", #3-cut wool on rug warp.
Designed by Jane McGown Flynn. Hooked by Carol Scherer,
Dayton, Maryland, 2004.

Rosetti, Holman Hunt, and Milhais. Following their second trip to the Continent, the two men realized their futures lay, not in the clergy, but in the arts: Burne-Jones as a painter and Morris as an architect. Although his mother was unhappy with this career change, Morris took a position with George Edmund Street, a noted Neo-Gothic architect.

Morris, however, soon found architecture to be of little interest; he lasted eight months. It is said that he spent the entire time drawing one building. It must be stated that he was preoccupied; in 1856, a literary publication, the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* was issued. Morris financed this endeavor and contributed prose stories, poems and other articles to 10 of the 12 editions published. Despite his shortcomings as an architect, Morris' stint in Street's office proved invaluable in his later work as a designer.

When Morris and Burne-Jones became roommates in London, the former had aspirations toward becoming an artist. They both attended drawing classes for a time and, by attending the meetings and shows of such organizations as the Medieval Society and the Hogarth Club, they made contacts within artistic London circles.

Some of Morris' earliest work decorated the Debating Room of the Oxford Union; both he and Burne-Jones were part of the group that translated some of their favorite tales from *Morte d'Arthur* to the upper walls of this new construction. Due to their inexperience at mural painting and the difficult architecture of the room, this project was never completed and enthusiasm faded. Some of this work has been restored and is visible today. This scheme proved important for two reasons: Morris, Burne-Jones, and their colleagues found that, artistically and socially, they enjoyed working together and Morris met his future wife, Jane Burden. He was emotionally taken with this "stunner;" she was an unconventional Victorian beauty: *tall, dark, and slender with a mass of wild, naturally curly hair; a long neck, large eyes and a generous mouth.* Jane became his icon—representing the *avant garde* idealized sense of beauty for the next 30 years.

Despite Morris' love for Jane, there were certainly difficulties with their marrying; Jane was working class, the daughter of an Oxford stableman, while we have seen that Morris was most definitely of a higher social class. Even though Morris was quick to shun mid-Victorian mores, class differences were not taken lightly. Friends tried to warn them off, but the two were determined—albeit for quite disparate reasons. Jane found Morris' group of friends great fun and rather admiring of her and she could be assured that her future would certainly be one of comfort and security; Morris was ready for romance and marriage and all that they entailed, and for him, Jane embodied these things. They became engaged in 1858 and were married in April 1859. They took rooms in London while they waited for their home, dubbed the Red House, to be built. They moved in during the summer of 1860 and Morris occupied himself for the next two years in its decoration. Jane gave birth to daughters: Jane Alice (Jenny) in 1861 and Mary (May) in 1862.

Friends (Rosetti, Ford Madox Brown and a few others) along with Burne-Jones and Morris helped with the décor at the Red House and since this proved such a delightful experience, they decided to open their own company. Trying to run it from the home along the lines of a medieval workshop proved untenable, so larger quarters were found in London. Their first wares were shown at the 1862 International Exhibition to somewhat mixed reviews. Nevertheless, they were encouraged enough to seek prospective clients. At this time, their goods were mostly for familiar things like they'd done at Morris' home—namely wall painting and embroidery. Furniture and tableware were supplied by outside artisans. They soon added stained glass and tiles.

Their first important commission was for the decorating of three newly constructed churches and, truthfully, for many years, church stained glass was their most popular item. They made very little money and only Morris, with his private income, did not have to seek other work. In 1865, they moved to still larger premises.

With work at such prestigious places as St. James Palace and the South Kensington Museum, their popularity and prosperity increased. With Morris' deepening involvement in the firm, both financially and directorially, the family's moving back to London in 1865 seemed the best course to follow. They lived in rooms over the studio in good, middle-class, English shopkeeper style.

Jane was delighted with the return to the city's social whirl since she had made many friends and had turned out to be Rosetti's favorite model. When their relationship transcended the artist/model/friendship phase is unknown, but certainly Rosetti's dalliances were commonly discussed. Morris turned to poetry and, in 1867, published *The Life and Death of Jason*. This was received with great acclaim and was to be one story of a group of 24 that were collectively released in 1870 as *The Earthly Paradise*. Everybody, even people who didn't usually "do" verse, read and admired it. The success of this volume and the reputation it afforded Morris cannot be overstated; it would last until the end of his life.

The marital woes between Jane and Morris worsened and even a holiday in Germany didn't seem to help. Caricatures by Burne-Jones and Rosetti showed the widening rift: the former pictured Morris as a *bon viveur*—a lover of good food, wine, and conversation while Rosetti (surprise, surprise), savaged the man by showing him as an egocentric and neglectful husband. Both men remarked on Morris' intense involvement with poetry. During these troubled times, Morris researched Icelandic sagas and became fascinated by the history and language of the country. In 1868, he worked on translations and, in 1871, made the first of two trips there. Emotionally traumatized by his collapsing marriage, he was deeply affected by both the landscape and the people. His comparison of the simple lifestyle of the Icelanders and the convoluted, complicated London civilization awakened his political sense for the first time.

WILLIAM MORRIS, 32" x 45", #3-cut on burlap. Designed by Jane McGown Flynn. Hooked by Peggy Hannum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1999.

Before his Icelandic trips, he signed a joint tenancy on a house with Rosetti; while he was away, Jane, the children *and* Rosetti spent the summer there. This incredible living arrangement indicates that Morris had decided to accept the situation rather than face the emotional and social stigma any alternative would bring





MASTERFUL MORRIS, 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", #3-cut on monk's cloth. Designed by Jane McGown Flynn. Hooked by Peggy Hannum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 2006.

down upon them. Much of his unhappiness came out in letters to Burne-Jones' wife—herself a victim of marital infidelity; she would remain his confidante for life. The manor where this summer ménage occurred remained his beloved home and he visited as often as he could. He took up calligraphy again, which he had practiced since the 1850s. In all, he produced some 1500 illuminated and manuscript pages "as great as any thirteenth century draughtsman."

In 1872, the family moved to a new house in London that had extra space for the business. He was now in full control and spent his days designing, learning manufacturing techniques, and direct-

ing the workshops. Rosetti and some of the other partners resented his dominance, while Burne-Jones and the others supported him. The inevitable split came in 1875; it was re-organized as Morris & Company. Rosetti gave up his part of the tenancy and the two men broke completely.

The next 10 years proved to be a decade of strenuous activity. Duly recognized for both literary and artistic achievement, he continued to publish and was even asked to stand as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He declined. This era was also his busiest as a pattern designer. Textiles—printed and woven—and lino and machine-woven carpeting were added to the company's line of goods. These

were jobbed out under Morris' exacting specifications. He opened another very fashionable shop in 1877, which could supply almost everything for the home. Commissions for influential and prominent patrons took the firm all over Britain. Because of Morris' expertise in the decorative and designing arts, he was in demand as a lecturer and advisor to museums and trade guilds.

In 1876, Morris wrote his first political letter; doing so led to disillusion with Parliamentary politics, which, of course, advocated British imperialism. He disdained normal party lines and declared himself a socialist. In his new public persona, he was distressed at the way many of England's venerable buildings were being restored. This led to the creation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings—with Morris as Secretary. The Society devised a system of registering and monitoring buildings in need of repair and offered advice. It also acted as a protest organization. Over the years he was involved in both national and international causes: Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Hall in Great Britain and St. Mark's in Venice. Morris' political rabble rousing, although originally overlooked by authorities because of his fame, eventually led to his arrest in 1886. He was let off with a fine—much to the press' great amusement. Though the socialist movement waned during the 1880s and 90s, he remained loyal throughout the rest of his life.

Although he tried to get back to his beloved home in the country, he was in London more and more. Jane's liaison with Rosetti was dwindling and in 1876, Jenny developed epilepsy—then considered an incurable disease. Morris was particularly upset since the condition came from his family. His devotion to his daughters is evident in the letters he wrote them providing a great source of his day-to-day life. In 1878, the family moved yet again—to a five-

story Georgian house overlooking the Thames. Within a short time, he set up looms and made his first tapestry and hand-knotted carpets. This house was also the site of many political meetings. More space was also needed at the old shop so once again they sought a larger location. An old friend found Merton Abbey—an idle factory near Wimbledon—not far from London. In 1881, the move was made and with the establishment of the stained glass studio, dye vats, printing tables, and looms, he was finally able to have complete control of the firm's output.

With that control, his interests and technical knowledge encompassed embroidery, furniture, stained glass, wallpapers, murals, wood engravings, illuminated manuscripts, calligraphy, printed and woven textiles, and high warp tapestry. Eventually, it would also include book and type design. His view of design was complex and rich—what we now would call “total environmental planning.” His strength lay in the exactness of observation; he was incredibly visually acute. The things he saw in nature appeared over and over in his designs and patterns: trees, flowers, fruits, and little living creatures. He was an inveterate doodler covering business reports, meeting agendas, and lecture notes with his drawings. Still, he insisted on accuracy since he disliked sloppiness in all forms.

His color sense made him the supreme colorist of the Victorian period. He saw color as a panorama—especially from the medieval panoply—the red of knights, the purple of emperors, the gray stone of old villages, the blue of ancient holidays. These provided his decorative palette.

Morris thrived on materials and the processes that went into making his products. It has been said that he never designed anything he couldn't make himself. In his early twenties, he mastered stone carving, clay modeling, stained glass design, mural decoration, and painted furniture. He had a frame made for embroidery and supervised the dyeing of the yarns.

May Morris speaks of her father: “*He was in direct relation with the silk-weavers and carpet-weavers, dyers and blockers, with pattern-makers and block-cutters, with cabinet makers and carvers in wood; with glass painters, kiln men and labourers and with his wall-paper printers; and it was not as if he sat in an office and received reports from managers of different departments with the technical details of which he was unfamiliar: he had grasped the nature of those he employed—understanding their limitations as well as their capabilities.*”

Nearly the whole decade of the 1870s, Morris focused on textiles. He investigated vegetable dyes and learned to weave on an experimental loom set up in his bedroom. By the time, they relocated to Merton Abbey, the workshop was proficient in dyeing, silk and wool weaving, hand-knotting rugs and carpets, and had begun working on the high warp tapestry he had long dreamed of. He produced at least 32 designs for printed fabrics, 23 for woven ones, 21 for wallpapers, as well as designs for carpets and rugs, embroideries and tapestries—all between 1875 and 1885. He eternally warred with himself over his creating luxury products while he embraced socialist ideas.

Although he couldn't provide the short hours and increased pay he longed to give his workers, he was a generous employer. Five sub-managers shared in the profits; the color mixer and dyeing foreman received bonuses; other staff members were paid salaries or got recompense for piecework. They offered the only apprenticeships in Britain for carpet knotting and tapestry weaving. Morris also employed a few women.

Once established at Merton Abbey, (Yes, there is a rug named after the workshop.), he began overseeing less and less—leaving matters in the hands of assistants, managers, and daughter, May. (There's also a rug called *Mae Morris*.) New textile designs were shown at the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition in 1888. He never lost his interest in tapestry and with old friend, Burne-Jones, took part in the planning, designing, and weaving of a series of panels denoting one of his favorite Arthurian legends—the search for the Holy Grail.

Morris' love affair with books continued for the rest of his life: author, scribe, and publisher; he did it all. In 1891, he established a publishing company intending to print "books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite aim of beauty." He designed all the typefaces, initial letters, and borders while Burne-Jones did most of the illustrating. He had always attempted to improve urban and rural environments including helping the society that was the forerunner of the National Trust.

His ill health began in 1891 with gout, diabetes, and kidney problems, plus he began showing signs of his inherited epilepsy. By 1895, he was very feeble and in December of that year, he caught a chill which turned tubercular. He continued his activities and even took a trip to Norway. Late in September of that year, he hemorrhaged and died in early October. He was buried at his much loved home; his coffin was transported from the station to the church on an open, horse-drawn cart decorated with bay branches. Another old friend designed his simple tombstone as "a roof for the old man."

*What business have we
with art at all, unless we can
share it.—William Morris*

Jane McGown Flynn has created several patterns based on Morris' designs: *William Morris*, *Mae Morris*, *Merton Abbey*, and *Forest Tapestry*, to name a few. His large scale, repeat patterns make excellent rug projects. Since many books on Morris and his works show them in color, they can be a valuable aid to the development of the project; often they are reproduced in several different color schemes. The Victorian palette is considerably different from our modern one, so one must be careful in choosing a color path. For instance: even though Peggy Hannum's rug is the *William Morris* design, I planned it using Morris' *Compton* colors. ■

Nancy Clafflin Blood wrote about Currier and Ives rugs in the November/December 2006 issue. She is a member of Rug Hooking's editorial board and resides in Owego, New York.