

Ruth Poultney: “William Morris: Artist and Activist”

A packed Sully u3a enjoyed Ruth’s talk about William Morris, the most famous designer of the Victorian Arts and Crafts movement, and also famous for his mantra: “Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful”.

Morris’ wallpaper and furnishings are familiar in contemporary homeware – and, as Ruth wryly pointed out, even appearing on cat and dog bowls and in pricey National Trust tea-rooms – but contemporaries knew him better for fantasy novels, epic Icelandic saga translations, socialist publications, and social activism for a “different way of living”. Ruth’s talk centred on this lesser-known Morris.

Ruth described Morris’ eclectic and hectic journey from relative privilege, family expectations of church ministry, arrival at Oxford to do theology, disillusionment with Oxford teaching methods, and growing interest in medievalism and Victorian obsession with Arthurian legend. Morris met Edward Burne-Jones (whose Welsh origins Ruth mentioned) and they formed the ‘Birmingham Set’ of like-minded medievalists and artists. The Set, also known as The Brotherhood, became the pre-Raphaelite movement.

Showing his only oil portrait of Morris’ wife Jane, Ruth explained Morris’ painting talent didn’t match other pre-Raphaelites like Rossetti or Millais, though rendition of the textiles and wallpaper patterns isn’t bad. Morris luckily recognised design was his metier, abandoned painting, and with Rossetti as business partner, formed Morris & Co., who supplied the wildly popular wallpapers and furnishings.

Jane Morris and her two daughters became the real “& Co.” of the successful company, Jane assuming its management and with her daughters creating accomplished designs, though they sold under her husband’s more marketable name.

Morris championed artisan workers’ rights, and gave destitute boys education, factory jobs, apprenticeships and craft skills. He advocated 48-hour working weeks, fair wages, workers’ housing with flushing toilets, and women’s workplace equality. He protested (and was arrested) for a fairer voting system not based on property ownership.

Among many publications – including some of the first fantasy ‘other world’ novels – Morris, with co-author Hyndman, published *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (1884), which could be regarded as the first socialist manifesto.

Morris championed materials native to England e.g. linen not cotton and using safe natural dyestuffs: we learned the vibrant greens of Victorian wallpaper had hitherto been achieved with arsenic. Presumably not his famous “Strawberry Thief” print?

SJW