

## WILLIAM MORRIS REVISITED

(Exhibition by David Mabb at British Council, New Delhi, April 2005 in association with Anokhi and Nature Morte.)  
Work of art in the context of hand made reproduction



David Mabb, artist and senior lecturer in Fine Art, Goldsmiths College London, has been preoccupied with the work and ideology of William Morris for around five years. In coming to India, he says he was inspired and intrigued by the ongoing traditions of craftsmanship in Rajasthan and the similarities between the block-printed traditions and designs found in Jaipur and the designs of William Morris.

The images exhibited at the British Council (*William Morris in Jaipur*) were not specially created by Mabb for this exhibition/exercise but replicated from earlier works (exhibited in U.K. in 2002/3), by Rajendra Sharma a miniature artist of Rajasthan. The works were sent to Sharma as digital images and he copied them verbatim in the miniature format. This exercise evokes curiosity and provokes ire too. What is the artist trying to say? Does work pertinent to questioning the design ideology of Morris have relevance in the context of contemporary India because it has been custom-copied by an artisan of her soil?

Mabb does not really explain himself and neither do the works inform in this regard. What the viewer comes across are some textiles that do not do justice to the craftsmanship of the block printers of Rajasthan, with designs that neither extol the virtues of Morris's creativity and imagination nor give us any insight into the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement and their relevance in India today. The rest of the exhibition is devoted to the miniatures painted by Rajendra Sharma.

In the history of the decorative arts, there are few designers who have achieved the kind of lasting impact as William Morris (1834-96). Artist, designer, writer, poet, political thinker, activist and craftsman, he not only created his own beautiful patterns, but has inspired subsequent generations of artists and designers to follow the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement based on his teachings. Although Morris's originality as a designer and his sensuous patterns based on nature are what he is remembered for, it is through his

views on society and manufacture that his influence on the Arts and Crafts movement was most felt.

David Mabb is apparently fascinated by the paradoxical nature of Morris's practice, which although driven by socialist ideals, relied upon a capitalist system for survival. Mabb says that as an artist, his "interest in Morris was born initially out of two apparent sets of contradictions. The first was the apparent tension between Morris's politics and his work as a designer: he was Britain's own indigenous Marxist – the Trotsky or Gramsci of Hammersmith – and also the designer of interiors for the wealthy."

Mabb's imagery incorporates the juxtaposition of designs and images of Russian painters and photos of industrial objects upon cheap prints of William Morris designs. In the work entitled „Truck and Pit“, he has used an image of a factory seen through the underside of a train/vehicle on tracks and painted this on a delicate Morris floral design. He keeps the original context of the pattern on the borders to give us an indication of the design and the stark contrast between its delicacy and the crudeness of an industrial environment. In the main body; merely the flower heads have been retained, disfiguring Morris, in a manner of speaking. In another work, „Circles (after Morris and Popova)“he brings in the designs of Liubov Popova, a Russian artist and designer of the Russian revolution and juxtaposes „Twigs“ extracted from a design by discarding the sensuous floral pattern that was the veritable signature of a Morris design. The latter work was painted on *Khadi* by a signboard painter in Jaipur and the „twigs“ printed over this, by Anokhi.

His endeavour to study and question the implications of the Arts and Crafts movement with reference to industrialization, echoed by the artists of the Russian Revolution, through this kind of a visual collage appears confused and irrational for it seeks to impose strictures and a framework within which he thinks Morris should exist. It does not allow for the inevitable paradoxes of life or the many dimensions of Morris to exist with creative licence. In trying to force the many facets of a man like William Morris into a straightjacket, Mabb reveals his own naivety and eventually concedes that there could be no easy reconciliation between the two aspects of William Morris's ideology and his practice as a designer. He adds that if there is one, "it can be a productive one" for "there is no escape within capital, only its overthrow.....something Morris came to understand clearly."

William Morris believed that Art should not be the preserve of the rich and sought to counter the worst effects of mass-production at the beginning of industrialization in Britain, by encouraging the development of handicrafts of all kinds. He believed that the importance placed on a new technology in industry had resulted in the gradual erosion of the role of the craftsman and the subsequent loss of traditional skills. Despite a preoccupation with geometric, architectural patterns in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Arts and Crafts movement saw a revival of interest in natural forms and these provided the single most important source of inspiration for designers. Involved, intricate patterns of flowers and leaves, birds, animals and lyrical floral stylizations were the veritable hallmark of the designs produced by the designers then, which would have been difficult for the machines of that era to replicate. Most of these designs were block printed onto the fabric/wallpaper, or woven by specialists.

Considering David Mabb's obsession with the subject matter and the kind of intellectual discourse this has undergone through various exhibitions and installations, arriving at a conclusion that almost invalidates the premise of his study, it is surprising to see that some three years later, this change in perception has not been acknowledged and accommodated in the visual imagery of the works on show in Jaipur and New Delhi, and that neither has the artist really attempted to relocate the premise of his thesis in the Indian context beyond its diminutively scaled reproduction located on Indian soil.

Today, the context within which the designs of Morris and Company were created is no longer valid because modern manufacturing methods produce fabrics and designs of excellent calibre. In fact, the hand-crafted produce of the Indian subcontinent has to often deal with this level of sophistication without being able to provide solutions to counter it. Although it is recognized that excellence in design is what is required to keep the crafts alive, the mainstay of handcrafting in India today, is dependant upon novelty in design, short runs and prices competitive with machine-made goods, which is adversely affecting the level of craftsmanship. In the nineteenth century, with technology that was yet primitive, compared to what is possible today, Morris and his ideals promoted the art of the designer and today the Arts and Crafts movement has become associated more with the work of individuals as opposed to any cohesive living movement.

The tradition of hand-crafting lives on in India in the new millennium, while it has become an artist's medium of expression in the land that gave birth to the Arts and Crafts movement and many other countries in the world. However, handcrafting in the Indian context has been affected by the advent of sophisticated technologies of production and is struggling to grapple with the realities of co-existing with them. This has not enhanced but eroded the value of hand-crafted and diminished the prestige of work done by the hand.

Designing and crafting were the dual role of the traditional craftsman. This is no longer part of the handcrafting practice as globalization has made the customer a faceless entity, inaccessible to the craftsman. They are now dependant upon the urban, professional designer to provide the necessary design interface, to create a product that is market driven, reducing the craftsman to mere skilled labour. Regrettably this has been amplified by the exercise conducted by David Mabb and disappoints for the simple reason that having studied and debated the works of William Morris for around five years, one expected the outcome to reflect some of the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement either in terms of the excellence in design that was advocated and practiced or in terms of paving the way for a new ideology relevant to the tradition of hand-crafting in the contemporary context.

There is a fundamental difference between Art and Design. Art indulges intellectual debate while this is superfluous to the functional dimensions of design. Here the intellectual quotient is required not to be visible or audible; it must be integrated into the visual and functional appeal of the product. David Mabb's textiles may be related to his intellectual discourse on Morris but fail to appeal in the realm of Design for either excellence in pattern, novelty or skill of execution.

The ideals of William Morris were carried forward through various artistic movements

across the world resulting in the evolution of a genre of professionally educated Fiber Artists, studio potters and other craftsman-artists. Crafts in India live on as a cohesive movement primarily because of the socio-economic conditions that prevail. As this develops and grows, it is inevitable that the nature of its practice will also change. Skilful reproduction is something mankind has invented the machines for; therefore to bring Morris into the Indian context to propagate the very idea of India's craftsmen as skilled labour for "work of art in the context of handmade reproduction" is exceedingly difficult to digest.

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