

CRAFT PUNK

The influence of *William Morris* remains as *strong* as ever among artists and designers who have been *inspired* by the *revolutionary* Victorian-era *renaissance man*

By Grace Cain

Don't judge me, but sometimes I like to wonder what would happen if one of my favourite historical figures turned up on my doorstep. What would William Morris want to watch on Netflix? And where would he like to go for a drink? I find it hard to imagine that the radical Victorian polymath – best known for his contributions to art, literature and social thought – would be totally thrilled with the state of the world in 2022. He believed the rapid industrialisation of his own time was bad enough, so I'm not sure how he would feel about the billionaire space race.

Despite what he may have thought of the modern world however, our love affair with Morris & Co shows no sign of waning. You don't have to be a design aficionado to recognise Strawberry Thief wallpaper, and you've almost certainly read Morris' oft-quoted dictum that you should "have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful". It sounds like something out of the Scandi minimalist's handbook rather than the words of a 19th-century maximalist with a deep love for traditional crafts and the countryside. But thanks to the sheer diversity of his output, Morris' influence has permeated far beyond floral curtains and into our collective



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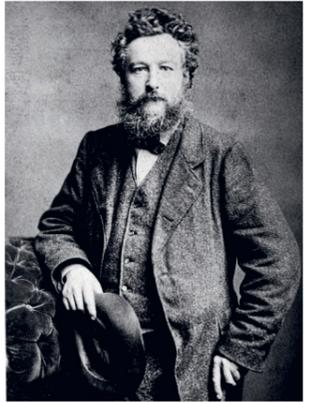
cultural consciousness. From fashion designers to portrait painters, it feels as though every creative sphere owes something to William Morris.

And this, at least, would have pleased him. Morris always championed the dignity of traditional craft and could never understand why the skills of the artisan were not valued as highly as those of the artist, so I think he would have been cheered to see the breadth of his legacy. “William Morris is not one hero for a single way of thinking,” explains Rowan Bain, senior curator at the William Morris Gallery in London's Walthamstow. “You might be an environmentalist and, therefore, interested in his philosophy; or perhaps you're not aligned with his socialist politics, but you do enjoy his wallpaper.”

The gallery's artist-in-residence programme encourages contemporary creatives to use various elements of Morris' legacy as a starting point for exploring their own ideas. “Many artists today are inspired by the way Morris integrated his beliefs into his art,” Bain explains. One such artist is Kehinde Wiley – and if you recognise that name, it might be because you've seen his famous portrait of Barack Obama, the one where the former US president is sitting in a chair enveloped by vibrant foliage and brightly coloured flowers. It's typical of Wiley's style, which depicts people (often women) of colour in a way that echoes the subjects of classical Western art. His aim is to challenge the view that only dusty images of old white men belong in museums. The backdrop for most of his portraits? Vivid Morris & Co prints. For his solo exhibition at the William Morris Gallery, Wiley painted Londoners in front of Morris' patterns, explaining that he wanted “to use the language of the decorative to reconcile blackness, gender and a beautiful and terrible past”.

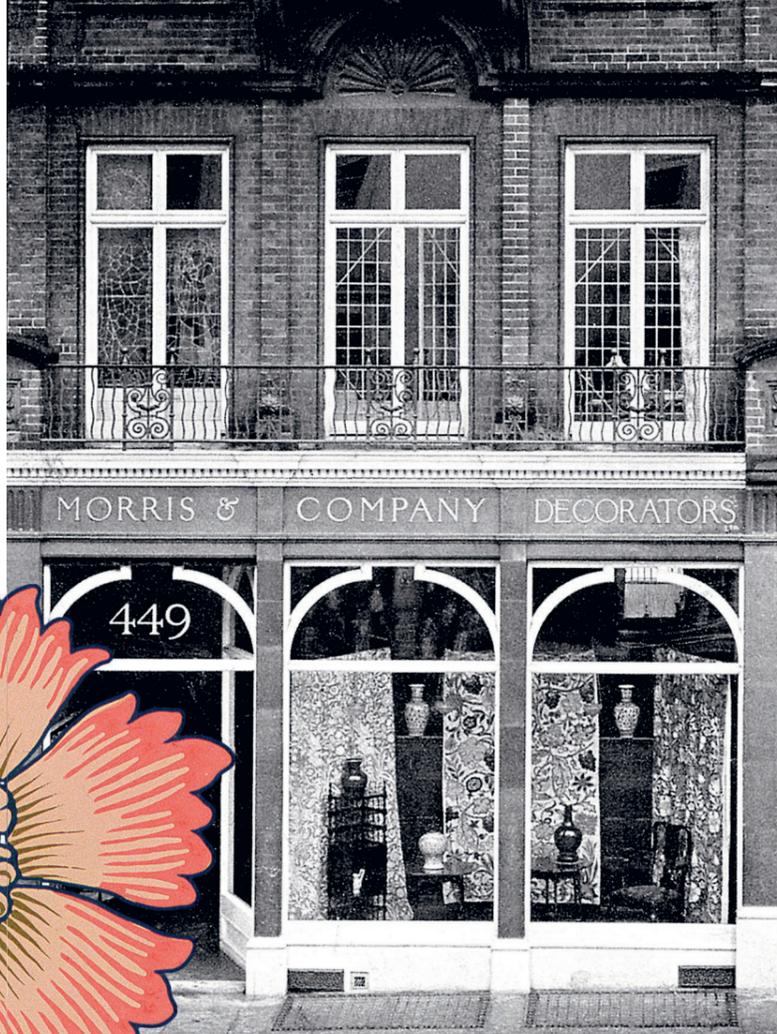
Perhaps the most logical place to find echoes of Morris' socially conscious approach is in the realm of interior design. After all, that's where the man himself believed he could have a direct impact on the lives of ordinary Victorians. And if you look directly below William Morris on the big family tree of British design, you'll find House of Hackney. Known for maximalist prints inspired by the natural world (sound like anyone we know?), the house has carved a place in the hearts of grandmillennials and anyone with a penchant for pattern. Indeed, House of Hackney has collaborated directly with the William Morris Gallery to reimagine some of Morris & Co's most recognisable prints, including Blackthorn and Golden Lily.

“William Morris was a big inspiration to us when we set about founding House of Hackney,” write Frieda Gormley and Javvy M Royle, the husband-and-wife duo behind the brand. “Not only for his nonconformist approach (like us, he was a bit of a punk and rebelled against traditional interiors), but also because of our shared values.” They specifically mention Morris' eco-conscious viewpoint, which feels as relevant today as it did during his lifetime. Just as their hero hoped to minimise the effects of Victorian urbanisation, Gormley and Royle take a sustainable stance on design. >



Above: William Morris, a champion of traditional craft; this page and opposite: John Henry Dearle designs for Morris & Co





Above: Morris & Co's Oxford Street premises in London, 1879; this page and opposite: More classic designs including (right) the renowned Strawberry Thief

House of Hackney's Eco Manifesto states that, as well as being a certified B Corp company, the brand aims to be carbon negative by the end of this year.

Morris' rage against the machines of Victorian industrialisation probably seemed old-fashioned in his day, but in the age of climate anxiety, it feels like one of his most forward-thinking beliefs. Bain agrees: "Today, we might see Morris' designs as a cosy representation of the British countryside, but at the time, they were a reminder to the Victorian public of what we should value. We can look at them as an important visualisation of his most radical ideas."

That unwavering love for the wonders of the British landscape is shared by another husband/wife design duo: Justin Thornton and Thea Bregazzi, whose brand, Preen by Thornton Bregazzi, is much loved for an Arts and Crafts-inspired aesthetic and punkish sensibility that encompasses fashion and homewares. "William Morris was a master of taking the beauty in nature and crafting it into prints that still feel modern today," says Thornton, citing Morris' working sketches as a particular inspiration for the way they reveal his craft. "At Preen, we love to leave areas of our prints unfinished to give them that same sense of romance."

But it's not only the English countryside that provided inspiration. As Bain explains, Morris was well versed in South Asian and Middle Eastern art – something that's often relegated to a footnote in the history of his life. The William Morris Gallery recently worked with Studio Carrom (a multidisciplinary design studio based in London and Bangalore) to recontextualise Morris' work within this framework, drawing links between his prints and traditional South Asian textiles. "Morris was very much a man of his time," Bain adds. "He was a white male in a position of power. He had a voice. That's something we have to continue to interrogate."

The gallery's current exhibition – the first major retrospective of innovative textile designer Althea McNish – aims to do just that. "Althea was a black woman working in the middle of the 20th century, and she didn't have the same platform that Morris enjoyed within his time," Bain says. "It's amazing to be able to showcase how important her work is to the history of modern design." Like Morris, McNish drew heavily from the natural landscape of Britain, but was also inspired by her birthplace, Trinidad. "Without taking away from Althea McNish's own genius, you can see definite links between her work and Morris," Bain continues. "She had an amazing sense of colour and a mastery of technique, and – like Morris – she believed in the value of craft and was always experimenting with new ways of presenting pattern."

If Morris was alive today, he would surely find a kindred spirit in JW Anderson founder Jonathan Anderson, who has transformed a long-held passion for craft into something of a personal crusade since 2013 when he took the helm at Loewe. In introducing the annual Loewe Foundation Craft Prize, Anderson has taken the Spanish brand beyond luxury fashion and into the wider cultural conversation. I'm sure that Anderson's Puzzle Bag (impeccably stitched, ergonomically designed, the ultimate realisation of beauty and usefulness) would be William Morris' accessory of choice. Perhaps he'd even hunt down the Strawberry Thief version from Loewe's 2017 collaboration with Morris & Co.

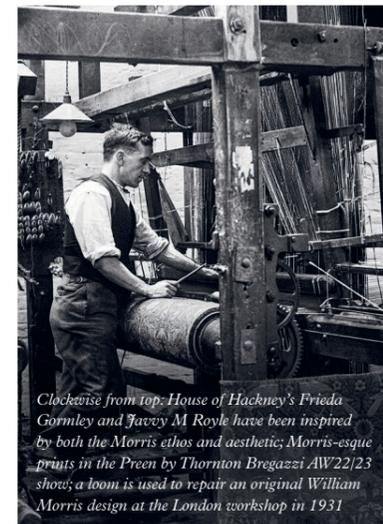
Bain believes it's too simple to assume that Morris would have rejected modernity absolutely. "I think he might have embraced some aspects of digital technology and processes," she says. "He was against it at the time because he believed that the quality produced by machines wasn't as high as traditional craftsmanship. But that's changed. Even his daughter, May Morris, who was an embroiderer and a huge champion of her father's ideas, began to use synthetic dyes in her later work."



"Morris' designs are *already there*, in a lot of people's *homes* – even if they *don't know it*"

Perhaps a modern-day Morris would follow the example of Timorous Beasties, the Glasgow-based design studio that has been described as 'William Morris on acid'. While founders Alistair McAuley and Paul Simmons engage with Morris' decorative devices and share his views on nature and society, they embrace digital processes as a way to heighten the details and colours in their prints. Many of their designs – such as the playful Fruit Looters wallpaper, which takes inspiration from Morris' Strawberry Thief pattern – pay direct homage to the polymath's vision.

Morris could never quite reconcile his beliefs with his work and, ultimately, shifted his focus to politics in his later years. And while his designs may have failed to revolutionise society in the way he had hoped, they have changed the world in ways he couldn't have expected. "People often say that William Morris would be appalled to see his patterns on an umbrella or a mug, but I wonder if he'd also be amused to know that his work has become part of the psyche of Britain," Bain muses. "It might be that someone is drinking their morning coffee and not realising that the pattern on the cup is by Morris. His designs are already there in a lot of people's homes – even if they don't know it." □



Clockwise from top: House of Hackney's Frieda Gornley and Javvy M Royle have been inspired by both the Morris ethos and aesthetic; Morris-esque prints in the Preen by Thornton Bregazzi AW22/23 show; a loom is used to repair an original William Morris design at the London workshop in 1931



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