

**Katharine A. Lochnan, Douglas E. Schoenherr and  
Carole Silver (eds.), *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by  
William Morris and His Circle from Canadian Collections***

GILLIAN NAYLOR

Lochnan, Katharine A., Schoenherr, Douglas E. and Silver, Carole (eds.). *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and His Circle from Canadian Collections*. Toronto: Key Porter Books Ltd, 1993. 294 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Paper \$39.95, ISBN 1-55013-450-7.

In 1969, Mario Amaya, then chief curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario, included paintings by Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Millais and Crane in an exhibition of *The Sacred and Profane in Symbolist Art*. "This exhibition," according to Katharine Lochnan (chair of the Curatorial Committee for *The Earthly Paradise* exhibition) "generated a level of controversy and excitement in Toronto art circles seldom produced by historical exhibitions before or since. Senior members of the fine art confraternity, raised to believe that British art was provincial, the term Victorian pejorative, and the Pre-Raphaelite movement its artistic nadir, debated the merits of its contents vigorously" (p. viii).

Now, some twenty-five years later, a major William Morris exhibition has toured art galleries in Canada (Toronto, Ottawa, Quebec City and Winnipeg), and there has been no suggestion of British provincialism, or questioning of Victorian taste and values. The curatorial team has, in fact, anticipated the celebration of Morris' centenary in 1996 by assembling an impressive selection of Morris' and related British Arts and Crafts work, all from Canadian public and private collections, and they have used the exhibition as an opportunity to *introduce* their audience to the work of William Morris and his followers. The catalogue, which is thoroughly researched, excellently produced and copiously illustrated, is based on a series of essays outlining the history of the involvement of Morris and the Arts and Crafts designers in various media. The essays are detailed, informative, and they serve as an invaluable introduction to the work, and to working methods; the captions to the exhibits are detailed and informative, and the publication is undoubtedly an important contribution to Morris scholarship.

There was, nevertheless, one major dilemma: Although the work was from Canadian collections, there was very little information about the Canadian context, or about *Canadian* responses to Morris and the British Arts and Crafts Movement. This was an exhibition about Morris and his followers, seemingly based on designs which *happened* to be in Canada — brought over by contemporary admirers, or subsequently acquired for private and museum collections. But, apart from the acquisition dates and information about provenance in the captions, there was very little about how, why or when the exhibits had reached Canada — or indeed, about the fluctuating regard for British achievements suggested in the Preface.

To the British viewer, therefore, the exhibition inevitably raised questions of cultural identity, and the emigration of ideas and cultural values, which the catalogue might have explored more fully. Rosalind Pepall's contribution, *Under the Spell of Morris: A Canadian Perspective* (pp. 19–35), provides invaluable information about early patrons, and the possible literary sources from the 1880s to the turn of century. Douglas E. Schoenherr's impressive essay on *Drawings* (pp. 37–99) includes a detailed account of Henry Holiday's work for the Household Sciences Building in Toronto, and K. Corey Keeble's section on *Stained Glass* (pp. 113–125) includes a section on *Morris Glass in situ in Canada*. It is left to Linda Parry, deputy curator, Department of Textiles and Dress at the V&A (and curator of the Morris Centenary exhibition) to sum up the problem when writing about the textiles: "In a number of cases, it has not been possible to discover how and when these textiles found their way across the Atlantic, or how successfully such patterns were utilized in fashionable Canadian life. It is hoped that renewed familiarity with such work may rekindle memories and that this influential designer's work can at last be judged within a wider artistic context than has been possible before" (p. 154).

The catalogue, therefore, concentrates on the range and scope of the artistic achievements of William Morris and his circle, and it

does this so thoroughly that it seems churlish to ask for a wider context. Similarly the exhibition (which I saw in Toronto) provided a unique opportunity to see a range of familiar and unfamiliar work. But there was a further problem: Central to the display (a brilliant idea) was the recreation of the Morris & Co. shop in Oxford St. a reminder that William Morris was a retailer and a businessman—and a further reminder that the most significant publication on Morris in recent years has been Charles Harvey and Jon Press' *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (Manchester University Press, 1991). This study (by two business historians) of the economics

of the Morris enterprise has extended Morris and related scholarship beyond the previous preoccupations with art, design, morality and socialism. It addresses the wider issues of production and consumption; issues which were acknowledged by the inclusion of the shop in the exhibition, and in the catalogue's foreword (p. vi), but scarcely addressed in the research and presentation. To widen the context, however, needs research, research funding and collaboration by researchers, but it is hoped that this undoubtedly pioneering Anglo-Canadian exhibition will be the forerunner of further explorations of cultural interchange, and their impact on *Canadian* art, architecture and design.