

*William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* by Caroline Arscott. New Haven: Yale UP (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art), 2008. 260 pp. + 101 colour plates, 35 b/w illus. ISBN 978-0-300-14093-4. \$75.00; £40.00.

In this fascinating disquisition, Caroline Arscott, Senior Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute, employs a number of theoretical approaches, some familiar (Marxist, psychoanalytical, gender) and others quite novel (fishing, armaments design), to explicate the “interlacings” between the work of William Morris and that of Edward Burne-Jones. The introductory chapter lays out the multiple intersections between the works of these two artists, strands of which are then woven throughout the text. One primary theme concerns the comparison of fine arts versus the decorative arts. (Although she never specifically states it, for Arscott “fine art” seems to refer to history painting, while “decorative art” is used interchangeably with “ornament.”) The two genres are linked via the Aesthetic Movement of which both artists were so much a part. This analysis differentiates formalist (“lyrical”) and narrative (“grand story”) aspects of their work. Arscott is a keen observer, and the emphasis placed, here and elsewhere, on the close scrutiny of the object, whether two- or three-dimensional, gives weight to her theoretical musings.

The physical characteristics and pursuits of both men are drawn upon to initiate discussions of manliness, physical fitness, and military strategy, all contrasted to the perceived feminine associations of the decorative arts. This physiological strand is extended to metaphorical associations with, for instance, skin and body tissue in the work of both artists. These analyses, each in and of itself worthy of singular investigation, are intermingled in a dense and challenging text full of revelations – too many in fact to cover in a review – as well as some frustrations. (At times the meandering ruminations make Arscott’s ideas difficult to follow).

This introduction is followed by alternating chapters on aspects of the artistic output of Morris and Burne-Jones. In the second chapter, Morris’s early wallpaper designs are discussed in relation to his personal affinity for physical activity and to contemporary developments in fitness theory. Throughout the 1870s, Morris’s compositions in this medium show a gradual decline in negative space in addition to a heightened contrast between naturalism and abstraction. The method of production which he favoured, block printing, produced sharply delineated repeated motifs and overlapping areas of colour. These stylistic and manufacturing elements contributed to confusing spatial relationships, comparable to the loss of temporality in the narrative imagery inherent in two-dimensional works of the period. Arscott sees Morris’s