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Terrors of the Third Dimension: William Morris and the Limits of Representation

Writing on *News from Nowhere* in 1973, Lionel Trilling struck a recurrent theme when he noted that Morris's "feeling for the lesser arts went along with a measured but strong antagonism to high art" (6). Graham Hough had made much the same point twenty-five years earlier in *The Last Romantics*, in which he criticized Morris for his "lack of interest in 'intellectual art'"—a lack of interest that led to Morris's own art becoming "purely decorative" and therefore inevitably thin, tedious, and lacking in emotional significance: "Morris's decoration offers pleasing colour, as the verse of Jason makes a pleasing noise, but they are both opaque: they give none of those glimpses, as through a translucent material, into a world of experience below the manifest surface" (98–99).

Hough's figure of speech is unexpected. Negative criticism of Morris's work—particularly of his narrative poetry—commonly accuses him of diffusion or lack of concentration. Hough, instead, suggests a distinction between two and three-dimensional art, in which the third dimension is associated with glimpsed rather than fully actualized material—with a world only partially within the control of the artist. Diffusion, by this logic, represents precisely what is missing in Morris's writing and design, and its absence signals, not a lack but an excess of concentration—and a preference for kinds of artistic representation in which the artist is able to exert absolute dominance over his work.

There can be no argument over the presence of such control in Morris's designs for chintzes and wallpapers. The medium itself, with its formal basis in repeatable patterns, dictates exactitude. But even if the medium

may have influenced his creative habits, the fact the Morris found this kind of work congenial—and that it brought out his skills as a graphic designer—suggests a predisposition for it.

The two-dimensionality of this work entails more than the literal flatness of a piece of cloth or paper. While Morris allowed himself "a limited suggestion of depth" (Clark 7) by the use of overlapping forms and tonal relationships of colour, he carefully avoided any illusion of a third dimension. What his 1881 lecture "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing" refers to as the "satisfying mystery" of a good wallpaper design is not a "world of experience below the manifest surface" but the equable covering of ground and the successful masking of construction in order "to prevent people from counting the repeats of our pattern, while we manage to lull their curiosity to trace it out" (22: 191). The mystery, in other words, lies in the apparent fullness and infinity of the design, not in any suggestion of an indeterminate reality beneath or beyond it.

Such a two-dimensional pattern can extend itself indefinitely without meeting an edge or turning a corner. It presents itself only as a surface and never as an object; and therefore it can engage neither the artist nor the observer as a co-ordinate object. Constructed according to no lines of perspective, a chintz or wallpaper does not imply the existence of a fixed perceiving consciousness. If such a design lacks intensity, this does not sign an absence of concentration, but the impossibility of inferring the locus of the artist. Because the eye of the designer is at all points equidistant from the surface of the pattern,