

THE GRASSHOPPER AND THE ANT:
OSCAR WILDE AND WILLIAM MORRIS IN THE EIGHTIES

The painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood worked with an exquisite fidelity to detail, an almost botanical refinement in the drawing of flowers, grasses, and the English countryside, and with a brilliancy of color that anticipated the French Impressionists. When William Morris allied himself with the Brotherhood in 1854, he brought to this revolution in color and style a keen interest in "the lesser arts," the design of fabric, furniture, wallpaper, stained glass windows, woven and embroidered tapestries, carpets, and pottery. Morris's first London home, the Red House, partly designed and entirely furnished by him, was a picturesque gabled building fashioned in adherence to Ruskin's call for a truly Northern, Gothic style. In Paris in 1863, the Salon des Refusés opposed the official Salon's yearly exhibit with works by excluded artists, including Manet's Dejeuner sur l'Herbe and Whistler's White Girl, whose subject and color delighted and alarmed the viewers. International expositions in London (1862), Paris (1867) and Philadelphia (1876) introduced the Japanese woodcut; in 1874, the first Impressionist paintings appeared in Paris, and in 1877, the Grosvenor Gallery opened in London to show works by followers of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: Watts, Burne-Jones, Alma-Tadema, Crane and Moore. The aesthetic movement was in full swing.¹

Oscar Wilde in the eighties was the inheritor of all these artistic forces: Pre-Raphaelitism, Whistler, Japanese prints, Impressionism. In Patience, Gilbert and Sullivan's satire on the aesthetic movement, the hero sings of himself as "a Japanese young man, a blue-and-white young man, a greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery, foot-in-the-grave young man...a super aesthetical, ultra-poetical, out of the way young man." The lines between aesthete and philistine had been drawn, and moral judgements might be made on the basis of one's color scheme. What Morris and his firm had helped launch, and what at first only the rich and royal could adopt, had in the eighties become a style ridiculed yet fascinating to the public. Oscar Wilde, a young Oxford graduate, anxious even for notoriety if that would win him money and position, came into the aesthetic movement in its latter days, when the middle classes had got hold of it and were shaking it and turning it over and sniffing at it to see if they liked it; he proclaimed himself its final and chief arbiter of taste. Morris was the ant who'd worked hard and built a goodly supply of works. The grasshopper,