

Notes and Reviews

Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris, eds., *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, pp. xii + 227. 101 illustrations. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1984. £8.95 (paperback).

William Morris and the Middle Ages is the generously illustrated catalog for an autumn 1984 show at Manchester's Whitworth Art Gallery that attempted the nearly impossible: to demonstrate William Morris's indebtedness to the middle ages and concurrently show the general importance of that period to the Victorians. Given such an amorphous subject, a display of over 200 items, no matter how thoughtfully selected, risks being diffuse and incomplete; this exhibition must have been both. Its catalog documents an assemblage of individually fascinating artifacts in search of a focus that Morris only tenuously provides.

The impression of miscellaneousness is immediately felt in the four contextual essays that open the volume. Jennifer Harris's "William Morris and the Middle Ages," directed toward the non-specialist, surveys the evolution of 19th-century medievalism as an increasingly complex response to the frustrated desire for organic social unity in an age of bewildering change. Harris briefly reviews writings of Cobbett, Pugin, Carlyle, and Ruskin and summarizes Morris's own career. The second article, Joanna Banham's ambitiously titled "'Past and Present': Images of the Middle Ages in the Early Nineteenth Century," in fact discusses just two themes evidenced in three paintings. The nostalgic notion of the middle ages as "Merry England" is exemplified in Daniel Maclise's panoramic oil *Robin Hood* (1839), its celebration of "brotherhood and affection" suggesting "a time of sociability" (27). Conflicting images of the period as an age of belief are seen in John Rogers Herbert's *The Monastery of the Fourteenth Century: Boar-hunters Refreshed at St. Augustine's Monastery, Canterbury* (1840), which bodies

forth "piety, charity and faith," while Edwin Landseer's *Bolton Abbey in the Olden Time* (c. 1834), showing a paunchy abbot accepting a bountiful tribute of game, conveys "superstition, corruption and greed" (23).

The next two essays are more specialized and thus of more value to scholars. David O'Connor in "Morris Stained Glass: 'An Art of the Middle Ages'" describes the stages of Morris's involvement with the medium, his attitudes toward restoration of medieval work, and the place of glass in the history of Morris & Co. Unfortunately, many of the cartoons and completed projects to which O'Connor refers are not illustrated in the catalog. (An audio-visual program on stained glass was included in the exhibit itself.) Most freshly informative is another Harris contribution, "Medieval Dress in Pre-Raphaelite Painting," which examines Victorian painters' concern for historically accurate costume and their dependence on antiquarian volumes like Joseph Strutt's *Dress and Habits of the People of England* (1796-99). From among the Pre-Raphaelites she particularly contrasts Ford Madox Brown, who not only worked conscientiously from such sources but had garments duplicated from them for his models, with Rossetti, who insouciantly gleaned details from several centuries in order to create ahistorically romantic rather than archaeologically correct scenes.

The seven roughly chronological divisions of the catalog that follows are introduced by short essays which, though they occasionally overlap among themselves and with the opening pieces, provide helpful contexts for the well-annotated individual entries. (Indeed, the catalog becomes more useful as it becomes more narrow.) Yet here too the widely varied materials resist coherent classification. The opening section, "Reconstructing the Past," documents background influences antedating the mid 1850s, seen, for example, in lithographs of the Eglington Tournament, cartoons for the