

A TALE OF TWO TABLES:  
WILLIAM MORRIS'S AND MAY MORRIS'S  
WORKTABLES AT KELMSCOTT MANOR

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Contrary to a common misconception, Kelmscott Manor was not merely a site of leisure for William Morris, but rather an important working retreat. A considerable part of Morris's professional output was begun, advanced, or completed at Kelmscott throughout his 25-year tenure of the house. The Manor saw the creation of designs for many celebrated printed cottons and wallpapers as well as high-profile carpet and embroidery commissions for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (from 1875 trading as Morris & Co.), several literary works of poetry, prose romances, and political lectures, and designs for the Kelmscott Press books (see Griffin 112-18). Morris's publisher, close friend, and one-time Kelmscott co-tenant Frederick Startridge Ellis thus summarized the role of the Manor for Morris: "To escape to Kelmscott from the smoke and turmoil of London when he had any special work, literary or graphic, on hand, was of the greatest benefit to its successful accomplishment" (Ellis 625). Kelmscott's function as a site of May Morris's creativity deserves a systematic study by a dedicated scholar, as visual sources clearly show that she also found the Manor conducive to her art production.

For a start, I am identifying here two worktables at Kelmscott Manor, the first one used by William Morris and the second one used by May Morris. Drawings, paintings, prints, and photographs provide the clearest documentation of the tale of these two tables, from their use by father and daughter to the surprising indifference to their subsequent fates. For his work in the Tapestry Room and for her work in the studio she set up in the Green Room, father and daughter used similar worktables: oval gate-legged tables, with May Morris likely following her father's example. Since the deaths of their respective owners, the two worktables of William and May Morris have been moved around the Manor with no acknowledgement of their provenance or their cultural significance. Though unidentified, they nonetheless have been preserved at Kelmscott Manor throughout four different periods in the house's