

THE ECOLOGY OF DECORATION: DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF WILLIAM MORRIS

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Now it is one of the chief uses of decoration, the chief part of its alliance with nature, that it has to sharpen our senses in this matter: for this end are those wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms invented ... in which the hand of the craftsman is guided to work in the way that she does, till the web, the cup, or the knife, look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the river bank, or the mountain flint.
– Morris, “The Lesser Arts”

Life is in its environment and not isolated from it.
– Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*

I

In Morris’s “Utopian Romance” *News from Nowhere; or An Epoch of Rest*, decorated artifacts are ubiquitous, remarkable not merely for being integrated into the daily life of Nowhere’s inhabitants but also for being wholly in tune with the general environment within which daily life takes place. In writing *News from Nowhere*, Morris set out to articulate the place of decoration within a larger society at once human and ecological, with the result that the novel abounds with examples of Morris’s vision of decoration in harmony with the world at-large. Shortly after awakening in Nowhere, for instance, where the very seasons seem to have been revolutionized by the combined actions of men and women (44-45), Morris’s narrator “William” finds his attention caught by the buckle (a “clasp ... of damascened steel beautifully wrought” [47]) fastening the belt of Dick the waterman, the very first individual he meets. Moments later, Dick – who has evinced no obvious interest in craft or beauty till now – confesses to the amazed narrator, “I am fond of working in gold and fine metals; this buckle here is an early piece of mine” (50). For a brief moment, Dick’s buckle seems to crystallize the brave new world of Nowhere, where even the commonest things suddenly appear (at least to the narrator’s jaundiced Victorian eyes) with an iconic, sharply-incised clarity. Even as the