

SYNAESTHESIA AND THE HOUSE BEAUTIFUL:
DESIGNING AESTHETIC INTERIORS WITH
MICHAEL FIELD, JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER,
FREDERIC LEIGHTON, AND WILLIAM MORRIS

Martine Lambert-Charbonnier

When building Red House, his rural retreat at Bexleyheath in 1859, miles away from the bustle of London, William Morris wanted to celebrate the value of craftsmanship and the sense of community. Designed by the architect Philip Webb in the thirteenth-century gothic style with turrets, gable roofs, and stained glass windows, Red House revived the Middle Ages both in style and in spirit. It conveyed the love of nature with its L-shape chosen to preserve the orchard on which it was built, while the various shapes of windows offered different views and perspectives of the garden. The house was not only a home but also a workshop for the Pre-Raphaelites' imaginative creations, and it was decorated with works of their own hands, from murals and wall-hangings representing biblical and medieval-romance themes, to stained glass and patterned ceiling-paintings. Red House pioneered Morris's Arts and Crafts movement which further progressed when the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was created in 1861 (and later renamed Morris & Co.), inspiring and furnishing many aesthetic homes. The beautiful London homes of the painter Frederic Leighton and the illustrator Linley Sambourne displayed furnishings from the Morris Firm, as well as collections of antiques, including Eastern and Middle-Eastern objects and artworks. Both homes were located in the Holland Park artistic circle, where Leighton had his house built in 1865 in the style of a medieval Italian Palazzo, and Sambourne moved into an already existing terrace house in 1875. Adding to the craftsmanship of Red House, the homes of Leighton and Sambourne were designed to convey their owners' identity as art collectors and aesthetes. Morris's Red House, Leighton's villa, and Sambourne's narrow row-house are emblematic of two contrasting dimensions, one encouraging self-reflexivity, the other emphasizing the connection with nature. In both cases the concept of synaesthesia is relevant for an exploration of the multi-sensory environments that are created either to reflect the aesthetic soul or to educate the senses to a full experience

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 32 (Fall 2023)