SOCIALIST AND ORIENTALIST? WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE "EASTERN" QUESTION OF INDIAN ART

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William Morris – artist, socialist, late romantic – remains among Victorian England's most famous and memorable, if not beloved, figures. Full-bodied and full-bearded, like so many of his noteworthy contemporaries – Karl Marx, among others, comes to mind – Morris might have been mistaken "for Jehovah in a frock coat," in the words of A.N. Wilson, the author of a suggestive study of Victorian ideas and religion (93). That powerful physical image reminds us of an appeal that reaches across time and space, tugging at us at the birth of the twenty-first century, as it did at the birth of the previous one. The influential English social historian, Asa Briggs, once remarked that at least some of this persistent appeal rests with Morris's open hatred of bureaucracy, militarism and ugliness, particularly when wedded to his equally open love of fellowship, the human spirit, and beauty (116-126). Biographical pieces appear regularly; students and scholars alike still read his *News from Nowhere* and essays on capitalism and art. Lionised on the Left, but rarely, if ever, vilified on the Right, his name and vision are secured for posterity in the popular Morris chair and wallpaper. Even the editors of *The Economist*, not a group known to share much with Morris, admitted that the British Post Office turned down a centenary stamp commemorating his death because he "used and believed in words like socialism, co-operation and community" (1 June 1996: 84).

In contrast to many of the other influential English cultural figures of his time – one thinks here of Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens, and Tennyson – Morris consistently interjected anti-jingoistic morality into discussions of his country's foreign policy. He attacked the use of militarism at home and abroad, a position not always shared by those others, or even by many of his fellow radicals, such as Blatchford and Hyndman. Morris cut his political teeth opposing the English alliance with the Ottoman Empire during the "Eastern Question" crisis of the late 1870s, when Disraeli refused to cut ties with the Ottomans in the face of their brutal repression of Christian rebels in the Balkans. It was that generation's Balkan Crisis and Morris's message in future years was much the same, as he continued to sharpen his politically anti-imperialist and anti-militarist teeth. He condemned the suspicious Jameson Raid in South Africa, a botched invasion of an independent Boer republic engineered by Cecil Rhodes and, quite possibly, Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, that brash duo of very "forward" imperialists. They had intended to get

their grubby hands on equally grubby Afrikaner gold, and secure the southeastern coast of Africa for the Empire. Neither did Ireland escape Morris's attention. His columns for the Socialist press often attacked English policy across the Irish Sea. Not surprisingly, Parnell and land were among the subjects covered in those anti-imperial writings.[1]

What about Morris and India, the Crown Jewel of the Empire? How anti-imperialist were his ideas and writings about Indian society, culture and art? At first glance, British India appears to be an open and shut case for Morris, the anti-imperialist. After all, to its critics – and he was most certainly among that crowd – the Raj was perhaps the most blatant example of the economic domination that went hand in hand with nineteenth-century political expansion, not to mention the cultural and social consequences of seemingly triumphant Britannia in the South Asian sub-continent. Morris claimed that the British Empire's "modern commercialism" devastated the weak and unprotected in South Asia, laying its "poisonous touch upon" traditional arts, leaving only shoddy wares in its wake (Morris, "History of Pattern Designing" 157). In the late 1870s, he denounced the British Empire's machines and commerce for killing the "famous and historical arts of the great [Indian] peninsula" in his oft-quoted speech, "The Art of the People," delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design (Morris, "Art of the People" 49-53). That speech included a funeral oration for the traditional art of India's villagers: "In short," he concluded, "their art is dead."

Morris not only defended India's traditional arts in the face of Britain's modern commerce and machinery, but also penned the editorial decrying what he called English political "tyranny" over the Raj in the late 1880s in *The Commonweal*, the official journal of his Socialist League (8 June 1889: 177). That column reminded readers that "We are a hated garrison in India, and hold it by means of force and fraud for the advantage of the robber class in England." Pushing his critical pen deeper and wider, Morris discerned that the so-called "New," or "High" Imperialism of the 1880s and 1890s included not only political, economic and military domination overseas, but also the nearly total immersion at home of British culture in a vast sea of imperial ideas, heroes, events, art and commodities.

Britain and its Empire were connected more deeply and in more ways than had unfolded in previous generations. Such connections included the institutions and activities of national culture, including, but not limited to, museums, newspapers, theatre, fairs and exhibitions. One of Morris's other *Commonweal* editorials

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[1] Morris's columns have been collected in two accessible volumes: William Morris, *Journalism: Contributions to Commonweal, 1885-1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol, U.K.: Thoemmes, 1996) and Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal, 1883-1890* (Bristol, U.K.: Thoemmes, 1994). Comments on the British Empire can be read in "Notes on News," "Notes on Passing Events" and "Notes on Matters Parliamentary." Not surprisingly, the most pressing "imperial" issue for Morris (and many others at the time) was Ireland; Morris considered Anglo-Irish relations to be imperial in nature.

criticised the popular Colonial and Indian Exhibition at South Kensington in 1886 as "just a piece of commercial advertisement" for that imperialised culture (15 May 1886: 49-50). Dripping with sarcasm, the editorial informed his readers (among whom might have been some of the 5.5 million ticket-holders) that they could see with the "strong magnifying glass" on display "[t]he mercy of Colonists towards native populations."

These political writings and actions support the consensus among scholars that Morris was an anti-imperialist. "Morris was a determined enemy of imperialism and racism," proclaims Merryn Williams in a 1995 contribution to *New Left Review*, echoing Edward Said's blunt, yet comforting, conclusion in *Culture and Imperialism* that Morris was "totally opposed to imperialism" (Williams 125; Said 241). Such reassuring comments represent the conventional wisdom enshrined in E.P. Thompson's monumental biography (296-305, 451-460). They are not challenged in Fiona MacCarthy's well-received more recent biography or by the popular "William Morris, 1834-1896" exhibition celebrating the artist at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London at the centenary of his death (9 May-1September, 1996).

On closer inspection, though, Morris appears a little less innocent vis-à-vis Britain's world role during the late-Victorian era and, more specifically, its role in India. This is not to say that he is implicated in the imperial project, as is commonly argued these days about many figures and organisations, or that his ideas are filled with racism, as is also often asserted, but rather to suggest that his relationship to India and both its society and art was a complex and ambiguous one, and one in which some of the parts mirrored those found in the actions and ideas of more explicitly pro-imperial and racialist Victorians. Distinctions can be found between Morris's aesthetic views about British India and his political, military and economic ones. Perhaps his political anti-imperialism coexisted with a rather Orientalist cultural imperialism? Morris's views on the timelessness of India and the lack of agency among South Asians rested alongside and were sometimes connected to disgust for and opposition to British rule.

This essay is an attempt to discuss and come to terms with his ideas about India and Indian Art in light of his own radical politics, the powerful pull of Orientalism, and the ideas and careers of others in his generation who were also intrigued by the relationship between Britain and traditional Indian art and society. Those included influential figures, such as Sir George Birdwood (1832-1917) of the India Office, considered among the leading (if not *the* leading) English Orientalist in the field of traditional Indian art of his time. Analysis of Morris's critical relationship to British India, the Jewel in the Crown and the co-dominant imperial issue alongside Irish Home Rule during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, reveals an unexpected affinity between Morris the apparent anti-imperialist and more blatantly pro-imperialists at home and in India.

Those linkages were particularly strong with others studying and trying to preserve traditional Indian art and thus traditional culture and society within the

powerful set of ideas and images comprising late-Victorian Orientalism; those linkages were not as strong, if existing at all, when "Eastern" questions assumed explicitly economic, military and political dimensions. Morris despised the garrison of troops and tax-collectors in India, but he was a bit more uncertain about the garrison of instructors and administrators overseeing arts and crafts education at the many schools of art and arts and crafts collections at the many museums in the Raj. The practice of Orientalism, or the way of knowing, representing and preserving India's past as part of the larger East (and the relationship between that East and the West), had a great deal to do with the worlds of art and culture, less so, perhaps, with the worlds of the battlefield. Morris's criticism of contemporary Indian art-wares revealed the common Orientalist paradigms of perceiving India's past-in-the-present as part of the timeless East and the West's role in both preserving and destroying that a-historical community.[2]

The relationship between Morris the critic and the art and society of the Raj's subjects reveals his imperialist position in and on the broader "Eastern" Question of Indian art. That relationship was filled with dilemmas, suggesting that Morris was caught in and contributed in his own way to the powerful, but sometimes loosely fitting, iron cage of Orientalism, or, less specifically, the assumptions, images, and the very language, or grammar, informing British public opinion and policy towards India. For Morris and others, India was "the other" in time and space. Indian civilisation was perceived and represented as "just the opposite" of the West in material and imaginative terms (Inden, "Orientalist Constructions" 402). In keeping with Orientalist visions, Morris found machines, ugliness and discontinuity in the West; he discovered artisans, beauty and continuity in the East. This idealisation of Indian art was one more Western invention of Indian tradition and appropriation of India's past, whether advocated by political officers of the Raj or political opponents of the Raj, such as Morris. Neither party recognised much, if any, South Asian historical or contemporary agency.

The sources for Orientalist knowledge were not South Asians themselves, but texts; in this case, arts and crafts products (e.g. carpets, pottery, metalwork) read for their social and historical meanings. Art annihilated time and space, allowing Morris

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[2] For discussion of "Orientalism" as an intellectual discourse and exercise of power, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Cultural Critique*, 1 (1985): 89-107. Said's first essay on "Orientalism" appeared in *The Georgia Review*, Spring 1977. For a comprehensive and suggestive review of *Orientalism*, see James Clifford, *"On Orientalism," The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP: 255-276). For additional reading on the debates around Said, "Orientalism" as a concept, and *Orientalism*, the book, see Aijaz Ahmad, "*Orientalism* and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said," in *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), 159-219; Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenberg, "The Challenge of Orientalism," *Economy and Society*, 14 (1995): 174-192; John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (New York: Manchester UP, 1995) and Gyan Prakash, "Orientalism Now," *History and Theory*, 34 (1995): 199-212.

to imagine and write about an India which was morally challenging and potentially beautiful and egalitarian, but, at the same time, utopian, if not preservationist, in its rejection of the historical process in South Asia. Ironically, the Indian National Congress was not completely out of step with Morris and other British Orientalists. The Congress also worked to revive traditional Indian art for its own political, economic and cultural purposes, although with a different sense of Indian agency (Mitter 215, 249, 284-86).

Those wishing to read only anti-imperialism into Morris, might, at least, stop for a moment and think about his use of the West to invent and preserve South Asian artistic purity; India offered one more arena for his compelling preservationist impulses. It was occupied by men and women not unlike his fictional English characters in *News From Nowhere*, or the Icelandic villagers he also admired. Morris was not completely anti-imperial, but participated in the wider imperialist pursuit of an elusive, imaginary, authentic and traditional culture, always just over the horizon, frozen in an idealised past at home in England or an equally idealised timelessness abroad in Northern Europe and Southern Asia. In the end, Morris was less antagonistic towards a cultural and intellectual form of imperialism in the South Asian subcontinent.

Perhaps, as some influential scholars have suggested, the logic of imperialist culture, including knowledge itself and the ways of knowing, pervades and dominates the criticism of that imperialism.[3] This essay is not an exercise in such a post-colonial discourse analysis, although I recognize the intellectual and political importance of that project. Rather, it is a more old-fashioned meditation on the often difficult and complex relationships, if not the very human inconsistencies, in the hearts and minds of English radicals, Morris among them, particularly in matters of art, tradition and empire. Their often nostalgic views for "the world we have lost" put them in traditionalist company with their otherwise political and social enemies. Thus, this essay is part intellectual history and part social history.

It explores the contours of Morris's Indian art criticism in an introductory way by considering his various connections with British India and the ways in which those links sometimes reconciled and at others could not, his tripartite identity as socialist, orientalist and anti-imperialist. Those connections include his public speeches and lectures, correspondence, published writings and activities at South Kensington. Intellectual affinities with other critics and promoters of Indian art provide the final piece in this puzzle. My project requires two initial confessions. It is pieced together in light of the fact that Morris did not leave a systematic and comprehensive critique either of the Raj or imperialism itself. Rather, there are

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[3] Among the many examples and discussion of postcolonial discourse theory, see Gayatri Spivak *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987) and D.A. Washbrook, "Orients and Occidents: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire," in Robin W. Winks, ed. *The Oxford History of the British Empire, 5: Historiography* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 596-611.

suggestive nuggets here and there in his writings and actions, both private and public. This essay would also not be possible without drawing upon the richly suggestive recent scholarship on the part of historians among others, who are also exploring the often complex relationships between the study and practice of Indian art and British imperial rule.[4]

Among such scholarship is Patrick Brantlinger's provocative essay, "A Postindustrial Prelude to Post-colonialism," in which he compares Morris to John Ruskin and Mahatma Gandhi, or, more particularly, "Gandhism" (Brantlinger 1996). To some degree, my discussion is a response to his arguments, although I focus more on questions of aesthetics, rather than of technology, and, in doing so, make Morris's status as an anti-imperialist more uncertain and unstable. It is to Brantlinger's credit that he opened a debate. We disagree on where to place Morris in the history of aesthetic theory and practice, British imperialism and Western Orientalism. He has found similarities in the anti-industrialism and, thus apparently, anti-imperialism of Ruskin, Gandhi and Morris. In doing so, he shares much with Partha Mitter's and Thomas Metcalf's discussion of, respectively, Indian art criticism and the Arts and Crafts Movements. For example, Mitter ranks Morris among those pursuing "the global search for Utopia" and finding it in India during the later Victorian era (Mitter 243-252) Additionally, Morris is implicated with the Arts and Crafts movement in the wider Western pursuit of a pre-modern aesthetic and the increasing traditionalism of official public culture at home in England and abroad in the Raj (Metcalf 149-162).

Brantlinger suggestively positions Morris at the nexus of two important discourses: "late- Victorian socialism and the arts and crafts movement on one hand, and emergent Indian nationalism on the other" (467). What links them, though, might not only be anti-modern attitudes towards machines and industrialism, as he writes, but, in a more fundamental and enduring way, the practice of preservationist Orientalism, or the way of creating, knowing, representing and restoring India's past as part of the larger East, and doing so as much, if not more as a critique of the West, or Britain, than as a serious study of the East, or India, on its own terms. Morris was not particularly interested in Indian nationalism, nor did he explicitly

[4] For example, see Jeffrey Auerbach, "Art and Empire," Robin W. Winks, ed. *Oxford History of the British Empire, 5*, 571-583; Patrick Brantlinger, "A Postindustrial Prelude to Post-colonialism: John Ruskin, William Morris and Gandhism," *Critical Inquiry*, 22 (1996): 466-485; Bernard S. Cohn, "The Transformation of Objects into Artifacts, Antiquities, and Art in Nineteenth-Century India," *Colonialism and its Form of Knowledge: The British In India* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996); Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989); John M. Mac-Kenzie, "Art and the Empire," in P.J. Marshall, ed. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 296-315; Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994); Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1992).

advocate political independence, or Home Rule for India. In Brantlinger's own words, Morris "never [. . .] escaped from some version of Orientalism" (468). On a closer look, this relationship to India and Indian Art might not be so easily dismissed as "some version," but rather the very essence of the Orientalist enterprise, the central framework for his critical position and application of aesthetics to Indian arts and society.

The connections linking Morris and India might shed some further light on the nuances and uses of both "Orientalism" and "tradition" in late-nineteenth-century English thought, and the ways by which political anti-imperialists might share cultural ideas and strategies with political pro-imperialists. Morris's urgent and moralistic call for the preservation of ancient buildings in India and the defence of Indian artisans in the face of destructive machinery echoed the nostalgic calls of many administrators governing the Raj at the time. They too praised and supported authentic Indian art-wares, non-mechanised artisanal craftsmanship, and organic village-communities, arguing that it was the British who could best restore and protect them. Like the views of nearly all Victorians on Indian Art, Morris's included assumptions about South Asian social order, labour, politics, aesthetics and taste. Traditional Indian arts and crafts mirrored his Medieval arts and crafts, repositories of a seamless past threatened by industrial capitalism. To Morris and many others, art was the collective memory for India's peasants, artisans and villagers, an art which reflected the legendary totality of the village and the basic happiness of the individual. The collection and criticism of Indian Art were thus not only vehicles for a philosophical speculation about beauty in the later Victorian era. Questions about Indian style and work were increasingly also about the social, cultural and economic conditions of Britain and its Crown Jewel.

Art became part of the debate about comprehending and governing India, as the study and promotion of traditional crafts were intertwined with the revived interest in traditionalist political authority and social order, not only with questions about aesthetics. Official policies promoting the arts and crafts in India paralleled and supported links made with Indian princes among other attempts to modify, mystify or, in some cases, reverse the East India Company's modernising reforms undertaken before the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-58 (Metcalf; Stokes 1959). The impulse to preserve Indian arts, monuments and social order was part of the language and practice of imperial power in British India after that watershed moment; it was represented by schools of art, exhibitions, museums, photography and the Archaeological Survey, all devoted to "the Promotion of Literature, Science and Art" in the Raj.[5] Most, if not nearly all, of that "Art" was traditional, or

[5] For an official contemporary listing and discussion of such projects, see *Memorandum of Measures Adopted, and Expenditure Incurred, in India, for the Promotion of Literature, Science and Art, Since the Assumption by Her Majesty the Queen of the Direct Government of the Country*, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, London, V/27/900/1. For discussion and analysis of the late-Victorian relationships between art, politics and governance in British India, see Maria Antonella

"industrial," rather than "Fine" art – textiles, metal-work, and pottery, rather than portrait painting, for example. The production and sales of such industrial art-wares were encouraged by many parties in Britain and India, including the ambitious Revenue and Agriculture Department of the Government of India.[6]

The thick text of English-language Orientalist studies of India, originating back in the eighteenth century with William Jones and the Royal Asiatic Society, framed the vocabulary and authority of most British writings on Indian art and society (Inden, "Orientalist Constructions"; *Imagining India*; Kopf; Roosa). That thread places Morris in one of his many suggestive historical and intellectual contexts. It helps us to reconsider his seeming anti-imperialism and, at the same time, to avoid lumping him with all other Orientalists in a rather monotonous sea of knowledge and power. Morris is much more interesting and the history of Orientalism is much more complicated than that. There were and perhaps still are, after all, many Orientalisms, rather than one monolithic discourse. There were certainly many alive and well in late-Victorian Britain.

The political objectives and social visions of various Orientalists might diverge, but they shared certain common assumptions about India. Those included the centrality of caste, village-communities, hand-made crafts, spiritual and organic unity, and degradation from a previous Golden Age. For example, one of Morris's public art lectures considered the "degradation" of Eastern pattern-designs from a point of original perfection (Morris, "History of Pattern-Designing" 156-57). He noted the loss of this mythic purity and contrasted Eastern and Western responses to that process. The British Empire accelerated that degradation, or degeneration, a claim seemingly illustrated by the arts and crafts displays at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition at South Kensington in 1886. Morris wrote in the *Commonweal* that those exhibits were only "[e]xamples of the last remains of the art of India which our commercialism has destroyed" (15 May 1886: 50). They were "a kind of gilding for the sordidness of the rest of the show [. . .] a sorry sight indeed to one who knows anything of what the art of the East has been" in its allegedly purer, original state.

Morris also addressed the "Eastern" question of British rule in India and its impact on the traditional arts in his famous address on "The Art of the People," delivered in 1879. He argued that "we ourselves are responsible for what is happening" in India, since "Chance-hap has made us the lords of many millions out there; surely it behoves us to look to it, lest we give to the people whom we have made helpless scorpions for fish and stones for bread." Readers will recognise these

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Pelizzari, ed., *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture and New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2003).

[6] Sir Edward C. Buck, *(Confidential) Historical Summaries of Administrative Measures in the Several Branches of Public Business Administered in the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Drawn up in 1896* (Calcutta: Government Printing Office, 1897).

words as a passionate defence of Indian Art and the Raj's subjects in the face of British imperialism, but what was the nature of that defence? Did it not contain an element of imperial paternalism to the prostrate and a-historical East, albeit to substitute fish for scorpions and bread for stones; and, perhaps, also, a recognition that the British were the agents not only charged with protecting India, but in doing so, also with defining and preserving its traditional society and culture? Here lies the challenging duality of his explicitly political anti-imperialism and implicitly cultural imperialism, expressed in a nostalgia uncomfortably similar to our own generation's imperialist nostalgia and renewed gunboat diplomacy. Morris was not necessarily nostalgic for empire itself, but, in an unexpected irony, as is the case with many today, for what empire might do, or appeared to have done.

Morris spoke about his "discouragement" in the face of imperial developments, such as the disappearance of "beautiful, orderly" Indian art. The justly famous lecture on "The Art of the People" delivered in Birmingham reminded his audience that the rate of destruction was machine-like, "fast, and every day faster." Nothing was spared in that attack. Jewellery, metal-work, pottery and other crafts fell aside as individual Indian artisans copied models from the English themselves or the imperial government manufactured mass, inexpensive Indian goods in prisons. The result? "Cheap and nasty" goods, such as those displayed at the previous year's Universal Exposition in Paris, rather than ones in keeping with genuine and natural practices. The only real art was found as relics in museums.

This is not only a political statement; it is also filled with social and aesthetic assumptions. One is that there is a true Indian Art and that it does not change; it is frozen across time and space. This was a proposition with which Sir George Birdwood, the prominent Orientalist, could agree, but not so John Lockwood Kipling (1837-1911), the famous author's father. Both Birdwood and the elder Kipling were contemporaries of Morris; both were intensely interested in Indian arts and crafts. Birdwood's vision of Indian Art connected it with a static, unchanging "Hindu Pantheon" (Birdwood, *Industrial Arts of India*). The senior Kipling, a prominent artist and art-school administrator in Bombay and Lahore, perceived historical change and development, although not necessarily improvement, in the centuries of Indian art (Archer; Tarapor, "John Lockwood Kipling and British Art Education"; "John Lockwood Kipling & The Arts and Crafts Movement"). If one were to admit that contemporary Indian art exactly mirrored India's older art and timeless religion, then, as Lockwood Kipling wrote his editor at Macmillan's in London, one would have to concede that "the art of England is [today] an illustration of the religious life of England as laid down in the 39 Articles" during the sixteenth century.[7] This was not a likely concession in the late nineteenth century .

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[7] J.L. Kipling to Maurice Macmillan, 20 April 1891, *Macmillan Papers*, British Library Add. Ms. 54,940: ff. 7-8.

A further assumption in Morris's speech is that the real art is a people's art, implying an idealised levelling of Indian society, an inversion of the more typical Oriental Despotism with its caste system to find an equally imaginary Oriental Democracy with its social equality. This argument was brought to life in the discussion of the Indian art-wares on display in Paris in 1878. Morris attacked the gifts of jewels, armour and weaponry for the Prince of Wales displayed at the Universal Exposition of that year. They had been given to the Prince by local Indian princes as signs of loyalty during his Royal Tour of the Raj two years before. For Birdwood, such treasures were praised for their artistic and political value (Birdwood, *Industrial Arts of India*; *Arts of India*). They linked traditional art and personal rule. But not to Morris. They were symbols of militaristic and oppressive rule, whether imperial, or princely, as well as of the luxury he vehemently despised. They had been that in 1876 and were even more so two years later, when exhibited and observed as part of the official Indian Pavilion at the Universal Exposition. That criticism was informed, in part, by his Occidental, anti-aristocratic social argument, as well as his artistic one. After all, those gifts were the signs of feudal obedience to the Royal Family in Britain and feudal rule in India over its peasants. They were works of art, but not only were they not original, they were also aristocratic in their vulgarity. Morris's attack revealed elements of an almost republican Orientalist fantasy.

Therein lies a critical social and political divergence from the Orientalism embraced by most others of his generation. Other Orientalists generally used art criticism to legitimise the personal rule of Indian princes and the social conservatism of the mythical "village-community"; these were popular emblems of "traditional," if not feudal, India (Dumont; Dewey; Burrow). Although the Indian village was considered a crucible of "liberty" and the ancient past for Radicals, Liberals, and Conservatives alike, they differed on the precise turn of that term. And they all did so in very English terms. Morris's village was highly democratic in political and egalitarian in social terms in contrast to the more aristocratic and hierarchical South Asian communities articulated by three of his influential contemporaries: Birdwood, Henry Maine and Richard Temple. They sought to preserve traditional Indian art-wares as part of the mechanism for traditionalist rule – whether British or local – and essentially feudal, or aristocratic society.

Temple, who served the Indian Government for forty years in Calcutta, Bombay and the Central Provinces, succinctly articulated the way in which this Orientalist position was tied to one sense of English tradition: "The son of an English Country gentleman, I took out to the East the traditions of rural life in England, and religiously brought them back with me" (Temple x-xi). For his part in this drama, Birdwood, arguably the leading English Orientalist studying Indian art of his day (at least in his own estimation, which did seem to count for quite a bit), desired the personal rule of Indian princes. Finally, Maine seemed to show no deep

love or admiration for the Indian peasant, but a paternalism he did not show towards the modern worker.

The differences between Morris and Birdwood, in particular, are revealing. Sir George Birdwood dominated the late-Victorian study and display of Indian art in Britain. Born in Bombay, he moved to England under somewhat questionable circumstances after working for the local Asiatic Society and its museum. He then assumed a long-term position with the India Office in London.[8] Lockwood Kipling wrote his publisher in the early 1890s that Birdwood "seems to keep a turnpike on the Indian high road," from where he could "pontificate" and be one of "those who regard India as their own back garden and snarl at all intruders."[9] Kipling's father was such an "intruder." Sir George snarled from positions of authority in the India Office and Royal Society of Arts. From there, he popularised his views on Indian art and society with public lectures, newspaper and journal articles, exhibition and museum displays and catalogues, and the various activities of the Society for the Encouragement and Preservation of Indian Art.[10] Birdwood used his considerable authority in Britain "to interest the world of art" in India's wares and to bring those "into the European market" for appreciation and purchase.

There were moments when Morris appreciated Birdwood's considerable influence and patronage of traditional Indian arts and crafts. He was among many artists, critics and other "men of culture" co-signing a public letter expressing gratitude for "the manner in which [. . .] [Birdwood] [. . .] performed an important duty" at the 1878 Paris Universal Exposition.[11] That "duty" was the "close observation" of such Indian art as he published in his official report from Paris, a narrative which also included the causes of deterioration in those crafts. That being noted, the contrasts between Birdwood and Morris are, in the end, perhaps more illuminating than their similarities, and not just for the study of those two influential Victorians, but also for the history of Orientalism and the ways in which Indian played across the theatre of the Western imagination. For political and intellectual inspiration, Birdwood drew upon the Radical Tory tradition; Morris, the Radical Left. Birdwood echoed Carlyle and his fellow public moralists in many ways;

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[8] For biographical information, see "Birdwood, Sir George Christopher Molesworth (1832-1917)," *Dictionary of National Biography, 1912-1921* (New York: Oxford UP, 1927), 46-47 and *The Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, 8 (1900): 45-50.

[9] J.L. Kipling to Maurice Macmillan, 3 February 1892, *Macmillan Papers*, British Library Add. Ms. 54,940: ff. 16-19.

[10] See: "Society for the Encouragement and Preservation of Indian Art," London, 1895, National Art Library, London, Box III.4.D. and *The Society for the Encouragement and Preservation of Indian Art. Catalogue of a Loan Exhibition of Embroidery by Indian Women, at Chestnut House, 142 Regent Street, W.* (London, 1893), National Art Library, Box I.43.MM.

[11] *Two Letters on the Industrial Arts of India* (London: W. B. Whittingham and Co., 1879). Among those joining Morris as co-signatories were C. Purdon Clarke, Walter Crane, Edward Burne-Jones, Coutts Kindsay, Frederick Leighton, Thomas Wardle, Richard Redgrave and John Everett Millais.

Morris reminds one of the seventeenth-century Levellers and Diggers, as well as the nineteenth-century Chartists, all three among England's most influential democratic movements. In the aesthetic world of Indian art, Birdwood advocated restoration, Morris, preservation.

Birdwood's traditionalism celebrated a socially and politically conservative order. His India was a world of personal, and nearly feudal, authority, not a democratic world, by any means, except in its shared lack of power among common men and women and its Tory communalism. Birdwood remarked in an essay against mandatory examinations for Indian Civil Service candidates that "All government, small and great, is, and must be personal; and directly that it ceases to be personal – whether by loss of faith in itself, or the loss of faith of the governed in it – it is anarchy" (Birdwood, *Competition* 13). Personal rule should hold sway over the Indian world governed by princes and the timeless "Hindu Pantheon," in which all social actions, "everything that is made," most notably art, reflected religious orthodoxies, uses and traditions (Birdwood, *Arts of India* 95-97). Birdwood and Morris both traced the beauty of organic art back to the East. Once there in spirit, if not body, Morris would find its crucible in the pleasure of non-alienated labour and its attachment to nature; Birdwood, in "the religious sense of the indivisible unit of spiritual with the material" (Birdwood, *Termless Antiquity*). He wrote in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* that "the arts of India are indissolubly bound up with [. . .] the unseen work of man's spiritual consciousness" ("Indian Pottery" 728). Both idealised the East, but one according to secular ideals and the other religious fantasies.

Morris's was a vision more democratic than the Liberal and Tory ones. While it shared Birdwood's anti-bureaucratic sentiment, it was grounded in the tradition of English radical dissent, anchored by the mythology since the seventeenth century of pre-Norman, Anglo-Saxon, or Teutonic English democracy. Some of those ideas were embraced by the thinkers of the village-community school by the end of the nineteenth century and transported to a variety of times and places, including British India (Burrow). In this way, Morris's India was to some degree a mirror of his legendary Iceland, where he could also find ancient rights and rugged happiness, as well as a reflection of early Britain and its own mythic lost rights. Finding mechanistic discontinuity in England itself, he found an organic continuity in India. This is not to say that Morris's village-community and its occupants were not as mythical as Birdwood's and Maine's. Although imagined and applied for different political uses, they called upon the same foundational Orientalist assumptions about India.

Arts and crafts (not the fine arts) were the texts, or documents, used by Morris to decipher that traditional India as others turned to manuscripts, caste, clothes and architecture to construct a sociology of the subcontinent (Cohn, "Notes"; *Colonialism*). The study of such texts might revive Indian arts and crafts, as well as traditional Indian society. But they did so as artifacts, removed from their original

and living context. Stripped of the very labour which Morris appreciated and sought to restore in the West, they became abstractions of Eastern work, precious signs to be protected like gems in a museum case. At times, examples of Indian art seemed to be pure aesthetic productions without any social anchoring or political meaning.

George Bernard Shaw perceived this museum-like aura around Morris's Indian art-wares and criticism. Visiting his socialist comrade's home, the playwright remembered how everything was "clean and handsome," almost exhibits themselves, whose beauty was matched by the beauty of their presentation (Shaw 20). Shaw reminisced about a "carpet so lovely that it would have been a sin to walk on it; consequently it was not on the floor but on the wall and half way across the ceiling." India's seemingly living artistic tradition had become a museum tradition, frozen in its recontextualised presentation, which could be read for its social and political meanings as much as its aesthetic implications, but more likely left alone to exist in a nearly Platonic realm of pure beauty.

Either way, Eastern history and society could be essentialised to an object, the beautiful carpet hanging from a wall, rather than being walked or sat upon as originally intended. This was a transformation of what we might consider original use-value, even in the case where the object had not been mass-, but hand-produced. The art-ware became Art, or in the colloquial usage of the time, it had become "South Kensingtonised."[12] That is not an inappropriate term for Morris and his relationship to Indian art, since, after all, he was connected to that museum in so many ways. He visited and corresponded about the South Kensington collection of Indian artifacts, as he had done with one of its predecessors, the India Museum. Both institutions were *loci* for the various strands of the Victorian English-Indian cultural network.

Among Morris's correspondents with shared South Kensington affiliations was Sir Thomas Wardle, the noted silk magnate, whose interests spun to include British India's silk industry. Most particularly, the two discussed reeling, dyeing and patterns. Morris patterns were printed on Wardle's silk displays at the Indian Pavilion at the 1878 Paris Universal Exposition and thus, in an irony which seems to have escaped Morris, exhibited in close proximity to the princely gifts he so adamantly despised. The pair continued to experiment with dyes, including indigo, over the next several years (Kelvin 255-56, 279-282; Henderson 89-90).

Morris could also put into practice his and their ideas about Indian art and craftsmanship at the South Kensington building itself, the museum founded for the industrial and practical arts in London and later renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum, as we know it today. He donated a series of Persian, Turkish and Indian art-wares to its collection, as well as acting as Art Referee and Examiner (Barbara Morris 1975, 159-175). Among the donated works were traditional pieces from India. He also advised on the purchase of Persian and Turkish carpets, as well as on

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[12] The phrase is from *The Builder*, 46 (1884): 395.

an Indian embroidered coverlet to enhance the Museum's Eastern Art collection. That coverlet was part of a wooden cabinet door purchased and donated by Morris himself. Those contributions echoed South Kensington's official Indian Art catalogue, which suggested that "By studying the art and production of India – inseparable from the history of nations, we learn not a little of its people themselves" (H.H. Cole, *Catalogue* 1-2).

To a great degree, Morris was continuing the mid-Victorian efforts of Sir Henry Cole, the Museum's first director, who was also a preservationist, rather than a restorer. The energetic and zealous Cole had "paid special attention to the representation in the Museum, of Indian Architecture and decorative carving," including casts of "ancient" Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim art (Cole, *Fifty Years* 348). He continually advocated the purchase and display of Indian crafts and art-wares, which he believed could be used to instruct English artisans and manufacturers. Morris built upon Cole's efforts and his own connections to the greater public afforded by his roles at South Kensington to influence that public's reception and understanding of Indian art. In doing so, he hoped to restore the mythical organic unity of pre-industrial labour and to connect "the people" to a sense of beauty in both Britain and "the East."

The "East" of British India provided Morris with a complement to the Middle Ages and Iceland. Those were periods and places admired by Morris for their authenticity and "sincerity," in the words of Walter Crane written just after Morris's death (Crane 89-91). These three a-historical, imaginary spaces were also anti-modern, providing seemingly authentic images far removed from the "commercial and industrial bustle and battle of the nineteenth century, the sordid life of modern cities," which, according to Crane, angered Morris. The latter made an even more explicit connection in his lecture "Of the Origins of Ornamental Art," in which he suggested "a certain sort of relationship" among the art found in Celtic, Scandinavian, Medieval English and Eastern cultures (146-147).

Morris's quest for the pure origins of such art drew him to the East, or the "pre-Aryan" art of Europe, precisely where Sir Henry Maine's pursuit of original legal and social institutions also terminated. Morris's compelling and influential Socialist vision grasped these utopias, but in doing so, rejected History; this was the case with his seemingly anti-imperialist construction of a utopian India across time and space, as it was with his pre-modern English villages and towns (Anderson 157-175; Spatt 1-9). The Orientalist and Utopian discourses merged in Morris's critical writings and actions to create a Preservationist Orientalism. He persistently desired a world in which beauty was created by the ordinary, anonymous and unified artist/designer/craftsman of the mythic past (Harvey and Press 15-21; Crane 90). That ideal (and happy) labourer could not be found in the contemporary West, or Britain, so he was created in the seemingly timeless East, or India, although the South Asian economy revealed its own complexity, diversification, and change – its own socioeconomic history – well before the late-nineteenth century. Morris seems

to predate Walter Benjamin's interest in the "aura" of art in its original, total context of production, before, or outside of, the jaws of capitalist reproduction (Benjamin, "Work of Art" 217-251). Art was not merely produced and reproduced in the East, but crafted, its "aura" intact, the organic unity between art, nature and the people strong and continuous without mechanical reproduction or division of labour. Indian art was "primitive" art, sincere, not mechanistic (Sussman 108-109).

As such, Morris treated that art as he treated his beloved old English buildings. They should be protected by the gloves of preservation, not the scrapers of restoration, a distinction he articulated in a letter to the *Times* in 1895 (1 June: 13). By then, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was up and running, and Morris was among its most active runners. He had helped initiate the Society in the late 1870s with his famous letter to *The Athenaeum*. That earlier correspondence included a rather quaint Victorian phrase: "living history" (5 March 1877 in Henderson 85-86). What did Morris mean?

He called for "an association" to watch over and protect rare relics as part of "the newly-invented study of living history [. . .] the chief joy of so many of our lives." This was, in part, the study of social atavisms, or institutions, practices and objects from the past, survivors of the trans-formative industrial and urban capitalism which angered Morris. It was as if the past of other peoples in other times and other places might be played out as epic theatre, a seamless connection to the past which had been disrupted for modern societies because of that capitalism, but perhaps not completely in India, even with the imperial introduction of machines (Benjamin, "Work of Art" 147-154). India and its art might still be saved by the English critic, artist and socialist, if not by the Empire itself.

The present could represent the past in India because they were one and the same, implying there was no true past, or sense of measurable historical distance. India's antiquity was near at hand, tangible in the form of its arts and crafts. It was this sense of antiquity in the present, as much as beauty itself, which marked buildings and crafts for preservation, whether in England or India. The past was elevated over the present for Morris and other preservationists, and the acquisition and display of carpets and pottery made the myth of that "past" tangible (Wiener, *English Culture* 64-72). At times this provoked the unexpected union with imperialists in the Raj.

Morris's living history seems much closer to what sociologists and other scholars term "collective" or "social" memory, rather than to what we might term History.[13] That was particularly the case with "ancient monuments," which he

13 The current literature on collective (or social) memory is vast. Among the many helpful inquiries are: Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1991); James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1992); Peter Fritzche, "Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity," *American Historical Review*, 106:5 (December 2001), 1587-1618; Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, "Collective Memory – What Is It?" *History and Memory*, 8 (Spring/Summer 1996): 30-50; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and

suggested were nearly objects of desire, psychologically important as more than repositories of the past's factual record. Morris wrote to the *Times* in the mid-1890s that the Royal Tombs at Westminster were not only structures of "our remembered history, embodied in them"; they were also the representations of "the unremembered History, wrought into them by the hands of the craftsmen of bygone times" (1 June 1895: 13). Such artifacts were *loci* of memory and its fantasies, rather than formal History, as the Victorians understood that process. Relics were not merely "ecclesiastical toys" to Morris, "but sacred monuments of the nation's growth and hope," made the more valuable by the claim to antiquity (5 March 1877 in Henderson 85-86).

Surely this was the case with Indian arts and crafts for Morris, as it was with Indian architecture for others, who struggled at the same time to preserve temples, arches and topes. Officers of the Raj's official Archaeological Survey addressed ancient Indian architecture in the way that Morris approached England's own ancient buildings and India's arts and crafts: they were watched over and protected. In India it was done by the State apparatus; in England, by a voluntary society. Morris admitted in the pages of *The Athenaeum* that "it is clearly impossible, when one comes to think of it, for ourselves or our buildings to live again either in the fifteenth century or the twelfth," but he was not so skeptical when it came to India (4 April 1877 in Henderson 87-89).

Might it be possible to live in India's past during the present? It is as if traces of the original aura from ancient India persisted, potential total victims of industrial capitalism, but whose ironic saviour might be the imperial state itself, and most certainly the English artist and art critic. Transcending History, Morris found his ideal space defined by the very imperialist process he allegedly opposed. Some might then conclude that Morris was as guilty as other cultural imperialists; but, if so, he was certainly motivated by different objectives for Indian society, inspired by the promise of a more socialist future defined by a mythically more democratic past. That distinction matters and might be kept in mind before we too quickly and easily link Morris with all other imperialists and Orientalists.

William Morris was critical of British imperialism in India and its effects on art. He also displayed an admirable and rather unorthodox political sympathy for the common Indian. But he did so in keeping with the Orientalist tradition and its grammar of knowing and representing India to both the Indians and the British. Morris's Indian art was "living in our own day," as if it did not change over time, as if there were no Indian transformative directions except downward in degradation (Morris, "Art of the People" 49). When not in a degraded state, Indian art was stationary, found in an ideal state before commerce and machines, somehow more authentic, closer to nature, as Europeans might argue that their own peasant art was at the same time an expression of pure and timeless national character (51).

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trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) and Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*," Marc Roudebush, trans. *Representations*, 26 (1989): 7-25.

To Morris the Orientalist, one could freeze Eastern Art for preservation, re-connecting it with a pure antiquity (Morris, "Of the Origins" 142-147). The Eastern and Indian artisan was happy in that state, in contrast to the unhappy English worker. Such cultural and social visions sprang from the same pen as the pointed critiques of the Raj's tragic political consequences. The inconsistencies and unsettled ideas we find in Morris's views on imperialism and India in particular are the result of the common Radical uncertainty about art, empire and tradition, as well as his own brand of Orientalism, a set of ideas which prevented appreciating a truly historical India.

In many ways, Morris understood the Raj as yet one more example of modern tyranny imposed upon traditional freedom. British rule in India was one manifestation of those seemingly omnipresent disciplines across English history, but this time enforced overseas in the name of Victorian imperialism, rather than Norman feudalism or home-grown political economy. Such tyrannies were for the benefit of what he called "the robber class" in Britain. Morris turned to the idealised village community of artisans to reveal and, if possible, break this overseas "Yoke" imposed by the British Empire and local Princes. This mirrored and drew upon the radical "Norman Yoke" narrative of English history; that is, the continuous reimposition of the Normans' aristocratic and undemocratic rule upon utopian pre-feudal Anglo-Saxon democracy, resulting in the lost ancient liberties of Englishmen (Hill 58-125). In this case, the liberties of the Indian peasant, artisan and village stood for Anglo-Saxon England, and the Raj substituted for the Norman conquerors. Birdwood, Temple, Maine and most other Orientalists thought such liberties could be protected by landlords and Princes in India; Morris suggested that the people themselves – with the assistance of the English artist and art critic – could restore them. The landlords were the problem, the people were the solution: an inversion of Birdwood's characterisation of Indian society.

Morris's meditations upon Indian art were in the final call articulated to criticise Western art. They provided the Orientalist foil and mirror, suggesting that what was amiss in the West, what needed to be corrected and revived, could be borrowed from the East. It was as if, echoing Maine, India's present was England's past, providing "a far more trustworthy clue to the former condition of the greatest part of the world than is the modern social organisation of Western Europe, as we see it before our eyes" (Maine 383). Maine's idealised tenurial arrangements and cultivation in village communities of the contemporary East and ancestral West were mirrored by Morris's idealisation of Indian artisan labour and its artistic products. Both were points of origin before historical time, foundation myths to explain the respective worlds of custom and beauty that had been lost.

The way out of the present was by transcending time and space, to escape History itself, as is the very nature of the Orientalist enterprise, since it could not be escaped in the West, only in the East. Art of the people and of nature were to be found in those moments and places. Although in political and moral sympathy with

India's subject population, Morris understood British India in the common critical binary paradigms of Western and Eastern Art, or modern and pre-modern dichotomies. The "East" imagined by Morris, like his imaginary pre-industrial Britain, offered a world away from the "West" and its machinery, cities, commerce and capitalism (Wiener, "Myth" 67-82). It offered beauty rather than ugliness, but only by annihilating time and space to create a timeless, abstract "India" with only limited, if any, indigenous agency.

This "India" was offered as a contrast to the ones created by active imperial rulers and South Asians, whether in the form of imperial laws, nationalist and subaltern insurgency, or Princely collaboration. Morris resurrected his imaginary India to critique modern British society and British imperialism; in doing so, he fuelled the drive to restore, preserve, and, at times, even invent a traditionalist India anchored in the power of the Raj and its intermediaries, the Indian princes. By the mid-1880s, Morris had odd fellow travellers among the many conservative British and Anglo-Indian officials overseeing their vast network of museums, publications, art-schools, and exhibitions for promoting traditional Indian art wares and their complementary traditionalist social vision.

The revived hope that we will find in Morris a path towards the future filled with justice and beauty rests, in part, upon the rather unjust, although at times quite beautiful, proposition of Orientalism. Morris did not equate industry and progress; he also failed to equate India and human agency. History was still the weapon and solace of the West, not the East. India was for Morris what it was for most of his contemporaries and is for so many of ours: a playground for preservationist fantasies, a world in which handcrafts were and remain frozen in the amber of tradition. One hears an echo of Fiona MacCarthy's comment in her biography about Morris being a man for our time, as well as his own. Perhaps he was more so than we would like to admit, or, as Shaw noted, "you never knew how much Morris had up his sleeve until he thought you knew enough to understand him" (Shaw 25). Perhaps we are only now beginning to understand him.

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