STUDIO CARROM

A DISTANT FELLOWSHIP

WILLIAM MORRIS & SOUTH ASIA

WILLIAM MORRIS GALLERY

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'fellowship is life'

William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*,
London: Reeves & Turner, 1887

We borrow the title of our exhibition and this booklet, *A Distant Fellowship*, from the often-quoted line in Morris's novel, *A Dream of John Ball*, 'fellowship is life'. Today it is the motto of the London Borough of Waltham Forest, and provides the name, Fellowship Square, to the site of the Town Hall, just up the road from the William Morris Gallery.

We have returned to this quote, and the sense of community it suggests throughout this project. This project has been a huge collaborative effort, with a number of people globally, who have come together around the shared interest in William Morris. It has grown and grown due to just how much people have been so enthusiastic about contributing, and this is a testament to just how much William Morris's work and ideology means to many people.

Our collaborators have found so many connections to Morris's work and South Asia: sometimes surprising and revealing. They have their own take on his legacy and it has been encouraging to see how a 'British' collection can be re-framed to expose more diverse histories and connections, if given the opportunity.

Fellowship can mean 'a group of people with the same purpose' or 'a good feeling between people who have a shared interest'. Morris's life and work were surrounded by fellowship, in his collaborative design work and his socialism. We see a sense of fellowship in Morris's admiration for South Asian art and design too, as he looked to learn from methods and processes from the region.

But Morris's fellowship can sometimes feel elusive too. His connection with South Asia represents the perspective of a white privileged male, who took many ideas from South Asia, but was also very derogatory about other aspects, without ever having visited the region. He believed in the rights and freedom of people, yet never advocated directly for India's independence. We think this is one of the things that makes Morris interesting and still relevant, and whilst his interactions with South Asia weren't always positive we think encouraging a dialogue around this is.

A DISTANT FELLOWSHIP

WILLIAM MORRIS & SOUTH ASIA

THE WILLIAM MORRIS GALLERY

STUDIO CARROM

PRESENT

PAST


PRESENT

FORE-WORD

Roisin Inglesby
Senior Curator,
William Morris
Gallery

Who owns William Morris's legacy? Technically, no-one. Having now been dead for 125 years, Morris is out of copyright; his patterns are officially free for all. Yet aside from this legal sense of ownership, there are other types of possession. Morris, like all historical figures, can be owned physically in terms of associated material, and also intellectually, in terms of the narratives told about his life.

As the world's largest collection of Morris-related objects and the only public institution dedicated to his life and work, the William Morris Gallery is a key guardian of both the physical and intellectual aspects of his legacy. But as an institution primarily funded by Waltham Forest Council, the Gallery is only part owner; the privilege and responsibility of shaping Morris's narrative also belongs to the people of the Borough.

It is a cliché to say that Morris's work transcends time and place, and it is lazy to assume that it automatically appeals to people with different life experiences and frames of references. In order for Morris to be meaningful, we have to discover connections that speak to different people in different ways. This exhibition by Studio Carrom considers some ways in which intellectual and emotional ownership of Morris's work and legacy can be shared with artists and members of the public. It takes Morris's designs and in creating something new from them, explores how these patterns tie people to him and to one another.

Morris was a man of contradictions. He was personally wealthy but a committed Socialist. He was deeply romantic but had a disappointing marriage. He was a fantastic speechwriter but a hopeless orator. He created objects intended 'for all' that were prohibitively expensive to most. And his design, which was radical and international, has suffered from what artist Tilla Crowne has referred to as British 'quaintification'.

One part of reassessing Morris's legacy, however, is not to see these contradictions as either/or, but as and/both. It is to open up the conversation to consider the tensions of these seemingly opposing elements as integral to Morris's work. This is particularly relevant for his influences, which were both fundamentally English and fundamentally international.

Morris believed that history did not progress as a line, but in a spiral – time did not move forward smoothly, but continued in ever increasing and enlarging circles. Our understanding of his work

should be the same. It is not a case of losing one narrative in favour of another. Instead, as the spiral develops it pulls more and more understandings into its orbit, adding to the story.

In recent years, elements of global politics and society have become increasingly divisive, encouraging people to think in terms of either/or rather than and/both. In the words of a senior British politician in 2016, 'If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere'. This statement implies that national identity is something exclusive and something fixed. Perhaps this is true in the most practical, bureaucratic sense, but it is at odds with what millions of people around the world feel about their relationship to countries and their culture. The work that Priya and Nia and the other artists in this exhibition have created speaks to the ability of art and design to incorporate and manifest this principle of and/both, putting South Asian stories and objects at the heart of Morris's narrative.

As William Morris knew, 'nowhere' was not necessarily a negative thing. The title of his novel *News from Nowhere*, set in an idealized future, was a play on words–'Nowhere' is a literal translation of 'Utopia', a perfect community. He therefore might have enjoyed the rephrased expression: 'If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of Utopia'.

DISTANT FELLOW-SHIP

EXHIBITION & INTERVENTIONS AT THE WILLIAM MORRIS GALLERY, 2021

Priya Sundram
& Nia Thandapani

Our project began with two swatches of fabric, neatly presented in a drawer at William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow. Between a swatch of Indian block printed fabric, and another of Morris & Co. fabric a small text read:

CROSS-CULTURAL INSPIRATION
Can you see any similarities between Morris's fabric above and the patterns and plant forms in the Indian textiles?

This booklet, and the exhibition it accompanies, are our answer to this question, which we developed while Artists in Residence at the Gallery in 2019. Both the residency we proposed and the subsequent exhibition consider the ways in which Morris was influenced by South Asia.

As creative practitioners working in the UK and India, we were fans of Morris's work: Priya, an illustrator, was particularly interested in his pattern design and Nia, a print designer, in Morris's typography and book design, and we both shared an excitement for Morris & Co. furniture and Morris's socialist papers. With our geographi-

cal backgrounds both deeply rooted in India and the UK, we were struck by how familiar his work felt, from both an Indian and British context. Looking at the Morris & Co. display Nia was reminded of the 'quintessentially British' curtains that hung in her home growing up in Cheshire, and Priya of her Grandma's house in Chennai, with all her block-printed bedspreads and saris. We even overheard a visitor to the Gallery refer to one of Morris's patterns as something you might see in an Indian restaurant, which felt like a perfect example of how Morris's work can feel innately 'Indian' too, without fully understanding why.

Despite the vast and complex narrative within the Gallery, references to South Asia were few, and those that were there did not make any direct link to Morris looking to South Asia for inspiration. We believed there was a real opportunity to draw this story out of the existing collection.

This felt particularly relevant when we considered the Gallery's location in the vibrant, multicultural area of Walthamstow whose motto, 'Fellowship is Life', is drawn from Morris's words and seems to still encompass a feeling of community and openness. There is a large South Asian community in the area too, but during our numerous visits to the Gallery, the visitors were predominantly white, as were the staff. Sri Karpaga Vinayagar Temple neighbours the Gallery and we got to know the elder Tamil community who met on a weekly basis in their building. We wondered if there was a way of drawing these two worlds closer together.

Facilitated by the unfalteringly generous and impressive Kuhan, director of Waltham Forest Tamil Sangam and by curator Roisin Inglesby who has been endlessly supportive of our project,

our residency culminated in a special guided tour for the Elders group, which drew out some of the South Asian narratives within the collection. The tour began with the drawing of a *kolam* – a rice powder floor drawing common across South India – on the Gallery steps, and lighting lamps to welcome the group. It was attended by 15 elders and was simultaneously translated and streamed in Tamil.

Sri Karpaga Vinayagar Temple, Walthamstow
2019, photography by Marathon
Drawing a *kolam* on the threshold of the William Morris Gallery, 2019

This marked the formal end of the residency, but it didn't feel so much like a conclusion as it did a potential beginning. We had accumulated so much material from the residency and there were a number of ideas we still wanted to explore. It was clear that we had only begun to scratch the surface during our three month residency period. Besides the research into Morris and South Asia which we had accumulated, there were personal and professional question that had emerged for us too.

We wondered if there was a way to look at the particular collection at the William Morris Gallery and recontextualise it for a different audience. The exhibition we have created aims to present a space in which visitors can reflect on both the connections between William Morris and South Asia, but also the contemporary connections between the Gallery context, in Walthamstow, and South Asia.

Stella Creasy MP, Walthamstow
Instagram
1. 28.11.18 documentation of racist graffiti
2. 29.11.18 featuring @doodlebank photoshopped response

THIS BOOKLET

This booklet has two core sections: the present, and the past.

In 1843 Thomas Carlyle wrote *Past and Present*. This was an influential and important text for Morris, cementing the idea of looking to the past for ideas and inspiration for his time. Over 150 years later, Indian historian Romila Thapar wrote *The Past as Present* a book that looks at how narratives of the past get used, and mis-used, in the present. These two texts represent two important ideas that this booklet presents.

Morris saw India, like many during his time, as a place of antiquity, where the past lived in the present. He even went as far as to attribute the quality of Indian art and design to this timelessness. But this was an idealised view of Indian art and design which didn't reflect the long history of India's relationship to the rest of the world and sought to essentialise an 'authentic' version of Indian art and design, untouched by the 'outside' influences. It's a problematic idea which we still see today, reflected in the presentation of South Asia in museums as first and foremost a place of history and rich tradition.

But this is something we grapple with too. How can we explore and present hand production and processes like block printing which are still practiced and contemporary in India, and still connect this to a long and important narrative of South Asian craft? How should we think about colonialism and its impact on UK museums and art and design in South Asia, whilst also not binding contemporary South Asia designs and their work to this history in the present?

These are some of the ideas we have juggled with during this project, and that we invite you to engage with through the physical space during the course of the exhibition, and books within the reading space, and the documentation of our working process and background research presented in this booklet.

***Tulip* textile printing block, Morris & Co.**
Made late 19th century by Barrett's of
Bethnal Green Road, R532

***Kolam* printing block**
2021

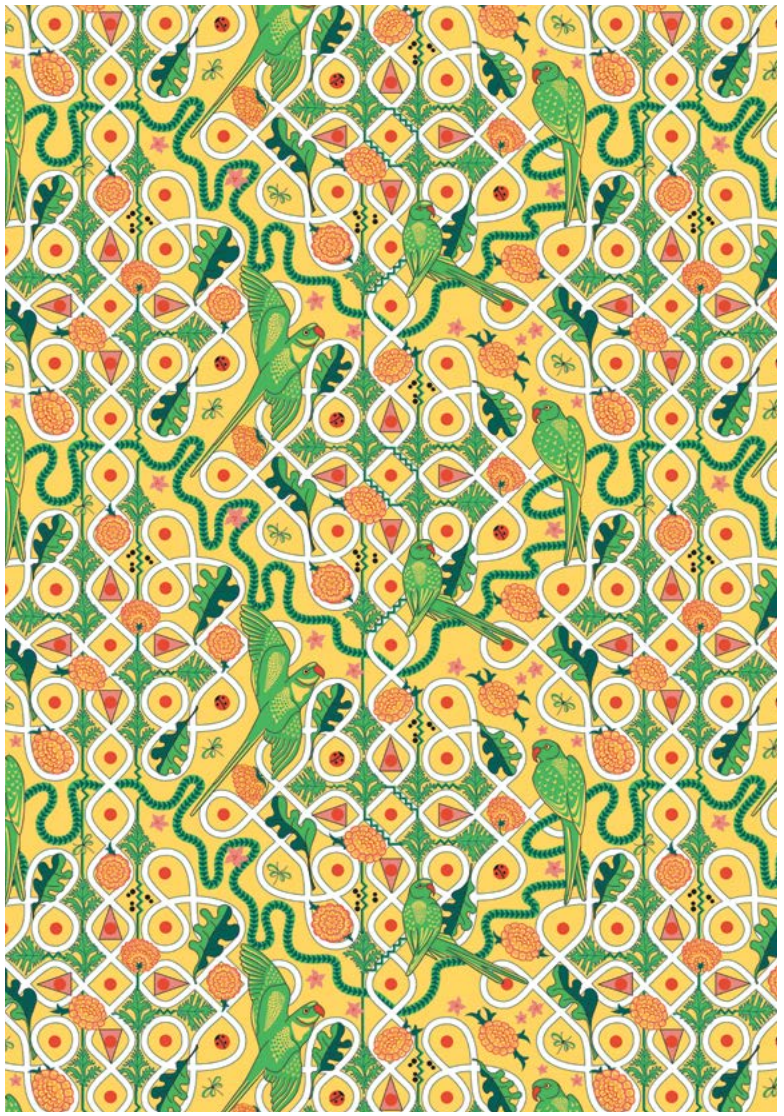
PATTERN & PROCESS

Kolam is a pattern designed for the exhibition *Distant Fellowship: William Morris and South Asia* at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, exploring the connections between William Morris's work and legacy, and South Asia.

Kolams are geometric patterns drawn by hand with rice flour on the threshold of homes, typically by women. The practice originates from South India but is similar to other floor drawing practices across South Asia. Throughout the day, the drawings perish, washed away by the rain or walked over by visitors, and a fresh drawing is made the next day. These drawings are not only decorative but are also symbolic, offering ants, birds and small creatures a meal, and welcoming the natural world into daily life. They are a tribute to the harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world.

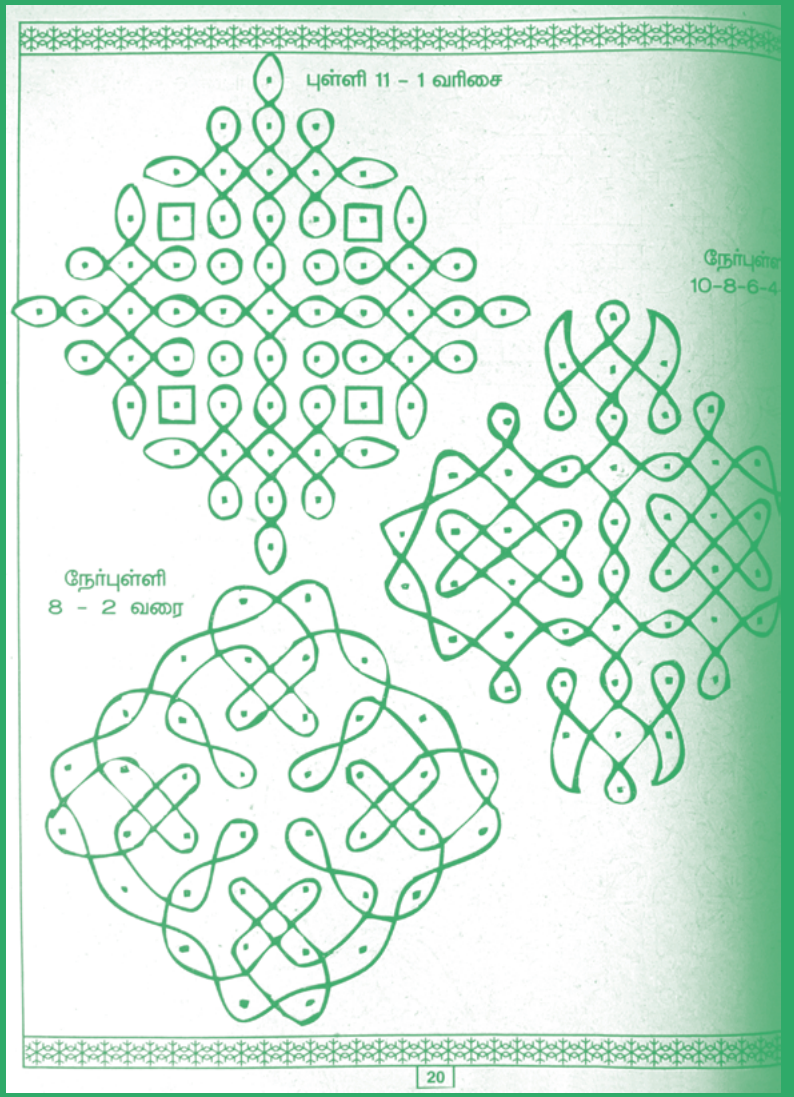
This practice felt fitting with Morris's ethos of harmony with nature, and the geometric form of the *kolam* reminded us of Morris's design *Trellis*, a pattern based on another structural form that welcomes the natural world.

The *kolam* structure of the pattern incorporates familiar symbols, present in both South Asia and Walthamstow today. Among other symbols, the pattern includes coriander leaves, beautifully delicate and ornate symbols of food, a central part of South Asian culture; the parakeet, a South Asian native yet a common sight in Walthamstow and the Gallery's grounds Lloyd Park; and marigolds, which are present in much of Morris's work but also used in South Asian celebration garlands. The aim was to create a pattern that felt both South Asian and Morrisean at the same time.



***Kolam*, Studio Carrom**
2021

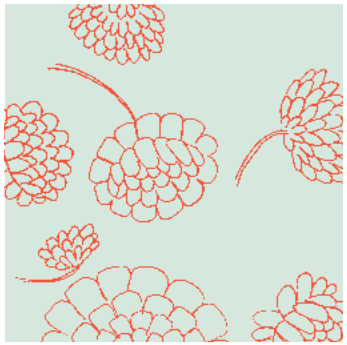
***Trellis*, William Morris**
Designed 1876, manufactured post 1917
by Morris & Co., F366



Kolam Source Book
from *603 Kolams*, Rajeshwarin
Publishers, Sivakasi

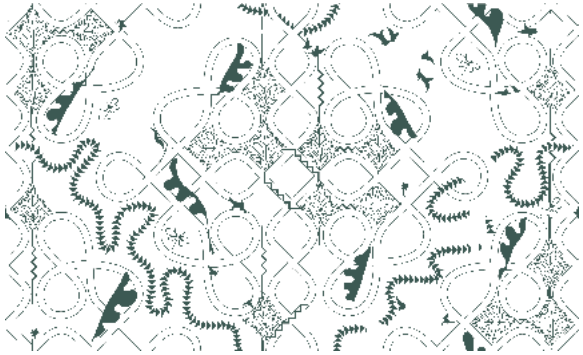
Parakeets
Across Waltham Forest and across the Indian Subcontinent

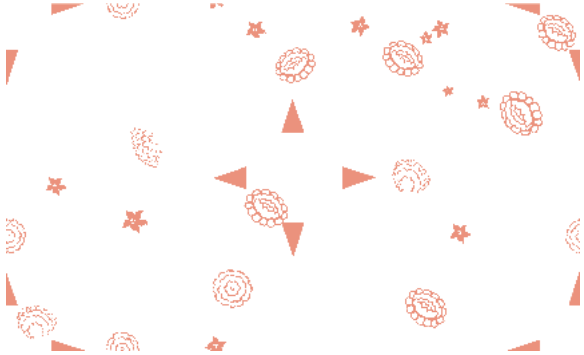
Turmeric (Colour / Spice)
From Sharavana, Hoe Street Walthamstow and across the Indian Subcontinent

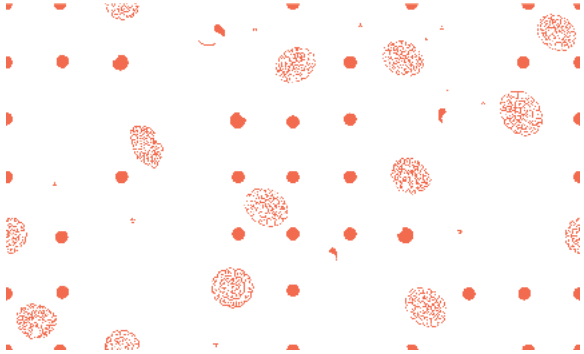


Marigolds
Sri Karpaga Vinayagar Temple,
Walthamstow and across the Indian
Subcontinent

Coriandrum Sativum (Coriander)
Plate 94, *Medical Botany*,
James Churchill, London 1828
Oak Leaf
Oak Tree wallpaper by John Henry Dearle
designed c.1896, Morris & Co., B114







Kolam was separated into the six colours of the pattern, and carved into 12 pieces of teak, by block carvers Sriram, Ali Hussain and S. K. Anwar Ali in Bangalore, India. Across the city, in Tharangini Studio, block printers Govind Raju, Satish C, Shiv Shankar, Krishna Bhatt and Mallikarjun hand-printed the pattern, colour by colour, onto lengths of heavyweight upholstery cotton.

Light green separation, and the same separation being transfered to the teak block

Block carvers Sriram and Ali Hussain working on the dark green and yellow separations.

Cross checking mixed colours
against selected swatches at
Tharangini Studio, Bangalore.

Master printers, Krishna Bhatt and Shiv Shankar printing the first two colours of *Kolam* – yellow and dark green – at Tharangini Studio, Bangalore.

SPACE

The fabric was used to upholster furniture, to create a domestic reading space that contains the literature and research relating to Morris's links with South Asia.

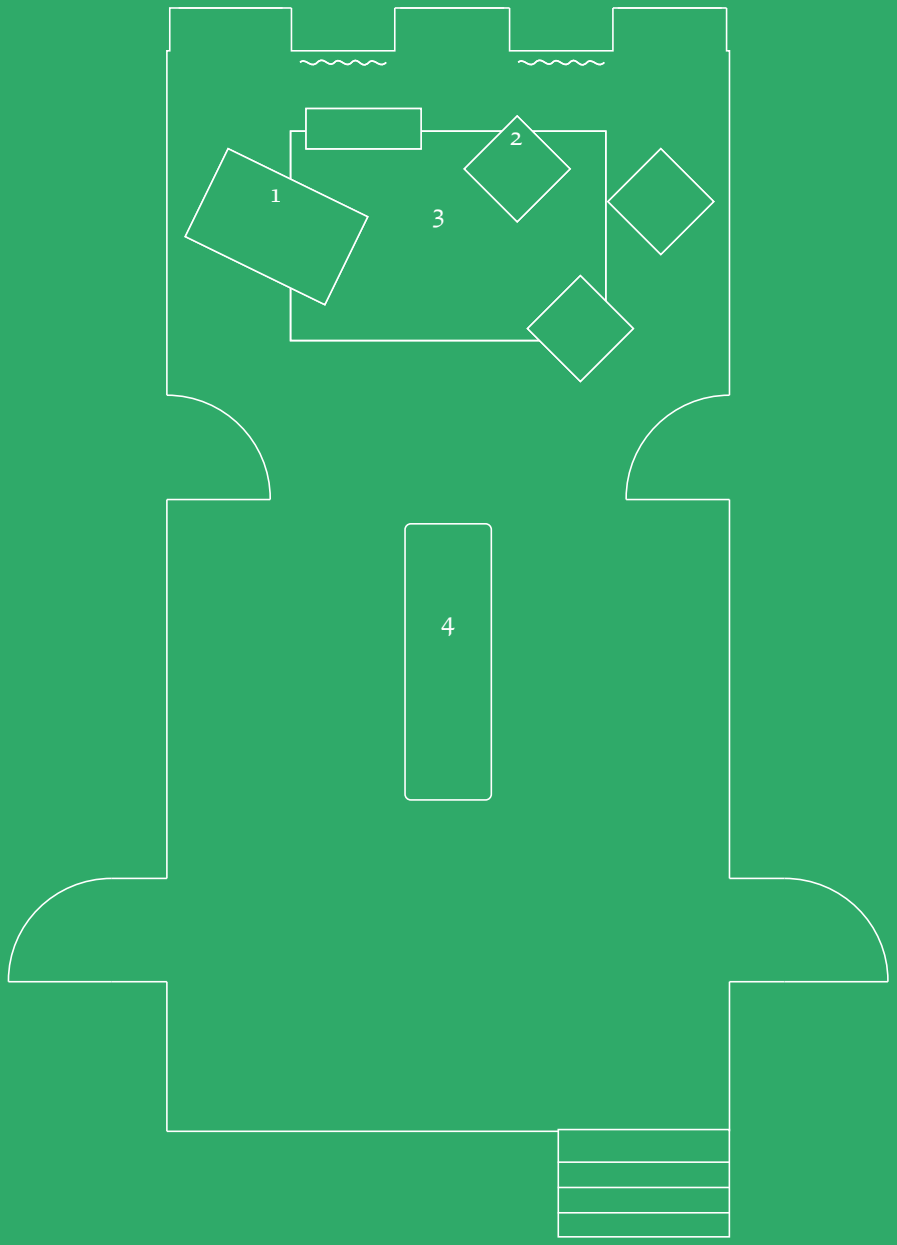
We wanted the space to feel inviting, in some ways familiar to visitors from South Asia or diaspora and at the same time 'British', in the way that the Gallery's Morris & Co. room had felt to us when we began the project. A space saturated with pattern with a number of items all featuring the same design, like a Morris showroom perhaps, but also very much like Anohki – a company that champions hand block printed fabric in India, and who use their designs on a multitude of products. (You will occasionally hear anecdotes of someone turning up to a dinner party wearing a salvar kameez that matches the host's table cloth!)

Interior of Morris & Co.
George Street showroom, 1919
watercolour by Dulce Wornum, W239

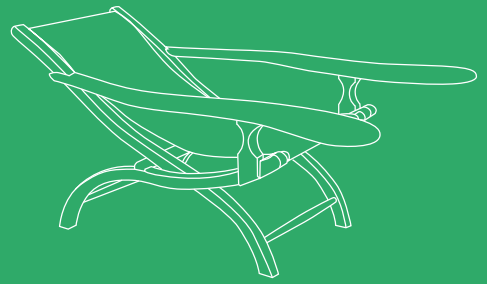
Three types of seating are offered in the reading space. The planters chair will be a familiar sight for many South Asians. This design product of colonial rule is still immensely comfortable and loaded with colonial symbolism, a 'seat of power' where the colonial settlers could put up their feet, literally. Whilst representing a complex and problematic history it is still a popular recliner in India today and reminded us of the Morris & Co. adjustable back armchair.

Floor cushions on a large hand-woven durrie offer more democratic seating. Also familiar to many South Asians, durries are woven carpets often produced in bright naturals dies with cotton yarns that make them light and easy to reposition and transport. The durrie featured in the exhibition has been woven by Bachhan Prasad, Ram Aasare Yadav and Lalnan Chhuhan in Telangana.

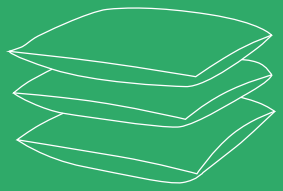
Leading into the reading space is a long ottoman, produced in collaboration with Chester's, a contemporary furniture maker that produces 'British' furniture in Bangalore, India, for the Indian market. This piece and the incredible craft that it showcases represents both the hybridity we think should be celebrated in South Asian design today, and challenges what we think of as Indian craft.



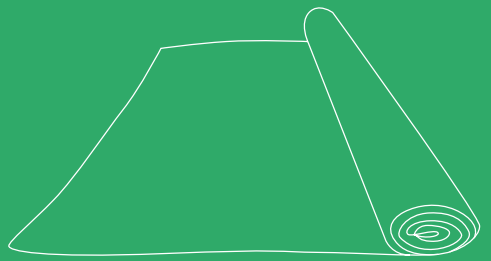
1
19th century
planters chair



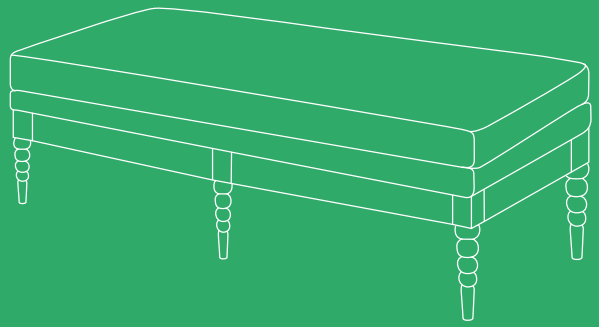
2
Floor cushions



3
Woven dhurrie



4
Ottoman



VOICES

Knowing that Morris himself never visited South Asia and within the Gallery there is little context on his South Asian influences, our project sought to bring South Asian voices back into the Gallery and into the narrative creation inside the space.

An intervention alongside our exhibition places the work of 8 artists, designers and architects with links to South Asia, within the collection, to explore how their practices connect with and can have a conversation with Morris's work. In contrast to how South Asian art and design is often presented in British museums as predominantly historic, this intervention brings contemporary work into the gallery space.

This is important as the Gallery itself is a very 'white' space in terms of visitors, staff and historical narratives. Artist Hans Haacke wrote that 'museums are managers of consciousness' giving us 'an interpretation of history, of how to view the world and locate ourselves in it.' By redressing how the South Asian voice is brought into the Gallery, we hope to enable an often underrepresented demographic to locate themselves within the collection.

Wallpaper by designer and artist Shehzil Malik

Displayed in Gallery 3: Morris & Co.


PAST

TELLING THE MORRIS STORY

Over the last fifty years, there have been numerous 'important' volumes written on William Morris's life and work. These have been helpful in creating a broad and seemingly comprehensive picture of a multifaceted man. But who is writing about Morris and how does this affect the narrative we are told and the way we are told to look at his work? Until recently this narrative has been almost uniformly written by European and American, white and western-based writers and curators. As a result, what elements have been forefronted in these narratives? What elements have been celebrated? And what remains under-researched, underplayed and ignored?

We don't have all the answers to these questions but we think it's time they were explored in greater detail, and luckily we don't need to look far to find some fantastic work already happening close to home in London. Curator Qaisra Khan has explored Morris's Islamic influences, and journalist Navid Akhtar has shared his personal experience of growing up as a British Muslim and connecting with Morris's legacy in Walthamstow. It is into this emerging conversation that we'd like to insert our own work on Morris's South Asian influences; not as an attempt to create a final and comprehensive narrative, but to raise ideas and questions and make more space for more work to come.

We see Morris as both an individual, but also a representative of larger ideas of his time. Morris never visited South Asia and his understanding of the region was largely mediated through exported objects and the reports of other white men.

Practically also, contemporary references to Morris often encompass more than the man himself. For example, patterns designed by other designers are often considered Morris pieces, because they were a product of his company, Morris & Co. We think that it is important that any story of Morris encompass the people he worked with and influenced, as well as those that influenced him. Without doing this we risk continuing to celebrate singular figures, overlooking the equally significant people around them.

The contours of Morris's 'India' were not the same as the nation-state of India that exists today. Encompassing most of present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and at times surrounding regions like Myanmar, British India covered a region loosely covering much of what we now refer to as South Asia or the Indian subcontinent. This project takes South Asia as a point of focus, as many of the sources and ideas we discuss relate to the larger region. At the same time we bring our own biases to this too, as individuals with strong ties to India today.

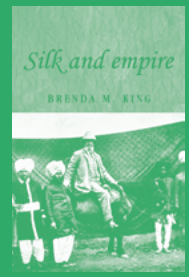
This project comes at an important time, when galleries and museums in the UK are increasingly questioning their relevance to the public, and asking important questions about how we decolonise our museums. We believe it is particularly important, especially for the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow today, to question why the story of Morris remains relevant, and ask why it has been told the way it has been told. This creates space to question what elements have been left out, removed and ignored, and to begin to consider other perspectives and draw them into a more relevant approach for our times.

These snippets of research offer an overview of the information we gathered during our residency at the William Morris Gallery and informed our subsequent exhibition. As a result, this overview has its limits. Documented connections between Morris and South Asia are fragmentary, and the aspects we highlight only represent a part of the wide influences on Morris and his work. Alongside the already extensively-researched Icelandic influences on Morris's work, these South Asian connections sit within a wider and as yet untold story of Morris's global influences.

A CONTEXT

To understand Morris's relationship with South Asia we need to keep in mind the wider context in which he lived and worked. Morris's younger brother was stationed in India as a commander in the Indian Navy, and Morris's company Morris & Co. designed the west window for St. Paul's Cathedral in Calcutta. Such concrete ties with British India – the so called 'jewel in the crown' of the British Empire – are good reminders that in Morris's time, the Empire was part of the backdrop of daily life in Britain.

From chintz cloths exported from the Coromandel coast, to rich *kantha* embroideries originating from parts of contemporary Bangladesh and West Bengal, South Asian textiles had been traded abroad long before the British Raj. Many examples of such historic textiles can be found in British museums today – and in fact, it's hard to overstate the influence of Indian textiles in Europe. Textile historian Brenda King writes:, '...[we] cannot conceive of European textiles today without taking into account the influence of Indian textile traditions.' Morris himself once wrote, 'it is hardly worth while as an artist going into the history of this art in Europe; since whatever was really fine in it was little more than a literal copy of Indian or Persian originals...'.



Brenda King,
Silk and Empire,
Manchester 2008

CHINTZ

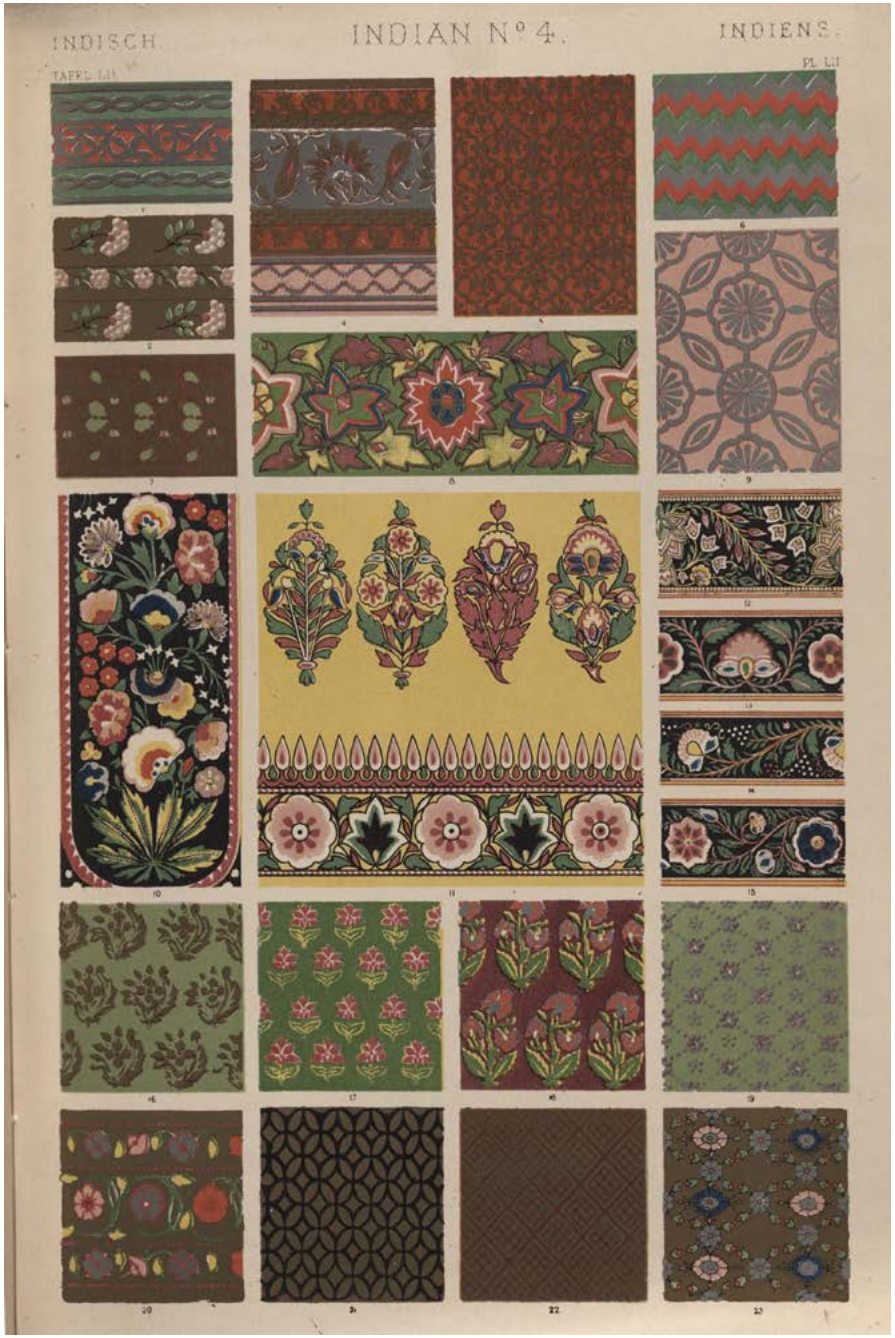
Petticoat
made c.1725,
Coromandel Coast,
V&A Museum: IS.14-1950

Perhaps the most well-researched example of Indian textiles in Britain is chintz. Originally, chintzes were hand-painted and resist-dyed textiles, typically with floral designs, imported from India to Europe from the 17th century onwards. However, chintz has a long, and often, fraught history in Britain, with its use in clothing and homeware even being outlawed during the 18th century, and over time 'chintz' developed into a mostly block-printed textile, with the name itself eventually becoming synonymous with floral textiles more generally. By the time Morris began his career, chintz was already thoroughly embedded into British textile history, making it no coincidence that some of Morris's very first designs were themselves 'chintzes'.

The V&A Museum in London has a large collection of historic Indian textiles, including many chintzes, many of which Morris would likely have seen in his capacity as an advisor to The South Kensington Museum (the former name of the V&A). In 1883 Morris even travelled to a Paris auction hoping to secure for the Museum 'a collection of chintz patterns, Persian, Indian...', which were 'just what [the Museum] want'.

LEARNING FROM INDIAN TEXTILES

Following the Indian uprising in 1857, the British East India Company's rule in India came to an end, with Crown rule beginning in 1858. Crown rule ushered in an era of cultural focus on India. As the relationship between Britain and South Asia changed, so did the way South Asian textiles were collected, used and interpreted. South Asian designs were increasingly seen as educational exemplars for British design and Morris was one of many important commentators to highlight their aesthetic qualities and educational potential.


INDISCH.
INDIAN N° 4.
INDIENS.

Previous page:

Indian Plate No. 4, *The Grammar of Ornament*
Owen Jones, London 1865
Public Library of India: archive.org

India section, Plate No. 5
Dickinsons' Comprehensive Pictures of The Great Exhibition of 1851, London 1852

The Great Exhibition of 1851 would be the first in a series of popular world fairs hosted across the west, touted as a chance for countries to showcase their culture, resources and industry to the world. The India section, presented by the East India Company, was highly praised by commentators and ultimately was acquired by museum director Henry Cole, forming an integral part of the original collection of the South Kensington Museum and its Department of Science and Art. Such institutions played an increasingly important role in collecting, presenting, interpreting, and also influencing South Asian, and particularly, Indian art and crafts.

Five years after The Great Exhibition, Owen Jones – a prominent architect, designer and design theorist – published his seminal work, *The Grammar of Ornament*. The book included over 100 plates of pattern and design elements from around the world, many of them copied from objects in the Great Exhibition and South Kensington Museum. This volume was not only a powerful example of ornament and style but was also a literal source of design, with elements being copied and adapted in later designs by eminent practitioners. Its impact had not diminished much when, 25 years later in 1881, Morris himself drew on elements from *The Grammar of Ornament* to illustrate his lecture *Some Hints on Pattern Designing*. Morris's early textile collaborator Thomas Wardle also used patterns that appear to be influenced by *The Grammar of Ornament* in his own textile prints.

Lecture Illustration after Indian Buddhist Designs, William Morris
made 1881, A241

The East India Company Museum, Leadenhall Street, London
Engraving from *Charles Knight's 'London'*, vol 5, 1843
Public Library of India: archive.org

This concentrated interest in South Asian art and design during this time can also be seen in the trajectory of the India Museum, a space Morris knew well. This

THE EAST INDIA-HOUSE. 63

[The Museum.]

the manufacturing processes of Oriental nations, with some objects of natural history. The next room is wholly devoted to natural history. In the third room there is another curious Burmese musical instrument, consisting of twenty-three flattish pieces of wood, from ten to fifteen inches in length, and about an inch and a half in width: these bars are strung together so as to yield dull and subdued musical notes when struck with a cork hammer; and their sizes are so adjusted as to furnish tones forming about three octaves in the diatonic scale. At the end of the corridor is a tolerably large room, containing a number of glass cases filled with specimens of Asiatic natural history. There are Indian, Siamese, and Javanese birds, Sumatran and Indian mammalia, besides butterflies, moths, beetles, and shells. In another room are sabres, daggers, hunting-knives, pipes, bowls, models of musical instruments, serving to illustrate some of the usages of the inhabitants of Java and Sumatra. The Library, in another part of the building, is also partly appropriated as a Museum. The Oriental curiosities in this department comprise, among other things, specimens of painted tiles, such as are used in the East for walls, floors, ceilings, &c., Bhuddist idols, some of white marble, others of dark stones, and some of wood. There are many other objects connected with the religion of Bhudda, as parts of shrines and thrones, on which processions and inscriptions are sculptured, and a large dark-coloured idol represents one of the Bhuddic divinities. In the centre of this room are three cases containing very elaborate models of Chinese villas, made of ivory, mother-of-pearl, and other costly materials; and from the ceiling is suspended a large and highly-decorated Chinese lantern, made of thin sheets of horn.

There are a few glass cases, which contain various objects worthy of notice. There is an abacus, or Chinese counting-machine, Chinese implements and ma-

still under-researched institution was founded by the British East India Company in 1801 and was relocated three times before parts of it were absorbed into the South Kensington Museum's collection in 1879. The Museum's India section continued to be referred to as 'the India Museum' until 1945.

The India Museum collection, in its various locations, was an important source of textile knowledge. John Forbes Watson, its one-time director, authored two extensive volumes in 1866: *The Textile Manufacture of India* and *The Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India*. These two projects collected and categorised textiles from across the polities of South Asia, and intended to provide examples of 'good' design principles and production, which might be both educational and profitable in value. Most of the 20 copies of *The Textile Manufacture of India* were distributed to textile manufacturing towns in Britain, often through art schools and town halls, whilst seven copies were sent to trade centres in South Asia.

Forbes Watson's project and The India Museum, are good examples of the simultaneous aesthetic appreciation of 'good design' from South Asia, and the financial potential that this offered the British Empire during Morris's time.

UNDERSTANDING INDIAN TEXTILES

Morris was not alone in his admiration for the quality of Indian textiles in the second half of the 19th century. Like others, he also wanted to understand how such quality was achieved. George Birdwood, an official in the British India administrative offices and popular commentator on Indian arts and design, was interested in exemplary Indian artefacts. Unlike Owen Jones and Henry Cole, though, Birdwood was interested in the people and social structures that he believed had produced the objects. To Birdwood, India's 'antiquity' and its social milieu – composed of the patterns of village life,

Various pages from *The Textile Manufacture of India, 1866*
Clockwise from top: No. 155 Indian fabrics for domestic use, from Bengal, No. 381, India fabric, piece goods, from Madras, No. 664, India fabric, cashmere shawls, from Punjab, No. 608, 609, Asiatic fabrics, silk, manufactured in Balk. Courtesy of the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston

of caste, religion, guild structures – became important focal points, tying design theory to 'Indology' – the academic study of India – which became increasingly popular in the 19th century and also took the village as its core space of study.

Unlike Birdwood, Morris didn't focus on hereditary caste structures but he was certainly interested in village-level cottage industries and was vocal in his admiration for Birdwood's criticism of British influence on Indian art and design. In 1878, after the Paris Universal Exhibition, Birdwood authored his *Handbook to the British Indian Section* which lamented the destruction of Indian art and design, attributing this to foreign intervention and industrial manufacture. The next year Morris, and a number of his contemporaries, co-signed a letter in support and encouragement of Birdwood's criticism.

But of late these handicraftsmen, for the sake of whose works the whole world has been ceaselessly pouring its bullion for 3,000 years into India, and who, for all the marvellous tissues and embroidery they have wrought, have polluted no rivers, deformed no pleasing prospects, nor poisoned any air; whose skill and individuality the training of countless generations has developed to the highest perfection, these hereditary handicraftsmen are being everywhere gathered from their democratic village communities in hundreds and thousands to the colossal mills of Bombay, to drudge in gangs at manufacturing piece goods, in competition with Manchester...

George C. M. Birdwood, Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878: *Handbook to the British India Section*, Offices of the Royal Commission (London 1878)

PATTERN & PROCESS

Morris's textile work harbours his most visible connection to South Asia. The patterns and processes he used reflected his admiration for work from the subcontinent, and the ways in which these were drawn into his own designs. This is important because textiles we think of as Morris's – and therefore British – are heavily indebted to work from South Asia. These aspects of his work include the patterns he developed, the dyes he used and experimented with, and the methods of printing he used.

Morris's patterns developed over time, and took forms and inspiration from a broader range of sources, but his textile printing processes continued to be drawn from his early experiments and collaboration with the industrialist and dyer Thomas Wardle, at Wardle's factory in Leek, and their shared initerest in South Asian textile printing.

***Snakeshead*, William Morris**
Designed 1876, manufactured post 1917
by Morris & Co., F366

***Indian Diaper* printed cotton, William Morris**
Designed before December 1875, F285

***Pomegranate* printed cotton, William Morris**
Design registered 22 June 1877, printed c.1877, F287

PATTERN

Some of Morris's earliest designs were directly influenced by South Asian textiles. *Indian Diaper, Snakeshead, Little Chintz* and *Pomegranate* clearly demonstrate this in their colour, forms, content, structure and even names. It has been suggested that more subtle Indian influences can also be identified in *Marigold, Larkspur, African Marigold* and *Honeysuckle*, particularly in terms of colour scheme. These patterns were all designed and printed between 1875 and 1877, a period during which Morris worked closely with Thomas Wardle in Leek.

The design *Pomegranate* was registered in 1877 and consists of 5 block printed colours. It demonstrates an early excitement with the strong natural dyestuffs abundant in Indian printed cottons, particularly blue and red. The flattened natural forms of weaving leaves around the eponymous exotic fruit is a good example of the strong influence of Indian pattern on these early designs.

Morris had many opportunities to encounter South Asian textiles through his engagement with the South Kensington Museum which already had an extensive collection of South Asian textiles. Wardle kept samples of Indian textiles at Leek, and in London Morris was increasingly surrounded by popular imported Indian silks in 'fashionable' London shops. Such materials demonstrated not only the coveted 'exotic' patterns but also the use of natural dyes.

PRINTING

In Britain, roller printing – feeding fabric through large inked rolling cylinders – had become a popular and commercial option for textile manufacture. In comparison, the printed textiles in South Asia which Morris and his contemporaries admired, used individual carved blocks, each with a different 'separation', or colour layer, which when printed one after the other built up to create an overall pattern. This was, and still is, a hand process that required accuracy and skill and virtually all of Morris's printed textiles were block printed using the same technique as those in South Asia.

Sample Book, Block Print Trials, Page 65" T.14006.65, Thomas Wardle and Co., Courtesy of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

DYEING

Unsatisfied with the colour he had until then been able to achieve, Morris approached Wardle, encouraging him to consider exploring indigo dyeing. At this stage, like Morris, Wardle had not visited India, or in fact anywhere in South Asia, but had a special interest in silk and had been importing Indian silk for his own work before his time working with Morris. Over the course of at least two years of close interaction in person and via letters, Morris and Wardle experimented with dyeing techniques in Leek. With Morris back in London, Wardle printed many of Morris's textiles, alongside other producers of Indian-inspired textiles popular during the late 19th century like Liberty & Co.

Wardle's sample books, now available digitally at The Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, document many of these early trials, capturing the deep, rich colours Morris and Wardle were able to achieve, and which demonstrate Morris's early excitement with the natural dyestuffs like indigo and madder.

Morris's textile designs were intended for upholstery, and so were largely printed on robust cotton rather than anything more delicate like silk. Despite this, in 1878 Wardle included Morris's patterns *Marigold, Larkspur, African Marigold* and *Honeysuckle* on silk in the India section of the Paris Exposition Universelle. The contribution of Wardle to this section demonstrates his increasing interest in Indian silk, and in what he saw as its commercial potential. It also demonstrates how appropriate Morris's patterns were deemed to be, placed within this 'Indian' collection.

Like Morris – and perhaps even more than Morris – Wardle had a keen interest in Indian textiles and processes and saw great potential in methods and materials from India as a means to revive the British silk industry. He was also involved in a detailed study of Indian natural dyes through the India Office, a copy of which was recently found with much excitement at the Botanical Survey of India. Through Wardle we can see a clear picture of Morris's exposure to South Asian textiles and theory.

William Morris in a smock
taken c.1876, PP1/Z521

> It is hardly worth while as an artist going into the history of this art in Europe; since whatever was really fine in it was little more than a literal copy of Indian or Persian originals; of which latter one may say that the peculiarities of the manufacture gave opportunities for special freedom of design and very beautiful colour, founded on the two most important dyeing drugs, madder and indigo.
>
> William Morris, *Textile Fabrics: A Lecture Delivered in the Lecture Room of the Exhibition*, London: William Clowes, 1884

Even as Morris's pattern designs developed and became less aesthetically influenced by Indian textiles, his interest in South Asian design continued. His interest took a sociological turn towards the people that produced it and the lessons that might be learned in Britain. As Morris began to lecture on textiles and pattern designing, he emphasised what he saw as the root of dyeing which, in his mind, lay in India 'a country of all others… fittest for following the art on account of its peculiar climate and its wealth of dyeing materials'.

UNDER-STANDING SOUTH ASIA

Morris addresses India directly through his writing and lectures on art and design and through his socialist writings in The Commonweal. When he does so Morris is actually referring to British India, a large and valuable region within the British Empire, covering much of what we now refer to as South Asia or the Indian subcontinent. It is important to remember then, that when Morris refers to India, he is referring not just to a country or region but encompassing the ever-present reach of the Empire.

Morris's writing on British India – and particularly on imperialism in the region – are fragmented. Nevertheless, a look at these fragments gives us a sense of where Morris's interest in South Asia lay and the ways in which he connected his admiration for South Asian art and crafts and socialism in the region.

ANTI-IMPERIALIST?

Was Morris an anti-imperialist? Though he had no trouble calling for home rule in Ireland, and taking aim at the colonial administrator Henry Morton Stanley's actions across Africa, Morris wrote surprisingly little about India in *The Commonweal*, the socialist journal he helped found. He never directly advocated for Indian independence, unlike his socialist contemporary Annie Besant, who would go on to join the Indian National Congress and help launch the Home Rule League. While Morris was ready with a strong critique of troops and tax collectors in India, and wrote critical notes on a broad range of issues from the Indian railways to colonial exhibitions, he was less vocal in his critique of other members of the imperial establishment in museums and arts institutions. In fact, while Morris displayed a sympathy for the 'common' Indian, he has some surprising companions in his broader approach to India.

> [India's] famous wares, so praised by those who thirty years ago began to attempt the restoration of popular art amongst ourselves, are no longer to be bought at reasonable prices in the common market, but must be sought for and treasured as precious relics for the museums we have founded for our art education. In short, their art is dead, and the commerce of modern civilisation has slain it.
>
> William Morris, *Art for the People,* Delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, 1879

Like Birdwood, Morris was quick to directly criticise what he saw as the destruction of arts and crafts in India attributing it to 'commerce of modern civilisation' – industry – and even more directly to 'ourselves' – British colonialism. But whilst vocal in his critique of the effects on Indian art, Morris provides little in terms of prescription for what to do in India. Whilst Morris clearly respected and admired Indian artisans for their craft and skill, he simply did not go far enough to imagine a role for, or agency of, the so-called 'conquered' and 'hopeless' South Asians themselves (Morris, *Art of the People*, 1879).

Opening page, *Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878: Handbook to the British India Section*
George C. M. Birdwood, London 1878

TIMELESS ARTS

Morris, like many of his contemporaries, imagined the Indian village as an 'authentic' India, a necessary venue for the achievement of the quality of Indian arts and crafts. Some writers have even gone as far as questioning what influence the idea and ideals of Indian village life had on *News from Nowhere*, Morris's utopian narrative. Indology – the increasingly popular academic study of India – saw the Indian village as the core of 'traditional' India, a place which best demonstrated India's past as living in its present. This is evident in the study of its art and crafts too, and the understanding of people like Birdwood and Morris that their idealised social structures of village life were at the root of the admired, if now apparently waning, Indian arts and crafts. A look at Birdwood's highly idealised village scene in his guide to the Paris Exhibition gives a little flavour of this:

> … in every Indian village all the traditional handicrafts are to be still found at work. Outside the entrance, on an exposed rise of ground, the hereditary potter sits by his wheel moulding the swift revolving clay by the natural curves of his hands. At the back of the houses, which form the low irregular street, there are two or three looms at work, in blue, and scarlet and gold, the frames hung between the acacia trees, the yellow flowers of which drop fast on the webs as they are being woven. In the street the brass and copper smiths are hammering away at their pots and pans; and further down, in the verandah of the rich man's house, is the jeweller working rupees and gold mohrs into fair jewelry, gold and silver earrings, and round tires like the moon, bracelets and tablets and nose rings, and tinkling ornaments for the feet, taking his designs from the fruits and flowers around him, or from the traditional forms represented in the paintings and carvings of the great temple, which rises over the grove of mangoes and palms at the end of the street above the lotus covered village tank. At half-past three or four in the afternoon, the whole street is lighted up by the moving robes of the women going down to draw water from the tank, each with two or three water jars on her head: and so going and returning in single file, the scene glows like Titian's canvas, and moves like the stately procession of the Panathenaic frieze. Later the men drive in the mild grey kine from the moaning jungle, the looms are folded up, the coppersmiths are silent the elders gather in the gate, the lights begin to glimmer in the fast-falling darkness, the feasting and the music begin, and the songs are sung late into the night from the Ramayana or Mahabharata. The next morning with sunrise, after their simple ablutions and adorations performed in the open air before their houses, the same day begins again. This is the daily life going on all over Western India in the village communities of the Deccan, among a people happy in their simple manners and frugal way of life, and in the culture derived from the grand epics of a religion in which they live and move and have their daily being, and in which the highest expression of their literature, art, and civilisation has been stereotyped for 2,000 years.
>
> George C. M. Birdwood, Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878: *Handbook to the British India Section,* Offices of the Royal Commission (London 1878)

The perceived destruction of arts and crafts in India was happening to what Morris and many saw as timeless art, unchanged and rooted in antiquity. In the relics of South Asia, which Morris suggested could now only be found in museums, Morris saw an authentic and traditional art 'founded on the truest and most natural principles'. His reading obscures the long history of foreign influences which had found their way into Indian art through trade. Morris' ideas are typical of a colonial, Orientalist approach to India in which the 'East's' past is seen to exist in its present, and in which colonial figures and institutions like the South Kensington Museum were able to step into the role of preserver and protector of these timeless arts. In this way, the British-inspired Arts and Crafts Movement's ideas, when applied to India, were patronisingly and paternalistically imperialistic. As historian Peter H. Hoffenberg explains, '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.' Morris-like critiques provided space for approaches to the preservation of Indian craft and ancient sites in which administrators of the Raj could position themselves as the saviours of timeless Indian cultural treasures.

Under European careful supervision the native Indian works beautifully. He cares more for patient manual labour and real handicraft traditional work than he does for progressive thought or invention, and it is not to be wondered at that it had been left to the quicker brain and the desire for development that characterises the people of the West, to produce results which find a readier market than his own unaided and unguided efforts can secure.

Thomas Wardle, *Empire of India, Special Catalogue of Exhibition by the Government of India and Private Exhibitions*, London, William Clowes, 1886

LEGACIES

Morris died in 1896 having never visited South Asia, but the impact of his thought and the larger Arts and Crafts Movement continued to have an impact in the region. The influence of Morrisean ideas is felt most strongly as art and design education developed from the late-19th and into the early 20th century. Alongside this, as the Indian Independence movement picked up steam, we see shared ideas around production as key Indian figures rethought the way local, small scale production might challenge Britain's rule in the region.

MORRISEAN CRITICISM

In the second half of the 19th century, colonial art schools in India mirrored those in Britain, often following lessons provided through the South Kensington Museum's Department of Science and Art, with classical casts acting as studies. In contrast, in the early 20th century, figures like John Lockwood Kipling, influenced by Morris's approach and the British Arts and Crafts Movement, began to actively promote education for artisans in India, hoping to preserve and nurture India's 'industrial arts'.

John Lockwood Kipling was the principal at the Mayo School of Arts, in Lahore, but was first exposed to Indian art and design during his time spent at the South Kensington Museum in London. Like Morris, he admired Indian ornament and craft, and, after arriving in India, was critical of the European art traditions which were being taught in colonial art schools, what he saw as the assimilation of

Three men from Amritsar jail working at a carpet loom, John Lockwood Kipling
drawn 1870, V&A Museum: 0929:33/(IS)

European influences in Indian work. Kipling's work in India is seen by many as a direct attempt to 'rectify' the trends which figures like Morris and Birdwood had identified years earlier.

While Kipling explored art education in India, the colonial administration in India also sought to respond to Morrisean criticism. Museum systems and new journals were promoted, but with outwardly more commercial intentions. Cultural and industrial exhibitions within India continued too, but by the early 20th century these began to take on a new focus. The Delhi Durbar exhibition of 1903, for example, can be seen as a clear reaction to Morris and Birdwood's type of criticism. The exhibition, organised by the Viceroy of India George Curzon, was a clear attempt to publically redeem Britain from its role in the 'destruction' of Indian art and crafts and protect a supposedly more authentic, un-Europeanised, Indian art (while at the same time promoting colonial commercial concerns).

Curzon's comments on the exhibition are worth reading in a little detail as they touch upon many of the criticisms that, several decades before, Morris and his contemporaries raised, and which figures in India like Kipling were now attempting to remedy:

> I would not have anything European or quasi-European in it. I declined to admit any of those horrible objects, such as lamps on gorgeous pedestals, coloured-glass lustres, or fantastic statuettes, that find such a surprising vogue among certain classes in this country, but that are bad anywhere in the world, and worst of all in India, which has an art of its own. I laid down that I wanted only the work that represented the ideas, the traditions, the instincts, and the beliefs of the people…
>
> Such is the general character of the Exhibition. But we have added to it something much more important. Conscious that taste is declining, and that many of our modern models are debased and bad, we have endeavoured to set up alongside the products of the present the standards and samples of the past. This is the meaning of the Loan Collection, which has a hall to itself, in which you will see many beautiful specimens of old Indian art ware, lent to us by the generosity of Indian chiefs and connoisseurs, some of it coming from our own Indian museums, and some from the unrivalled collection in the South Kensington Museum in London. Many of these objects are beautiful in themselves; but we hope that the Indian workmen who are here, and also the patrons who employ them, will study them not merely as objects of antiquarian or even artistic interest, but as supplying them fresh or rather resuscitated ideas which may be useful to them in inspiring their own work in the future. For this may be laid down as a truism, that Indian art will never be revived by borrowing foreign details, but only by fidelity to its own.
>
> And now I may be asked, What is the object of this Exhibition, and what good do I expect to result from it? I will answer in a very few words. In so far as the decline of the Indian arts represents the ascendency of commercialism, the superiority of steam power to hand power, the triumph of the test of utility over that of taste, then I have not much hope. We are witnessing in India only one aspect of a process that is going on throughout the world, that has long extinguished the old manual industries of England, and that is rapidly extinguishing those of China and Japan. Nothing can stop it. The power-loom will drive out the hand-loom, and the factory will get the better of the workshop, just as surely as the steam-car is superseding the horse-carriage, and as the hand-pulled punkah is being replaced by the electric fan. All that is inevitable, and in an age which wants things cheap and does not mind their being ugly, which cares a good deal for comfort and not much for beauty, and which is never happy unless it is deserting its own models and traditions, and running about in quest of something foreign and strange, we may be certain that a great many of the old arts and handicrafts are doomed.
>
> George Curzon, speech at the opening of the Delhi Durbar, 30 December, 1902

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY

The influence of Morris's thought can also be seen in the work of key early 20th century arts and crafts theorists like Ananda Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy – a Ceylonese Tamil metaphysician and historian of Indian Art – wrote *The Indian Craftsman*, and most directly applied the approach and thinking of Morris and his contemporaries to India, rooting ideas of the village craftsman firmly within an Indian and Ceylonese context, even quoting both Morris and Birdwood in his appendices.

Cover of *The Indian Craftsman*
Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, 1909
University of Toronto: archive.org

SWADESHI

Connections have also been drawn between the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement and idealisation of village level, handmade production, and the Swadeshi movement. The Swadeshi movement formed part of the Indian Independence Movement and championed the production of locally made Indian goods with local materials. The movement was championed by Gandhi, and though no evidence has been found that Gandhi read Morris, we do know that he read and was influenced by John Ruskin. Ruskin, a once-revered art critic, commented directly on Indian art and design and production, and was an altogether more conflicted admirer of India, not subtle in his racist commentary in texts like *The Two Paths* (1859) in which Indians represented both the 'wildest races' and 'lovers of art'. Morris was an early follower of Ruskin the two men both deeply admired and championed hand production.

The shared emphasis on hand production between the Swadeshi and Arts and Crafts Movement, are worth noting as they highlight equal ownership of ideas of handmade, communal and cottage production, which is often credited to Morris and his western contemporaries, especially in British-centric writing.

NOW

Morris has come to define the 'British' Arts and Crafts Movement and for many, Morris patterns and textiles are quintessentially British in aesthetic. Combined with Morris's socialism, this makes for one of the more comforting dead white men of Britain's cultural past. The incredible scope of his life and work has made for a compelling narrative, and since the mid-20th century we have seen increased writing on Morris, with more books, more exhibitions and more galleries dedicated to his life and work. More products too have entered the market, through gallery shops, heritage brands and mainstream high street shops.

We are also increasingly seeing artists, designers, curators and writers beginning to engage with the Morris legacy and ideas and challenge the perspectives these have been written from. Artist Shehzil Malik, notes being taught about William Morris in art school in Lahore. In her recent residency with Rabbit Road Press, she created a wallpaper that wove together elements of Morris pattern design with motifs from Persian and Arabic manuscripts. British artist David Mabb's project *Morris and Jaipur* continued his ongoing exploration into Morris's work, and in this project particularly his patterns, (re)transposed onto Indian fabrics. Most recently Indian artist Vasundhara Sellamuthu's project began with the Morrisism 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful,' and collected reflections on home during the lockdown. These were then etched onto the Indian story box form, the *kavad*, reimagining this narrative storytelling tradition as a platform for concrete poetry.

Such contemporary responses challenge a sense of ownership of the Morris narrative and open it up for new perspectives and further research into areas as yet unexplored. Such work, when placed in cultural spaces and institutions like museums, are critical at a moment when we are finally questioning who our museums and galleries are really for.

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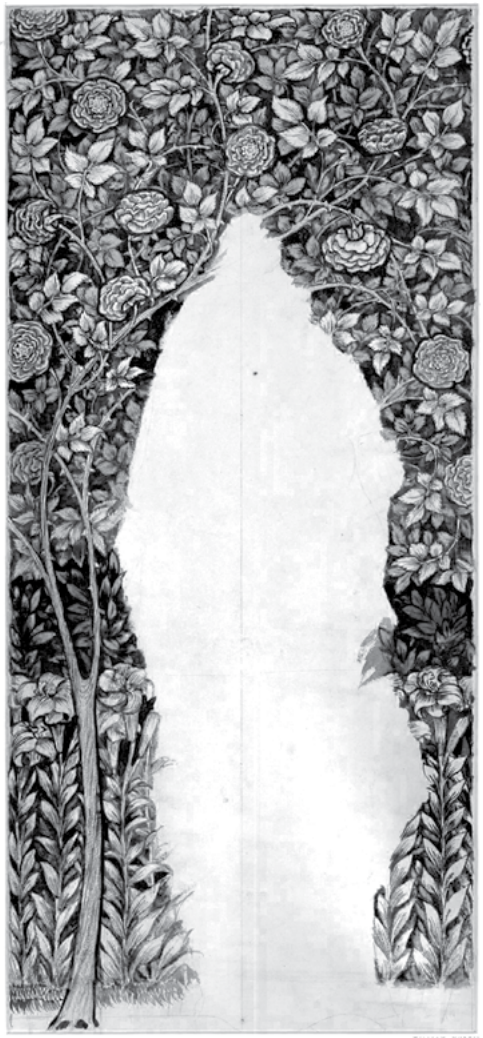

Design for the background of windows, by William Morris
Brush drawing in brown wash, over graphite, 1834–1896. © The Trustees of the British Museum, 1940,1012.11

Initial sketch during Studio Carrom's residency at the William Morris Gallery
Priya Sundram

All collection archival images
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Distant Fellowship was an exhibition held at
the William Morris Gallery from 25th May to
19th September, 2021. For more information visit

wmgallery.org.uk

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Fanny Harrison-Banfield & Pam Hookey

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