

The Kelmscott Private Press

William Morris and Design

By Amanda Robin HEMMONS



Image source: Wikimedia

William Morris

Born in Essex, England in 1834, William Morris was the eldest boy of nine children and named for his father. William Morris Sr. was a successful businessman who made his fortune as a financier. When he passed away when Morris was young, the ownership of a nearby copper mine was able to support the family and allow several of the children to attend college.

As a child, Morris displayed a keen interest in literature and the arts. He developed a great love of reading and immersed himself in a wide range of literature, including medieval romances and ancient myths. It was during his school years at Marlborough College he encountered Old Norse as well as Scandinavian sagas and Arthurian legends, which captivated his imagination. It isn't a stretch to assume that these stories of gods, heroes, and epic battles provided a mental escape for Morris and ultimately sparked a lifelong passion for mythology. These early influences would later shape his artistic and literary pursuits.

He went on to study classics at Exeter College, Oxford and it was during his time there that Morris became involved with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Founded in the mid 19th century, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of English painters, poets, and art critics who sought to revive the spirit and techniques of medieval art.

As an adult, Morris was a polymath with diverse interests, including literature, poetry, design, and social activism.

In 1861 he created, in partnership with Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Charles Faulkner, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, P. P. Marshall, and Philip Webb, a firm whose focus was on medieval-inspired, handcrafted items for the home. *Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.*, "Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture and the Metals" did everything from wood carving, stained glass, metal-work, paper-hangings, to printed fabric and carpets.

The company was dissolved in 1874 and reorganized under Morris's sole ownership as *Morris & Co.* in 1875. To continue the trend of his diverse interests, Morris took up the practical art of dyeing to the point where he revived several old methods as well as discovered new ones. Until nearly the end of the decade, his focus was on the production of textiles and carpet-weaving as a fine art. The transition to tapestry weaving in the medieval style in 1879 was natural, and his preference for Arthurian legend as a design scheme was a staple of *Morris & Co.*

In the 1880s, Morris's interests shifted from production to other things like politics. By the 1890s, his daughter, May Morris, was the director of the embroidery department and his apprentice, John Henry Dearle, was head designer. In 1891, Morris turned his attention to books with the founding of the *Kelmscott Press*. In keeping with his preference for medieval methods, each book was designed and ornamented by Morris and printed by hand.

While the *Kelmscott Press* would close shortly after Morris's death, *Morris & Co.* would continue on, being renamed *Morris & Co. Decorators Ltd.* in 1905 before finally being dissolved in early WWII.

Traditional Production Methods

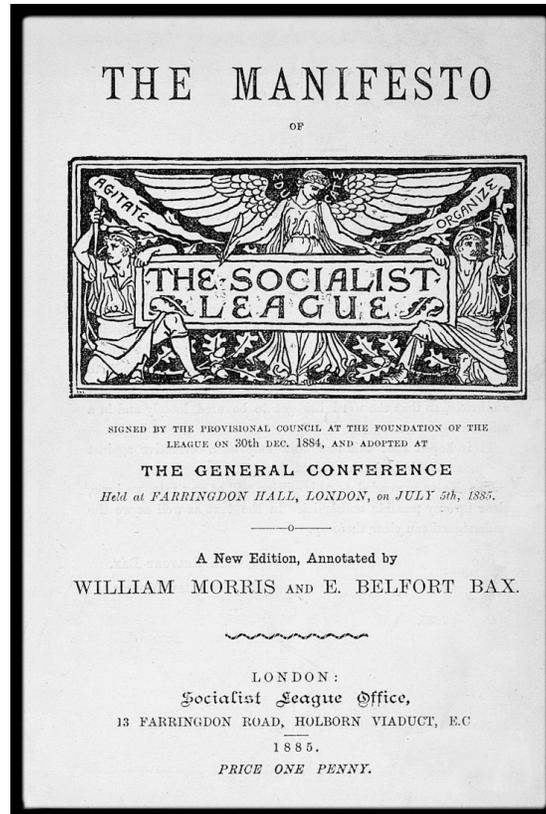
During the Middle Ages, production was characterized by localized and labor-intensive methods. Craftsmen and artisans played a central role in creating goods, utilizing techniques that had often been passed down through generations. These traditional methods were deeply rooted in local communities and relied on a close connection between producer and consumer. Whether it was blacksmiths forging tools, weavers creating textiles, or potters shaping pottery, the process was meticulous and hands-on.

One of the defining features of medieval production was the lack of standardization. Each item was unique, reflecting the skill and creativity of the individual artisan. This personalized touch, however, came at a cost – the production rates were slow and couldn't keep up with the rising demands of growing populations. Additionally, the limited geographical reach of these craftspeople meant that goods were often scarce or unavailable in distant regions.

The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century brought about a seismic change in production methods. The invention of machinery, powered by water, steam, and later electricity, revolutionized the manufacturing process. This era saw the rise of factories, where goods could be produced on an unprecedented scale. Unlike the Middle Ages, where a skilled artisan could only produce a limited number of items, factories could churn out identical products at a much faster rate.

Identical, but soulless, as William Morris and his fellow artisans would say. Along with the rise of industrialization in the 19th century, there was a backlash against those machine-made, mass-manufactured goods. Furthermore, the rapid urbanization driven by industrialization led to the rise of factory work, often characterized by harsh conditions and long hours. This sparked social and labor movements advocating for workers' rights and better working conditions, as people grappled with the challenges and complexities of this new economic landscape.

Little wonder, then, that Morris was a card-carrying member of the Socialist League in the UK.



Source: Wikimedia

The Kelmscott Press

Morris had an interest in books long before he founded the *Kelmscott Press*. We know from letters exchanged that he was a frequent visitor to the Bodleian Library to admire the illuminated manuscripts there. In 1870, he designed and illuminated his own anthology of poetry, *A Book of Verse*. Not content with being merely an artist, a craftsman, a designer, a poet, and a businessman, he then decided to add novelist to the pile. *The House of Wolfings* was published by Reeves and Turner in 1889, and its successor, *The Roots of the Mountains*, in 1890, and tells a historical fantasy tale of a Germanic tribe with a war-leader who is more than human.

The appeal for publishing books himself, on a larger scale than one or two handmade ones, seems to have come from Emery Walker, a book collector who was Morris' neighbor. Walker gave lectures in 1888 that were sponsored by the Arts and Crafts Society and focused on letterpress printing, bookbinding, and illustration. Walker was one of many authors and book collectors who disapproved of the modern rotary presses that made books of poor quality because the focus was on speed and cost-effectiveness.

William Morris rose to the challenge, starting by renting a cottage near Kelmscott Manor, his home in Oxfordshire and the namesake for the printing press. The *Kelmscott Press* produced

exquisitely designed and meticulously crafted books, often incorporating intricate typography, woodcut illustrations, and handmade paper. Morris's dedication to quality and aesthetics, reminiscent of medieval craftsmanship, left a lasting impact on the world of printing and design. He didn't completely reject modern innovations, however. While each book was hand pressed, Morris preferred the iron presses of the 19th century over the wooden ones of the medieval era. The iron presses worked with damp or dry paper and allowed for crisper edges.

Kelmscott Press printed in a variety of sizes. Its folio edition of the complete works of Chaucer, including many wood engraving, is one of the most well known books produced there. However, the majority of the books printed were simpler octavos without illustration. These paid the bills, so to speak, so Morris could spend time on more complex designs. Even the books without ornamentation were notable for their wide margins and text placement close to the book's spine, similar in style to medieval books.

The first book printed by the *Kelmscott Press* was *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, by Morris himself. In the same vein as his earlier books, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, it was to some degree a historical novel with fantasy elements. It was set in a world similar to the distant past of northern Europe. It was published in 1891 and almost immediately sold out.

The *Kelmscott Press* published 23 of Morris's books, more than that of any other author, unsurprisingly. In addition to Morris's work, the press also printed editions of modern poetry as well as medieval poetry and romances. It also published works by the popular writers Keats, Shelley, Ruskin, and Swinburne. In 1895 *Kelmscott* even printed an American edition of *Hand and Soul* by Dante Rossetti, to be distributed by *Way and Williams Publishers*.

The one book that *Kelmscott* is likely best known for, however, is considered to be the *Kelmscott Chaucer*. It is based on Walter William Skeat's edition of the complete Chaucer. Morris designed the title, 14 large borders, 18 frames for illustrations, and 26 large initials specifically for the *Chaucer*, and it contains 87 wood engravings of drawings by Edward Burne-Jones. There were a number of delays and setbacks, plus Morris's own ill-health, but it finally went to print in the summer of 1894. Morris sold them for 20 pounds each, except for 13 copies printed on vellum that were sold for 120 guineas. While 20 pounds in those days was quite a sum of money, the *Kelmscott Chaucer* was still not profitable considering the amount of work put into it. However, Morris was able to subsidize the *Chaucer* by the profits from other books. And while it may not have been financially profitable, critical response to the *Kelmscott Chaucer* was extremely positive.

When Morris died in 1896, Walker and Sydney Cockerell, the *Kelmscott Press*'s administrator, finished the last five volumes of *The Earthly Paradise* and ten other titles. Some had already been started or were in planning stages at the time of Morris's death, but they sadly lacked the decorations that Morris usually created for *Kelmscott* books.

After the closing of the *Kelmscott Press* shortly after Morris's death, leftover paper and the type fonts were given to the *Chiswick Press*. After that, the *Kelmscott* types were sold to *Cambridge University Press* in 1940 and eventually made part of the Cambridge University Library. Around the same time, ornaments and other woodblocks were given to the British Museum while the presses and accompanying equipment were sold to C. R. Ashbee's *Essex House Press*.

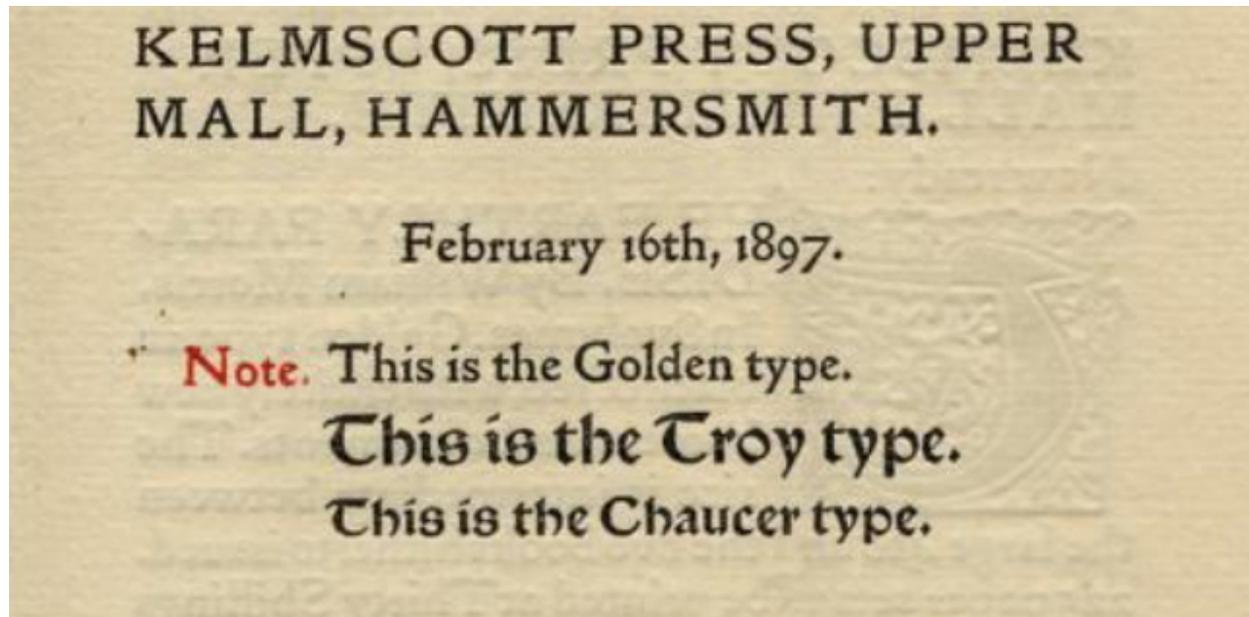
Morris Typefaces

In his quest to produce books that were not just vessels for text, but objects of beauty in their own right, Morris worked with Walker to create typefaces for printing that were reminiscent of medieval fonts and strongly influenced by Nicolas Jensen's work.

Morris' first font, *Golden Type*, was started in 1889, years before he opened the *Kelmscott Press*. In another example of using modern technology to drive traditional methods, Walker took photos of Pliny's *Historicae naturalis* published by Nicolas Jenson at a large scale. This allowed Morris to more easily familiarize himself with Jensen's technique and then pioneer his own, similar one. In turn, Walker took photos of Morris' large scale letter designs, reproducing them in the correct scale. They had the typeface cut in 1890 by Edward Prince, who had done similar work for other fine presses. Sir Charles Reed and Sons carried out the casting, leading the font to be completed before the spring of 1891. *Golden Type* was designed to be a 14-point size, and was never accompanied by an additional italic or bold version.

Troy was Morris' next typeface and maintained Morris' preference for elegant shapes while being inspired by the Gothic styles of font popular in medieval books. It was also more readable than most Gothic fonts, and designed at 18-point size.

For the complete works of Chaucer, also called the *Kelmscott Chaucer*, Morris specifically created a version of *Troy* that was a smaller size at 12-point. This typeface was named *Chaucer* after the book it was designed for.



Source: Wikimedia

By the mid 1890s, photoengraving– the technique that Walker and Morris pioneered to analyze and create unique typefaces– made it easy for less creative entrepreneurs to copy the designs and sell pirated typefaces.

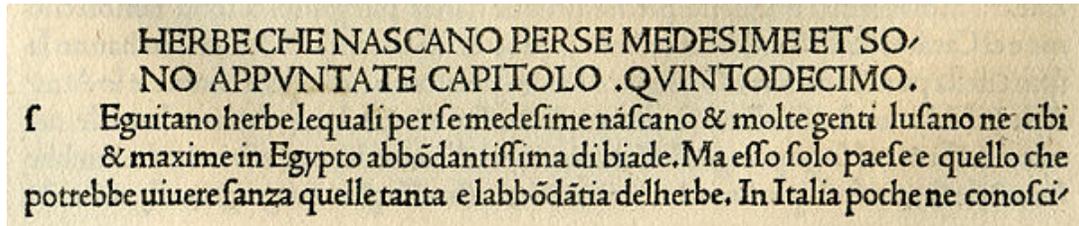
Nicolas Jensen in the 15th Century

While he had his own interest in medieval methods, Morris was influenced by Walker's preference for 15th century book design. Nicholas Jensen in particular was pointed out as being an engraver who designed types that were beautiful and dignified.

Born in 1420, Nicholas Jensen was a French artisan but spent most of his career in Italy. Active in Venice during the incipient years of the printing press, Jensen's innovations left an indelible mark on the world of typography. He opened a printing shop in Venice in 1470 and was that rare businessman who was prolific, prodigious, and well-respected. By 1477 he could run as many as twelve presses simultaneously! Scholars also speculate that he had training as a goldsmith before turning his attention to printing, and that gave him a sculptural ability to carve beautiful letters.

His most notable achievement was the creation of the first Roman typeface, often referred to as "Jenson's Roman." Drawing inspiration from the letterforms found in ancient Roman inscriptions and manuscripts, Jensen meticulously designed a typeface that balanced elegance, legibility, and a sense of proportion. You can trace the history of typography through them, from the littera antica of Aldus Manutius that likely inspired Jensen to the Carolingian minuscules that in turn inspired the littera antica.

Jenson's Roman typeface departed from the prevalent Gothic scripts of the time, setting a new standard for the appearance of printed texts. Its clear, upright letterforms became a hallmark of early Renaissance printing, influencing subsequent generations of typographers and designers, like William Morris and Emery Walker.



Capitals of Nicolas Jenson's roman typeface, Source: Wikimedia.

Bibliography

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Nicolas Jenson". Encyclopedia Britannica, 1 Jan. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicolas-Jenson>. Accessed 21 May 2023.

"FONT DESIGNER – NICOLAUS JENSON." Linotype, <https://www.linotype.com/731/nicolaus-jenson.html>, Accessed 21 May 2023.

MacCarthy, Fiona. William Morris: A Life for Our Time, Faber & Faber, 1994, London.

"OXFORD AND THE PRE-RAPHAELITES' STORY." *Ashmolean*, University of Oxford, <https://www.ashmolean.org/article/oxford-and-the-pre-raphaelites>, Accessed 19 May 2023.

Peterson, William S. The Kelmscott Press, University of California Press, 1991.

"The Tale Saith: Morris as Translator." *Hornbake Library Exhibitions*, University of Maryland, <https://exhibitions.lib.umd.edu/williammorris/morris-as-translator>, Accessed 21 May 2023.

"William Morris: an ode to the revolutionary activist of Arts & Crafts." Typeroom, 24 March 2020, <https://www.typeroom.eu/william-morris-an-ode-to-the-revolutionary-artist-of-arts-and-crafts>, Accessed 20 May 2023.

"William Morris Initiates the Arts & Crafts Press Movement." *Designhistory.org*. http://www.designhistory.org/Arts_Crafts_pages/Morris.html, Accessed 21 May 2023.