

William Morris' 'New and Lighter Design'

by K. L. Goodwin

FOR OVER a century, error, misunderstanding, and controversy have surrounded the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. Their cabalistic beginnings and brash self-confidence invited opposition; their flair for self-advertisement encouraged the creation of legends; and legends came to be accepted as fact. One of the oldest and most involved controversies concerns the decoration of the Oxford Union debating hall. The decoration was begun without official sanction during the long vacation of 1857; it excited a good deal of derision when finally displayed; it was never finished; the history of its origins became hopelessly confused within a dozen years of its commencement; its obliteration has been seriously considered more than once; and attempts to raise funds for its renovation were defeated in the early 1870s and were barely successful in 1935-6.

Most attention has been given to the wall-paintings, inspired by Rossetti and painted by him, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, Arthur Hughes, Val Prinsep, John Hungerford Pollen, Spencer Stanhope, and, without Rossetti's approval, William Rivière. Since the cleaning of 1935-6, however, the roof-painting has attracted much attention, chiefly because it is in a better state of preservation than the wall-paintings and can therefore be appreciated more readily. Yet even to the present day a misconception about the painting of the roof is accepted as fact; and once accepted it gives rise to all kinds of speculative, but unsoundly based, theories. The misconception takes one of two forms: either that the roof as it is now visible was designed and painted at the same time as the wall-paintings; or that it was designed and painted then, but refurbished in 1875. The cruder belief, which assumes that the design now visible was painted in 1857, is stated or implied in such standard sources as Holman Hunt's *The Story of the Painting of the Pictures on the Walls and the Decorations on the Ceiling of the Old Debating Hall*

(*now the Library*) in the Years 1857-8-9 (London, 1906), Herbert Arthur Morrah's *The Oxford Union: 1823-1923* (London, 1923), and the publicity associated with the appeal for funds in 1935-6. The letter to *The Times* opening the appeal on 17 May 1935 contained, in fact, an even more egregious blunder; it stated:

The painting of the roof undertaken by William Morris proves to have undergone little change. The cleaning of a portion shows that the ground, on which a repeating pattern is painted, was originally a radiant white which can now be recovered. The painted roof is a superb example of Morris's art, astonishing when we consider that it was done while Morris was still an undergraduate.

As Mr Loraine Conran pointed out in a letter that was printed, in part, in *The Times* of 23 May 1935, Morris had graduated over a year before the paintings were begun. Mr Conran also pointed out that 'The roof was re-decorated by him [i.e. Morris] in 1875.' This was a reference to a more nearly correct version of events stemming from the account of the painting of the Union in J. W. Mackail's standard biography, *The Life of William Morris* (2 vols., London, 1899). In discussing the various schemes suggested between 1869 and 1874 for cleaning and repairing all the paintings, Mackail stated that 'The redecoration of the roof, which was carried out by Morris in 1875, left the wall-paintings below untouched...' (I, 125). It is not easy to know what Mackail intended by this statement; later writers relying on Mackail certainly assumed that what happened in 1875 was that the original design of 1857 was repainted. H. C. Marillier, for instance, in his *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of his Art and Life* (London, 1899) referred the reader for a fuller account of the paintings to Mackail, and offered the condensed statement: 'The roof alone, which was re-decorated in 1875, remains a success, and a tribute to the genius of William Morris, whose design for it – almost his first work of the kind – was done in a single day and carried out with customary vehemence and energy' (p. 91). Now Mackail had referred to the original design of 1857 as having been made 'in a single day' (*Life*, I, 120), so Marillier obviously assumed that it was this design that 'remains a success'. (Actually it would not be surprising if the design now visible had been made in a day; both the plaster and the timber are decorated with a small number of patterns that are simply repeated as many times as the space to

be filled requires.) Another writer who seems to interpret Mackail in this way is Sir William Rothenstein. He was chiefly responsible for securing the services of Professor E. W. Tristram to restore the wall-paintings and the roof in 1935-6, and he probably composed the first appeal letter to *The Times*. This letter was re-issued as a pamphlet without the corrections suggested by Mr Conran. But Rothenstein no doubt read Mr Conran's letter, for in volume III of his memoirs, *Since Fifty: Men and Memories, 1922-1938* (London, 1939), he substituted a statement about Morris' age in 1857 for the incorrect statement in the letter about his being an undergraduate. Yet he still did not mention the 're-decoration' of 1875, and presumably took Mr Conran's words to mean that the original design was simply repainted then. He wrote: 'I was surprised to find how completely Morris was himself at this early age; he was but twenty-three when he painted the roof, yet already the kind of design we associate with Morris was thoroughly worked out, not on the roof only, but on the supporting wood work' (p. 215). To judge from a letter quoted by Rothenstein (p. 215), even Morris' daughter, May, was under the misapprehension that what had been cleaned in 1936 was the design of 1857.

It is, in fact, not the least surprising that the design as visible now displays Morris at his maturest and best. It dates from the same time as his designs for the drawing room of the Hon. George Howard at 1 Palace Green, London (some of the drawings for which are now in the collection of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow), the nave-roof of Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge, the 'Anemone' woven damask, the 'Larkspur' and 'Acanthus' wallpapers, and the Homer and Virgil illuminated manuscripts.

A correct, if very brief, account of the origin of the design executed in 1875 appears in a broadsheet prepared by the Oxford Union Society for the English Education Exhibition of January 1900. The substance of this broadsheet was later used in the descriptive pamphlet, *The Oxford Union Society* (1907), which is still regularly reprinted, virtually unchanged, in the *Rules & Regulations of the Oxford Union Society*. In one of the Bodleian Library copies of the broadsheet, authorship is attributed to the Rev. T. H. Grose, who was at the time Registrar of the University and Senior Treasurer of the Union. The statement about the ceiling reads: 'in 1874 W. Morris kindly gave a design for repainting the ceiling - which was carried out'.

This account, in one of its many printed forms, must have been available to Morrah when he was writing the centenary history of the Union. By some mischance he seems to have overlooked it, or at least to have failed to realize its significance. Even more unaccountably, he seems to have ignored the many references in the minutes of the Union to the negotiations with Morris over the re-decoration of 1875. The Fresco Committee appointed on 19 February 1874 presented their 'First Report' on 12 November of the same year to a public business meeting of the Union. They reported that in their discussions with Morris about the state of the wall-paintings,

Mr. Morris further called attention to the very unsatisfactory condition of the decoration of the roof, in which he took a special interest as it was in great part his own work. He pointed out that restoration was impossible, as the work could not be restored to its original colour and brightness unless it were entirely repainted; but, if it were thought desirable to repaint it, he suggested that a new and lighter design might be adopted, and he very kindly said that he would prepare such a design gratuitously if the Society cared to go to the expense of having it executed...

In the Committee's 'Second Report', presented to a private business meeting on 9 March 1875, they recommended that not more than £120 should be spent in carrying out Morris' design for the roof. A decision on the matter was deferred after some opposition had been expressed. One of the most persuasive points against accepting the recommendation was made by H. H. Asquith, who said he 'believed the architect of the room had wished neutral tints to be placed in the roof'. But the deferment was only temporary. At a special private business meeting of 13 May 1875, a joint report of the Fresco and the Standing Committees, recommending that Morris' scheme be carried out, was adopted. F. R. Leach was engaged to carry out the design, 'taking the roof as you found it, for the sum of £75, & [completing] the work within two months'.¹ The matter came to an end with the adoption, on 25 November 1875, at a public business meeting of the Union of the 'Fresco Committee's Final Report';

¹ Letter from Alfred Milner, Treasurer of the Union, 26 May 1875, in the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, J 596. I am indebted to the William Morris Gallery for permission to inspect and reproduce documents in its possession and to the former Senior Assistant, Mr Lionel Lambourne, and his staff for unfailing helpfulness.

the report expressed the opinion that 'the satisfactory result must be largely attributed to Mr. Morris's personal supervision of the work', and asked the house to pass a motion thanking him 'for the time and trouble he devoted to the perfect execution of the plans, which he had so generously presented to the Society'.

This 'new and lighter design' was the one discovered under the accumulated dirt of sixty years by Professor Tristram and Sir William Rothenstein. As the appeal letter to *The Times* described it, 'The cleaning of a portion shows that the ground, on which a repeating pattern is painted, was originally a radiant white which can now be recovered.'

The original design of 1857 seems, however, to be permanently lost. A section of the roof fell to the floor in December 1964,² and close examination of it shows that, under the currently visible design, the plaster holds traces of the previous painting in patches of brown, russet, and black. As the surface painting is, however, impervious to infra-red rays, the prospect of recovering the original design from a sufficiently large section of the roof is very slight. The sketch or sketches for it seem not to have been preserved, so that to gain any idea of what it was like one must rely on literary evidence.

As Morris said in 1874, the design was 'in great part his own work'. The first of the Union's two Fresco Committees, which was set up on 27 April 1869, stated in its Report (presented to a private business meeting on 24 October 1871) that 'The decoration of the ceiling was designed by Mr. William Morris and his friend, Mr. Swan, and was executed by those artists with the assistance (as we learn from a Latin inscription on one of the rafters), of Mr. Tyrwhitt, of Christ Church, and Mr. Faulkner, of University' (p. 4). C. J. Faulkner (at the time of the original painting a Fellow of University College, and later to be a partner in the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company) also, apparently, had some hand in the design, for Edward Burne-Jones, in a letter of October 1857, wrote that 'Charley comes out tremendously strong on the roof with all kinds of quaint beasts

² Some of the pieces were preserved, and I am indebted to the Steward of the Oxford Union Society, Mr Leslie Crawte, to the Senior Library Clerk, Mr Raymond Waters, and to the Union Architect, Major T. W. Knight, for help in locating them, and for permission to examine and photograph them. Mr Crawte and Mr Waters also gave me assistance in locating Union records, extracts from which are printed by permission of the Oxford Union Society.

and birds.³ It would seem as if Morris designed only the general effect and outline, including the rafter pattern, and left the filling up of the plaster panels partly at least to the whim of the individual painters. Arthur Hughes told Mackail that 'In the decoration of the roof they would put little figures of WM astraddle like Henry VIII instead of flowers up in the dark angles at the ends of the roof.'⁴ One other person who helped with the execution of the design was Cornell Price (later head-master of Westward Ho!), who recorded in his diary for 1857:

Oct. 24. Spent afternoon in daubing in black lines on the Union roof for Topsy.

Oct. 31. Stippled and blacklined at Union.⁵

Rossetti, the prime mover in the scheme for decorating the debating hall, described the ceiling as 'covered with a vast pattern-work of grotesque creatures by Morris, assisted by amateur workmen who offered on all hands, chiefly university men who stayed in Oxford that "Long" for the purpose'.⁶ One might expect that the designs for the 'grotesque creatures', whether designed by Morris, Faulkner, or Swan, were influenced by the illuminated manuscripts that Morris, at least, spent much time examining in the Bodleian and the British Museum. One might also expect that if Morris had been responsible in the long vacation of the previous year for painting the beam in what is now Room 3, 'Drawda Hall', 33 High Street, Oxford,⁷ the dragon design used there could easily have been adapted for the Union roof. Apart from these speculations, however, one fairly extensive contemporary description provides evidence for the nature of the design. It occurs in a satirical squib, written and published towards the end of 1857 by someone who had managed to gain a preview of the unfinished decorations in the debating hall. After an amusing, but highly uncomplimentary

³ Quoted by J. W. Mackail in *The Life of William Morris*, I. 120.

⁴ J. W. Mackail's first note-book for *The Life of William Morris*, the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, J 163, p. 88; see also *Life*, I. 127.

⁵ Mackail, *Life*, I. 120.

⁶ Letter to Alexander Gilchrist, June 1861, Bodleian MS. Top. Oxon. d. 144 (2), fol. 6a; reprinted in *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, Oxford, 1965, II. 406.

⁷ See Edward A. Tunstall and Antony Kerr, 'The Painted Room at The Queen's College, Oxford', *The Burlington Magazine*, LXXXII (February 1943), 42-47.

description of the wall-paintings and suggestions for filling in the remaining bays, the author turned to the ceiling:

It is almost unnecessary for us to call the attention of visitors to the elaborate appearance of the roof, which we believe to be a representation of that conglomeration of various animals generally known as the "Happy Family."

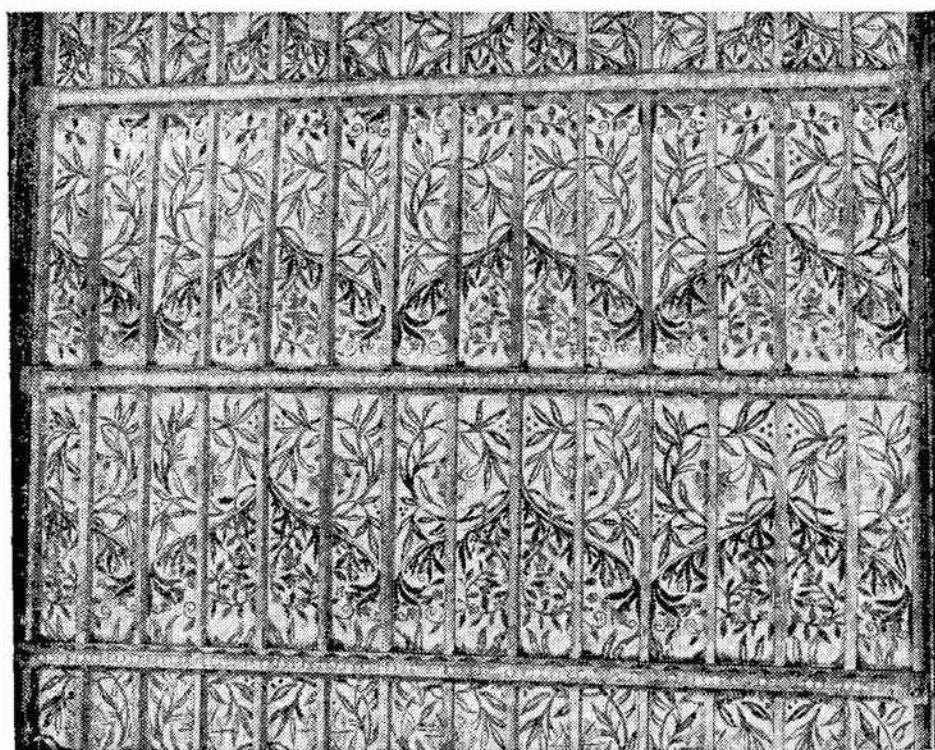
Here gleams the dragon in the air, there roams along a dancing bear; here crocodiles in scaly coats make love to birds with purple throats; and there in vests of brightest green rhinoceroses large are seen; while winking with their weather eye, roll round red hippopotami; and kindly lent in great variety by the Entomological society blue bees, which honeyed words their trade is, pay court to gray opossum ladies, where mammoth beasts with mammoth wants are kindly fed by ring-tailed ants, while unaccoutred peacocks sing, Mr. B. proffers honey but bears a sting; a black-legged beetle on the turf, a ship-wrecked p(h)easant on the surf (serf), a female-blue-without a book, and "à la Mr. T. P. Cooke," a British lion, and Houndsditch beagle hobnobbing with a Russian eagle, or perched on wings of yellow hue, with eyes of pink, and teeth of blue, protectress of the Union's byrth, a Circe soars 'twixt heaven, and earth; and all this varied exhibition of animals in good condition, thanks to our postal expedition, you have *sans* Treasurer's permission.

This passage occurs on pages 5-6 of the pamphlet, *A Peep at the Pictures, and a Catalogue of the Principal Objects of Attraction in the Room of the Oxford Union Society; being an explanation of the gallery of painting, shortly to be opened to the public, with hints for designs suitable to the spaces as yet unoccupied*. The title was borrowed from a solemn little pamphlet, *A Peep at the Pictures; or, a Catalogue of the Principal Objects of Attraction in the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition . . .*, one of the many guide-books to the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, held earlier in the year. The style of the Oxford pamphlet was in part a parody of the Manchester one; its author had also apparently seen another of the Manchester pamphlets, a satirical attack on the Pre-Raphaelites by one of the superintendents of the Exhibition, John Burley Waring. This pamphlet, *Poems inspired by Certain Pictures at the Art Treasures Exhibition, Manchester, by Tennyson Longfellow Smith, of Cripplegate Within . . .*, was 'Dedicated, with profound admiration and awe, to that greatest of modern poets, philosophers, artists, art-critics, and authors, the immortal Buskin'. This method of referring to John Ruskin as 'Mr. Buskin' or 'Mr. B.' was taken up by the author of the Oxford pamphlet. Most other references are self-explanatory. 'Mr. T. P. Cooke' is a

reference to the nineteenth-century melodrama actor, famous for his interpretation of blatantly chauvinistic and imperialistic roles; in 1857 he was especially prominent on the London stage, appearing as Harry Halyard in a revival of J. T. Haine's *My Poll and my Partner Joe* at the *Adelphi* and starring at the (*New*) *Standard* in October, shortly before this pamphlet was written. 'Sans Treasurer's permission' refers to the fact that, as the Treasurer of the Union explained on 25 October 1857, the project for decorating the debating hall had been allowed to begin by the architect, Benjamin Woodward, without specific authorization from the Union.

One other opinion of the Union roof is worth quoting. On 29 December 1857, after the roof design had been completed, Ruskin wrote to William Michael Rossetti that the roof was '*not* satisfactory – clever but not right'.⁸ Perhaps Ruskin, too, thought that it should have been decorated 'in neutral tints'.

⁸ Printed in *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism: Papers 1854 to 1862*, ed. W. M. Rossetti, London, 1899, p. 193.



Ceiling of the Old Library, Oxford Union Society (photographed 1968)