

A Call to Art: William Morris & the Pre-Raphaelites
23 October 2026 – 3 May 2027



William Morris, *La Belle Iseult*, 1858, Oil paint on canvas, © Tate

William Morris was one of the great visionaries in the history of art, changing attitudes to art, design and making forever, both in Britain and beyond. A major new exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, *A Call to Art: William Morris & the Pre-Raphaelites* (23 October 2026 – 3 May 2027) will re-examine Morris and his circle – including artists and designers Kate Faulkner, May Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal. It will examine their radical quest to change society by transforming ideas of beauty, and how we might live better, through their romantic interpretation of the past and their idealistic vision of the future. Morris's belief in the power of art and nature as antidotes to industrialisation, pollution, and mass production anticipated many of today's concerns – not least the desire to find value and joy in creative, dignified, and collaborative work.

Through a wide selection of both well-known and rarely seen paintings, designs, and art objects, drawn from the Fitzwilliam's collection, along with key loans from major UK institutions including the William Morris Gallery, Society of Antiquaries, Tate, V&A and the National Portrait Gallery, this exhibition will explore how and why Morris and his circle looked backward in time to reimagine a new future – and how, in our own digital age, their ideals, challenges, and contradictions feel newly relevant. Highlights will include a focus on women artists and designers, including Faulkner and Siddal, revealing through new research how their endeavours showed other women how they too could make roles for themselves in this field.

William Morris and his peers were sceptical of modern civilisation and found deep inspiration in art, craftsmanship and stories from the medieval past. The first section of the exhibition will introduce the varied sources that inspired Morris's work, ranging from Morris's own childhood memories and tales of knights and chivalry, to Dürer prints of the kind he had in his own home, Ruskin's watercolour studies and Morris's own marked-up copy of Ruskin's influential text *The Nature of Gothic*.

Morris was deeply influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite art movement, which challenged the dominant artistic conventions of its time, rejecting academic, formulaic art in favour of intense colours, intricate detail, and "truth to nature" inspired by pre-Renaissance, medieval art. Like Morris, the Pre-Raphaelites believed that art should be beautiful, meaningful, and socially engaged with issues of class and gender. Embracing its ideals, he collaborated closely with Pre-Raphaelite artists and extended their principles into the decorative arts, helping to redefine craftsmanship and design.

The second section of the exhibition will introduce the artists in Morris's circle including Rossetti, Burne-Jones, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, bringing together their paintings of individual figures to look at how the Pre-Raphaelites created new standards of beauty drawn from real life, rejecting idealised images, pushing back against gender norms and traditional artistic practice.

From 1860, Morris and his wife, Jane Burden, an embroiderer and model, moved to Red House in Bexleyheath, co-designed with the architect Philip Webb in 1859. Morris conceived Red House as a 'palace of art' surrounded by an integral garden. He decorated it together with his family and friends, inspired by a love of medieval literature and art. This section will bring together the wallpaper, furniture, tapestries and designs that decorated the home, as well as some of the artworks it housed. It will also look at Red House as a social and artistic hub for the Morrises and their circle, introducing the artists and models through a series of portraits. A spotlight on Elizabeth Siddal, model and muse to members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,

will represent her as a significant artist in her own right with important works from the Fitzwilliam's own collection.

Following the success of Red House, in 1861 the partnership Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (1861–1875) was founded to provide artist-designed furnishings for homes and churches, challenging the “costly rubbish” of the time. In 1875, it became Morris & Co. The exhibition will feature key examples of works produced by the Firm including painted tiles, early wallpaper patterns, furniture and tapestry. Morris & Co.'s commissions to design and decorate interiors for significant sites in Cambridge including Jesus College chapel, Queens' College dining hall, and a new wing of Peterhouse will be explored in this section, as well as a spotlight on the integral role of women artists and designers. One of the Firm's most successful areas of production was embroidery, first managed by Jane Morris and her sister Elizabeth Burden, and then May Morris. For the first time in any exhibition, this section celebrates the work of Kate Faulkner, the under-acknowledged designer and contributor to the Firm. Faulkner worked alongside William Morris as a designer, maker and workshop supervisor, and independently sold her designs for wallpapers to other manufacturers, earning her an international reputation. She embroidered figurative panels to Morris's design, cut woodblocks for engravings, helped with the design and production of carpets, as well as painted tiles, and was the first person, after William Morris, to design patterns for textiles and wallpapers for Morris & Co. Faulkner created at least eight patterns for the Firm including *Carnation* c.1875, one of several of her designs which remains in production today.

Objects from the Morris' own homes at Hammersmith Terrace and Kelmscott Manor were furnished with objects of special resonance, not with wallpapers of his own design: instead he insisted that – in a medieval manner – rooms should be hung with fabrics, tapestries and carpets. The homes reflect William Morris's guiding principle: “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.” This section reveals Morris as a collector of art and objects, many of whom have joined the Fitzwilliam collection through his relationship with the former director Sydney Cockerell.

In 1883 Morris joined the emergent Socialist movement based on the Marxist economic analysis of capitalism. The aims were social equality, sustainable prosperity, peace and fellowship. Morris became an eloquent propagandist, addressing audiences nationwide and subsidising Socialist publications. He argued for a society with unpolluted environments, social equality, gender parity and international peace, where life would mix creativity and repose with ‘work which is pleasure and pleasure which is work.’ This section considers the Firm's output against Morris's own political ideals, and the contradiction of making luxury goods for wealthy clients while campaigning for Socialism and his own staunch anti-imperialism. The exhibition will juxtapose commissions for St James's Palace and Balmoral Castle with Socialist pamphlets (e.g. *How I Became a Socialist*). Through the visual dichotomy of extreme luxury

and popular, less expensive goods, the exhibition invites us to consider Morris's attempts to push back against the contradictions his business success created.

Throughout his life, William Morris protested against the pollution and destruction of the natural world. He looked back to the pre-industrial era of the Middle Ages, and in his designs and writings dreamt of a post-industrial future. Nature was an important source of inspiration and hope. Looking backwards and forwards, in poems, tales, designs and tapestries, Morris created images of flower-filled meadows and leafy riverbanks without pollution and destruction. *A Call to Art* concludes by looking at relationships to the environment and environmental issues, and the realities of the human/industrial impact on the natural world as explored by Morris and circle. Rivers were important to Morris – his workshops depended on them. He was concerned with their decline, decried their pollution, but his textiles workshops at Merton also washed harmful dyes into the River Merton. The exhibition ends with Morris's patterns inspired by rivers alongside key utopian texts which imagine a natural world in which the demand of 'Full leisure for rest of mind and body' can be satisfied – a space for respite from work, for imagination and dreaming, for reclaiming the earth and crafting the future.

A Call to Art: William Morris & the Pre-Raphaelites is curated by Jan Marsh, with Karen Livingstone (Fitzwilliam Museum). The exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated book featuring new research and essays by Rowan Bain, Annabelle Campbell, Tom Chatfield, Jeremy Deller, Terry Eagleton, Suzanne Fagence Cooper, Tristram Hunt, Karen Livingstone, Jan Marsh and Marcus Waithe.

NOTES TO EDITORS

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Listings information

A Call to Art: William Morris & the Pre-Raphaelites

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Open Tuesday-Saturday 10:00 – 17:00, Sunday 12:00 – 17:00

Tickets on sale in July 2026:

<https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/plan-your-visit/exhibitions/a-call-to-art-william-morris-and-the-pre-raphaelites>

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The Fitzwilliam Museum is home to one of the world's most remarkable university art collections. We care for works of art and material culture primarily from Europe, North Africa and Asia that connect people across cultures and time. Since 1816 we've been a place for learning and discovery. Today, we use art, objects, spaces and experiences to inspire curiosity, reflection and creativity—opening up the past to transform our futures. As an internationally recognised centre for research and conservation, we work with partners across the world to explore how collections can be better understood, cared for and shared.

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