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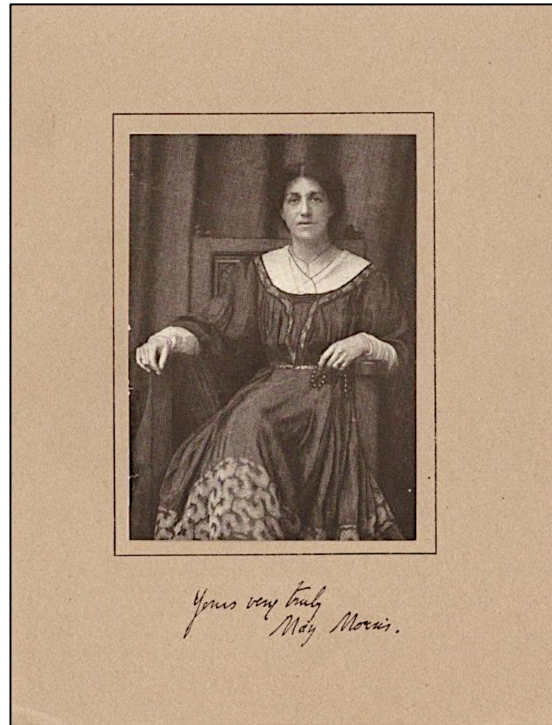
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## The Reluctant Reformer: May Morris' United States Lecture Tour of 1909-1910

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**Figures 1-4.** “Pamphlet Publicizing May Morris’s Lecture Tour of the U.S.A.,” 1909. Ink on card stock,  $6\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{7}{8}$  in. folded,  $12\frac{1}{4} \times 7\frac{7}{8}$  in. total. Images courtesy of Edith F. Hunter and Graham C. Hunter, II.

May Morris (fig. 1) was born March 22, 1862, just one year after her father, William Morris established the workshop of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company with six friends. Later renamed Morris & Company, the firm played a prominent role in the Arts and Crafts movement of late nineteenth century England, meaning May was automatically positioned in the center. She grew up surrounded by some of London’s most important artists. She climbed trees with Edward Burne-Jones’ children, collaborated on a creative writing journal, *The Scribbler*, with Rudyard Kipling, toured the Continent with Countess Rosalind Howard, and spent idle summer days modeling with her mother, Jane, for Gabriel Rossetti. May Morris exchanged these modeling sessions for drawing lessons with the artist, who strongly encouraged her artistic aptitude. At the age of 18, Morris enrolled in embroidery and design classes at the South Kensington School of Design. This decision was likely shaped by the possibility she would one day become manager of the Morris & Company embroidery department. Morris & Company had always employed women, in many departments, but May Morris became the firm’s first female designer when she was appointed head of the embroidery department in 1885.

May Morris’ connections with the leading proponents of Arts and Crafts ideology and aesthetics led to her participation in the influential Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, established in 1887. After

William Morris passed away in 1896, May Morris left Morris & Company to pursue a second career as an arts instructor. By 1899, May was appointed head of the embroidery department at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, “among the premier colleges of the Arts and Crafts movement, responsible for a generation of decorative artists and teachers who spread Arts and Crafts principles into schools and homes throughout southern England.”<sup>1</sup>

Like her father before her, May Morris was also interested in writing. Her first essay on embroidery was published in 1888, the same year she first exhibited with the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. By 1893, she had contributed a chapter on embroidery for Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo’s *Plain Handicrafts* and wrote her own embroidery design manual, *Decorative Needlework*. She continued to write plays, exhibition reviews, and editorials throughout her life and is today considered an indispensable William Morris scholar on the strength of her introductions to his *Collected Works*.

In addition, May Morris’ participation in late nineteenth and early twentieth century social reform endeavors was extensive. From her active membership in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, her organization of the Women’s Guild of Arts, to her involvement with war relief efforts, environmental protests, low-income housing projects, education reform activities, rural women’s art organizations, and various socialist and feminist groups for which she created banners, May Morris was an extremely active figure in British social reform causes, many of which she helped instigate.

Like so many other prolific British Arts and Crafts leaders before her, May Morris was deluged with invitations to share her experiences with eager audiences in the United States. Beginning in 1896, hundreds of communities across North America founded Arts and Crafts societies, most modeled after the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in London and claiming William Morris as their inspirational high priest. Because their movement was built upon the British model, American Arts and Crafts societies invited their British counterparts to visit the United States, lecture, exhibit their work, and offer advice about what the country could do to further the agenda of the movement. Though several notable British Arts and Crafts proponents traveled overseas, including Charles Robert Ashbee, Walter Crane, Oscar Wilde, and T.J. Cobden-Sanderson, William Morris refused every enthusiastic invitation.

“William Morris does not love America,” complained *New England Magazine* writer William Clarke in 1891.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he despised American commercialism, considered republicanism “an empty form, apart from real social equality,” and believed that capitalism would inhibit social reform efforts.<sup>3</sup> These beliefs, along with his growing interest in socialism, led William Morris to decline all offers to visit the United States. With her corresponding political principles, May Morris likely had similar reservations about America; however, in October 1909, she embarked on what was to be a three-month lecture tour of the Eastern and Midwestern United States. The impetus for this tour is unclear. Scholars Janis Londraville and Jan Marsh believe Morris’ tour was motivated by an interest to discuss her father’s life and work and to promote his *Collected Works* scheduled for publication beginning in 1910. Evidence suggests something more complicated was at stake, both for May Morris and her American audiences.

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1. Jan Marsh, “May Morris: Ubiquitous, Invisible Arts and Crafts-Woman” in *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880-1935: The Gender of Ornament*, eds. Bridget Elliot and Janice Helland (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 42.

2. William Clarke, “William Morris” in *New England Magazine* 3, no. 6 (February 1891): 746.

3. Ibid.

May Morris arrived in the United States an unchallenged authority on the British Arts and Crafts based on her apprenticeship under William Morris and her own artistic accomplishments, both in England and abroad. It was this expertise that recommended her to several notable American Arts and Crafts leaders, including Jane Addams of Hull House, George G. Booth of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts and, later, the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Gustav Stickley of the Craftsman Workshops, and Elbert Hubbard of Roycroft. Although American Arts and Crafts leaders thought highly of May Morris, she was not always so enthusiastic about them. For example, when Elbert Hubbard invited her to speak at Roycroft, she outright refused, explaining “‘I have no desire to see that obnoxious imitator of my dear father.’”<sup>4</sup> During one of her three tour stops in New York, May Morris met with Gustav Stickley.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to her friend Emery Walker, Morris likened Stickley to Little Lord Fauntleroy, claiming he “‘prattled on’” about Craftsman taste until she lost her patience and “‘let him have it with considerable directness and simplicity.’”<sup>6</sup> Hubbard and Stickley both professed their devotion to Morrisian Arts and Crafts ideology and modeled their workshops after Morris & Company. May Morris’ strong reactions to these men suggests that satiating the curiosity of her father’s fans was not high on her agenda.<sup>7</sup>

American audiences expecting May Morris to play the role of her father’s ambassador were no doubt deeply disappointed, as were those expecting Morris to play the role of British militant suffragette. The day after her arrival in New York, May Morris held a press conference to discuss the details of her tour. According to the *Washington Post*, she “shrank into herself as a snail into its shell as she was bombarded with questions about woman suffrage and such topics of the hour.”<sup>8</sup> Morris’ reluctance to answer the reporters’ questions and obvious discomfort in receiving them in the first place prompted the *Post* to declare:

“You cannot imagine her in the van of any feminist movement....She makes a protesting gesture when she is asked if she intends to speak in favor of the ‘Cause’ and to drum up recruits in America for the campaign. This gesture explains the shutting of the door after several interviewers and leaves the atmosphere less highly charged with vitality.”<sup>9</sup>

The *Washington Post* article makes it clear that American audiences expected Morris, an important advocate for gender reform in England, to discuss women’s rights. Reporters had even gone so far to surmise that the impetus for her tour was to advocate for the suffrage movement.

While reluctant to discuss gender reform at the press conference, May Morris’ tour itinerary belied her obvious interest in the topic. One of her first activities in the United States was to attend a women’s

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4. Freeman Champney, *Art and Glory: The Story of Elbert Hubbard* (New York: Crown, 1968), 199, quoted in Janis Londraville, ed., *On Poetry, Painting, and Politics: The Letters of May Morris and John Quinn* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1997), 197 n. 2.

5. Most likely, May Morris met Gustav Stickley during one of her three stays in New York which took place October 1909, December 1909 and February 1910.

6. May Morris to Emery Walker, 21 February 1910. William Morris Gallery, quoted in Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story 1839-1938* (New York: Pandora, 1986), 252.

7. During her stop in Buffalo, New York, Hubbard’s assistant, Dard Hunter handed Morris an invitation to lecture at Roycroft. According to Hunter, May Morris crumpled Hubbard’s invitation in her hand and gave it back to the messenger as proof of her conviction. Ibid.

8. “Girl Pleads for Arts and Crafts,” *Washington Post*, November 14, 1909.

9. Ibid.

suffrage meeting at Carnegie Hall.<sup>10</sup> May Morris discussed the meeting a few days later during a press release held for her at Hull House in Chicago, noting “the American women were as enthusiastic as our women in England. There seemed as much interest in the contest here as in England.”<sup>11</sup> This subtle praise is characteristic of Morris, but in it, one senses her admiration and interest in American gender reform efforts.

Though initially hesitant to engage in American politics, May Morris emerged from her tour an outspoken advocate for trade unions and guilds for female textile artists. This paper will offer new scholarship about May Morris’ American lecture tour and discuss her ideas on the state of female textile artists in the challenging political environment of early twentieth century America. Morris used her celebrity to build trans-Atlantic camaraderie between women in the arts during this exciting time of activism and awakening.

At the time May Morris’ tour was announced in early July, her tour itinerary was largely unplanned. According to the pamphlet created to advertise her tour (fig. 1-4), she was to “accept engagements in the Middle West, between November 20 and December 10, 1909, and in the East from that time until January 15, 1910.”<sup>12</sup> However, newspaper accounts and letters indicate that Morris’ tour followed a very different route and took place over a much longer time period. On October 20, 1909, May Morris arrived in New York aboard the ocean liner *Minnetonka*. From New York, she traveled to Chicago for one month, returning to New York for the holidays. She then repeated this circuit, traveling once again to Chicago via Washington DC, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Buffalo, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Madison.<sup>13</sup> After a brief stay in Chicago, Morris returned to New York around February 3, 1910 where she remained at least until February 21. The reason for this extended tour is not documented, but it seems likely she was in greater demand as a speaker than expected.

It is curious that this pamphlet did not mention May Morris’ interest in gender reform. Instead, it describes Morris as a “keen student of historic design and embroidery, and a practical craftswoman,” who planned to discuss an assortment of handicrafts and theater with interested American audiences (fig. 2).<sup>14</sup> The pamphlet clearly indicated the scope of Morris’ tour as practical and art historical. For example, the description for “Mediæval Embroidery” explains May Morris would discuss the British embroidery technique of *Opus Anglicanum* and contrast it with embroidery practiced in Italy at the same time (fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> She would also discuss medieval workshops and craft guilds. *The New York Times* account of her “Mediæval Embroidery” lecture indicates she focused on women’s roles in these workshops and guilds and explained how lessons gleaned from medieval institutions might improve

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10. The date of this meeting is not recorded, but it is likely Morris joined 3000 other women to hear one of England’s leading suffragettes, Emmeline Pankhurst speak on October 25, 1909. This was an important women’s suffrage meeting, falling just a few days before the first ever Women’s Suffrage Convention in New York. The meeting drew an overflow audience and over one hundred police officers to Carnegie Hall.

11. Founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, Hull House was an organization responsible for a number of social reform endeavors in the early twentieth century. “Seeks Art, but Sees Smoke,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1909.

12. Civic Forum Lecture Bureau, *Miss May Morris*, pamphlet publicizing May Morris’s lecture tour of the U.S.A., 1909.

13. Since May Morris deviated from the schedule printed on the pamphlet, traveling to the Midwest not once, but twice, it is likely she made additional stops. In fact, Jan Marsh notes that Morris also visited Canada. Marsh, *Jane and May Morris*, 252.

14. Civic Forum Lecture Bureau, *Miss May Morris*, 1909.

15. Ibid.



working conditions for women in modern workshops.<sup>16</sup> Morris' seemingly innocuous history lesson actually belies her interest in the controversial topic of unions and their connections to women's rights and socialist movements, an idea that will be developed later in this paper.

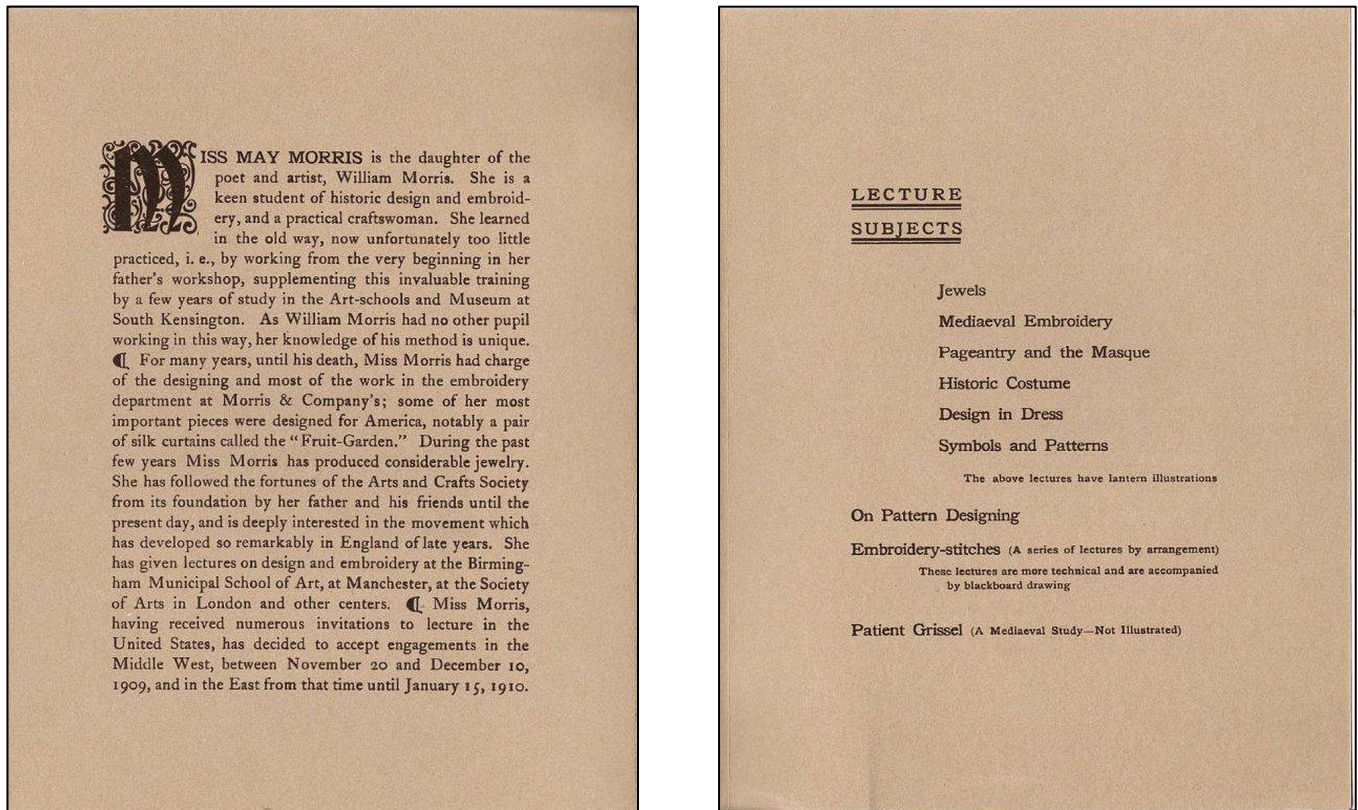


Figure 2 and 3.

A few days after May Morris arrived in Chicago, an article was printed in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in which women challenged each other to “follow the example of England and New York and make a success of Miss May Morris.”<sup>17</sup> Noting a past failure to engage with “interesting feminine visitors,” these women planned to demonstrate their increased awareness and support of women's movements. When British suffragette Mrs. Cobden-Sanderson visited the year before, the article explained, her audiences “came away more interested in the way she tied a ribbon about her hair than they were in her ideas.”<sup>18</sup> This embarrassing display of indifference was not to be repeated with May Morris' visit. In addition to alluding to the healthy sense of respect women had for Morris, the article indicates that her lecture tour would promote social ideas pertinent to women.

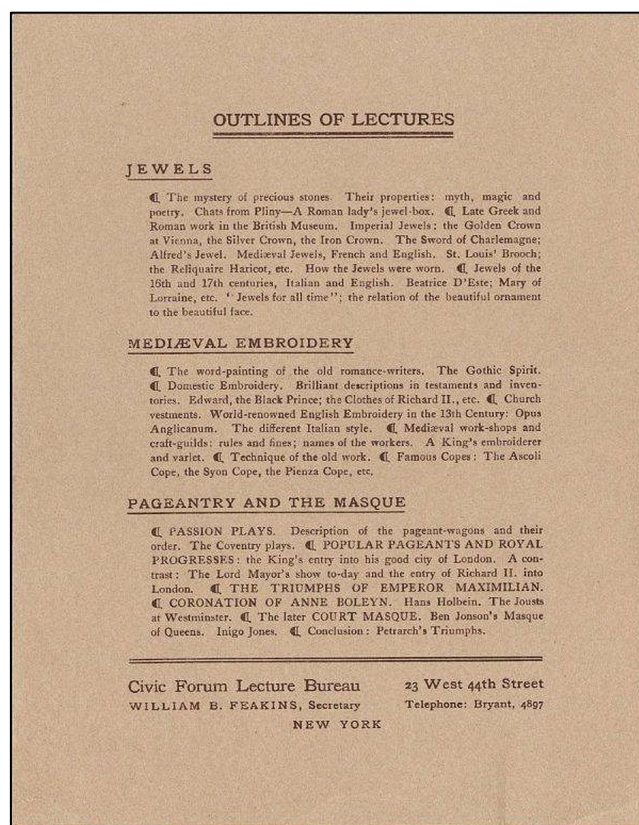
Although May Morris did not consider herself an active suffragette, she was impressed with the activism of American women involved with the Arts and Crafts movement, such as those involved with Hull

16. “First Trade Union of Women Workers,” review of “Mediaeval Embroidery” (lecture) by May Morris, 55 E. 90th Street, New York, *New York Times*, December 19, 1909.

17. This article suggests that audiences attending May Morris' lectures were “society” or upper-class women who “incline to a breadth of knowledge and life.” This could mean that, as in England, the main demographic interested in American Arts and Crafts were upper-class. “News of the Society World,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 31, 1909.

18. Coincidentally, nearly every article that mentioned May Morris' lecture tour discussed her clothing, hair, jewelry, and speaking voice. One article even asked her to comment on the latest fashion trends. Ibid.

House. Likewise, she admitted to being jealous of the support system American women artists developed, noting that women in England were “not banded together in the common cause of art as much as were the men.”<sup>19</sup> Morris also, surprisingly, admitted a growing interest in American Arts and Crafts ideology, noting during a press conference at Hull House “I am much interested in your arts and craft movement. I shall make a special study of this while here.”<sup>20</sup> What Morris found in the American Arts and Crafts movement was a situation for women much different than the one she left behind in England.



*Figure 4.*

In England, the appeal of handcrafted objects prompted a demand for hand-embroidered objects. Professional female designers and craftswomen like May Morris worked to elevate embroidery to fine art status where it soon became valuable both economically and socially. The American counterpart to May Morris was Candace Wheeler and her workshop, the New York Society of Decorative Art. Wheeler and the NYSDA's efforts to elevate both the aesthetic quality and cultural perception of embroidery did much to shape the development of the American Arts and Crafts movement. Perhaps her most important achievement was the involvement of all class levels in Arts and Crafts production and consumption. By combining education with philanthropy, Wheeler ensured that women from every economic background were trained, employed in the workshops, or taught how to sell products they made at home. Additionally, the products crafted by students of the NYSDA bore the hallmarks of so-called democratic design: they were inexpensively produced and priced and therefore marketable to a

19. "Seeks Art, but Sees Smoke," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1909.

20. Ibid.

broad public. Wheeler's business savvy helped make the NYSDA commercially successful even as it engaged in meaningful social reform.<sup>21</sup>

The success of the NYSDA can be contrasted with another industry responding to the marketability of hand-embroidery: the sweatshop. In a lecture titled simply "Decorative Needlework" given for the International Women's Congress of 1899, May Morris condemned the economic structure that made it necessary to sell embroideries at prices that devalued both the work and the worker. She declared that "no human being has the right to buy fineries at a price which, however slight the work may be, cannot possibly represent a fair remuneration to the worker."<sup>22</sup> The value of modern embroidery had to reflect the value of its maker for any true social change to take place.

Morris criticized the public's collective taste for this cheap embroidery and explained that until they were educated as to the difference between quality and inferior work, she could not "take a very hopeful view of the art as an employment for women."<sup>23</sup> The idea that embroidery in itself could bring creative pleasure to a worker – the idea that she herself endorsed – meant nothing if the worker did not receive fair remuneration. Morris suggested "the girls who sit in a stuffy workroom, embroidering true-lovers' knots... would be little or no worse off working a sewing machine all day."<sup>24</sup>

This is the message May Morris appears to have presented to American audiences in her lecture, "Mediæval Embroidery." While the original text for this lecture has yet to be uncovered, a neat summary exists courtesy of the *New York Times* review of her presentation for the Teacher's College on December 18, 1909.<sup>25</sup> In addition to describing the importance and artistry of medieval embroidery, Morris took great interest in correcting the myth of the *chatelaine* who created beautiful embroidery in her spare time. This myth formed the basis for the turn of the century feminine ideal. Modern women were likened to chatelaines (castle caretakers), their devotion to domesticity was reflected in all that they did, even in the selfless industry of embroidery. In contrast, the article explains, the finest examples of medieval embroidery were not executed by amateurs in their spare time, but by highly trained female and male professionals working in embroidery guilds.

In "Mediæval Embroidery," May Morris invoked the idea of the medieval guild in order to urge the creation of modern professional women's guilds. That the *New York Times* review was titled, "First Trades Union of Women Workers" indicates, at the very least, professional organization was one of the main ideas in May Morris' lecture.<sup>26</sup> Morris felt embroidery should reflect the value of its maker, claiming her "serious duty" was "to discourage women from undertaking ornamental needlework at prices which put it into competition with work done by machinery."<sup>27</sup> A professional trade union would

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21. Catherine Zipf, *Professional Pursuits: Women and the American Arts and Crafts Movement* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 8-10.

22. May Morris, "Decorative Needlework" in *The International Congress of Women of 1899: Women in Professions*, ed. the Countess of Aberdeen (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), 193.

23. *Ibid.*, 194.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Anna Mason of the William Morris Gallery explained that the museum recently acquired "lecture notes that May probably made for her US tour (currently in store offsite so I can't check the details)." These notes will help further expand this area of May Morris scholarship. Mason, email message to author, October 18, 2012.

26. Although Morris uses the term "trade-guild" to describe professional medieval embroidery organizations, the *New York Times* deliberately uses the term "trades union" as a reference to contemporary American labor (trade) unions.

27. May Morris, "Decorative Needlework," 194.



be invaluable for women's industries in order to regulate prices, set quality standards, and help train those who could meet such standards.

In general, American capitalist leaders did not consider trade unions the modern equivalent of medieval guilds. These leaders described unions as the antitheses, not the heirs, to medieval guilds. They claimed that whereas the guild had "fostered self-reliance and cooperation" and "guaranteed excellent workmanship," unions "bred only selfish grumbling about 'oppression.'"<sup>28</sup> For American capitalist leaders, the guild's modern equivalent was the corporation. As an antimodernist directly opposed to capitalism, May Morris did not agree with those who opposed unions. Her views on the subject were clearly expressed in her lectures, in which she advocated for "fair remuneration" and a "compact between public and employer" to accept the higher cost of goods made by fairly paid laborers.<sup>29</sup>

The ideas presented in "Mediæval Embroidery" positioned May Morris as a leader for women who saw unions as a way to better their working conditions and, by proxy, their social conditions. Though some conservative labor unions worked as intermediaries between workers and owners, others adopted the revolutionary cause of socialism, which, for the average female worker promised the idea of freedom from oppressive working conditions as well as freedom from oppressive social conditions, one of these conditions being the inability to vote. Suffragettes and socialists were natural allies.

When finally pushed to describe her interest in suffragette activities, May Morris explained her "interest in suffrage is linked with the guild workers in the arts and crafts."<sup>30</sup> Although Morris felt art was the best way to invoke social reform, she realized that artistic opportunities were limited for women. She was interested in suffrage because of the rights it would afford women within unions and her own Arts and Crafts movement. This was a topic about which she was passionate; in 1907, Morris organized the Women's Guild of Arts in London. This act was a response to the British Art Workers' Guild's policy, which excluded women from membership. Morris was keenly aware of women's exclusion from the AWG, noting that "A foreign visitor to London (if of the superior sex) could nowhere more readily approach the heart of the artistic movement than by a visit to...a Guild meeting."<sup>31</sup> May Morris' Women's Guild of Arts provided an opportunity to "meet women who know their work and are not playing at art," but the group was in no way the center of British art like the AWG.<sup>32</sup> Morris recognized the inequality between male and female artists, an inequality that did not exist for their medieval counterparts.

Ultimately, May Morris promoted women's rights during her tour of the United States, finding kindred spirits in American union leaders, socialists, and women like Jane Addams. She was impressed with the strength of American women's ability to band together in the common cause of art, as in the case of Candace Wheeler's NYSDA. The workshop's commitment towards developing artistic opportunities for women in the United States reflected Morris' own endeavors with the Women's Guild of Arts and her interest in trade unions. May Morris' experiences in the United States left a profound effect – she was actively involved in women's social programs modeled, in part, on organizations like the NYSDA and Hull House for the remainder of her life.

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28. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 84.

29. Morris, "Decorative Needlework," 193-194.

30. "Seeks Art, but Sees Smoke," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1909.

31. May Morris, *Introductions to the Collected Works of William Morris* (New York: Oriole Editions, 1973), 2:459.

32. May Morris to John Quinn, December 6, 1910, in Londraville, *On Poetry, Painting, and Politics*, 69.

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