

Aesthetic Sensuous Community in the Lesser Arts: William Morris's Critique on Modernity

Ying Lin

Department of English, College of Foreign Languages, Qufu Normal University, Qufu 273165, China

ABSTRACT

William Morris criticized the aesthetic ugliness of the Victorian era, which is essentially an artist's way of critiquing capitalist modernity. He diagnosed Victorian society with a symptom of "the famine of art", and viewed it as an aesthetic representation of capitalist crisis. He thus elevated "the lesser arts" to stir a redistribution of the collective sensibilities within the community. This approach encouraged artists to return to craftsmanship and create art for the people. Such "aesthetic practice of everyday life," condensed in handicrafts, to some extent reconstructed the sensuous world of individuals and the collective, highlighting the theoretical foundation of Marxist philosophy of praxis. In this sense, everyone is an artist; this is both a way to realize the aesthetic sensuous community and to manifest Morris's socialist ideals.

KEYWORDS

William Morris; Modernity; Aesthetic Sensuous Community; Handicraft

1 Introduction

The multiple identities of William Morris as a writer, artist, businessman and socialist were the result of his reflecting on and engaging with the crisis of capitalist modern civilisation in the 19th century Britain. As a writer, Morris's creations spanned poetry, novels, essays, and other genres, all indirectly or directly concerning the realities of the 19th century Britain. In 1877, he was nominated by Oxford University to succeed as the Oxford Professor of Poetry. Furthermore, after Tennyson's death in 1892, he was nominated to succeed as the Poet Laureate (a title he declined due to his socialist beliefs). As an artist, Morris is considered a representative figure of the later Pre-Raphaelite movement. His work "La Belle Iseult" (1858) is now housed in the Tate Modern. As a businessman, Morris established the "Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co" (MMF), and later "Morris & Co". Through these ventures, he designed and produced a large number of wallpapers, stained glass, and other decorative arts, which continue to inspire and provide aesthetic pleasure. He is revered as the "father of modern design", profoundly influencing the Arts and Crafts Movement in both Europe and America. He also founded the Kelmscott Press and initiated the private press movement, dedicated to reviving the traditional art of medieval bookmaking as a counter to the burgeoning modern publishing industry. As a socialist activist, Morris was active in the late Victorian socialist movement in Britain. His first public speech in 1877 marked the beginning of his turn towards socialism. In 1883, Morris joined the Social Democratic Federation, officially becoming a socialist. Due to differences in political views, he left the federation two years later and, with the support of Engels, co-founded the Socialist League with Marx's daughter, Eleanor Marx-Aveling, and son-in-law, Edward Aveling. Morris was not only the most important financial supporter but also the editor of the League's newspaper, *The Commonweal*. In 1890, Morris left the League and founded the

Hammersmith Socialist Society, uncompromisingly continuing to pursue his socialist ideals.

Morris's socialist thought emerged from the comprehensive crisis of modern civilisation exposed during the development of capitalism in Britain. If the deterioration of the natural environment and the decline in artistic taste at the end of the 19th century prompted Morris to explore ecological issues within his socialist endeavors, Morris sought to use a sense of ugliness to address its overall degradation. "Ugliness" from Morris's point of view was the symptoms of the crisis of capitalist modern civilisation. Influenced by the rise of socialist thought in the 19th century, Morris's socialist thought in his personal exploration and practice encompassed literary consciousness, aesthetic attitudes, and political expression. He was dedicated to transforming society through art and reshaping the community aesthetically, making his mark in the lineage of socialist thought. However, the concept of "aesthetic socialism" does not merely refer to his various insights and practices in the field of art but also aims to illustrate how he used the evolution of artistic creation and concepts to interpret the vision of an ideal society.

This article attempts to reveal the deep political aesthetic logic behind Morris's reflection and correction of the crisis of capitalist modern civilisation. Morris advocated for "the lesser arts", initiating a redistribution of collective sensibility within the community and promoting aesthetic equality. The "aesthetic practice of daily life" condensed in craftsmanship restructured the sensuous world of the individual and the collective, reaching a realm of freedom and liberation for both. This is one way the aesthetic sensuous community is realized, fulfilling Morris's socialist ideals.

2 Against Ugliness: Critique on Capitalist Modernity

The Victorian era in which Morris lived was a significant transitional period in British history, marked by rapid development and social crises. On the one hand, people often defined this era by "progress" with the significant population growth, the establishment of the empire, and the implementation of social reforms. On the other hand, Victorian London was often likened to Babylon or Pompeii, with the implication that it, too, might collapse. This contradictory and complex sentiment reflected the deep-seated anxiety of Victorians beneath the facade of economic prosperity. In 1848, revolutionary sparks spread across Europe, but Britain, buoyed by economic prosperity, avoided a revolution. However, this prosperity brought another crisis: the widening gap between rich and poor and sharp class conflicts. Engels, after twenty-one months of field research on the living conditions of the British working class, believed that the workers had been placed in an "unlivable situation" tantamount to "murder", stating that "I have now to prove that society in England daily and hourly commits what the working-men's organs, with perfect correctness, characterise as social murder, that it has placed the workers under conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long" (Engels 96).

Faced with an era of coexisting prosperity and crisis, mid-19th-century Victorian intellectuals engaged in diverse debates, seeking ways to sustain national prosperity and avert potential crises. Matthew Arnold argued that "the whole civilisation is...mechanical and external...in our own country has culture a weighty part to perform, because here that mechanical character...is shown in the most eminent degree...Faith in machinery is, I said, our besetting danger" (Arnold 37). Morris agreed with Arnold's critique of civilisation and adopted the term "civilisation" himself. In "How I Became a Socialist" (1894), Morris expressed his heartfelt disdain, "apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilisation" (Morris *Volume 23* 279). His first significant encounter with "modern civilisation" can be traced back to the Great Exhibition of 1851 opened in London that brought together goods from all over the world in the Crystal Palace. Though Morris at 17 years old could not theoretically analyze the "Crystal Palace"

in terms of the deeper logic of capitalism, he, with an artist's aesthetic intuition, grasped its overall impact and viewed the Crystal Palace as a visual embodiment of Victorian modern civilisation. "Incredible ugliness" was the artistic instinct he felt for the Crystal Palace and thus refused to enter so as to express his personal stance.

"Ugliness" was not only Morris's immediate response to modern civilisation but also his critique and judgment of the consequences of modern civilisation. Although he could not theoretically grasp the structural mechanism of capitalist society behind the exhibition, his aesthetic intuition allowed him to sensibly reject and express a radical stance against the "ugly" consequences of modern civilisation. This significant and often-cited anecdote foreshadowed Morris's future path of unifying aesthetic pursuit with political exploration. The critique of ugliness was the starting point of Morris's reflection on modern civilisation and the beginning of his political aesthetic practice.

"Ugliness" was clearly defined by Morris. In "The Arts and Crafts of Today" (1889), Morris pointed out, "I have said that the produce of man's labour must be ugly if art be not applied to it, and I use the word ugly as the strongest plain word in the English language" (Morris *Volume 22* 357). Morris intended to use everyday, non-metaphysical words and meanings to express his feelings about modern civilisation. He further expanded the connotation of ugliness with terms like "negation of beauty" and "non-artistic human work", aiming to establish a direct opposition between ugliness and beauty. By simplifying the diametrical opposition in this binary opposition, he sought to stimulate sensibility and evoke a collective resonance of aversion among the public, thereby constructing a critical collective sensibility domain.

The critique of ugliness was both a reaction to the ugliness of public spaces symbolized by the Crystal Palace and an extension into the everyday living space, unfolding a cultural dimension of critique concerning daily life. In "The Lesser Arts of Life" (1882), Morris criticized the ugliness of everyday items such as pottery, glassware, and fabrics. He believed that we had lost half the pleasure in our daily lives, stating, "I should say that the making of ugly pottery was one of the most remarkable inventions of our civilisation" (Morris *Volume 22* 242). Ugliness, in its concrete form, permeated the everyday living spaces of the Victorian era.

In Morris's view, if art and craftsmanship were not beautiful, they were "actively ugly". This concept of "actively ugly" deepened Morris's critique of ugliness from the superficial to the profound. For Morris, "ugliness" was a manifestation of a deeper cause—the crisis of capitalist modern civilisation in 19th-century Britain. In "Some Hints on Pattern-designing" (1881) and "Art Under Plutocracy" (1883), Morris used "base and ugly" interchangeably. The ugliness he referred to was not merely a matter of personal conduct but a reflection of the overall issues and structural decay of the Victorian era. Morris stated, "the produce of all modern industrialism is ugly" (Morris *Volume 22* 336). He believed that if work was devoid of gratitude and joy, it equated to oppression of the workers, which inevitably led to the production of ugly products "again I say that if such work (non-artistic parts of the work) were otherwise than ugly and despicable to look at one's sense of justice would be shocked; for the labour which went to the making of it was thankless and unpleasurable, little more than a mere oppression on the workman" (Morris *Volume 23* 151). Therefore, "actively ugly" fundamentally stemmed from the immoral class exploitation and oppression between capitalists and workers under capitalism.

It is evident that Morris did not stop his critique of the ugliness of the Victorian era at modern civilisation. Instead, he traced its roots to class oppression, thus more profoundly grasping the social manifestations of prosperity and crisis coexisting in the Victorian era. In "Art and Socialism" (1884), Morris diagnosed the Victorian era with a "famine of art," stating, "the world of modern civilisation in its haste to gain a very inequitably divided material prosperity has entirely suppressed popular Art; or in other words that the greater part of the people have no share in Art" (Morris *Volume 23* 192-193).

"Famine" here refers to the hunger experienced by the majority, a lack and deprivation of art among the masses. Thus, the essence of the "famine of art" is a result of the political issue of class inequality in the Victorian era extending into the realm of art, "for the cause of this famine of Art is that whilst people work throughout the civilized world as laboriously as ever they did, they have lost, in losing an Art which was done by and for the people, the natural solace of their labour; a solace which they once had, and always should have" (Morris *Volume23* 192-193). Therefore, the famine of art is not just a social issue of the Victorian era but an aesthetic manifestation of the inevitable political issues brought by capitalism.

In 1883, Morris wrote to the editor of *The Manchester Examiner*, stating: "I specially wished to point out that the question of popular art was a social question, involving the happiness or misery of the greater part of the community...popular art has no chance of a healthy life, or, indeed, of a life at all, till we are on the way to fill up this terrible gulf between riches and poverty" (Kelvin 173). By this time, Morris had clearly equated political concerns with aesthetic claims, extending the dimension of political critique and practice in art. Morris's first public speech in 1877 marked the beginning of his socialist turn, and in 1883, he joined the Social Democratic Federation, formally becoming a socialist. Morris's political views shared a similar sense of community and revolutionary spirit with his artistic views. It was in art that Morris embedded his political ideals to correct the ugly landscape of the Victorian era.

3 Justifying the Lesser Arts: Art for People

The study of art history generally believes that the class of artists truly emerged during the Renaissance. "In ancient and medieval times, the cultural and social status of painting, sculpture, and architecture and their practitioners was typically very low. The three arts were not only classified as technical and manual crafts but also subordinated to other major crafts, lacking an independent position within the knowledge system. Correspondingly, painters, sculptors, and architects were usually regarded as humble manual laborers and artisans, occupying the lower strata of the social hierarchy" (Liu 363). However, in "The Lesser Arts", Morris stated, "Time was when the mystery and wonder of handicrafts were well acknowledged by the world, when imagination and fancy mingled with all things made by man; and in those days all handicraftsmen were artists, as we should now call them" (Morris *Volume22* 9). Morris deliberately ignored the historical facts of art history, asserting that craftsmen were all artists during the Middle Ages, with the aim of deconstructing the binary opposition between artists and craftsmen. By doing so, he sought to subvert social class concepts, promote the aesthetic interweaving of the community, and express a radical political aesthetic view that was integrated into his artistic propositions.

In Morris's view, real art is "the expression of man's happiness in his labour" (Morris *Volume22* 46). In "The Lesser Arts of Life," Morris also stated: "What I mean by an art is some creation of man which appeals to his emotions and his intellect by means of his senses." (Morris *Volume22* 235). Therefore, "In considering the Aims of Art, that is, why men toilsomely cherish and practice Art...I find that I can give it no other name than happiness" (Morris *Volume23* 81). Morris's definition of art emphasized "human" and "sensibility." In fact, this definition of art aligns with the most orthodox definition of aesthetics. Baumgarten's aesthetics, from its inception, has been positioned to celebrate sensibility: "He was concerned with demonstrating the independence of sensible cognition and complementing the rationalist concept of cognition with the concept of cognition with the concept of 'cognition guided by sensibility'" (27-28).

In Morris's view, the lesser arts are art forms capable of carrying aesthetic sensibility. The lesser arts, with pottery and glassware being the most important forms, primarily include crafts such as

house building, woodworking, ironwork, pottery, and weaving—arts that serve to decorate, beautify, and perfect. These lesser arts are mostly completed by hand, and thus are “the expression of a man’s delight in beauty” (Morris *Volume22* 8). Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923) acknowledged Morris’s association of the lesser arts with sensation, “Many a grin of pleasure...went to the carrying through of those mazes of mysterious beauty...While they were at work, at least, these men were not unhappy”(455).

In Morris’s perspective, the lesser arts, by employing handicrafts, directly connect to the senses, emphasizing human subjectivity and realizing the aesthetic ideal of reproducing the beauty of sensibility through art. In this pure aesthetic sense, craftsmen should be regarded as artists.

However, what worried Morris was that the lesser arts had already declined during the Victorian era. Morris believed that the lesser arts of the Victorian era became “trivial, mechanical, unintelligent, incapable of resisting the changes pressed upon them by fashion or dishonesty.” (Morris *Volume22* 2-3). “Fashion” and “dishonesty” alluded to the historical context of machine production and the replication of artworks in the Victorian era. Artworks had entered the era of mechanical reproduction. Art faced competition from photographic technology. Photography, as Hobsbawm worried and questioned, “must seriously jeopardise the existence of ‘entire branches of art, such as engravings, lithography, the genre-picture and portraiture’ . How could these compete in the sheer reproduction of nature with a method which translated ‘the facts’ themselves into an image directly and, as it were, scientifically?” (341) Similarly machine manufacturing, with its absolute price advantage, suppressed traditional handmade craftsmanship, and the aura of artworks gradually faded. In such a historical context, Morris’s elevation of craftsmen to the status of artists and his call for artists to return to the aesthetic roots of craftsmanship took on a more urgent and practical significance.

Morris believed that “handicraft is to my mind desirable, and its destruction a degradation of life” (Morris *Volume22* 336), and therefore, he held great expectations for the lesser arts. The naming of “lesser arts” encapsulated Morris’s critical stance and revolutionary attitude. In 1877, Morris’s first public lecture had the lesser arts as its main theme. This lecture, named “The Lesser Arts,” is preserved in Morris’s collected works. In fact, when this article was initially distributed as a pamphlet, it was titled “The Decorative Arts.” In this article, Morris frequently used the term decorative arts and had not yet developed the complete concept of the lesser arts. The term “lesser” was often used as an adjective to describe the “secondary” status of the decorative arts and to critique it. In 1882, in “The Lesser Arts of Life,” Morris began to widely use the term “lesser arts.”

Morris’s political aesthetic practice, which unified political pursuit and artistic practice, led him to defend the oppressed working class against the bourgeoisie. It also led him to uncover the marginalized lesser arts, overshadowed by “the greater arts” such as architecture, sculpture, and painting. As he stated, “True it is that in many or most cases we have got so used to this ornament, that we look upon it as if it had grown of itself, and note it no more than the mosses on the dry sticks with which we light our fires.” (Morris *Volume22* 4). Morris’s stance on socialism made him believe in the tremendous potential within the working class and in the aesthetic resistance and liberating energy contained within the lesser arts.

The lesser arts embody the subjectivity and free will of the laborers, presenting a mode of democratic political order. Moreover, because the lesser arts are used in daily life, they can illuminate the lives of a broader populace, serving as a way to achieve socialist political goals. Thus, Morris broke down the aesthetic hierarchy between the greater arts and lesser arts, redistributing the collective sensibility of the community. Only when artists are regarded as craftsmen can the return of aesthetic sensibility be realized, resisting the enslavement of machine production, integrating art into the daily lives of the people, and achieving the goal of art for the people. Consequently, artists

also return to the midst of the people.

4 Towards Aesthetic Sensuous Community: Everyone Is an “Artist”

Morris’s concept of the “lesser arts” holds significant political aesthetic value not only in achieving aesthetic equality but also in activating the individual’s sensuous world and constructing an aesthetic sensuous community. His artistic views, based on Schiller’s play theory, inherently embody Marx’s idea of humans as sensuous beings engaged in practical activities, reflecting the essence of Marx’s philosophy of praxis.

Schiller’s aesthetic theory of play encompasses an art-utopian transcendence in daily life. He posits that human nature comprises both “sense impulse” and “form impulse”. However, modern civilisation has caused severe fragmentation in both society and individuals. On the one hand, the strict division of labor in science and technology, and on the other hand, the complex state machinery have created significant disparities between professions and social classes, leading to a split in human nature and a loss of inner harmony and integrity. To restore the unity and harmony of sense impulse and form impulse, achieving an ideal human nature, Schiller proposed “play impulse”, and he advocated that “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing” (80). The play impulse balances sense impulse and form impulse, and through this process, beauty is created. As Schiller said, “when we have once reached the point of applying it to the twofold seriousness of duty and of destiny; it will, I promise you, support the whole fabric of aesthetic art, and the still more difficult art of living ” (80). Thus, Schiller’s aesthetic theory of play contains an art-utopian realm of transcendence: “In the midst of the awful realm of powers, and of the sacred realm of laws, the aesthetic creative impulse is building unawares a third joyous realm of play and of appearance, in which it releases mankind from all the shackles of circumstance and frees him from everything that may be called constraint, whether physical or moral” (137). According to Schiller, it is precisely within the aesthetic practice of play that the liberating power to escape the constraints of modernity is found, for “to grant freedom by means of freedom is the fundamental law of this kingdom”(137).

Morris’s advocacy for the freedom found in “lesser arts” and “craftsmanship” aligns closely with Schiller’s concept of play. Morris’s artistic perspective is also deeply rooted in daily life. He believed that art should be as commonplace and essential as food. In fact, Morris’s vision of integrating art into daily life to reshape culture as a way of life goes beyond merely “the aesthetics of everyday life.” It more profoundly manifests as the “aesthetic practice of daily life”.

Morris’s “aesthetic practice of daily life” bridges the practical and the aesthetic, embodying the realization of Marx’s new world view in the political aesthetics of everyday life. In this practice, everyone can become an artist. Contrasting with traditional metaphysics, which pursues the supersensible realm behind phenomena, Marx’s philosophy anchors itself in practical life, rejecting pure speculation in favor of a practical mode of thinking that considers society, history, practice, and real people. In his “Theses on Feuerbach”, Marx states: “The question whether human thinking can reach objective truth—is not a question of theory but a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, actuality and power, this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute about the actuality or non-actuality of thinking—thinking isolated from practice—is a purely scholastic question” (99). By bringing human thinking back to the tangible world, Marx emphasized understanding social and historical development through practical engagement and the importance of practice in grasping and transforming the world.

Thus, Marx’s focus on humans is neither the abstract, speculative man of traditional philosophy nor Feuerbach’s “sensuous human activity” in an abstract existence. As Marx noted, “Feuerbach,

not satisfied with abstract thinking, wants perception; but he does not comprehend sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity. Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the essence of man is no abstraction inhering in each single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relationships" (100). Therefore, Marx's concern is with humans engaged in "sensuous activity." For Morris, the reason handicrafts can become timeless works of art is because their creation encapsulates the sensuous life of the laborer: "for from the first there was a soul in them" (Morris *Volume 23* 197). Each sensuous life is unique and diverse, and the value of art lies in its reflection of the differentiated sensuous practices of laborers. This art perspective, imbued with Marxist ideas of liberation and freedom, aligns with Marx's political aesthetic view, "William Morris and others realized more clearly than Kant, Schiller, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel that true revolution is not merely a change in constitutional and governance forms but a reconstruction of the sensuous world, which requires transforming the forms of art into forms of life. For them, the artistic revolution implied a more thorough political revolution" (Lu 3).

For Morris, in addition to reconstructing the individual's sensuous world, the political aesthetic value of the lesser arts contains the potential to build an aesthetic sensuous community. Morris believes that the lesser arts cannot be disconnected from artistic tradition: "no man, however original he may be, can sit down today and draw the ornament of a cloth, or the form of an ordinary vessel or piece of furniture, that will be other than a development or a degradation of forms used hundreds of years ago." (Morris *Volume 22* 7). Yet, amidst the survival crisis faced by handicrafts in the age of mechanical reproduction, Morris lamented: "these forms that were once perhaps the mysterious symbols of worships and beliefs now little remembered or wholly forgotten" (Morris *Volume 22* 7). Hence, Morris called for the revival of handicrafts, looking back at the craftsmanship tradition inherited in handmade products to preserve and continue the civilisation embodied within. Morris broadened his vision beyond the confines of nations and states, standing at the height of human history's totality to elucidate the aesthetic sensuous community that the lesser arts can reconstruct and reach.

These arts, I have said, are part of a great system invented for the expression of a man's delight in beauty: all peoples and times have used them; they have been the joy of free nations, and the solace of oppressed nations; religion has used and elevated them, has abused and degraded them; they are connected with all history, and are clear teachers of it; and, best of all, they are the sweeteners of human labour, both to the handicraftsman, whose life is spent in working in them, and to people in general who are influenced by the sight of them at every turn of the day's work: they make our toil happy, our rest fruitful. (Morris *Volume 22* 8)

In essence, within the lesser arts, the "object" created by hand manifests itself and in doing so, reflects and connects to the sensuous life of its creator. Therefore, within the lesser arts, what intertwines is the history that merges with the sensory lives of individuals, forming a "living" human history. The material culture studies of the 21st century, beyond the perspectives of Baudrillard and the Frankfurt School, have uncovered another relationship between people and objects. Handmade artifacts can bear the intimate relationship between people and objects. "The products of handicraft culture appear as intermediaries and mediators; they transcend direct utility, possessing their own weight, life, and meaning. They have their own attributes that enable them to become crystallizations of specific times and spaces, structures filled with meaning and sensibility, places one can inhabit" (Wellmer 127). Morris preemptively allowed the "object" or handmade object to manifest, attempting to discard the inherent capitalist commercial logic of commodities, making the commodity appear as an "object" as much as possible, thus reconstructing the intimate relationship between people and objects. Consequently, the lesser arts, through the representation

of the community of "objects," present an aesthetic and sensuous community.

Coincidentally, after Morris, Rancière continued to focus on the construction of an aesthetic community. His focus was on establishing a certain artistic aesthetic regime, specifically discovering the subject of the people. This somewhat aligns with Morris's idea of an aesthetic community. Morris had long said, "I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few" (Morris *Volume22* 26). In Morris's political aesthetic practice of the aesthetic and sensuous community: every person engaged in sensuous activities is an artist. The construction of the aesthetic regime of the lesser arts as an aesthetic and sensuous community is Morris's way of imagining and practicing socialist democratic politics. As "aesthetic regime of art" proposed by Rancière who pointed out that a piece of furniture can be precepted as a temple, and "these metamorphoses are not individual fantasies but the logic of the regime of perception, affection and thought"(XII).

5 Conclusion

In *From Romantic to Revolutionary*, Thompson mentions a detail where, after Morris's speech, a lady from another party asked who Morris was, to which Faulkner politely replied. She then inquired, "A poet, I suppose, not a socialist?" Faulkner responded sharply this time, "How can Morris be a poet if he is not a socialist?" Thompson commented, "Until Morris's death, his political opponents and critics continued to insist on distinguishing Morris the poet from Morris the socialist" (360). In fact, only by seeing Morris as a poet, artist, and socialist simultaneously can one discover the resistive vitality embedded in his art. Morris embraced Marx's historical materialism and optimistically envisioned the future. He hoped that art could fulfill its responsibilities in the revolution because art could "save the world from what at the best will be a loss, the result of ignorance and unwisdom...keep alive some tradition, some memory of the past, so that the new life when it comes may not waste itself more than enough in fashioning wholly new forms for its new spirit." (Morris *Volume22* 11-12).

Morris played a role in the field of philosophy and aesthetics after the critique of modernity. In the Victorian era, he deeply worried that "civilisation has reduced the workman to such a skinny and pitiful existence, that he scarcely knows how to frame a desire for any life much better than that which he now endures perforce" (Morris *Volume23* 281). Morris believed that, "it is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him, a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyment of real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary to man as his daily bread, and that no man, and no set of men, can be deprived of this except by mere opposition, which should be resisted to the utmost " (Morris *Volume23* 281).

From Morris's critique of ugliness to the practice of aesthetic sensuous community, it was both a critique of capitalist modern civilisation and a practice of his socialist political ideals. His radical political ideas were crystallized in the aesthetic practice of daily life, especially in the lesser arts and handicrafts. Each handmade item, embodying the sensuous activities of laborers, became an artwork, thus Morris advocated that everyone could be an artist. In the lesser arts, the practice without class distinction realized Morris's concept of an aesthetic sensibility community, fulfilling his socialist ideals. As a contemporary of Marx, Morris internalized Marx's philosophy of praxis, and his artistic socialist ideas represented a historical practical attempt at Marxist art theory.

Funding

This paper is supported by Ministry of Education Humanities and Social Sciences Youth Fund Project (20YJC752009) and Shandong Province Social Science Planning Research General Project (19CWWJ03).

About the Author

Ying Lin is an Associate Professor at College of Foreign Languages, Qufu Normal University and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Postdoctoral Research Station of Chinese Language and Literature, Qufu Normal University.

References

- [1] Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- [2] Bosanquet, Bernard. *A History of Aesthetic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- [3] Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1855*. Trans. Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- [4] Franke, Ursula. "Baumgarten's Invention of Aesthetics". Ed. J. Colin McQuillan. *Baumgarten's Aesthetics: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.
- [5] Hobsbawm, E. J. *The Age of Capital: 1845-1875*. London: Abacus, 1975.
- [6] Kelvin, Norman. *The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II Part A 1881-1884*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- [7] Liu Jun: *From Craftsman to Divine Artist: The Rise of the Artist Class in Renaissance Italy*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2018.
- [8] Lu Xinghua: *Art — The Future of Politics: A Study of Jacques Rancière's Aesthetic Thought*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2017.
- [9] Marx, Karl. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Lawrence H. Simon. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1994.
- [10] Morris, William. *The Collected Works of William Morris Volume 22*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- [11] ----. *The Collected Works of William Morris Volume 23*. Cambridge: Cambridge. University Press, 2012.
- [12] Rancière, Jacques. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Trans. Zakir. Paul. London & New York: Verso, 2013.
- [13] Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Trans. Reginald Snell. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994.
- [14] Thompson, E. P. *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. New York: Pantheon, 1976.
- [15] Wellmer, Albrecht. *On the Dialectics of Modernity and Postmodernity*. Trans. Qin Wen. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2014.