



Mr. William Morris on Modern Book Illustration.

MR. WILLIAM MORRIS delivered recently an address before the Applied Art Section of the Society of Arts in London, on "The Woodcuts of Gothic Books." It was supplemented by a number of illustrations taken from books of the fifteenth and the first years of the sixteenth centuries. In reference to these works Mr. Morris observed that all organic art, all art that was genuinely growing, as opposed to rhetorical, retrospective, or academical art—art which had no real growth in it—had two qualities in common, the epical and the ornamental. Its two functions were the telling of a story and the adornment of a space or tangible object. Mediæval art, the result of a long unbroken series of traditions, was pre-eminent for its grasp of these two functions, which indeed interpenetrated more than in any other period. The designs which he showed, one and all, while they performed their epical function never forgot their other function of decorating the book of which they formed a part. This was the essential difference between them and modern book illustrations, which he supposed made no pretence at decorating the pages of the book, but must be looked upon as black and white pictures which it was convenient to print and bind up along with the printed matter. The question, in fact, which Mr. Morris put was this, "Whether we are to have books which are beautiful as books—books in which the type, paper, woodcuts, and the due arrangement of all these things are to be considered, and which are so treated as to produce a harmonious whole, something which will give a person with a sense of beauty real pleasure whenever and wherever the book is opened, even before he begins to look closely into the illustrations; or whether the beautiful and inventive illustrations are to be looked upon as separate pictures embedded in a piece of utilitarianism which they cannot decorate because it cannot help them to do so." People might say they did not care for this result—that they wished to read literature and to look at pictures. He could understand that, but they must pardon him if he said that their interest in books in that case was literary only, and not artistic, and that implied a partial crippling of the faculties. It seemed to him that there was growing up a taste for books which were visible works of art. He claimed that illustrated books should always be beautiful, unless, perhaps, where the illustrations were present rather for the purpose of giving information than for that of giving pleasure to the intellect through the eye; but surely, even in this latter case, they should be reasonably and decently good-looking. Turning to the practical side of the question, Mr. Morris urged that an illustrated book, where the illustrations were

more than mere explanations of the printed matter, should be a harmonious work of art—the type, the placing of the type, the position of the page of print on the paper, should all be considered from the artistic point of view. The illustrations should never have a mere accidental connection with the other ornament and the type, but an essential and artistic connection. They should be designed as part of the whole, so that they would seem obviously imperfect without their surroundings. The designs must be suitable to the material and method of reproduction, and not offer to the executant artist a thicket of unnatural difficulties, producing no result when finished save the exhibition of a *tour de force*. The executant on his side—whether he were the original designer or someone else—must understand that his business was sympathetic translation and not the mechanical reproduction of the original drawing. That meant, in other words, that the designer of the picture blocks, the designer of the ornamental blocks, the wood engraver, and the printer, should all of them be thoughtful, painstaking artists, working in harmonious co-operation for the production of the work of art. This was the only possible way in which we could get beautiful books.

MODERN BOOK ILLUSTRATION.

SIR,—Mr. William Morris, who delivered an address on "The Woodcuts of Gothic Books" before the Art Section of the Society of Arts in London, said in the course of some very interesting remarks that the executant—whether he was the original designer or someone else—must understand that his business was sympathetic translation, and not "the mechanical reproduction of the original drawing." The lecturer concluded his remarks by saying that "this was the only possible way in which we could get beautiful books and beautiful and artistic illustrations." In this matter I partly disagree with Mr. Morris. I presume that he wishes to prove that the results rest to a very large extent with the engraver, printer, &c. I would point out that if a competent artist were engaged by the publishers of such books referred to, and a fair price paid, good work would be turned out, and work that, with only ordinary care and supervision, would do credit to all concerned. If "process" (zinco) engraving were more generally used excellent results would be obtainable, provided that a good artist did the original "black and white" drawing. The great advantage of this class of work over the average wood block, is that by the aid of photography and acid on their zinc plates every line in the original is reproduced in *facsimile*. By this means it will at once be seen that when an artist gets a happy expression or a good touch of "light and shade" it is preserved, and not, as is the case more often than not in wood-engraving, entirely ignored by the workman. By this means not only are good results obtained, but at a cheaper rate, the "process" being far simpler—in fact, mechanical—more reliable, and—what Mr. Morris complains of—not wanting in artistic finish, when the original has been carefully designed by a capable man.

I am, etc.,

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