

The Arts and Crafts Movement and J.R.R. Tolkien: Middle-Earth's Imagery and Philosophy of Craft

By **Ty Rosenthal** for Tolkien 2005, August 11 – 15, 2005, Birmingham, U.K.

Abstract: Tolkien's own artwork for Middle-Earth shows clearly that he was influenced by the British Arts and Crafts movement. This paper provides a review of Tolkien's education and accomplishments in the visual arts; a comparison of Tolkien's artwork and significant Arts and Crafts pieces; and a discussion of the overlap between Arts and Crafts philosophy and Tolkien's treatment of creativity and craftsmanship in Middle-Earth, from the *Silmarils* to *hithlain* rope.

Note: The presentation on this topic given at Tolkien 2005 included many images. Selections of these, including Tolkien's own art, are reproduced in this article for the conference proceedings.

Introduction

In 1971, Tolkien recounted the following in a letter intended for a friend:

*"A few years ago I was visited in Oxford by a man whose name I have forgotten...He had been much struck by the curious way in which many old pictures seemed to him to have been designed to illustrate The Lord of the Rings long before its time. He brought one or two reproductions. I think he wanted at first simply to discover whether my imagination had fed on pictures, as it clearly had been by certain kinds of literature and languages. When it became obvious that, unless I was a liar, I had never seen the pictures before and was not well acquainted with pictorial Art, he fell silent. I became aware that he was looking fixedly at me. Suddenly he said: "Of course you don't suppose, do you, that you wrote all that book yourself?" Pure Gandalf!"*ⁱ

He admitted to his visitor "I don't suppose so any longer." But it is surprising to see that J.R.R. Tolkien, as a gifted amateur artist, did not consider himself informed about art, nor inspired by art – even though in at least one instance a character, Gandalf, was inspired by a painting.ⁱⁱ In his awkward encounter above, Tolkien does specify "pictorial Art." If he had been asked about a different type of artistic inspiration, he might have answered yes. For in both his art and his philosophical approach to art, crafts, and creativity, Tolkien was notably influenced by the British Arts and Crafts movement.

The quintessential Tolkien-and-Arts-and-Crafts image is one of his illustrations for *The Hobbit*, featuring Bilbo, as a diminutive figure on a barrel, being carried through a riverscape of flowing water and stylised trees. In its use of line, colour, and landscape, this appealing painting draws directly from Arts and Crafts stylisations.



Figure 1: "Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves", J.R.R. Tolkienⁱⁱⁱ

However, it is not the image that inspired this research. This painting shows the results of Tolkien being influenced; it does not show how the influence came about.

The following sequence of three images, also closely linked in style and related to the Arts and Crafts movement, neatly demonstrates the pathway of this influence. First, a page of casual doodles by none other than the great William Morris:



Figure 2: Sketches by William Morris, 1860s^{iv}

Compare this to this practice sheet of designs for British art students to draw:



Figure 3: London School of Art practice sheet. "

Thirty years later, the Arts and Crafts style of botanical decoration was so entrenched that similar stylised images were an art exercise for young people, under the aegis of the London School Board, everywhere that the Union Jack flew. As a boy, Tolkien received his first artistic education in the 1890s. Later on, as a mature man, he was still drawing in a similar style, as shown by this envelope:



One hundred years after Morris's doodling, at least one artist is still showing the influence of late Victorian schooldays in his stylized, symmetrical plant images. Tolkien's casual art here is not a copy of anything else – the viewer can see Tolkien's own creative fillips, and some of his own Elvish script. But the visual parallels between Tolkien's doodles and Morris's doodles are clear, and they are linked by the London School Board and Morris's own enormous influence, on British culture in general and Tolkien in particular, as the bridge. This grouping of images is what inspired my research and this presentation.

Before further analysis, I wish to note that any discussion of Tolkien's own art owes a debt to the Tolkien scholars and academics Wayne Hammond and Christina Schull, and their book *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*. Their earlier work has made the scope of Tolkien's artwork available to us, and their foresight in including certain images has made this research project possible. They discussed the link between Tolkien and the Arts and Crafts movement; the goal of this presentation was to build upon their foundation in greater detail.

About the British Arts and Crafts Movement

The British Arts and Crafts Movement was an artistic, architectural, and philosophical set of influences. Writer Steven Adams notes, "It incorporated a wide variety of artists, writers, craftsmen and women...some of its precursors were deeply conservative and looked wistfully back to a medieval past, while others were socialists and ardent reformers."^{vii} There were Protestants, Catholics, and artists from painters to potters. The movement cycled from its beginnings to its end between 1860 to the late 1930s. In its day, it impacted manufacturing, women's suffrage, and changing ideas about the role of art and nature in an industrialized society.

The seeds of Arts and Crafts were sown in earlier Victorian times, from 1830 to 1860, by Gothic architects, such as Augustus Pugin.^{viii} These architects held that medieval architecture was far superior to buildings of the then-present day. Their allies, including authors Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, objected to how much Victorian design was made using machinery, in their opinion obliterating the human aspect and "creative dignity" of craftsmanship.^{ix} In looking backwards and idealizing pre-industrial works, they had artistic kinship with the Pre-Raphaelites. These were a group of artists who rejected the academic, classical conventions embodied in the paintings of Raphael. Instead, they strove to create symbolic emotional works.^x At their beginning, the Pre-Raphaelites were a group of seven members, based in London – and including William Morris.

William Morris gently dominated British Arts and Crafts during his lifetime; today, his name is almost a synonym for the Arts and Crafts style. Tolkien himself might have wished for Morris's upbringing, in the embrace of a prosperous and affectionate family who indulged their son's medievalist interests. Morris's wealthy father even had a small suit of armour made for young Morris so that he could quest about the grounds of their house on a pony!^{xi} As a well-off young man, Morris had the time and resources to encounter the Pre-Raphaelites.

The Pre-Raphaelites created profoundly romantic paintings and poetry. Often their works expressed ideals of beauty, ones that inspired or were in tandem with the Arts and Crafts movement. Their works included themes of British folklore, often relating to Greek and Roman mythology, King Arthur and faerie/pre-Christian ideas, or illustrating the works of Shakespeare. They also favoured depictions of spirituality, both

pagan/mythological and Christian.^{xii} Their rich, romantic themes combining feminine beauty with spiritual rapture is well shown in Dante Rossetti's poem *The Blessed Damsel*, which he later accompanied with a painting.^{xiii}

Morris joined the Pre-Raphaelites with his young wife, Jane Burden. Burden was an artist in her own right, in textiles and embroidery, who would make significant contributions to the textile works of Arts and Crafts. She is more remembered for her striking good looks and for being her husband's muse and Dante Rossetti's preferred model.^{xiv} In 1860, William and Jane moved into the romantic Red House. This was commissioned by Morris, and decorated with items they and their friends had made. This lovely and idealized abode was meant to be a refuge from the ills of fast-paced modern society. It was within the walls of the Red House that the British Arts and Crafts movement really began.

Morris and his companions started up a small company, intended to be a community of "fine art workmen." Working in a variety of media, their goal was to play a part in reforming the decorative arts. With their medievalist streak and their mix of the radical and the conservative, most of their first commissions came from churches. Slowly but surely, their beautiful designs drew more admirers and commissioners.

The medieval nostalgia of Arts and Crafts became popular as a reaction against the changes brought about in Britain by industrialization and colonial expansion. Emigration and industrial work were changing lower class forever, with a great move from the countryside into cities, often into slums. Daily life for many was a hard industrial grind. George Orwell's book *The Road to Wigan Pier* provides a late, if evocative, view of this life. For those who could afford it, there was a glamorous side to the products of industrial work. Whatever was new in technology and manufacturing became popular. Processed foods were advertised. New developments in chemistry and metallurgy trickled down to change women's clothing, making steel inexpensive enough to use for corsets and crinolines, and providing vivid aniline dyes, especially shades of purple, to make clothing brighter. The Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations 1851, in the steel and glass Crystal Palace in London, extolled the virtues and products of Victorian industrialization. Fireworks, battery-operated devices, fountains, mechanical looms and reaping devices, and the architectural wonder of the Palace itself entertained the crowds. The Palace's central glass vault, encompassing a tree, was itself a visual image of technology triumphing over nature.^{xv}

At same time in Britain, a growing middle class was encroaching on the privileges of aristocracy, rising through education, successful transition into industrialized society, and as middlemen for the industrial goods. Some of the nostalgia for a simpler time of lord and knave evoked by this change was neatly channelled into the colonial urges of the British Empire, which united the middle-class virtue of successful capitalism (such as the East India company) with ideas of British superiority (exemplified in Rudyard Kipling's poem *White Man's Burden*.^{xvi}) This also caused unease by bringing in a constant stream of foreign food, foreign art, foreign textiles, and foreign people. Amidst the enticements of empire, what did being British mean?

Hence, Arts and Crafts evolved its philosophies. The most commonly quoted one today is, not surprisingly, from William Morris: "Have nothing in your homes that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful."^{xvii} As well as being appealing, this neatly sums up the Arts and Crafts belief that beauty and daily objects can and should blend together. For Morris, beautiful decoration was an "alliance with nature," and nature, in birds, trees, and access to living natural settings, was highly valued.^{xviii} So was the past. British, Celtic, and Nordic history, folklore, and myth were viewed through rose-colored

stained glass as a way of valuing British heritage and encouraging artists in Britain to find inspiration in local traditions.^{xix}

The Arts and Crafts idealists may have been the first adopters of the belief that one should “think globally, buy locally,” and they preferred to have their items made by local craftspeople, if they could not make them themselves. Arts and Crafts carpet-makers settled for Ireland’s cheaper labour as “local,” with many rugs made in Donegal. Encouraging this form of employment was the idea that practicing an art had elevating moral and spiritual qualities. Records of art and design schools in New Zealand specifically encourage working men and women to attend and better themselves.^{xx}

As well, Arts and Crafts items were to be made out of natural substances and fibres, avoiding innovations like celluloid, latex, and chemical dyes.^{xxi} These ideals were even applied to the practitioners’ bodies and emotions, with the ideas that simpler dress (especially for women) and emotional freedom would lead to health and creativity. On a spiritual level, the Arts and Crafts aesthetic was both sympathetic to pagan folklore and indubitably Christian. Both of these came together in the underlying sentiment of Arts and Crafts, that things used to be better.

Artistically, this medievalism was expressed in different styles. The Gothic revival, the Celtic revival, and recaptured rusticity all strove to evoke the Britain of a simpler time, before both industrialism and colonialism.



Figure 5: Stained glass, Burne-Jones, *The Wedding of Sir Tristram*, 1862^{xxii}

At first, professional artists created Arts and Crafts works. As the Arts and Crafts movement progressed and more learned about it, projects done at home became an important part of actualising the Arts and Crafts vision. From Morris to others, kits and classes, and items in publications, enabled those at home to become artistic crafters, too.^{xxiii} Building on the skills in handicrafts that were widespread in pre-television times, often these “homemade” or “amateur” works were indistinguishable from works being done in Morris’ studios. Women became widely involved in Arts and Crafts through this accessibility, aided by the belief that this type of artistic work was elevating and a suitable occupation for a woman. Women even became professional wood-carvers and silversmiths through Arts and Crafts school curricula.^{xxiv}

The British Arts and Crafts movement was evidently influential, but was it a success? William Morris himself came to doubt that it had achieved his goals. He observed, correctly, that much of the work produced by his companies was only for the wealthy, and that the masses were excluded from the pleasure of his vision.^{xxv} At the time of its

inception in the Victorian era, Arts and Crafts production studios only achieved a modest commercial success. In their time, the style and its related philosophies were radical and controversial, for intellectuals and, in some cases, those who wished to shock.

In its devotion to beauty and usefulness and history, Arts and Crafts sacrificed a sense of humor. This made it a tempting target for those who wanted to satirize it. The wits of the day were given further ammunition for amusement when Arts and Crafts was taken up by Aesthetes – upper-middle-class people who admired art because it was fashionable, without being very discriminating about where it came from.^{xxvi} Oscar Wilde, gazing at lilies and sunflowers for inspiration, and the idea that art need have no purpose all and that Nature was not essential, are all Aesthetic. George Du Maurier's famous Victorian cartoon *The Six-Mark Teapot* features an airheaded corruption of the Arts and Crafts credo that the things of daily life should be lovely: here they have moved into being fetishized.^{xxvii}

Arts and Crafts designs became more widely produced and accepted in the early half of 20th century, blending with other Edwardian building styles. (The related American Arts and Crafts movement, with its less idealistic approach to manufacturing, was a commercial success.) Though we think of it now as classic, Arts and Crafts was very much of its moment. Inevitably, it evolved into other artistic styles as its moment passed. In Europe, it was taken in different directions by Aesthetic works, especially Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Glasgow spaces, Art Nouveau in France, Jugendstil in Austria, and the beginnings of Modernism and the Bahaus movement.^{xxviii}

By the end of the 1940s, Arts and Crafts, as an artistic movement, was complete. But by then it had had its chance to imprint itself upon a cultural phenomenon that would reach into the 21st century; the art and writing of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Tolkien's Life and Art

Tolkien was famous for his writing, but an accomplished artist in his own right. He was modest about his artistic talents, saying the following about his illustrations for *The Hobbit*: "They are not very good and may be technically unsuitable"^{xxix}...I am also grateful and pleasantly surprised that the drawings for *The Hobbit* can be used...I now enclose 6 more. They are all obviously defective."^{xxx} Artistically, his strengths were landscapes, excellent pen-work, inventiveness, and a talent that would be given more of its due nowadays – skill with layouts and fonts. His greatest artistic weakness was anything involving a sentient two-legged being. He succinctly described his own artistic shortcomings: "I tried, but alas! Can only draw very imperfectly what I can, and not what I see."^{xxxi} We can see how this came to be if we examine his artistic education.

Tolkien was born in 1892. In 1896, his father died and he, his brother and mother went to live in the UK, at first in the semi-rural suburbs of Birmingham. He spent his early years with his grandparents, where art was an intrinsic part of the family. Humphrey Carpenter notes in his Tolkien biography that Tolkien's ancestors had been engravers. His grandfather could write the Lord's Prayer in the circumference of a sixpence, using a fine-nibbed pen, and he told young Tolkien stories of being praised by King William IV for their excellent artistic work.^{xxxii} Taught by his similarly talented mother, young Tolkien could write by the age of five – very likely in cursive. Both he and his mother had "elegant and idiosyncratic" handwriting, according to Carpenter. Tolkien's mother provided first elements of his artistic education, which continued with drawing classes at school, and in his own frequent drawing for pleasure during vacations. He sent drawings to his mother as she was in the hospital for diabetes in 1904.^{xxxiii}

Then as now, art was a part of general school education. To modern students, it would seem strictly regimented, taught by prescribed exercises and exams. By the end of his general school courses and the artistic education they provided, Tolkien's strengths and weaknesses as an artist were firmly in place. Two images drawn by Tolkien in 1910, at the age of 18, demonstrate this. First we have his pen sketch of *The Ruins of Whitby Abbey*. This elegant, brooding landscape piece is finely skilled; as with his later fiction, it uses darkness, hints of distant beauty, and the weight of the past as an integral part of its design. Compare it to Tolkien's pencil sketch of Whitby harbour, done during the same summer. This piece is strong enough – until the viewer notices the attempts at adding a few children to the streetscape. The small figures are so clumsily rendered that they seem out of place. Some time in the studio with some figure models might have rectified this, but this was not a part of a proper young person's drawing education in those days. Instead, students would have been presented with plaster parts of neutral anatomical areas, such as noses and arms. Any practice there added up to less than the whole, as the students themselves were known to remark.



Figure 6: *The Ruins of Whitby Abbey*, J.R.R. Tolkien, 1910.^{xxxvii}



Figure 7: *Details of sketch of Whitby Harbour*, J.R.R. Tolkien, 1910.^{xxxviii}

Where does the Arts and Crafts influence on Tolkien come in? By the time Tolkien was a boy and a young man, Arts and Crafts was in its later, more commercially widespread period; its mark was everywhere. One potent source of Arts and Crafts influence for young Tolkien would have been in the books he loved. The volumes of Andrew Lang's *Fairy Stories*, which Tolkien enjoyed,^{xxxvi} are a trove of romantic, Pre-Raphaelite influenced art, and he surely encountered the works of Walter Crane and Anne Greenaway.

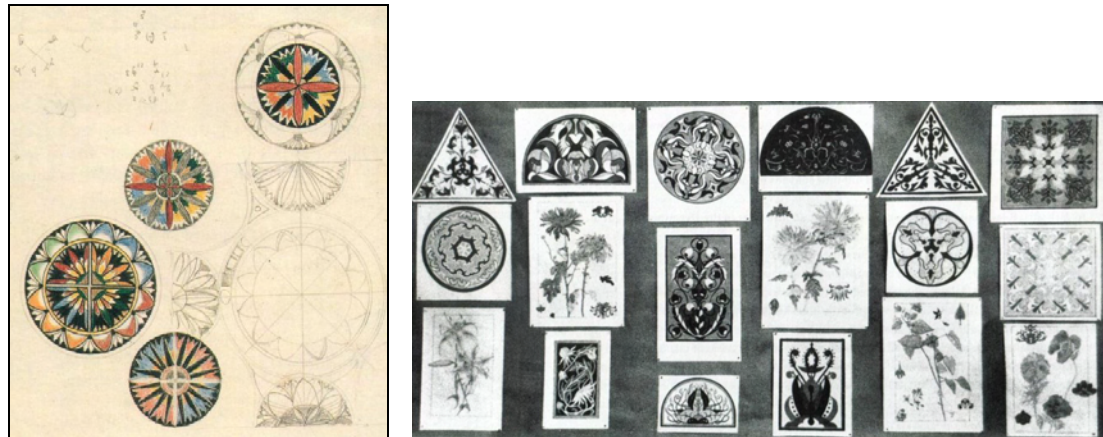
Edwardian homes were not like the fast-turnover consumer society of today. Items that entered a home, especially modest residences, were likely to stay around for a while. Not only would this include treasured Victorian children's books, but also furniture and completed needlework. In his Middle-Earth writing, Tolkien showed an unusual sensitivity to needlework, to embroidery and tapestry. *Míriel* and *Melian* and *Luthien*, with their broderies and weaving, are the female equivalents of Tolkien's talented smiths, *Fëanor*, *Celebrimbor*, and the dwarf *Telchar*. This appreciation was very probably gained from a childhood environment where needlework was present and valued.

Another link between Tolkien and the Arts and Crafts movement was his blend of medievalism with his well-known love of nature and plants, and anti-industrialism. Tolkien's own sentiments, gained in his youth in the English countryside, continued throughout his life.

His main influential encounter with an Arts and Crafts related work came in 1914. Tolkien won a literary prize with the award of five pounds. He used the money to buy some of the works of William Morris – a *Volsungsaga translation* and Morris's historical novel, *The House of the Wolfings*. The literary content of the latter, a fictionalised account of Goths on their way through Europe, had a huge writers' influence on Tolkien.^{xxxvii} If these works in their printed form bore any resemblance to Morris's own calligraphy or to the works of Morris's famous, artistically lavish Kelmscott Press, they might have imprinted Tolkien in other ways, as well. However, the Kelmscott Press did not publish *The House of the Wolfings*, so this, too, remains conjecture.

Classic Arts and Crafts Design and Tolkien's Works

In direct comparison, much of Tolkien's art is evidently influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement. One of the strongest examples is Tolkien's designs for the heraldry of his Elvish nobles. Their stylized, mandala-like squares and roundels are captured in one illustration half-completed. They are nearly identical, in form and style, to design exercises by students being taught in the British Arts and Crafts tradition, using the London School of Art methods.



Figures 8 and 9. Tolkien sketches for Elvish heraldry^{xxxviii}; completed art student exercises.^{xxxix}

Another one of Tolkien's well-known pictures, *The Foyer of Bag End* drawn for *The Hobbit*, provides us with an interior imagined by Tolkien as belonging in Middle-Earth. With its rounded lines, contrasting woodwork and plaster, and tiled floor, this hallway is strikingly similar to the hallway of Morris' own Red House, in colour, wall treatments, and even the round elements.^{xl} *The Foyer of Bag End* is one of Tolkien's few drawings of interiors. He did limn an unusual decorative element, possibly partly as an exercise in drawing a pattern, but possibly also to capture an imaginary place. One of his geometric designs is preserved with the title *Númenorean Carpet*. It use of colour and repeating swirls and diamonds, yet again, bears comparison to Arts and Crafts design, this time for carpets. Rugs by William Morris also showed similar elements, albeit Morris rugs, meant to be manufactured, are simpler in design. (Most rug designs of the Arts and Crafts period became more streamlined between the design drawing and the actual carpet.)



Figures 9 and 10. “Númenorean Carpet” by Tolkien^{xli} contrasted with a William Morris design carpet.^{xlii}

Tolkien did other pieces to capture the reality of his imaginary place, devoting special care to illuminated manuscripts, something that was done by members of the Arts and Crafts movement, and that is still a popular past time for medieval hobbyists today. The pieces of Tolkien’s calligraphy that are well known were limned fairly late in his life, and they bespeak both artistic confidence and confidence as a writer, that his ideas and designs deserved to have this much time and detail lavished upon them. Some of these works of Tolkien’s, namely the calligraphy of *Dangweth Pengolodh: The Answer of Pengolod*, are done in English.^{xliii} For this piece, it is consonant with Tolkien’s imagined history of the text within, that it was a recorded discussion between an Elf and a mortal man, with the latter returning to Middle-Earth. In the imagined logic of Middle-Earth, such a manuscript could indeed exist in English.^{xliiv} Other pieces, like the letter in Elvish calligraphy from King Aragorn to Samwise,^{xlv} are almost entirely fantastic, posited entirely in Middle-Earth and inaccessible to all but the most ardent scholars of Tolkien’s imagined languages. This letter bears comparisons to several of the works produced by William Morris’s Kelmscott Press. In many cases (especially with Morris’s own novel, *The Glittering Plain*) the Kelmscott manuscripts were so encrusted in ornamentation that they are difficult to read, to approach as anything but an artistic object, yet this profound richness also enhances the idea that the text may be a true chronicle of the fairie days of yore. The Kelmscott Press produced a less lavish volume of *Beowulf*; Tolkien may have seen this, or perhaps even possessed a copy.

Art and Creativity in Middle-Earth

Arts and Crafts philosophy, as well as art, overlaps with Tolkien’s Middle-Earth. The man and the movement shared many qualities; closeness to nature, valuing folklore, and appreciation of fine works of craft.

As Arts and Crafts did, Tolkien exalted artisans. In his Middle-Earth writings, he praises the beautiful things made by Elves most of all, followed closely by the Dwarves, but he also made skilled craftsmanship an attribute of his hobbits and good mortal men. In *Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel’s gifts to the Fellowship^{xlivi} exemplify the “beautiful and useful” adage. When the hobbits are in trouble, these gifts provide aid, sometimes in unexpected ways – as when Sam uses the hithlain rope to bind Gollum, or Pippin leaves his elven-brooch as a signal for Aragorn. With Pippin’s brooch, its glittering beauty, catching the eye amidst the mire of the orcs’ passing, gives it its purpose. The virtues of the hithlain rope are subtler. The rope is described as “strong, silken to the touch, grey of hue like

the elven-cloaks.”^{xlvi} This item of craft is accorded special notice, and Samwise has an unusually friendly exchange with an elf about the hithlain rope, where it turns out that rope making is something both he and the Elves have in common.

The most persistently useful of the elven-gifts, in a gentle way, are the elven-cloaks, and these incorporate Tolkien’s ideas of the “divine sub-creative”^{xlvi} into material creativity. These cloaks camouflage the ones who wear them with their surroundings, something that keeps the hobbits hidden from the orcs on several occasions.

“It was hard to say what colour they were: grey with the hue of twilight under the trees they seemed to be; and yet if they were moved, or set in another light, they were green as shadowed leaves, or brown as fallow fields by night, dusk-silver as water under the stars...”

“Are these magic cloaks?” asked Pippin, looking at them with wonder.

“I do not know what you mean by that,” answered the leader of the Elves. “...They are Elvish robes certainly, if that is what you mean. Leaf and branch, water and stone: they have the hue and beauty of all these things under the twilight of Lórien that we love; for we put the thought of all that we love into all that we make.”^{xlv}

In a more general sense, Tolkien showed his esteem for craft by always including it in the pleasant zeniths of his civilizations. In Valinor, the Elves are masons, gemwrights, and boat-builders, and their wives talented weavers and embroiderers. Menegroth is a marvel of Dwarven architecture and Elvish arts, adorned with the tapestries woven by Melian. Later, when the fall of Númenor is mourned, there is special mention of “its jewels and its webs and its things painted and carven.”¹ In *The Hobbit*, the Dwarves reminisce about the pre-dragon days of Erebor by saying, “The poorest of us had money to lend and to spend, and leisure to make beautiful things just for the fun of it.”^{li} And when Sauron is toppled, Minas Tirith is rebuilt with a blend of art and nature. “...the City was made more fair than it had ever been, even in the days of its first glory; and it was filled with trees and with fountains, and its gates were wrought of mithril and steel, and its streets were paved with white marble; and the Folk of the Mountain laboured in it, and the Folk of the Wood rejoiced to come there.”^{lii} In Middle-Earth, both paradise and happy endings open up space and time for people to be creative.

As a corollary to all this crafty virtue, there are also creative vices; over-reaching for power through created objects, and greed of those objects. Evil begins when art and treasures are withheld. With good characters, Elves give away gems and Bilbo is generous with his wealth at the end of his adventures. In contrast, Fëanor’s hoarding of the Silmarils leads to selfishness that is the final death of the Two Trees of Valinor. He refuses to give his works up to be destroyed, so that their light can bring the Two Trees back to life. The evil Vala Morgoth then steals the jewels, inciting a long, bitter, and ultimately useless war.^{liii}

This theme is repeated with greater sophistication with Tolkien’s concepts of the Rings of Power. Those who fall under the spell of the One Ring inevitably find it a beautiful object, its loveliness and its power equally alluring. The Rings of Power were marred from the beginning by ulterior motives by their creators. Sauron’s motivation in creating the One Ring was pure control. As for the Elves who helped, Tolkien has described their way of overstepping the bounds of “good” creativity, crossing the fine line between art and technology. “The particular ‘desire’ of the Eregion Elves – an ‘allegory’ if you like of their love of machinery, and technical devices...”^{liv} With the Rings that preserve life, they are trying to overcome nature and fate in Middle-Earth, and in this letter, Tolkien notes that the evil and distorted power that results is the toxic by-product of this, the

equivalent of industrial pollution. Like the nature-loving hearts of Arts and Crafts philosophers, Tolkien disliked industry and its “dehumanising” effects. Sublimating industrial urges to beauty makes them seductive, and all the more troublesome, unlike the ugly signifiers of evil that Tolkien shows us with the engines of Isengard in *The Two Towers*, and Ted Sandyman’s mechanized mill in *Return of the King*. In Middle-Earth, Art cannot save Industry.

To overcome hoarding and industry, in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, the solution is a generous return to nature. In an eco-parable,^{lv} Isengard is destroyed by the tree-shepherds the Ents and the tree-people the Huorns, as if one of William Morris’s wallpaper designs had come to life with vengeful intent. Treasures, works of craft, are at their best when given away. The kindly hobbits institutionalise this with the practice of giving mathoms, pleasant items that are endlessly circulated as presents. For more troublesome things, Tom Bombadil, in *FOTR*, is confronted with the treasure-hoard of the barrow-wights. “He bade (the treasures) lie there ‘free to all finders, birds, beasts, Elves or Men, and all kindly creatures,’ for so the spell of the mound should be broken and scattered and no Wight ever come back to it.”^{lvi} Bilbo, as well, gives away most of the dragon-treasure and troll-plunder that he gains, saying that he felt it never really belonged to him, and later disburses many of his belongings when he leaves The Shire, showing a socialist urge that the Arts and Crafts progressives would have admired. The circulation and free giving of treasures, making beauty available to many, echoes the goals of the Arts and Crafts companies (some of which operated at a persistent financial loss).^{lvii}

An incident in *FOTR* brings together these three themes of virtuous creativity, the evil of hoarding and industry, and the power in being freehanded with beauty. During the gift-giving scene in Lothlórien, Galadriel asks Gimli what he would have as a gift from her, and, struck by her beauty, he asks for a single strand of her hair, to treasure in memory of friendship and beauty. Galadriel agrees, and also gives him the blessing that gold shall flow from his hands, but have no dominion over him.^{lviii} This fate, too, hearkens back to Arts and Crafts ideals, of devotion to beauty rather than to industrial lucre. It is fitting that it is bestowed by a character that, with her white robes and flowing hair, might have been modelled on a Pre-Raphaelite beauty.

Tree, Leaf, and Conclusion

One of the images that appear most often in Tolkien’s writing is that of a beautiful, symbolically significant tree. There are Laurelin and Telperion, the trees that once lit the land of the Valar; the White Tree Galathion and its scions, which indicate that the royal line of Elendil continues; the mallorn that grows and blooms in the Shire; and the perfect Tree idealized by Niggle, which may exist only in the allegorical afterlife. This Tree also appeared in Tolkien’s artwork. “I have among my ‘papers’ more than one version of a mythical ‘tree’, which crops up regularly at those times when I feel driven to pattern-designing.... the tree bears besides various shapes of leaves many flowers large and small signifying poems and major legends...”^{lix}

The trees that inspired this in Tolkien may have been, as well as in nature, in the art of his time. For images of trees occur again and again throughout Arts and Crafts design. Hangings, embroideries, and decorative motifs repeat this image, at times in ways that seem to overlap with Tolkien’s own visualizations.



Figures 9 and 10: C.F. Voysey carpet design,^{lx} Tolkien drawing “The Tree of Anarion”^{lxi}

This C.F. Voysey carpet design of an elaborate tree is here compared to a Tolkien tree sketch. They both share curving lines and diverse leaves and flowers. Tolkien’s tree is more varied. His drawing is titled *The Tree of Anarion*, but it evokes a tree from another piece of his writing, the short story *Leaf by Niggle*. In this story, a great and glorious tree was persistently imagined by its artist, but never fully captured in paint, due to the artist’s procrastination and the demands of the outside world. After the metaphorical “journey of death,”^{lxii} in the transcendent story, Niggle comes to a land where his Tree, the Tree that he imagined, existed. Looking upon his artist’s visualization made real, Niggle declares, “It’s a gift!”

It is a poignant moment worth considering as we look back over Tolkien’s art. The *Leaf by Niggle*, tale, with its gifted but limited and procrastinating protagonist, is often seen as a metaphor for Tolkien’s relationship to his writing. But it might also have been about Tolkien’s relationship to his artwork. As Tolkien expressed about himself, Niggle’s artistic talents do not match his visions: “Niggle was a painter. Not a very successful one...He had a large number of pictures on hand: most of them were too large and ambitious for his skill.”^{lxiii} In this allegorical story, after several trials and tribulations, Niggle is rewarded with the experience of being in a world where the painting he has most wished to do, of a diverse, fruit- and bird-laden tree, is made real. More than that, the Tree’s setting combines the reality of a landscape with the charm of a painting’s vista. “You could go on and on, and have a whole country in a garden, or perhaps a picture.” Best of all for Niggle, in this locale he experiences Tolkien’s ideal of “creative paradise,” for this landscape calls out for more creative refining and completion by him, Niggle, and his friend, Parish. When Parish arrives, the two of them work together in this way. It has echoes of the creative communities of the Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts companies. And when Niggle is ready to move on, more creativity awaits for Parish’s wife, when it is her turn to arrive. The men have imagined the trees and forests and gardens, but the house awaits her touch. “She’ll make it better, I expect.”^{lxiv} Is there any question as to what style of design Tolkien imagined her using?

Those of us who appreciate Tolkien's creativity in all its forms can look back gratefully to the Arts and Crafts movement as part of what moved and empowered Tolkien, though he may have seen his own artwork more as Niggle's leaf than as Niggle's completed Tree.

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- ^{xi} Parry, Linda, ed., *William Morris*. London, UK, Philip Wilson Publishers Limited, 1996.
- ^{xii} Cooper, 2003.
- ^{xiii} <http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem1763.html>, University of Toronto.
- ^{xiv} Naylor, 1998.
- ^{xv} <http://www.ric.edu/rpotter/cryspal.html>, Rice University.
- ^{xvi} "Take up the White Man's burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child." – from the poem *White Man's Burden*, Rudyard Kipling, 1899.
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- ^{xix} Anscombe et al, 1978.
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- ^{xxi} Naylor, 1998.
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- ^{xxiv} Calhoun, 2000.
- ^{xxv} Naylor, 1998.
- ^{xxvi} Adams, 1987.
- ^{xxvii} Ibid. Caption of cartoon: "AESTHETIC BRIDEGROOM: It is quite consummate, is it not?" INTENSE BRIDE: "It is, indeed! Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!"
- ^{xxviii} Adams, 1987.
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- lvi "Fog on the Barrow-Downs," *FOTR*.
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