

MODERN ART OXFORD

Love is Enough: William Morris & Andy Warhol

A transcription of a discussion between Jeremy Deller, Eric Shiner (Director of the Warhol Museum) and Anna Mason (Chief Curator of the William Morris Gallery)

With an invited audience at the Oxford Union Library, July 4th 2014

JD: For me these two artists have a lot in common. Let's start with their childhoods. Maybe Anna could talk about William Morris's, examining his interests as a child.

AM: It was a very affluent childhood, unlike Andy Warhol's, but he was quite closeted by his mother. He was the eldest son who survived and had quite poor health, so he spent a lot of time reading and exploring books. He grew up in Walthamstow on the edge of London, in Epping Forest, so the outdoors and the natural world was very important to him. One of the most important books he had as a child was *Gerard's Herbal* (first published in 1597) all about plants and their properties. He had his own garden.

As a child he also discovered the medieval world, through things like Walter Scott's novels, which he claimed later that he had read all of them by the age of seven. But also he had a little suit of armour. He used to ride around in his suit of armour on a Shetland pony, imagining that he was a medieval knight, and that kind of aspiration stayed with him through the rest of his life really.

ES: And it's quite interesting that, of course, Warhol grew up in incredibly humble surroundings. Julia, his mother, was the driving force in his life and Julia happened to be an artist, a drawer. She loved to draw angels and cats and Andy was her chief assistant in all of those things. Of course, he was also a sickly child – he had a neurological condition called St Vitus's Dance – and stayed home for two years because of that. Unlike Morris, who was outside in nature, Warhol was the exact opposite and stayed in his room and built a little fort out of sheets on his bed and played with paper dolls.

He started at around that time to take photographs with a Brownie camera that his mother had bought for him. They even built a darkroom in the basement so that he could develop his own photographs, again around the age of nine or ten. That was also when he began to collect Hollywood movie stars' pictures, which was his way out, his way to fantasise and to aspire to something else – it was all around celebrity and fame and wealth.

For example, the picture of Shirley Temple, which is in our collection, was Andy's prized possession. We have the album of all of his autographed celebrity movie star pictures, of which there are dozens. That's, I think, what allowed him to think of a world, a life beyond the very rough world of Pittsburgh at that time. The Shirley Temple photograph is signed to Andrew Warhola. She was merely four months older than him and I know that he wanted to be as famous and as glamorous as she was.

JD: This photograph is one of the key moments of the exhibition; for me, it is the template for his future career – within this image you have Marilyn, Jackie, Liz, all the women that he idolised and then went on to depict.

ES: Absolutely. We call the album 'our Rosetta stone'. When you see the arrangement of celebrities in grids, that's where it all starts.

JD: Yes. So the exhibition will have this work with his later female portraits opposite *The Attainment of the*

Holy Grail (1893) by Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. That image of Shirley Temple is a holy-grail image of eternal youth. These images, this whole mythology around Hollywood and around medieval Britain are key. Could you talk a little bit about Morris's interests, especially as we're here in this room, in relation to the paintings we have around us?

AM: The murals on the ceiling here, were Morris's first attempt really at being an artist; it was very collaborative – Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Burne-Jones. In a fit of youthful enthusiasm, they volunteered to paint these murals free of charge, apart from their materials and lodging costs. They chose as their subject matter the Arthurian legends and that wasn't particularly fashionable at the time. Actually in Oxford, other monuments were being put up of scientists and the classical age, but this is what they chose to focus on, partly because of the romance of it all, I think.

There was something about the quest for the Holy Grail, the quest for truth, the kind of pure spirituality of it that really appealed to them. Although later in life Morris lost his faith, whilst at university at Oxford, he had plans with Burne-Jones to set up a monastic order and that's what they were going to do with their lives.

JD: His idea of community is very interesting – of working with groups of people to make work. When you think of the Factory and those great images of people just hanging out and being around - Warhol was social, he was quite private as well, but he liked having people around.

ES: He *loved* having people around and loved the role of voyeur, standing off to the side and watching things unfold and certain dramas that might develop. That's what he enjoyed. But of course the Factory and the concept of working with studio assistants and making paintings in an assembly-line technique were critical to an understanding of how Andy was producing.

JD: Morris was about 19 when he was painting the Oxford murals, what was Warhol doing at this age?

ES: Probably around the age of 20 he started working at Horne's department store in downtown Pittsburgh doing the store windows and was on that team. We actually have a very early – and the only known example to exist – stencilled vase, an urn of flowers, that he made for that window. I assume he cut it out of the drywall, took it home and gifted it to his mother, which is the only reason that I can think of that it still exists, that he wanted to give it to his mother because she loved flowers. We have that on extended loan from the Warhola family right now.

JD: Flowers, a motif that we associate with Morris above all others.

ES: Oh absolutely, whereas Warhol's flowers are very far away from nature, very far.

AM: So are Morris's in a way. When he was creating his first designs, he was trying to get away from the very realistic depictions of flowers that were fashionable at the time. So although they're not as abstract as Warhol's they are still stylised and they are still quite two-dimensional, which is what he was aiming for.

JD: If we think about the Factory set up and how Warhol worked, I do think about all these other people that were coming in and out and who were working with him in a multimedia environment. It's similar to the way that Morris worked. When you think of what multimedia would have been in Victorian England, it would have been stained glass, book engravings, tapestry – different methods of fabric printing and so on. Morris centralised that production and was really involved in almost every element of art making, apart from classical painting.

AM: He had a go at painting. He discovered he wasn't very good at it so he gave it up. I think that really collaborative stuff happened more in the first ten years or so when it was him and his bunch of friends

and it was genuinely everyone having a go. When he set up the Morris & Co. factory at Merton Abbey in 1881, it was a lot more structured. There were sort of apprentices and people being told what to do. He never achieved that thing you were talking about with everyone designing and making, it didn't really happen that way.

JD: What is so interesting about Morris, you don't think of him as being a businessman in the way that Warhol celebrated the idea of business and art. But actually Morris... When did he have the shop on Oxford Street?

AM: 1877.

JD: So in 1877 he had a shop on Oxford Street with his name on the front. No artist since has been able to achieve that on the main shopping street in London. Even though he wasn't necessarily a businessman in the traditional sense, he obviously was very good at business.

AM: I don't think he tried to hide it, I think it's something that people have done later on. By that point – he was born wealthy or he came into wealth – but after that he had to make his business work. He created a very, very strong brand identity that was recognised not just in the UK but in America and Canada, all around the world and I think he was quite proud of that. It wasn't just about making money, it was about sharing his approach to art and what art should be like and the whole philosophy about the way we should surround ourselves with things, and what those things should look and be like. What we now would call a brand identity.

ES: Warhol was doing the same exact thing and was equal parts entrepreneur and artist. It was about forming the brand 'Warhol'. His company was called Andy Warhol Enterprises, which was a play on words I think in that he was very enterprising and was all about getting that message and that aesthetic out to all corners of the world. It's interesting thinking about Morris's early interactions with Rossetti and other artists. Warhol too had very close friends from right out of the shoots who went on to great fame – the artist Philip Pearlstein being the most predominant of those.

They were in college together, they moved to New York together and they were roommates for several months from the get go. Each went their separate ways but they certainly had numerous conversations about their careers and their art-making processes. In terms of collaborations, Andy starts collaborating with his mother from childhood and then she moves to New York with him to actually become part of the art-making process. So any text you see in any 1950s commercial drawing is all Warhol's mother doing that text, even signing his name. So you think about Morris's collaboration with his wife, Warhol was doing that with his mother.

JD: What interests me is that they both are from industrial backgrounds, Morris from a mine owning wealthy family, Warhol from the steel town of Pittsburgh.

AM: His attitude to industry and machinery was a bit more complex than people make out. He wasn't opposed to it per se, it was kind of letting machines rule your lives that he had a problem with. I think he'd feel the same about email now, for example, the way it takes over and stops you from doing real, genuine creative work. So yes, he had a problem with huge factories and insanitary conditions, but he also had machinery in his workshops when it played a useful function.

JD: We have a design for wallpaper from the William Morris Society with, 'To be mechanically printed', written in his own handwriting. There are two quotes by him; 'Machines... I myself have boundless faith in their capacity'. It's true; he saw a use for machinery. 'Make it mechanical with a vengeance', was another. Warhol grew up in an industrial environment which he found quite difficult later in life.

ES: He would constantly tell people he was from Cleveland or from Buffalo. He was very conscious about the idea of creating a myth – the myth of Andy Warhol – so that there was never a true answer of his upbringing, of his past, and I think that was to keep people guessing. And ultimately he, of course, went on to making the myths paintings, of which he inserted himself in as the last character, called the 'last shadow', building a mythology around himself. That was very central to his thinking; he didn't want anyone to be able to pin him down perfectly.

JD: Was it a class issue?

ES: I think it was slightly. In certain ways he was very apologetic about his upbringing and kept that hidden. Later on his mother moved to New York in 1952, about 18 months after he did. He would often tell his socialite friends that she was the maid, which was not the nicest thing to say. So he was a little bit embarrassed of his upbringing I believe. Of course by the late 1960s and 70s, he's hobnobbing with the wealthiest people in the world and he became incredibly wealthy himself.

AM: I think that's one important difference. Morris never tried to create a cult of personality around himself. He was never that interested in his self-image.

JD: We have done it for him though.

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