The Architectural Theory of William Morris

The period of William Morris’s public career, which lasted from 1877 to his death in 1896, was one of crisis in the British economy. The onset of the ‘Great Depression’ (c.1875–1895) marked the end of the period of prosperity that the country had enjoyed since mid-century, inaugurating a period of declining profits and rising unemployment which came to a head in the mid-1880s. The sense that the mid-Victorian ‘age of equilibrium’ had passed was reinforced first by the election in 1874 of a strong Tory government under Disraeli, marking the end of the Whig–Liberal dominance which dated back to 1846, and then by the troubles, both at home and abroad, of the Liberal government under Gladstone which was returned in 1880. Already by 1880 Morris noted that the ‘century of commerce’ had not been able to ‘spread peace and justice throughout the world, as at the end of its first half we fondly hoped it would’.

The economic crisis of the late 1870s brought with it a return of doubts and anxieties about Britain’s industrial economy on a scale that had not been seen since the crisis of the 1840s. Critiques of society first formulated in the 1840s – whether by Carlyle, Ruskin or Marx – but largely ignored during the boom years experienced a revival of interest. In this process Morris (1834–1896) played a prominent part. His lectures from 1877 onwards explicitly revived the ideas first published by Ruskin around the mid-century, above all in ‘The Nature of Gothic’. In his first public lecture, in December 1877, on ‘The Decorative Arts’, Morris invoked Ruskin’s mid-century teaching:

if I did not know the value of repeating a truth again and again, I should have to excuse myself to you for saying any more about this, when I remember how a great man now living has spoken of it: I mean my friend Professor John Ruskin: if you read the chapter in the 2nd vol. of his ‘Stones
3.1 William Morris, photographed by Frederick Hollyer (1887)