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Museum Catalogue Record: William Morris's *News From Nowhere*

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## Museum Catalogue Record: William Morris's *News From Nowhere*

MADELEINE SEYS

Object: The Utopian Museum

Material: William Morris's *News From Nowhere*; or, *An Epoch of Rest, Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*

Date: 1890

### HISTORY

THE VICTORIAN period saw the rise of the museum and the novel as dominant cultural and intellectual forms. Both museums and novels used reason and description to categorize and organize facts and artifacts in order to tell stories, connecting earlier events to the culture and politics of the Victorian period. Novels and museums are, alike, repositories for narrative. In Victorian museum practice, catalogues such as the British Museum's

*Catalogue of Printed Books: Homer* (1890) document the provenance, description, and condition of an artifact in constructing a narrative of its history and significance. These categories were codified in museum collection accession practice throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A similar logic to that which informs the museum catalogue is evident in the structure of the nineteenth-century novel. Here, background information provides a narrative's history and provenance, build-up utilizes description as a literary technique, the novel's climax is a complication of that description (as is an artifact's condition), and its resolution concludes the narrative and assesses the novel's significance. As Mieke Bal states, "Collecting is an essential human feature that originates in the need to tell stories" (103); the museum and the novel both represent and explore this need.

William Morris's 1890 novel, *News from Nowhere*, bears witness to the influence of the museum as a cultural site, as a collection, and as a form of storytelling in Victorian literature. Morris presents his novel, subtitled *An Epoch of Rest, Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*, as a collection of textual artifacts, in the form of chapters, through which he describes and explores a utopian future. The museum is an important literal and symbolic site in *News from Nowhere*. It is crucial to the novel's narrative strategy and utopian function and provides a framework for analyzing it. The museum is also a significant cultural site and narrative metaphor in other late-Victorian utopian and dystopian novels, including H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1899). Barbara J. Black's *On Exhibit: Victorians and Their Museums* examines the utopian impulse of Victorian collecting culture and how literature responds to this impulse in its representations of the future. She argues that Morris's museum in *News From Nowhere* represents a "social criticism targeted at the future of a society committed to imperialism and industrialism" (168). Instead of being a "guarded national treasury, the museum plays back the history of its own institutional inception" (167).

In this essay, I use the museum catalogue as a form for exploring Morris's utopian representation of the Victorian period, taking history, provenance, description, condition, and significance as subheadings to structure my analysis. In doing so, I continue this process of self-consciously examining the museum as an object of and subject for narrative and history. Like Morris, I look at the Victorian period, in this case its literature, through the epistemologies of the museum. As a short form of analysis that explores the connection between objects and narratives, and the significance of the past (provenance) in understanding the present (significance), the museum catalogue record is the ideal form for literary analysis that is attentive to the historical, material, and poetic aspects of the Victorian novel.

#### PROVENANCE

From the Greek, *museum* means the "seat of the muses" (Siegel 3); in its modern usage, these muses are material rather than mythic, and the museum

is an institution for the collection, protection, preservation, and exhibition of objects of historical and artistic value (Siegel 3; Maleuvre 9). During the Victorian period, the museum emerged as an object of and a subject for the defining intellectual and cultural activities of collecting, categorization, and exhibition. In the years that have followed, the Victorian period itself has become an object to exhibit in museums, with both institutions and their artifacts functioning as icons of this era.

In 1967, Germaine Bazin described the nineteenth century as “the Age of the Museum” (qtd. in Siegel 3). This is true both literally and metaphorically. The British Museum was established in 1753, and between 1820 and 1914, over four hundred museums were founded in Great Britain (Siegel vii). These institutions, ranging from small regional museums to the grand buildings of South Kensington, represent the nineteenth-century desire to collect, categorize, and catalogue the world and, in doing so, to find and strengthen Victorian Britain’s place within it (Siegel 2). The museum was one of the main public institutions of the modern city and became a locus for ideas about citizenship, democracy, scholarship, education, and British colonialism. Didier Maleuvre states that the “museum penetrated the cultural consciousness of the nineteenth century” (4); however, it is equally true that the Victorian cultural consciousness produced the museum. The museum represents Victorian rationality, historiography, geography, politics, and visual and literary cultures. It maps nineteenth-century hierarchies of race, gender, and class onto gallery spaces and the intellectual practices of collection, interpretation, and exhibition. The Victorian museum represents confidence in the authority of a singular, impartial, and hegemonic history of the world. In built heritage and in narrative histories, the Victorian museum persists through ensuing decades and becomes an artifact of the nineteenth century, preserved through careful curation, or happy accident, to represent the epistemologies of the period. This role is evident in Morris’s *News From Nowhere*, in which the museum functions both as a cultural and scholastic institution and as a narrative strategy.

#### DESCRIPTION

*News From Nowhere* constructs an image of the future of Great Britain. William Guest falls asleep upon returning from the Socialist League and awakes in a future Britain that is run according to the principals of democracy and common ownership. Morris’s future may be utopian; however, it is informed by a curation and interpretation of the nineteenth-century as an historical object. Both history and future are represented in *News From Nowhere*’s utopian museum.

In the opening chapters of the novel, William offers to pay a “waterman” for transporting him down the Thames. His offer is met with confusion,

and he is told payment “seems to us a troublesome and roundabout custom” (Morris 7). The waterman adds:

As to your coins, they are curious, but not very old; they seem to be all of the reign of Victoria; you might give them to some scantily-furnished museum. Ours has enough of such coins, besides a fair number of earlier ones, many of which are beautiful, whereas these nineteenth century ones are so beastly ugly, ain't they? (8)

The waterman concludes this speech by describing “a piece of Edward III” held in the museum’s collection, “with the king in a ship, and little leopards and *fleurs-de-lys* all along the gunwale” (8). Morris describes and analyzes William’s Victorian coins as artifacts for accession into a museum catalogue and collection. He dates and describes the coins, and assesses their provenance, rarity, and significance to the collection, concluding that they are curious but “ugly” (8) and largely worthless. This negative assessment of the coins functions as a metaphor for Victorianism’s broader loss of currency in this utopian future. This is represented, on a larger scale, through William’s description of the condition of the British Museum.

#### CONDITION

The museum’s function as a repository of Victorian values and artifacts is emphasized when William happens upon the British Museum. He is told that, although its collections and library are considered to be of interest, the building itself is “ugly” and “old” (8) and “many people have wanted to pull it down” (43). However, the guide condescends, “It is not a bad thing to have some record of what our forefathers thought a handsome building” (43). This emphasizes the loss of currency, both monetary and cultural, of Victorianism in this utopian future. The Victorian coins and British Museum have, at best, curious or incidental value. Likewise, Windsor Castle, once an icon of the strength and authority of Britain, is used for housing, although it does have a museum, described by the guide as “a well arranged store of antiquities of various kinds that have seemed worth keeping” (139). In *News From Nowhere*, the rejection and repurposing of the Victorian coins, museum, and castle represent the disintegration of Victorianism and the Victorian museum. As the climax of the novel, this scene marks a change in approach to the Victorian museum and its collection and interpretation of objects and narratives.

During the Victorian period, museums championed the strength of the British Empire through the collection and exhibition of its objects. In Morris’s utopian future, the condition of the museum offers not so much a celebration of Victorian imperialism and industrialization as a critique of

these discourses. During a discussion of the “world-market,” colonialism, civilization, and slavery, an “old man” points to the museum and says:

I have read books and papers in there, telling strange stories indeed of the dealings of civilization (or organised misery) . . . from the time when the British Government deliberately sent blankets infected with small-pox as choice gifts to inconvenient tribes of Red-skins, to the time when Africa was infested by a man named Stanley, who — (Morris 81)

Though the old man is interrupted, his speech re-establishes the utopian “museum” as a site for exhibiting and recording British colonialism, not through the artifacts that the Victorians collected but via the invasions and atrocities that brought them to Britain (Morris 81). This institution serves the function, as Darby Lewes observes, of the “utopian museums . . . designed . . . along the lines of academies, where students of history can learn never to repeat it” (7). As such, the utopian museum and its collection have a political as well as historical function: representing “an as-yet non-existent new world” to which Morris aspires (Beaumont 214).

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Representing Victorian Britain—and its values, institutions, and narratives—through the lens of a utopian romance, Morris anticipates the move toward postcolonial and decolonizing approaches to scholarship and museum practice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Today, the museum persists as a site for collecting, interpreting, and exhibiting histories. These are not, however, the hegemonic and celebratory histories that filled the Victorian museum. Instead, scholars, curators, and artists, like Morris before them, reconsider and interrogate the objects and narratives of the Victorian period without evading their ugliness and violence. In using the museum catalogue record as a framework for this reading of Morris’s *News From Nowhere*, I have demonstrated how both the Victorian museum and novel use background (history and provenance), build-up (description), climax (condition), and resolution (significance) as critical and narrative tools in exploring the past and creating a utopian image of the future. Black argues that the museum of Victorian utopian fiction does not function as a repository of objects but self-consciously “plays back the history of its own institutional inception” (167). This analysis both examines and practically demonstrates this idea in exploring Morris’s utopian museum in *News from Nowhere* and establishes the significance of the museum record as a tool for analyzing the form and significance of Victorian textual and material objects.

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Women in the Victorian Art Museum:  
Travels with Eurydice and Flora

JO DEVEREUX

IN 1899, *Woman's Life* published an essay titled "How to Succeed as an Artist," by successful woman artist Henrietta Rae (1859–1928). Subtitled "Miss Henrietta Rae Gives Some Valuable Advice," the article opens with a surprising recommendation to women: "never to become artists at all" (161). Rae's reasons for giving this "not consoling advice" include the difficulty involved in making a living as a professional artist, as well as the strain on one's health, and the discouragement women artists like Rae were regularly subjected to in this period (161). In this regard, Rae recalls one instance (of many in her lifetime) illustrative of the kind of condescending experience that women artists and art students could then expect to face:

I remember when I was a student [at the Royal Academy Schools] that a life study stood on my easel, and two men, ignoring entirely my presence, began discussing it. "There's style about that thing, anyhow," one of them said. "Yes," replied the other, "damned bad style." It was rather disconcerting, but I didn't mind—much. (162)

In spite—or perhaps because—of this early dampening experience, Rae became one of the few women in the later decades of the nineteenth century to exhibit nude paintings at the Royal Academy and other galleries, beginning with *A Bacchante* and *Ariadne Deserted by Theseus* in 1885, and continuing with