

Inspiration from Nature

Activity Sheet Teachers' Notes:

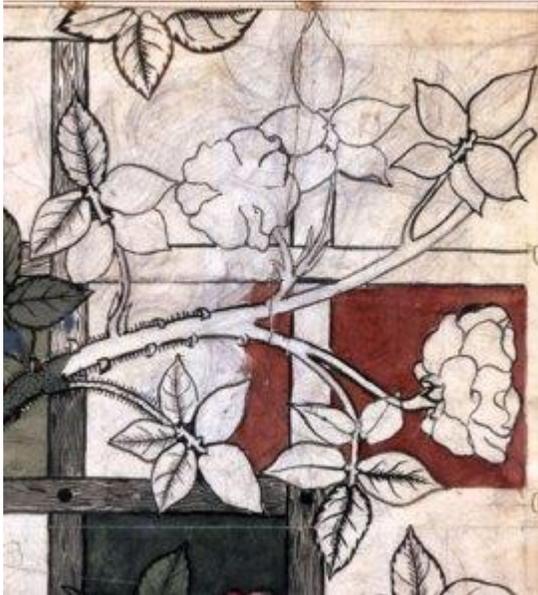
Key Stage 2

Galleries 2, 3 4 & 5



WILLIAM
MORRIS
GALLERY

1. INSPIRED BY NATURE



Works looked at: *Trellis* wallpaper in Gallery 2. Morris's original design (1862) and a modern reprint of the wallpaper

What plants and animals can you see in this design?

The plant is a rose bush – spot the thorns.

There are two types of bird: a short-beaked brown one similar to a sparrow, and a longer beaked crested yellow bird, possibly based on a crested jay or waxwing but hard to identify specifically.

Draw something from the final wallpaper..

There are also tiny insects flying in the wallpaper and for the really sharp sighted, a beetle on one of the roses (the bottom one in the design).

Which parts of the design did he do first and which last?

This can be worked out with some careful looking and thinking! Think about what overlaps what and therefore had to be drawn first.

Morris would need to put the trellis in first as the **squared framework** of the design then overlap the plants and animals around this.

- Look at the top right hand corner of the design for evidence of Morris's first thoughts and changing his mind. This is rare as most of Morris' later designs appear perfectly thought out.
- You can see faint pencil outlines where he has changed the position of the leaves.

When he was happy, Morris drew the outline of a leaf lightly, then more heavily with black ink; then he added lines to show the inner detail of the leaf veins; then he painted on colour.

He didn't colour any more because as the design repeats beyond this section this gives enough information.

- **Additional question:** *why do you think the background squares are painted different colours? Why do you think he chose blue for the final design background?*

He was working out different colourways. Blue sets off the design by contrasting with the foreground and best fits with creating the feeling of being in a garden. The design chimes with descriptions of Morris's garden at the Red House which had 'wattled rose. Morris was very happy here so this design would have had personal significance.

What do you think is realistic/not realistic about the way the plants and flowers are growing?

This is a harder, 'think about' question to encourage students to consider the way Morris adapted nature to suit the purpose of the design.

- Think about the directions the rose bush is growing in –

What would happen to roses growing on a trellis in your garden? All the stems seem to be growing sideways – none are growing out towards us or backwards.

- Morris has flattened out the bush to make it more 2-dimensional. This suits the fact that the design is for a 2-dimensional surface. Also the fact that roses are growing at regular intervals help create repetition of the pattern.

***Did you know?** Although Morris loved to create designs inspired by nature, he thought he wasn't any good at drawing birds. For this design he asked his friend, the architect Philip Webb to draw the birds. Have a look round for other birds in Morris's later designs to see you think he was right about his abilities?*

Further discussion

What sort of mood or feeling does this wallpaper create? Do you like it? Reasons?

What sort of person might buy it? What type of room would it suit? Bedroom, bathroom?

Further information

Trellis is Morris earliest wallpaper design. It uses one of the simplest forms of pattern organization, a square grid with the stem of the rose threading through this.

Morris's friend, the architect Philip Webb designed the birds. Webb was the architect who designed Morris's first home – the Red House in Bexley Heath. Morris had this built for his marriage to Jane Burden, He and his friends helped decorate it with hand-crafted designs.

In the design, Morris shows one unit of the repeat. The top half of the leaf cut off bottom right matches up with the bottom half just showing right at the top. It took about 2 years from initial design until final product registration in 1864. During this time Morris was experimenting with printing oil based colours on zinc plates. When this did not work he went back to established methods using distemper paint and wood blocks to hand print the wallpaper,

Follow up Activity Idea

Key Stage 2: Your own 'trellis' design

Use large gridded paper and ask children to design wallpaper with 1 plant and animal of their choice.

First they can make drawings of different plants and animals from observation and books.

Then they should discuss how to adapt and simplify their drawing to make good designs.

2) A MATTER OF TASTE: two wallpapers inspired by nature



Make a list of their differences:

This could be a range of things: – Maybe one looks more old-fashioned, more girly etc.

Answers looked for could include:

A more is colourful with flowers, more space around designs, emptier background;

B more muted ‘natural’ colours; design covers most of the surface.

Pupils might not like either of them – which is fine but ask them to explain their reasons.

Which design do you think William Morris liked best?

B is actually by William Morris: *Willow Bough* – one of his most popular designs still used today. This is a difficult question to think about but..

Some reasons he would have preferred it to A are:

It was simpler with natural colours and less ornate

It didn't attempt to pretend to be a three-dimensional illusion of flowers, but instead the design is flat and covers the surface of the flat wall without attracting attention to any particular point.

A is a reproduction of a 19th century French wallpaper by the Zuber company – it represents the type of design Morris and Rossetti didn't like. Look at the quote on the wall for an example of Rossetti's contempt for such designs

You remember our dear little house in Curzon Street; when we furnished it, nothing would please me but watered paper on the walls, garlands of roses tied with blue bows! glazed chintzes ... and gilt bows everywhere. Mr Rossetti ... could hardly sit at ease with them. I began then to ask him if it were possible to suggest improvements! "Well" he said, frankly, "I should begin by burning everything you have got!" An early client's first encounter with the Firm

3) Abstracting from nature

Find the large tulip from the *Medway* design

(image of textile not shown on worksheet)

This is in the left hand corner of *The Workshop*, under the Indigo section. There is a part of the design showing pencil drawing and a part coloured in. There is also a simple black line drawing used as a guide for producing the wooden printing blocks

Pupils may find it easier to draw the tulip from the black and white drawing

Explanation: This section is about how it is important to study natural



forms and make detailed drawings to understand them, but a designer may want to change and simplify shapes to create a better and clearer design. For example, you may not want to include an insect-eaten leaf in your design.

Differences could include: the petals of the *Medwaytulip* very regular and spread out; the plant has only one leaf which curls over half way each time shown etc whatever they notice as long as it can be backed up by visual evidence.

Observational drawing

The drawing of the duck by 16 year old Morris & Co apprentice weaver Douglas Griffiths shows how this was encouraged. You can just make out that it's a stuffed duck on a stand so presumably it was done at a drawing class. There is also a photo of Douglas Griffiths at his loom

However we don't have evidence of Morris doing initial observational drawings of plants for his designs this apart from occasional doodles. It seems he had the ability to translate what he saw immediately into design form because he had already studied nature so much – either that or all his initial drawing got thrown away!

- What experience have pupils had drawing from nature? What do they enjoy it? What's difficult?

Further Discussion: Defining Abstract

'Abstract' literally means to take away. Fully abstract art is where references to nature or reality have been taken away and only by shapes and colours are used to show what the artist wants to express. Back in the class room look at some abstract and semi abstract art inspired by nature by Matisse or Picasso.

4. Finally find and draw a detail...

An opportunity for a more free choice activity which could also be done in sketch books. Please ensure pupils remain under adult supervisions in rooms 2-5. Keeping to a restricted size helps develop confidence.