



Evelyn De Morgan. *The Sea Mermaids*, 1886-87. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.



William De Morgan. A tile panel of a dragon. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.

## William De Morgan

by Zita Thornton

William De Morgan was one of the Pre-Raphaelite set which included his friends Burne-Jones, William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Lord Leighton. Having trained at The Royal Academy School, he turned to painting, furniture and stained glass. It was his interest in the latter that led him to a career as a potter. He remained closely associated with William Morris, both at the start of his career in 1863, when he produced designs for ceramics, in particular tiles, at the Morris works, and later when he had successfully established his own potteries.

De Morgan left Morris' company in 1872 to open his own pottery in Chelsea. There, he decorated Staffordshire earthenware blanks for tiles and vessels, reviving the art of lustre decoration, and producing wares in a Persian style. Designs for his lustre pieces were transferred on to blanks by shaking powdered pigments through an outline of holes pricked on a paper pattern, ready for painting and glazing with lustres. The Persian designs were transferred by painting the design on to thin paper which was placed between the slip and the glaze and which disappeared under the firing process, leaving the coloured pigments on the wares.

Ten years later he opened a pottery at Merton Abbey, in Surrey. There he produced and decorated his own pieces and also collaborated on tiled projects with William Morris. In 1888 he decided that the commuting journey to Surrey was too long, so he opened a new factory at Sands End, Fulham, even designing the machinery himself. The next decade was De Morgan's richest and most successful.

Failing health meant that he was spending half the year in Italy, and there he established a studio in Florence to produce his own designs which he sent home already pierced

and pigmented, as well as designs for the Italian pottery Cantagalli. In 1907, De Morgan retired from designing pottery, having created over 300 designs. His work had been highly prized, despite being very expensive, and had decorated a number of P&O liners and a yacht belonging to the Czar of Russia. The firm continued until 1911. At the age of 65, De Morgan embarked on a successful career as a novelist, producing five bestsellers.

De Morgan's early tiles and dishes from the Chelsea pottery had neo-classical decorations of putti and scrolls, as well as showing the influence of William Morris in its stylised flowers. Playful or grotesque creatures shimmered in lustred tones of red, yellow, pink, silver and gold. From 1875, he introduced 'Persian' colours of royal blue, violet and green, inspired by fifteenth and sixteenth century Iznik pottery. At Merton Abbey, he added vases, bottles and bowls to his output, many in Oriental designs. He introduced a range inspired by Hispano-Moresque pottery in bluish/grey, gold and the ruby red lustre which is more desirable today than his Persian inspired work. He also used the favourite arts and crafts motif of a galleon, on a sea of glittering waves. Tiles continued to feature in his output either singly, in pairs, or as pictorial panels. At Sands End, he introduced the 'Moonlight' and 'Sunlight' series of double and triple lustre effects and continued to produce richly coloured and decorated pieces.

### The De Morgan Centre

The first half of 2002 saw a lot of interest in the influential arts and crafts designer, William De Morgan. In April, *The De Morgan Centre* opened in Wandsworth, London and in June, The Richard Dennis Gallery, Kensington Church Street, hosted an important selling exhibition of his work, including pieces which had never before been on the market.



Lustre, 10.25in, c1890. Fulham. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.



William De Morgan Centre. A selection of flower tiles. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.



The Richard Dennis Exhibition included notable examples of tiles and tiled panels, vases and dishes from the whole of De Morgan's career, many of which Richard Dennis had purchased 20 or 30 years ago. A selection of copper lustre dishes decorated with ship, bird and other creatures sold for between £5,000 and £7,500. There were many fine examples of single tiles. Red animal lustre tiles were £1,200. Tiles from Chelsea and Fulham with stylised florals or Islamic patterns were £600-£1,100. Tiled panels included sailing ships £8-10,000, a washstand with a tiled back, which rarely comes up for sale, £6,500 and an intriguing Italian tiled panel showing a figure of 'Justitia' from 1899 £10,000 with the middle section missing. A contemporary illustration shows what it looked like but no one knows where it is.

There were dramatic vases from £1,500-1,700 with and without single or double handles, including one similar to a vase which features in a portrait of William De Morgan painted by his wife Evelyn, in the National Portrait Gallery.

The De Morgan Centre gives a permanent home to the collection of his work owned by the De Morgan Foundation. It is appropriate that it should be displayed in South London as it has not been kept together for nearly 40 years, since it was in the keeping of Evelyn's sister who lived in South London. The centre has moved into a building dating from 1887, the year the De Morgan's were married, which was once the West Hill reference library. It provides plenty of space for the extensive collection of work by both William and Evelyn as well as archive material which will be available for research students.

#### Visitor Information

The De Morgan Centre is at 38 West Hill, Wandsworth, London SW18 1RZ. Telephone: 020 8871 1144. [www.demorgan.org.uk](http://www.demorgan.org.uk)  
Admission is free. Open: Monday-Wednesday 12-6pm Friday and Saturday 10-5pm. Closed Thursdays and Sundays.



*Multi lustre vase, painted by Fred Passenger, 12.5in, c1890. Fulham. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.*



*Evelyn De Morgan. Flora, 1894. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.*



*Rare lustre dish, 14in, c1885. Merton Abbey. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.*

#### William De Morgan Books

Richard Dennis Publications produce two books about William De Morgan.  
*The Designs of William De Morgan* by Martin Greenwood £45  
*William De Morgan Tiles* by Jon Catleugh £9.95



*Evelyn De Morgan. Night and Sleep, 1878. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.*



*William De Morgan. A tile panel of a snake. Photo courtesy of The De Morgan Centre.*