

Edward Burne-Jones' own copy of the Kelmscott Chaucer, pinnacle of Arts and Crafts book design

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Works Now Newly Imprinted*. London: Kelmscott Press, 1896. 17 1/8 inches x 12 inches (435 x 305 mm), 564 pages, illustrated throughout.

William Morris (1834–96), poet, painter, calligrapher, printer, and Utopian fabulist, had the surest grasp of any modern designer of the bonds that unite words and decoration into a single graphic form. He spent a lifetime attempting to revive the hand crafts, designing stained glass, textiles, wallpaper, and furniture. In 1888, he founded the Kelmscott Press to bring together his taste for medieval literature and early methods of book design. This great folio edition of Chaucer's works was Kelmscott's masterpiece.

This is a work that rewards the closest and most attentive examination: Morris obtained permission from Oxford University Press to use their authoritative Chaucer text, developed handmade paper from pure linen rags, and had his printer obtain a specific stiff, black German ink. With Morris' Troy type — especially cut to imitate the best made in the fifteenth century — and Burne-Jones' magnificently suitable illustrations, these luxuriant pages have a wonderful unity. The book is, as Morris intended, “essentially a work of art”; it is also the greatest monument to the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages, as well as a lasting embodiment of the complex aesthetics of the Victorian era.

Central to Morris' artistic vision are the eighty-seven beautiful engraved illustrations designed by his friend, the great Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98). It was a harmonious partnership: Morris and Burne-Jones worked closely together so that Burne-Jones' designs for the upper part of a page would be perfectly complemented by Morris' intricate typography and borders.

The Kelmscott Chaucer remains a pinnacle in the art of printing; it is not the least of the abiding results of Morris' lifelong quest to set the standard by which the quality of book production is measured.

This is Burne-Jones' personal copy of the work, preserved at Bridwell Library at Southern Methodist University in Texas. One of the first two copies completed, its binding was designed by William Morris and executed at the Doves Bindery in white pigskin, completely decorated with blind tooling, over oak boards. Clasps, on white pigskin straps are attached to the back board.

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