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William Morris at the Huntington. Exhibition Review

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The exhibition opened with a rather dulcets and Moreau, but in Ferrara the international was much more pronounced. The Palazzo dei Diamanti provides more than twice the exhibition space of the Dulwich Gallery, and was able to display some sizeable pictures, which greatly altered the feel of the exhibition. It is a tribute to the Dulwich Gallery that such a success started with works on paper with oils, was achieved, although the colours on the walls could have been less dramatic. In Ferrara there is a version of the Villa Carlotta’s large Francesco Hayez Balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet, and a large if surprisingly insipid depiction of the same scene by Anselm Feuerbach. Ferrara also had on view a portrait of the great French actor Talma as Hamlet, and an imaginative Richard III by the Danish neoclassical painter Nicolai Abildgaard. But the picture that British viewers are likely to have missed the most is a splendid monumental early work by Leighton The reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets over the dead bodies of Romeo and Juliet which has been in America since 1958. Ferrara also had the benefit of a good Maclise, The disemancipation of Bottom, from the Wadsworth Athenaeum, and Paton’s Elves and Fairies: a scene from A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and there are several other pictures in Ferrara which emphasised the embellished elements in Shakespeare but which were missing in Dulwich. But both venues had the extraordinary fresh and spooky Ferdinand lured by Aries by Millais, from the Makers Collection, together with some impressive works by Dyce and Holman Hunt.

The catalogue published by Merrell has contributions from a variety of specialists including, apart from those already mentioned, Brian Allen, Jonathan Bate, John Christian, Robin Hamlyn, and Desmond Shawe-Taylor, and is well illustrated, although the images of the Wright of Derby and Leighon are too dark and do not read well.


William Morris at the Huntington
Wendy Salmond

With this beautiful and intelligently curated exhibition the Huntington Library celebrates both the design career of William Morris and his own good fortune in now housing one of the world’s largest collection of Morris materials. In 1999 the Huntington acquired the Sandy and Helen Berger collection, the nucleus of which was the archive of Morris & Co, the design company that executed Morris’s patterns and most literally applied his dreams of social reform to contemporary reality. Including over 1000 sketch designs and full-scale cartoons for stained glass, and hundreds of designs for wallpaper, textiles, carpets, tapestry and embroidery, the Berger collection complements and completes the Huntington’s already rich holdings of Morris books, manuscripts and letters. Curator Diane Waggoner has drawn on these two extraordinary repositories to present a fresh portrait of this eminent Victorian, not merely as the towering personality he undoubtedly was, but more broadly – and rewarding – as a member of a community of artists and craftsmen and of a world of ideas and images embodied in books.

It is a central tenet of Morris lore that the great design revolutionary found his ideal model for creating ‘an earthly paradise’ in the guilds and workshops of the Middle Ages. One of the exhibition’s great successes is the way it breathes life into this now sadly clichéd notion, deploying the cream of the Berger collection to instruct and delight an audience even more alienated from the joy of labor and the bonds of community than was Morris’s own. While the larger-than-life ‘Ipozy’ is naturally the star this is not in any real sense a one-man show. We are made aware from the very first room that Morris was most true to his own ideals as a member of Morris & Co. Created in 1861 as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co, a high-minded brothelhood of ‘Fine Art Worksmen’ that included Philip Webb and Edward Burne-Jones, in 1875 ‘the Firm’ became Morris & Co under Morris’s sole direction, producing a wide range of furnishings for houses and churches that revolutionized the art of design.

The section entitled ‘The Decoration of Houses’ explores the pattern side of Morris & Co’s work. Generous and apt labels provide invaluable commentary on arcane processes such as indigo-discharge dying and double-cloth weaving on Jacquard looms. Thanks to the riches of the Berger collection, we can follow the many steps by which a Morris pattern sketch became a Morris & Co tapestry, chintz, or wallpaper and acknowledge the central importance to Morris’s success of his own techniques or those of his clients, particularly his clients, particularly his women with whom he worked. The struggle of machine-against-hand-work, that so often mires Morris’s legacy in sweeping abstractions, becomes instead a fascinating question of how the designer dealt with his clientele’s varied financial resources. The hierarchy of techniques for introducing pattern into a home – from labour-intensive tapestry and hand-knotted carpets to block-printed chintz and wall-paper – is presented in rich detail.

A pendant to this section is ‘The Decoration of Churches,’ in which the firm’s prolific production of stained-glass windows is illustrated, from the figure-drawings and cartoons of Morris and Edward Burne-Jones to the modest ornamental designs for quarries by unknown craftsmen. Of particular interest is the pragmatic ‘mix and match’ approach that allowed Morris & Co to effect what was almost a revolution in ecclesiastical stained-glass design. The wealth of drawings preserved in the firm’s archive takes us behind the scenes of its spectacular success, revealing the cunning way its signature artists’ designs were recycled. This is brilliantly brought home in the stunning stained-glass window that is the exhibition’s visual heart. Taken from a demolished Unitarian Chapel in Lancashire, the window is flanked by two of Burne-Jones’s cartoons for angels that recur in this and many other window commissions in the exhibition.

Just as the myriad swatches and sketches from the Berger collection so effectively evoke the collaborative nature of Morris’s design, the array of books from the Huntington Library show him not simply as a precocious polymath, but as someone bound to a rich intellectual tradition. In the section ‘The Art of the Book’ Morris’s own contributions to book design and typography are richly represented, but so too is the way his imaginative life, his exceptional visual memory, and his view of history were formed by reading. Close by his celebrated Kelmscott Chaucer and his early efforts at illumination are books by printers he revered, such as Nicolaus Jenson’s Latin Pliny (1476), the source of Morris’s roman Golden type design. A particular pleasure is the pairing of the dye-book from the Metron Abbey workshops containing recipes and fabric swatches using natural dyestuffs, with John Gerard’s Herbal (1633), a copy of which Morris’s family owned and which was part of his childhood reading. Opened to the page on pinks, the herbal helps one understand in a single image Morris’s crusade for natural dyes, his love of nature and of an idealized past. The exhibition offers many such illuminating and delightful juxtapositions, and it is icing on the cake that it is often the books Morris himself owned that we see.

The last rooms of the exhibition are devoted to the pattern work of John Henry Dearle, whom Morris chose to succeed him at the Firm. From 1896, the year of Morris’s death, until his own death in 1932, Dearle faithfully perpetuated the Morris ethos and aesthetic, continuing to design in his mentor’s manner. Rather than dismiss his patterns as ‘weakly’ imitations of Morris’s vitality, Waggoner convincingly suggests that Dearle’s lighter and more delicate designs of the early 1900s represent his efforts to adapt the classic Morris...
Francis Grant in Edinburgh
Thomus Tuohy

Francis Grant succeeded Lawrence as the leading society portrait painter after 1830 and succeeded Eastlake as President of the Royal Academy in 1860, when he was responsible for the transfer of the Academy from Trafalgar Square to Burlington House, where the first Summer Exhibition was held in 1869. Although he received royal patronage, Queen Victoria was later to prefer the more glamorous style of Winterhalter after 1842, and Grant was only second choice as President of the Royal Academy after the Queen’s favourite painter Landseer declined the honour. The Queen was rather disparaging about Grant, writing to the Prime Minister, Lord Russell, ‘The Queen will knight Mr Grant when she is at Windsor. She cannot say she thinks his selection a good one for Art. He boasts of never having been to Italy or studied the old masters. He has decidedly much talent, but it is the talent of an amateur.’ Even when Grant had earlier enjoyed royal patronage the Queen has described him in her diary in 1838 as ‘... a very good-looking man, was a gentleman, married a Miss Norman, spent all his fortune, and now paints for money’.

Miss Norman was related to the Duke of Rutland, and Grant’s success was in no small part due to his social connections. The younger son of a Berkshire lord, at the age of 15 he inherited a substantial portion, which he worked his way through in nine years, spending indulgently on fox hunting, and losing at whist. He married well twice, and the dashing and elegant portrait of his first brother-in-law, in highland dress, James Farquharson of Invercauld, painted in 1844, demonstrates why he was so popular as a society portrait painter.

Grant was well connected from birth and encouraged by Lord Elgin, who lent him a Velázquez to copy, and by Sir Walter Scott, whose portrait he painted. He also benefited from the example of the distinguished Scots painters Raeburn and Wilkie, and it was to Wilkie that he was indebted for the informal groupings of hunt scenes that played a large part in his oeuvre, although the landscape backgrounds were painted by others. The exhibition at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1855 of The Ascot Hunt, painted 20 years earlier, met with acclaim, his compositional skills being compared with the fashionable Moranier. Grant was not without his technical limitations – poor perspective and an inability to set figures convincingly in space, combined with weak drawing and a palette limited to black and mud, with a few flashes of scarlet and white – but he was very good at capturing a likeness and character, and he handled his paint well.

Grant’s work is represented in the houses of some of the grandest families of the time, but a substantial exhibition in Edinburgh has now made it possible for us to assess the work of this, by now, fairly obscure painter. Grant moved comfortably in hunting circles, and was to be buried in Melton Mowbray. The Melton Breakfast, from the Wemys collection, is a wonderful evocation of a relaxed Trollopian moment, and A Meet of the Pigeon Hounds and A Meet of the Buccleuch Hounds, both of 1833, are both filled with characteristic men and animals, but without the anthropomorphic sentimentality that pervades the works of Landseer. Portraits of Edward Nugent, 6th Earl of Milltown, from Dublin, and of Sir Tatton Sykes, 4th Bt, from a private collection, are both fine evocations of the pleasures of landowning and country pursuits, but Grant was equally good at capturing masculine swagger, as in Sir James Brooke or the sketch for the 7th Earl of Cardigan (NGP). The contrast between the dandified dark curls and fleshy lips of Benjamin Disraeli (National Trust, Hughenden Manor) and the solidly respectable Sir Edward Landseer (National Portrait Gallery, London) illustrates this ability well.

Grant was less successful with women and children, at least in terms of establishing character, but it is an indication of Grant’s eclecticism that he could provide images to complement portraits that his patrons already possessed. Lord Charles Scott is clearly indebted to an earlier Reynolds of Lady Caroline Scott as Winter, both with the Duke of Buccleuch as Bowhill. Queen Victoria was not entirely correct in suggesting that Grant had not studied Old Masters (although it is debatable whether she would have thought of Van Dyck or Velázquez as Old Masters). The horse she rides in Queen Victoria riding out (Royal Collection) is taken from Van Dyck’s Equestrian portrait of King Charles I, then at Blenheim and now in the National Gallery, and the equestrian portraits of Velázquez were an inspiration. Indeed the skilful uses of paint and limited palette that characterise the work of Velázquez have resonances in some of Grant’s work. The detail of a pair of hands with grey gloves from the portrait of Grant’s daughter painted in 1857, Mrs Markham (Private Collection) used on the cover of the catalogue, could easily be mistaken for the work of Manet, who was similarly indebted to Velázquez.

This revealing and instructive exhibition has been based on the researches of Catherine Wills who has written a PhD thesis on Grant, and the catalogue provides a wealth of contemporary assessments of the painter, which in themselves serve as an indication of his status at the time. But it is a pity that the catalogue entries do not provide more information, and that the useful chronology which features on a wall label at the exhibition has not been included. There are also tantalising references to the list of portraits kept by Grant’s second wife, about which it would be nice to know more.


Alan Reynolds at Kettle’s Yard
Adrian Clark

The work represented in this exhibition covers the period 1951 (when the artist was 25) to 2003. For a brief period during the 1950s Reynolds produced the work for which he is known – the extent he is known at all to art historians of the 20th century. These were usually landscapes, produced from a fairly consistent low-key palette of greens, greys, blacks and browns. They are instantly recognisable in the saleroom, where examples appear surprisingly frequently. Since they come from such a short period – not much more than five years – it seems as if many may have been produced and, if so, it would appear to be a feature of this artist that he works consistently at those aspects of his art which seize his attention. There are, for example, many works exhibited from recent years and, again, they show him worrying at the thoughts he chooses to wrestle with.

The shock with the work of this particular artist is not that he worries at his subjects, but that his work has divided into quite distinctive phases, each at first glance sharply removed from previous phases. Following the landscapes now so commonly found at Sotheby’s and Christie’s come some years of abstracts, involving...