Morris and Munthe

by St. Tschudi Madsen

'Don't copy any style at all, but make your own; yet you must study the history of your art.' William Morris in Some Hints on Pattern Designing.

The influence of William Morris' art was acknowledged even by his contemporaries. A connoisseur of both British and Continental art, the German, Herman Muthesius, was able to say in all truth in 1904 that 'the whole of our movement is based on the results England achieved from 1860 and up to the middle of the 1890s'. In France, Toulouse Lautrec's statement made in 1896 is very typical, 'I believe we have only to look at William Morris to find an answer to all your questions (on modern industrial art) - despite pre-Raphaelism and countless relics - this man has produced books which can be read and objects which can be used'. Jean Lahore, the man who with good reason could be called the William Morris of France, states that Ruskin and Morris were the precursors of Art Nouveau. By Art Nouveau, he was not only thinking of the style around 1900, his pronouncement was intended to be interpreted in a wider context.

In the case of Holland and Belgium, a number of articles were written on William Morris in various periodicals in those countries, and van de Velde's interest in the English movement and his repeated recognition of the fundamental importance of Ruskin and Morris is well known.

It may then be of some interest to examine his influence in the cultural sphere from which Morris himself gained so much of his inspiration - the Nordic countries. He knew this part of the world, not only from visits - to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 - not only from translations, but through a deep appreciation of its culture and literature, so poetically mirrored in his hymns and poems to the Queen of the North and the Muse of the North. Thurid, Thorbiorg, Thorleik, Thorgerd, Thordis and Thorolf - Haldor, Helgi and Hauskuld were not only names to him but had
a personal familiarity in the same way as places were familiar to him. It all linked him to what he calls the Early English, and he writes in a letter to Janey in 1879, after having seen Stonehenge, that he would like to live on Salisbury Plain, 'since I can't live on Blaskogheifi'.

Of this 'Nordic' area I choose Norway, whose early history and tales of the Kings Morris knew so well; he even called Heimskringla one of his 'Bibles'.

This may also be of special interest, since his influence here is significant. The young Norwegian art historian, Jens Thiis, with an open eye for what was going on in England, points out, as early as 1893, the influence coming from England—especially from the pre-Raphaelites, and Gerhard Munthe writes in 1901 about 'the unanimity with which everyone follows the English'. On the whole, however, William Morris' influence seems to have been ignored both by his contemporaries and during the subsequent history of Norwegian art.

Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929) was one of the leading naturalists in Norwegian late Nineteenth Century art. He began his studies in Düsseldorf under the influence of Achenbach, 1874–76, continued in Munich, 1876–82, and was a convinced and experienced naturalist when he returned home for good in 1882. It may, however, be well worth noting that during this year he also painted one 'troll' picture:

A little stream runs into deep, dark pools through the marshland where the mist hangs between the scraggy trees and a black bird flies into the interior. Between the treetops a fairy castle can be seen in the evening haze and a troll appears out of the thicket and tumbles down the path,

as he described it himself. During the following six or eight years he created some of the masterpieces of Norwegian Naturalism.

But why and how did Munthe begin to work in the field of decorative art and what approach did he have to its problems?

About 1888 a certain ornamentalism can be traced in his landscapes. We cannot be quite certain—nor is there any agreement on—when Munthe really began his true decorative work. Andreas Aubert believes that the interest can be traced right back to 1870, but puts 1890 or '91 as the real start, Erik Weren- shriold points at 1888. Munthe himself says that 1892 is the correct date. About 1890, at any rate, he painted landscapes with orna-
mental areas and peasant motifs incorporated as definite independent sections of the canvas. 'Recollections of Gulsvik', 1890, for example. This is a sort of Norwegianized variation on the Pont-Avent school but however that may be, his first certain decorative work dates from 1891 and from this time up to the first world war a stream of important and minor pieces came from his hand. The strength of his true artistic value and the personal quality of his mode of expression has made him Norway's undisputed foremost decorative artist and the founder of recent Norwegian decorative art.

As the first impulse promoting his interest in decorative art, Munthe himself mentions in 1895 the direct contact with Norwegian folk art. Secondly, he mentions his indignation at all the imported rubbish:

Everything we surrounded ourselves with in our homes showed foreign modes of thought and foreign ingenuity which made us homeless in our own sitting-rooms. The dragon's coils were the only Norwegian (and moreover these are not only purely Norwegian) feature used, and like a worn-out adage they were to be found everywhere, where the Japanese style was not used just as in the case of the Pompeian, old German, and classical styles—as poor imitations.

It is therefore to some extent correct to say that his desire to create a more beautiful and more personal setting for his newly founded home in 1886, just as in the case of Morris, was one of the driving forces of his art.

It is particularly interesting to note that it was in the field of two-dimensional art that they both made their first attempts, Morris, with his designs for wallpapers 'Daisy', 'Fruit' and 'Trellis' in 1861-62, Munthe, with his designs 'Young Trout and Water Plants' and 'Pine Branches', both done in 1891 for wallpaper, and 'The Red Cockerel', 1891, for woven tapestry. These intimate nature studies have been transferred to a two dimensional artistic style by way of a well-outlined stylisation set against an abstract backgound. Morris' three demands for Beauty, Imagination and Order are present in all of them.

But there were thirty years between Morris' and Munthe's first attempts, and it is not therefore always so easy to realise the outward unanimity in context. It ought to be much more natural to seek the closer artistic unanimity amongst that generation of
Englishmen who carried Morris’ inheritance further, Ashbee, Voysey and Crane. It is here that the outward similarity is easy to trace. ‘Young Trout and Water Plants’ clearly reflects the influence from England, in the same way as ‘The child and the Angel’, in 1892. With their delicate colours, small illustrative scenes and calm, peaceful pictures of animal life, one’s thoughts are immediately led to Voysey and Crane. ‘The Red Cockerel’ on the other hand, clearly shows that Munthe was inspired by the old Norwegian art of weaving.

In the same way as Morris, Munthe fought actively to build up and renew Norwegian arts and crafts which presented such a chaotic picture at the time around 1890. With his idealism and strong national feelings, Munthe wanted to play his part and gave all his support to the newly founded Christiania Husflidsforening (Home Crafts Associations) established in 1891, and in 1896 he became a member of the Board of the Norwegian Folk Museum with whose founder and leader, Hans Aall, he formed a lifelong friendship.

Morris’ idea of helping to raise the level of industrial art by setting up a special studio was also no strange idea to Munthe, who stated in 1895:

If we could ever manage to get so far that we had a large workshop where all kinds of materials could be handled from weaving to metal working, from ceramics to woodwork, art would then immediately enter into the very core of the crafts.
I wish we had an Academy, but only one of this kind.

Such an idea is completely in keeping with Morris’ view of industrial art and must be seen as a reflection of his ideas on the soil of Norway.

Just as Morris, Munthe was also convinced that it was up to the artist to bring new life into the crafts. ‘The craftsman must be brought up with the artist and must work side by side with him’, as Morris states in The Lesser Arts. They were both originally painters who saw their work hand in hand with the craftsman and both of them were in possession of such a wealth of technical knowledge and insight into the various aspects of industrial art—from the weaving of tapestries to interior decoration, from furniture to books—that they had no parallel in their home countries.

To return, however, to the mainspring of Munthe’s inspiration—the Middle Ages—and here the inner unanimity with Morris
was certainly greatest. Whether consciously or not, he followed Morris’ advice about creating his own style – ‘through the study of the history of your art’. During the years following 1891 he acquired all the ornamental certainty and the concise descriptive form to be found in Norwegian folklore and the art of weaving, and using this language of form he incorporated in his compositions the stories from the fairy tales and the sagas. His decorative art is free from any classical inheritance; ‘The Shadow of Rome’ that Morris speaks of in connection with the early literature of England and which ‘the Scandinavian kingdoms were free from’ is not to be found in Munthe’s art; its roots are heathen as in the case of so much of Morris’ own composition.

In this field both of them felt and composed from the same basic impulse, both sought the Middle Ages in admiration for its form and craftsmanship but the one joined hands with foregone times whilst the other carried the work further, a work founded on a living tradition renewed by the nationalist movement which not least characterised industrial art and the decorative arts in Norway in the time immediately before and after the turn of the century. It is just here that Munthe shows his own and completely national basic assumptions, whilst Morris was universal in the whole of his view of art. It is interesting, however, to note that he, too, was open to the Norwegian nationalistic view of art, in any case in literature, if one is to believe his daughter. She finds ‘a certain kinship’ between such tales as Björnson’s Synnøve Solbakken and Morris’ own latest romances. The taciturn life in constant struggle with nature, and a sober rejoicing in her not lightly yielded gifts; the sweetness of the little maid and the shy wooing under difficulties, the ‘queerness’ of some of the minor characters, the grave spaciousness of the northern mountain country with its miniature patches of human mirth here and there: you can recognise in all this what it was that appealed to him and was familiar – (‘Ibsen’s art’, on the other hand, ‘left him unmoved in the long run’).

As a source of inspiration to Munthe, the importance of Jonas Lie’s ‘Trold 1’, 1891, and ‘Trold 2’, 1892, to the artist cannot be overlooked, as mentioned by Hilmar Bakken, and the book by the Dane, Holger Drachmann, ‘Troldtøy’, 1889, ought also to be remembered. This was illustrated by Joakim Skovgaard, August Jerndorf and Thorvald Bindesbøll. The original drawings were, amongst others, shown at Munthe’s big debut exhibition as a
decorative artist in 1893. Nor can one disregard his trip to Paris in 1892. After this visit he renounces the English entirely, '... the similarity is in any case purely superficial'. 'I would prefer to resemble Grasset after what I have just seen ...' If Munthe had seen *L'Historie des Quatres Fils Aymon* illustrated by Grasset, 1879–83, one can well understand this. Here in these illustrations is to be found a view of the Middle Ages which, in its virility and ornamental certainty, must have affected the Norwegian. He must have been left outside the more mondaine Parisian art: 'The dancing girl in front of the Paris Opera is delightful in herself, but she plays her violin alone'.

During the years between 1896 and '99, Munthe participated in the design for an edition of 'Heimskringla' and in 1904 came the illustrations to 'Draumkvedet'. Munthe achieved great heights as a book designer in these illustrations; he was in his true element '... At a time when all was blood and iron' as he says. His imagination and mysticism were freed at the same time as his form was sufficiently controlled. This is an expressive decorative art characterised by essential masculinity. There is nothing to be found of Voysey's refinement and sophisticated elegance, but so much the more of Morris' 'Spirit of the Sagas'.

One may ask whether Gerhard Munthe really was a creator of style.

To 'create style' is romantic. It was not Munthe's intention to do this, he wanted to renew and carry on the tradition of the best in the Norwegian national folk art and it was his intention to raise the level of craftsmanship as a protest against the machine. He wanted to set off the form of the artistic personality in contrast to the mass production of industry and here he was much more on the same wavelength with William Morris than with Charles Ashbee, Charles Voysey and van de Velde, with their recognition of the possibilities and value of the machine. Both Munthe's and Morris' personal styles were so artistic and showed so much individualism that they did not establish the basis for a broad movement in style. But each in his own way cleared the ground for further developments in his own country. They remained artists without pupils but with a whole generation to carry on their ideas. Both Morris' and Munthe's decorative art had all its roots in the nineteenth century, but their work laid the foundation for the new century.

I do not believe one should speak about any influence between
Morris and Munthe. Impulses are not always spread directly in the way we usually look for them. They sometimes spread indirectly like rings in the water but the connection between the centre and the periphery may be just as marked even so.

Both of them immersed themselves in the Saga times—the one through absorption and literary studies—the other through nationalistic feelings. One of them reached great heights of epic depiction—the other achieved the fine epigram. One of them designed whole books and printing types—the other, vignettes. One was universal, the other, national. But it is the one with his nationalism who helped to make the other universal.

REFERENCES

Hilmar Bakken: *Gerhard Munthes dekorative kunst*, Oslo 1946.
Jens Thiis: *Gerhard Munthe*, Thrhj. 1904.

Books and articles by the author.