Nature in Art: William Morris and the Woodpecker Tapestry Design

“...everything made by man’s hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her; it cannot be indifferent...” BY WILLIAM MORRIS

William Morris was one of the most influential designers of the nineteenth century. He was the founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which valued nature and craftsmanship over the mass production of the industrial time. In the late Victorian period, England was the most industrialized country in the world. At that time, English arts and crafts designers sought to improve standards of decorative design and to create environments in which beautiful and fine workmanship was valued. Such ideas spread during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that had a great influence on architecture, painting, sculpture, graphics, illustration, book making and photography, domestic design and the decorative arts.

Tapestry is one of the best examples to display the principal of Arts and Crafts Movement since there is nothing mechanical. According to Morris, tapestry is the “noblest of the weaving arts”, and it is looked upon as a mosaic of pieces of color made up of dyed threads and is capable of functioning as a wall ornament (Parry, 1983). Disappointed by the mid-19th century tapestries, Morris taught himself to weave the type of tapestries he visualized.

William Morris’s textile work reflects many of the themes, stylistic preferences, devices and the philosophy that characterize his design. The woodpecker tapestry designed by William Morris is a simple decorative vertical panel but a remarkable piece completed by a process of hand-loom work. The tapestry depicts two birds, one a woodpecker, sitting in a tree garlanded with flowers and huge swirling acanthus leaves. On the left is a songbird with a fruit-eater’s beak. An embroidered inscription of Morris’ poetry is included. Little edges of blossom can be found behind the banner at the top and bottom, showing that this garlanded frame continues to grow on all four sides. This design was inspired by a tale from the Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. A sorceress turns King Picus into a woodpecker because he refuses to become her lover (Gillow, 1996).

Morris’ central ideal of bringing nature’s beauty into his design is realized in this tapestry. He always has a deep love towards all natural things. The
motif in this tapestry is showed through the natural world with its flowers and trees and its animals and birds. He utilizes the elements of color, scale and point-line-plane to create a harmonious design that is simultaneously naturalistic and playful. Scrolling acanthus leaves in deep indigo blues wind around the trunk of the tree with its brightly warm colored fruits and birds. Morris loves utilizing every possible space in the work which adds the difficulty for the formation of a focal point. However, such color contrast ensures that the fruits and birds’ function as focal point won’t be impaired by other details. The warm color moves the tree forward while cool colors move other elements back, which makes the tree the dominance of whole design.

This tapestry is also a fine example of the range of subtle shades and color harmonies achieved by the use of organic rather than chemical dyes (Parry, 1983). Usually, chemical dyes tended to be more harsh and garish. It requires more calculation and precise measurement to make sure colors can go well together. Natural dyes produce an extraordinary diversity of rich and complex colors that complement each other. Different colors go well together and rarely clash. In this tapestry, the organic dyes make a range of soft, clear colors, rich in hues, subtle and deeper in tone, blending together harmoniously and can create exquisite gradation of tints (Baker, 1996). Dark blues is an important color for Morris, a dominant part of his favored color combination, with scarlet red, yellow and green (Baker, 1996). The heavy, dark and rich tones along with the complex tints create a feeling of mystery.

The tapestry is also characterized by large-scale, very dense patterns where the relationship between background and foreground is closely interwoven. Morris’ use of scale, juxtaposing the huge acanthus leaves below the small green leaves and fruits, moves the eye from the upside of the panel to the middle, along the trunk. The tree’s dominance in the tapestry is emphasized by the contrasting size of the acanthus

William Morris, The woodpecker tapestry, Courtesy of the William Morris Gallery, 1885 c.e.

Colors made form natural substances
wound around it. All the patterns are interwoven in this tapestry except the trunk, which is characterized with straight lines. The contrast makes tree the dominance of the picture. The other small size flower heads, stems and leaves work as background which enliven the whole surface and create the illusion of depth. The wide border crops the content and sets it apart in a composition to gives it more prominence. The tapestry border follows the content style it bounds, with naturalistic honey suckles climbing around the poles which creates unity.

In this tapestry, Morris utilizes a highly ornamental style of traditional typography. The space between letters is extremely narrow, which keeps consistent with the other elements in this tapestry---all of them are designed to avoid an abundance of white space. According to Morris, lateral spaces between words should be no more than necessary and should be as nearly equal as possible. The lines in the tapestry are beautifully crafted but the type is very dense and difficult to read. The text would easily become a black block, with little rest for eyes. Thus, in this design report, I decided to utilize Baskerville, an elegant and well-designed readable typeface created by the Englishman John Baskerville in 1757. Baskerville is a typical example of Transitional typeface that forms a bridge between the old style typefaces, such as Garamond, and the Modern faces, such as Bodoni. Compared to old style font, Baskerville has greater contrast between the thick and thins in the strokes. Serifs are less heavily bracketed. The letters are closely fitted and are of comfortable proportions, which makes Baskerville well-designed typeface. As a transitional font, it not only inherited the ornamental element from the traditional typeface but also has the feature of modern fonts, which is more readable in a design report.

The design has a clear repeating pattern, which is based on organic forms. There are seldom straight lines in the design. The blue acanthus leaves are characterized by the prominent and serpentine lines. The curve of the leaves convey a fluttering sense of movement, avoiding flat and static qualities. Other lines in the background are arranged to create a rapid and continuous growth, which is an easily recognizable quality of all of Morris’ designs. Buds and shoots spring from their branches, and the leaves curl over in a natural and luxuriant manner. It conveys a refreshing spontaneity and energy. Little edges of blossoms show from behind the banner at top and bottom, showing that this garlanded frame continues on all four sides.

To sum up, the woodpecker tapestry displays Morris’ philosophy of bringing nature’s beauty into his work. His design, inspired by living forms and made by natural materials, have great vitality and rhythm, which ensure their lasting appeal. It is the aesthetic of nature that makes William Morris a significant designer in the history whose works can survive the vagaries of fashion for hundreds of years.

Source:

