

Morris Carpets

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Abstract

William Morris's carpet designs have been discussed in terms of design scheme, historical sources, naturalism and abstraction. This essay revisits some of these aspects in order to consider Morris's intimations of action. Action was associated by Morris with the pictorial and considered by him to be one of the great resources of oriental carpet design. The article considers the specific historical carpets with which Morris was familiar and discusses the terms used by Morris in assessing the intellectual and aesthetic value of historical carpets. It discusses the way that the knot in the fabric of the carpet might have been understood by Morris as analogous to knots and interlacements in the design. It goes on to propose that the knot was also understood in relation to linkages, contests, cultural exchange and forms of interconnection in human history. There is a discussion of common ground between Morris's discussion of ornament (in terms of cultural transmission) and ideas set out by Alois Riegl. The carpet *Clouds*, made by Morris & Co. in 1885 for Clouds, East Knoyle, Wiltshire is the central example.

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- [1] In this article I will argue that the ornamental zone of the carpet represented for Morris something more than an area of geometrical pattern and stylisation. The discussion of his ornament has generally focused on the overall schema adopted, his historical sources and his stylisation of natural form. With respect to schema considerable attention has been paid to forms of field division and repeat in his designs and to kinds of symmetry. Morris's use of historical sources has been discussed in terms of his enthusiastic response to sixteenth and seventeenth-century textiles, notably Spanish, Italian and Turkish brocades and velvets. There have been accounts of his recourse to stylisation of natural forms acknowledging that he relied on observation and celebrated the variety of the natural world while at the same time avoiding the introduction of insistently three-dimensional motifs as unsuited to the flat plane of the design.¹

¹ "Medievalism, floral realism and eastern precision" are identified by Linda Parry as "his greatest influences", *William Morris Textiles*, London 1983, 95. She charts the development from all-over patterning with dense random floral and vegetal elements pre 1883, e.g. *Hurstbourne*; 1883-1889 quartered symmetry, central medallion or "looping branches or leaf designs" with greater resemblance to Persian medallion carpets, and with borders referencing Turkish cut velvets sixteenth-seventeenth century e.g. *Holland Park*, 1885- diminishing importance of all-over pattern of sprigs etc., increased size of medallion and stylised flower motifs" e.g. *Black Tree* exhibited at the 1889 Arts and Crafts Exhibition. Lesley Hoskins discusses Morris's creative combination of the competing conventions of the "naturalistic" and "reformed" wallpaper styles of the 1860s and 1870s. Lesley Hoskins, "Wallpaper," in: *William Morris*, exh. cat. London 1996, 198-223, especially 200. Malcolm Haslam, *Arts and Crafts Carpets*, London 1991, 38-85 discusses allusions to seventeenth-century Italian textiles, Chinese art, and especially motifs taken from gothic ornament and Safavid Persian carpets, stressing that the distinctive aspect of Morris's carpets lay in a revolt against geometric stylisation of plant forms.

- [2] I will be approaching the question of natural reference and two-dimensionality in a slightly different way as I consider the potential of the flat area of the carpet to function pictorially for Morris. The knot will be my central device.
- [3] Morris started making carpets and designing for carpets at a relatively late stage in his career; the 1880s are the decade of his intensive activity in this medium. He set up a handloom in Kelmscott House, Hammersmith in 1877-1878, and experimented with small rugs, converting available space there into weaving sheds with twelve-foot wide looms in 1879 and then from 1881 installed and deployed full-sized looms (up to 25 foot wide) at the Merton Abbey workshops where all the Morris & Co manufacture was located. All the hand-knotted carpets made by Morris & Co are known as Hammersmith carpets: the early ones have an M surmounted by a hammer, with or without waves, as part of the border. He did also design for power-loom-made carpets and for contracted-out hand weaving of the carpets known as "real Axminster" and made by Wilton but these factory-made carpets are not the topic of this study. He started to get commissions for Hammersmith carpets sometimes as part of ambitious decorative schemes for houses such as Rounton Grange, Northallerton, Yorkshire (family of Isaac Lowthian Bell, carpet *Flower Garden* now lost), Naworth Castle (home of George and Rosalind Howard, carpet for Library now lost completed October 1881), Hurstbourne Park, Hurstbourne Priors, Hampshire (house of Isaac Newton Wallop, Lord Portsmouth),² 1 Holland Park, Kensington, London (family of Alexander Ionides, for which Morris made four carpets, scheme commissioned march 1880, completed October 1888). Other important commissions that should be referenced are Old Swan House, Chelsea (London home of Wickham Flower, carpets produced 1881), Clouds, East Knoyle, Wiltshire (family of Percy Wyndham, decorative scheme November 1881-end 1886, see fig. 1), and Bullerswood, Chislehurst, Kent (family of John Sanderson, carpet completed 1889).³ Morris exhibited carpets in 1882 as a way of stimulating demand for his elaborate hand-knotted productions and then included them in the Morris & Co exhibits in 1883 at the Boston Foreign Fair. Carpet design in Morris & Co was eventually taken on by John Henry Dearle and it is thought that the *Bullerswood* carpet, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, was the last carpet to be designed by Morris.

² Isaac Newton Wallop, 5th Earl of Portsmouth, and his wife Lady Eveline Alicia Juliana, daughter of Henry Herbert, 3rd Earl of Carnarvon. Their eldest son became the 6th Earl in 1891 and Liberal MP from 1881, Under-Secretary of State for War 1905-1908, known as "the demon" due to red hair at Balliol College, Oxford and wore a suit of yellow clothes, so was called "Symphony in Yellow." We have to picture this colourful character on Morris's carpets; his enthusiasms included music (with a seat at the Opera), photography, planting trees and, in the twentieth century, motoring, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=OW19071218.2.376> (accessed 27 August 2012), "Personal Notes," in: *Otago Witness* 2805 (18 December 1907), 82.

³ Found in Australia, Les Murdie House 300 miles East of Perth in 2001, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/australia/1337204/William-Morris-masterpiece-found-after-80-years-in-Outback.html> (accessed 27 August 2012).



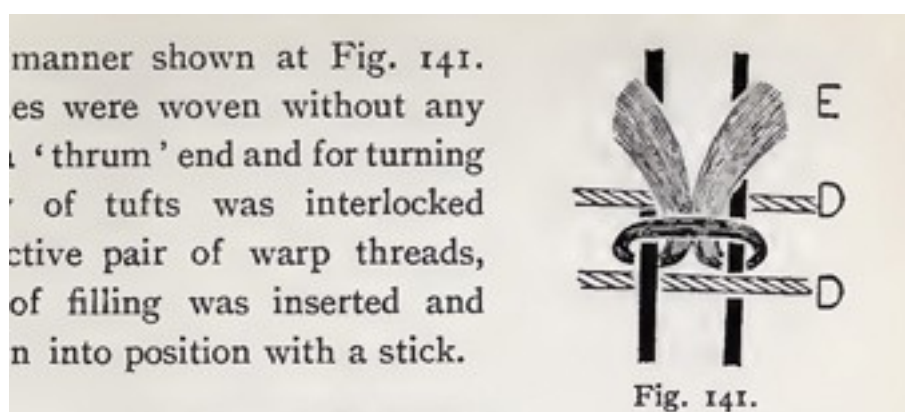
1 William Morris & Co, *Clouds*, 1885, wool on cotton, 1189 x 396cm, hand-knotted carpet for drawing room at Clouds, East Knoyle, Wiltshire. Collection: University of Cambridge (photograph provided by the author, reproduction by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

- [4] The large carpets produced for grand interiors represented a huge amount of labour since the hand-knotting, undertaken by young women at Merton Abbey was meticulous work, every single tuft of the pile was introduced by hand, knotted onto two warp threads by the adept operatives; the resultant row of knots was beaten down vigorously with a batten when the horizontal thread of the weft shoot is introduced, the tufts forming a line of colour in the densely packed woven substance of the carpet.⁴ Shears were used to cut the loose ends to an even pile. Current experience of the carpets when they have been worn by use misses the plump comfort and optical richness of the deep pile; the spacing of the cotton warps produced a carpet that had a low knots per square inch count compared to the fine antique examples that Morris studied; his carpets are by comparison crude and primitive-looking, but they have their particular beauty. The length of each thick tuft was relatively long, held vertical in the pile by the beating down and the use of single weft thread (pointed out in the technical analysis of Diana Drummond 1993 who comments on the intensity of colour especially in the small rugs achieved when the upright tufts are viewed end on thereby absorbing more light than threads seen on their sides).⁵ They were dense and substantial, robust in weight, bold in the design, brilliant in the colouring.

⁴ *Spectator* (24 November 1883); "Carpet looms at Messrs Morris's Manufactory," image in Allan S. Cole, "The Year's Advance in Art Manufactures: No. V. – Textiles, lace, tapestry, stuffs," in: *Art Journal* (May 1883), 149-52, here 151.

⁵ Diana Drummond, *A Comparative Study of Two Carpets: The Fremlin Carpet and an Early William Morris Rug*, MA Conservation thesis, RCA/V&A, London 1993.

- [5] I propose that we can see the M of the monogram as equivalent to the knotted tuft. Morris used a symmetrical Turkish knot (fig. 2), easier to achieve than the asymmetrical knot used in the finest antique Persian carpets. The Turkish knot is pulled tight around each of two warp threads making a robust linkage which can be seen as an M (the knots at the top of the M and the pile at the bottom of it). To see the whole monogram in terms of carpet manufacture we have to identify the hammer head, hammer shaft, letter M, and Thames-waves in terms of batten, warp, tuft and achieved pattern. To interpret it this way it is necessary to shift axes several times. These kinds of shift are fundamental to Morris's project in developing carpets of comparable ambition to those of classic periods of historic carpet manufacture. Geometrical transformation through multiple dimensions, including what we might posit as the dimension of time, is, I will argue, the key to meaning in Morris's carpet designs. I will try to trace the figure in the carpet and one preliminary finding is that having tied himself onto the warp threads Morris hammers himself in to the pattern.



2 Turkish knot, fig. 141 in Fred Bradbury, *Carpet Manufacture*, London and Boston 1904, 209. "The filling weft is indicated at D, the fur [or pile] at E [...] each individual tuft being wrapped about the warp threads in the manner shown at Fig. 141." (Explanation of diagram from pages 208-209)

- [6] *The Figure in the Carpet* is the title of a Henry James novella of 1896 where the overall theme of a famous writer's work becomes a great mystery that none of the characters can solve. The author states that it is there in the oeuvre, "like a complex figure in a Persian carpet." The crisscrossing of the characters in their search, their junction points, whether heterosexual or homosexual, describe a figure but the narrator never finds out what the theme is, though one character (travelling in India) claims it jumped out suddenly "like a tigress in the jungle." James's novella offers a model for an investigation of the figures described in Morris's carpets and of ways to engage with ornament. Rather than reaching directly for a singular, coherent meaning the historian can focus on charged points of conjunction. This is not to abandon the goal of identifying an overall theme but to proceed indirectly, focusing on cultural hybridity and the energies of nodal points, always remaining alert for the leap of the tigress. The elements of difference that

drive the narrative and form the pattern in the James work may be present in different ways in Morris's work. James muses on patterning and narrative. Morris deploys ornament in the interests of the pictorial. Eclectic historical references made by Morris and a range of ways of referencing the world are brought together in his pattern-making.



3 *Ardabil Carpet*, 1539-1540, wool on silk, 1051.5 x 533.5cm, Iran, V&A Museum, London, purchased by the South Kensington Museum in 1893 (272-1893). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

- [7] Morris was extremely knowledgeable about the history of carpet manufacture. He was a consultant for the South Kensington Museum when they started to build their oriental carpet collection in the 1880s writing a series of reports on potential purchases in 1883 and subsequently. He strongly encouraged the Museum to purchase the great Ardabil carpet in 1893, recognised today as one of the finest carpets in the world (fig. 3). He was emphatic in his advice assuring Thomas Armstrong of the Museum that it was "by far the finest Eastern carpet" which he had seen "(either of actual ones [carpet] or representations of them)", giving a clue in those words to his active study of extant examples and his systematic scrutiny of publications on carpets. He declared it to be quite unique (as we know now it was one of an exceptional pair; the dealer concealed this fact). He was stunned by the workmanship of this huge and finely knotted example and the perfection of its condition. In his letter he spelt out the main reason that it deserved to sit in the Museum collection: the excellence of the design. "The design is of singular perfection; defensible on all points, logically and consistently beautiful [...] its size and splendour as a piece of workmanship do full justice to the beauty and intellectual qualities of the design."⁶ That word intellectual, underlined by Morris stands as a challenge to us. Just what did it mean to him for a design to have intellectual qualities and how did he aim to emulate these qualities in his own revived carpet-designing and making?

⁶ Norman Kelvin, *Collected Letters of William Morris*, vol. 4, 23.

- [8] The logic of the design lies in the disposition of the major motifs, centre medallion and corresponding quartered medallions at the corners. Giant blossom-like ogival motifs are radially arrayed at centre, the dazzling yellow of the medallions contrasting with the depth of the dark blue ground. There is a rhythmic alternation of red blossoms with other colours, the suspended red lamps taking their place in the sequence along with the alternating red cartouches in the border. Two superimposed networks of winding branches spread all over the ground. There is a regular switch in the portrayal of elements between plan and elevation at all levels from the macro to the micro: from the great medallion and lamps to the tiniest flower on the daintiest stem which can be a centred eye in plan or a pendant bloom in elevation. Morris's point about logic and consistency has a negative definition in part – he writes about the absence of eccentricity or grotesquery, but in positive terms we should attribute to him a recognition of the orderliness and cohesion of the system of the design and the way in which it bridges the disparate contexts of plan and elevation, the vast and the minute, nature and manufacture, the field and the sky, the earthly realm and the divine.⁷ A. H. Church's article in *The Portfolio* of 1892 ended with comments on symbolic systems and hidden meanings in the traditional designs of oriental carpets. The article states: "In some of the choicer carpets of Persia 'the fleeting finite beauty of created things' is represented by the lovely floral forms and figures which adorn the ground, while the ground itself conveys ideas of space and eternity."⁸ The formal elements in the design were readily mapped in the late nineteenth century onto conceptual elements.
- [9] A publication was produced by the dealer Vincent Robinson in 1892 when the Ardabil carpet formed the centrepiece of a collection of carpets, some on loan and some for sale.⁹ Robinson gave a knot count of 380 to the square inch for this carpet measured as 34 ft 6in by 17ft 6in and translated the words woven in the cartouche "I have no refuge in the world other than thy threshold, My head has no protection other than this porch, the work of the slave of this Holy Place, Maksoud of Kashan, in the year 942," giving as the equivalent date in the western system 1535.¹⁰ He deployed the analytical terms that were emerging in decorative arts scholarship for the carpet's design elements, recognising medallions, floral tracery, cloud bands or the "so-called cloud pattern" (in

⁷ "We might add the Persian and the Chinese (Sasanian lotus palmette crossed with the Chinese peony as typical in Safavid)." Footnote in Norman Kelvin, *Collected Letters of William Morris*, vol. 4, 26, citing Rexford Stead, *The Ardabil Carpets*, Los Angeles 1974, 20.

⁸ A. H. Church, "Cardinal and Harford's Carpets," in: *Portfolio* (1892), 72-77, here 77.

⁹ Edward Stebbing, *The Holy Carpet of the Mosque at Ardebil*, London 1892. Stebbing was managing director of Vincent Robinson & Co.

¹⁰ The Victoria and Albert Museum registers 340 knots per square inch but elsewhere on the website, perhaps in error, 304 knots per square inch. The inscription is translated by the V&A thus: "Except for thy haven, there is no refuge for me in this world. / Other than here, there is no place for my head. / The work of a servant of the Court, Maqsud of Kashan, 946 [equivalent 1539-40]," <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O54307/the-ardabil-carpet-carpet-unknown/> (accessed 27 August 2012).

pale blue on the yellow medallion and in red on the cream border) and scrollwork on the outer border.

- [10] Vincent Robinson had published an illustrated work ten years earlier, in 1882, with twelve historic carpets rendered in watercolour by his sister Julia Robinson and produced as chromolithographs by William Griggs and a scholarly preface by George Birdwood the Indianist.¹¹ The publication includes speculation on cultural transmission of motifs. One example is the cloud pattern illustrated in plate XII. This motif is said to be of saracenic origin coming to be called the cloud pattern which takes the form of the cloud as sketched by Marco Polo. The book also offers an alternative explanation that it could be derived from a snake emblem taken from India to China with the introduction of Buddhism – the cloud bands discussed in the text are picked out with reflective silvery printing ink. The second publication under this title of 1893 offering a different set of examples, ponders the question of those nature-derived motifs which cannot be directly linked to codified symbolism. The proposition made is that stylised natural forms can be incorporated spontaneously by craftworkers on the basis of their love of nature even when longstanding symbolic associations of certain key nature-based motifs such as the tree of life had been eroded. The sheer variety of floral subjects introduced as motifs and the range of views of any plant including roots, seed pods and cross sections are discussed, "the growth of ideas taken direct from vegetable life, in which the rose, the pink, the tulip and other flowers suggest the elements of the pattern and by dissection afford endless changes both of form and colour."¹² Scholars in the 1880s and 1890s were debating issues of cultural transmission, the phases of active religious investment in symbolism, the possibility of the loss of meaning of symbols or arbitrary attachment of meaning to pre-existent motifs, how to make a place in the account for the direct response to nature and the gradual morphology and variation of decorative motifs.¹³ Morris was well aware of the artistic exchange and hybrid forms resulting from contact between cultures, mentioning to a correspondent in 1882 "that mixture of Persian and

¹¹ Vincent Robinson, *Eastern Carpets: Twelve Early Examples with descriptive notices by Vincent J. Robinson*, London 1882. The Baghdad Carpet went to Adolf Thiem in Berlin. George Birdwood, author of *The Industrial Arts of India*, London 1880, was supervisor of the Indian collections of the India Office from 1871, keeper of the Indian Museum from 1875 and the organiser of Indian exhibits at all the principal international exhibitions of the period. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004-2013, <http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/31896> (accessed 30 May 2013).

¹² Vincent Robinson, *Eastern Carpets*, London 1893, "Design," unpaginated.

¹³ Margaret Olin, in a review of Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism* (2009) calls for more research on nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century art historians in relation to science, engineering and photography as well as philology, religious studies, archaeology etc. Her contention that orientalist discourse cannot be aligned in a simple manner to imperialist interests is useful to bear in mind in the case of Morris's involvement with the specialist topic of oriental textiles. Olin cites competing accounts in the period of the status and significance of artefacts such as carpets and ornament vis à vis fine art. She indicates the different views of those emphasising origin and those (like Alois Riegl) more invested in the changes brought about by cultural contact. Margaret Olin, review of *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship*, by Suzanne L. Marchand, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 5 (December 2011), unpaginated.

Chinese that is found in Persian art of the time of Shah Abbas the Great, when there was so much intercourse between the two countries by the overland caravan trade."¹⁴

[11] Vincent Robinson & Co had a range of carpets available in 1892, not just the great medallion carpet that Morris advised on and its partner (which Robinson was secretive about) but also very distinguished sixteenth-century Persian animal carpets one of which was sold to the Berlin collector Adolphe Thiem of Berlin and San Remo (it has ended up in Qatar Museum of Islamic Art) while the other went to the New York collector Charles Tyson Yerkes (and thence to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Morris certainly will have seen the one – now Qatar – that was exhibited with the medallion carpet. But Morris when commenting on the Ardabil carpet, and indeed earlier in the 1880s when consulting for the South Kensington Museum, did not just consider the examples offered by the dealers concerned (Myers and Robinson); he had a very extensive range of examples to provide a frame of reference. He sought out books on the subject, was provided with photographs by his friends and contacts.¹⁵ He had studied the collection of the Musée des Arts Decoratifs and Gobelins in Paris, and had been assiduous in calling in at carpet dealers on his travels, making his own collection from the mid 1870s. As Malcolm Haslam points out in his *Arts and Crafts Carpets* of 1991 Jane Morris was unimpressed by the time devoted to examination of worn fragments while May Morris was promised that the newly acquired rugs would make her feel as if she was in the

¹⁴ Letter W. M. to H. H. Richardson, 11 July 1882, quoted by Malcolm Haslam, *Arts and Crafts Carpets*, London 1991, 64. We should note Alois Riegl's criticism of the design reformers' orthodoxy of classifying by either geometric or vegetal and his stress on the mental element of design. See discussion of this by Joseph Mashek in Richard Woodfield, *Framing formalism: Riegl's work*, London 2001, 166. Mashek points out Riegl's acknowledgement of Lessing, Karabacek and Redgrave, Semper and Owen (for Owen Jones) in *Altorientalische Teppiche*, Leipzig 1891 (not translated). Mashek notes Riegl's acceptance of a Semper example as Riegl gives an account of the oriental stone relief and Roman pavement mosaic going into carpet design, referencing Semper's chapter "the knotted carpet in old oriental art". Mashek notes the Maori example which carries through to Riegl, *Stilfragen*, 1893, given by Riegl as a fundamental example of the urge to decorate (even horror vacui) which develops at its pinnacle into the Greek sense of beauty. For a discussion of Morris's designs in relation to Owen Jones's and Riegl's interest in Maori art see Caroline Arscott, *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings*, New Haven and London 2008.

¹⁵ Letter to Thomas Wardle, 24 October 1876: "As to the carpets, Mrs Wardle shall have patterns from me whenever she wants them; and I will send down the book about the Gobelins carpets [...] Macqueur/Maqueur" (he indicates they are being bound). He indicates a series of books *Arts et Metiers*, Paris, Academie des Sciences (volume on carpet weaving). George Howard had sent photos of carpets to Morris, probably of antique carpets bought by the Howards at Liberty and Co. in 1892, letter William Morris to George James Howard, 27 July 1892, Norman Kelvin, *Letters of William Morris*, vol. 3, Princeton 1996, 421. In the same letter Morris mentions a carpet in the collection of George Salting which "used to be exhibited at the S.K.M." Salting bequeathed three carpets to the museum. We can also hypothesise that he knew the collection of Alfred Morrison of London which was paired with Salting's as significant collection. O. Fairclough and E. Leary draw attention to his friendship with the archaeologist John Henry Middleton whose knowledge about oriental textiles was very important to Morris. Middleton was Morris's travel companion in Iceland; formerly an architect in offices of George Gilbert Scott, he was appointed Slade Professor at Cambridge, became Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum 1889 and then Director of the Art Department of The South Kensington Museum in 1892. Middleton wrote the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry "Textiles" citing William Morris's periodisation of Persian carpet design, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th edition, 1875-1889.

Arabian Nights.¹⁶ Morris mentioned the Vienna carpets – "the Vienna ones don't come within a mile of it" – in his letter to Thomas Armstrong of 12 March 1893 as a point of comparison to the Ardabil carpet and here he refers to the carpets exhibited in Vienna in 1891 and published in an extraordinarily lavish four-volume publication coming out in the following year *Oriental Carpets*, published by the Imperial and Royal Austrian Commercial Museum also in an English edition and printed in London by Cousins & Co. with magnificent plates in an "elephant folio" format.¹⁷ Morris owned a copy of this.¹⁸ The very finest antique carpets in the world were gathered together from museums and private collectors in this publication and described in great detail by Alois Riegl with contributions to the volumes from Vincent Robinson, George Birdwood, and Caspar Purdon Clarke of the South Kensington Museum along with authorities such as Wilhelm von Bode. Many of these carpets Morris would have already known by repute or from publications.

[12] We can therefore establish a roster of examples to set against Morris's remarks on the merits of oriental carpet design. In the Morris & Co circular announcing their venture into carpet making (or "carpeteering" as Morris privately called it) Morris frankly stated that he was motivated by the decline of standards in design and manufacture of current day eastern hand-knotted carpets. He was not impressed by the nineteenth-century examples that came into the South Kensington Museum. The company sought in their modern-day productions to emulate the beauty of antique oriental carpets. At the same time Morris said he was not intending to imitate eastern designs, even those of most beautiful ancient Persian carpets. In his designs he said he would be drawing on "modern and western ideas, guided by those principles that underlie all architectural art in common."¹⁹ This article will make some suggestions about what these modern and western ideas were, how they can be linked to his statement about the intellectual aspect of great Persian design and how the term "architectural" fits in.²⁰ It will go on to emphasise the way that he saw the western and modern sensibility as linked to the pictorial and make some suggestions about the narrative dimension of his ornament.

[13] Morris said in 1881:

¹⁶ Malcolm Haslam, *Arts and Crafts Carpets*, London 1991, 56. William Morris to May Morris, March 1876, "it will make you feel as if you were in the Arabian Nights."

¹⁷ Österreichisches Handelsmuseum, ed., *Oriental Carpets*, Vienna 1892-1896.

¹⁸ Kelvin, *Complete Letters*, vol. 4, 24 citing Sotheby's Catalogue, 1898, lot 920.

¹⁹ Cited in J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols., London 1899, vol. 2, 4.

²⁰ The key to the architectural is connectedness. This becomes clear when Morris discusses the non-architectural design produced in Japan. Design in this context, he argues, fails in meaningfulness, it is perhaps marvellous in its workmanship but is empty, "the Japanese have no architectural and therefore no decorative instinct. Their works of art are isolated and blankly individualistic, and in consequence [...] they remain mere wonderful toys, things quite outside the evolution of art, which I repeat, cannot be carried on without the architectural sense that connects it with the history of mankind." William Morris, "Textiles," in: *Catalogue of the Exhibition ... Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*, exh. cat. London, New Gallery, 1888, 26.

But I admit that you will probably have to go to the school of the Eastern designers to attain excellence in the art, as this in its perfection is a speciality of theirs. Now, after all, I am bound to say that when these difficulties [i.e. difficulties over getting beauty in every little bit of the surface, in maintaining due flatness and managing the disposition of colours without using tonal gradation or shading] are conquered, I, as a Western man and a picture-lover, must still insist on plenty of meaning in your patterns; I must have unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields, and strange trees, boughs, and tendrils, or I can't do with your pattern [...].²¹

- [14] Every time he reverts to this topic he emphasises that suggestion of nature rather than naturalistic depiction of actual instances of nature is what is required. If there isn't meaning of this kind he would rather have the meaning that is still to be found even in the degraded examples (as he saw it) of modern-day tribal manufacture where the motif consists of abstract forms. The sentence just quoted finishes

[I must have unmistakable suggestions ...] or I can't do with your pattern, but must take the first piece of nonsense-work a Kurdish shepherd has woven from tradition and memory; all the more, as even in that there will be some hint of past history.

- [15] This is to put the geometric (nonsense-work) into a relationship with the historical. I do not think this is just a case of Morris saying that there is continuity in the patterns over a long historical period. Morris's view on the historical dimension of abstract pattern partly relies on assumptions about the morphology of motifs, seeing the production of abstract ornament through a process of copying and loss of referential intention:

[S]uch carpets as have been made there for the last hundred years or so, which are chiefly pieces of nearly formless colour [...] delightful as they are, are themselves the product of a failing art: their prototypes are partly those simple but scientifically designed cloths whose patterns are founded on the elaborate pavement mosaics of Byzantine art; and partly they are degradations, traceable by close study, from the elaborate floral art of Persia.²²

- [16] Rectilinear or curvilinear geometrical patterning, can be the end-result of loss representational meaning or else relate to an ongoing tradition of architecturally derived patterning, intellectual in its knowledgable or scientific design. His thinking on this owes something to the prominent design theorist Semper. He referred in 1884 to "geometrical designs [...], the prototypes of which were obviously floor-mosaics."²³

- [17] We can contrast the statement the journalist George Augustus Sala made sixteen years before:

²¹ William Morris, "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing," 1881, delivered as a lecture to the Working Men's College, London, reprinted in Christine Poulson, *William Morris on Art and Design*, Sheffield 1996, 75.

²² Omitted: "could not be made satisfactorily and spontaneously by Western art; but these carpets," William Morris, "The Lesser Arts," 1882, first delivered as a lecture to the Trades Guild of Learning, London in 1877, reprinted in Poulson, *William Morris On Art and Design*, 81.

²³ "Textile Fabrics," delivered as a lecture 11 July 1884 at the International Health Exhibition at the South Kensington Museum, London, published in pamphlet form, London 1884, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/fabrics.htm> (accessed 30 May 2013).

The carpets of Mascara are famous throughout North Africa and compete not unsuccessfully with the world celebrated carpets of Stamboul. Like Turkey carpets, their pattern resembles nothing in the heavens above, nor in the earth beneath, nor in the waters under the earth; but also like the products of the looms of Constantinople and Asia Minor, the brilliance and harmony of the colours is most exquisite.²⁴

[18] Sala could settle for meaningless non-representational pattern and celebrate it: Morris identified history in his ornament, was deeply uneasy about the idea of meaningless ornament and in yearning for suggestion sought story.²⁵ Indeed he felt that for the post-renaissance westerner the familiarity with the pictorial made it a matter of necessity that the area of the design should have pictorial associations, that it should correlate to the environment whether the built structure, the earth with its plants and creatures or the field of human action like the hunting field. This investment in meaning effectively rendered the two-dimensional area of the design as an area for projection of place, life process and willed action.

[19] Morris lectured frequently on art and design and in 1888 he delivered the lecture "Textiles" also titled "Tapestry and Carpet Weaving" in the series sponsored by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society to correspond with their exhibition of that year.²⁶ At the lecture apparently he displayed his own carpet, removed from his house in Hammersmith for the occasion. This carpet subsequently (after his death) came into the collection of the Museum.²⁷ In this lecture once again he emphasised the need for the suggestion of nature and life. The lecture ends with these words:

It is the pleasure in understanding the capabilities of a special material, and using them for suggesting (not imitating) natural beauty and incident, that gives the *raison d'être* of decorative art.²⁸

²⁴ George Augustus Sala, *A Trip to Barbary by a Roundabout Route*, London 1866, 224, <http://archive.org/stream/atriptobarbaryb00salagoog#page/n232/mode/2up/search/carpets+of+Mascara> (accessed 30 May 2013).

²⁵ Morris's thinking on this owes something to Ruskin in *The Two Paths* where a repetitive border made up of blots, numerals and stick-men is compared to Correggio's mural at Parma consisting of an illusionistic presentation of vine trellis and lovely figures in action. John Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, New York 1859, 96.

²⁶ Morris & Co exhibited two carpets at that exhibition one of which was a weaving of the Holland Park design devised for Alexander Ionides. "Introductory Notes: I, Textiles," in: *Catalogue of the Exhibition ... Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*, exh. cat. London, New Gallery, 1888, 17-29. Entries are as follows: "103 – No. 50b. Hammersmith Carpet. Wool, hand-made. Designed by William Morris. Executed by Morris and Co."; "166 – No. 399. 'Holland Park' Carpet. Hand-made. Designed by William Morris. Executed by Morris and Co." This was one of his most successful carpet designs; Linda Parry has identified six weavings; one was the carpet for the hall at Clouds in Wiltshire. Linda Parry in *William Morris*, exh. cat. London 1996, 282.

²⁷ William Morris, letter to Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson, 27 October 1888, in: Norman Kelvin, *Complete Letters*, vol. 2B, 833.

²⁸ William Morris, "Textiles," in: *Catalogue of the Exhibition ... Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*, exh. cat. London, New Gallery, 1888, 29.

[20] We can see how this example of his own seventeenth-century Persian vase carpet supported his points about the suggestion of the beauties of nature. He sees in the carpets a link to the experience of the makers:

These men whose names are long forgotten, but whose works we still wonder at. In their own way they meant to tell us how the flowers grew in the gardens of Damascus, or how the hunt was up on the plains of Kirman, or how the tulips shone among the grass in the mid-Persian valley, and how their souls delighted in it all, and what joy they had in life; nor did they fail to make their meaning clear to some of us.²⁹

[21] The meaning is in this communication of the joy to be found in experience both of environment and action. This is not so far from Riegl's tracing of *Kunstwollen* in the morphing forms of spiral ornament through the ages set out in his *Stilfragen* of 1893. Riegl in the Vienna carpet book of 1892-1896 comments on the lively cloud bands in Persian carpets. These are traced back by Wilhelm von Bode in his introductory essay in the volume not to Buddhist snakes or Marco Polo's travel impressions but to representations of the emblem of immortality (or life force) "shi" (chi) in Chinese art. Von Bode writes at some length on the knotting, "knotted ribbon-like forms of various shapes", rolling up like a ball or a mollusc, unrolling, stretching out, shooting out side branches and other transformations of this motif.³⁰

[22] The floral carpets, such as his own vase carpet, represent for Morris the second category among the repertoire of antique carpets after the geometrical Byzantine-influenced "mosaic pavement" type. He speaks of this category of carpet "whose headquarters was Ispahan in Persia: this kind of design was elaborate, flowing, and founded on floral forms." This he brings together with the type of the animal carpet from the same period and centres of production, "very commonly mingled with animals and sometimes with human figures." The carpet he advised the South Kensington Museum to buy can stand as an example of this, where tigers and leopards attack antelopes, fish are placed in a central "pond" (fig. 4) and as Morris stated in his report "the centres of many of the flowers in the connecting pattern are filled with leopard heads or human faces."³¹ (fig. 5) Or else we could look at the example of the magnificent Schwarzenberg Carpet exhibited at Vienna in 1891 where, as we see in the illustration in the *Oriental Carpets* publication, ducks swim placidly in the central area, paired peacocks are placed in the cartouches, the branches of the shrubs are thronged with birds and leopards pant in the shade of trees. The third kind of Persian carpet from the celebrated Safavid period that Morris references is the hunting carpet. At the Vienna Exhibition the centrepiece of the show was the most

²⁹ William Morris, "Making the Best of It," 1880, delivered as "Some Hints on House Decoration" to the Trades Guild of Learning, 1880, published in William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, 1882, reprinted in Poulson, *William Morris On Art and Design*, 119.

³⁰ Wilhelm von Bode in Österreichisches Handelsmuseum, ed., *Oriental Carpets*, vol. 1, Introduction.

³¹ MA/1/M3315/1 Lindo Myers (aka Myers & Son) RP/1883/811. 2 February 1883, Report on two carpets offered by Mr Myers of Bond Street. No. 1. Transcribed by Ayla Lepine.

distinguished extant example of this genre, picked out by Riegl for showing human figures in varied action, "natural growth" rather than stilted symmetry in the vegetal ornament and incorporating Chinese motifs of paired dragons, and phoenixes as well as many "amorphous cloud bands winding their way everywhere in the border."³²



4 *Sangusko Carpet*, 16th century, wool on cotton and silk, 510.5 x 236cm, Iran, V&A Museum, London, purchased by the South Kensington Museum in 1883 (23-1883). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



5 As fig. 4 (detail). © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum

[23] The subject matter and stylistic markers separating these kinds of carpets: the mosaic pavement, flowing floral/animal depiction or the representation of human action do not represent a menu for Morris, a range of motifs and schemes that can be selected and combined at will. He states with a shade of disgust that current degenerated carpet design in the east approach the process in just this way, picking randomly between the "disjecta membra". For Morris, in this as in all the arts, the project was to bring the sundered body-parts back together to re-knit or re-knot the elements and restore dynamic force and vitality. This was to put the modern designer back at the nexus of cultural exchange where diverse elements were creatively conjoined as Persian designers were able to do, or even more significantly (because he thought Byzantine design was anterior to sixteenth and seventeenth-century Persian design and all the stronger

³² Description of plate LXXXI.

because he correlated the achievements of Byzantine art with emergent social equality) as Byzantine designers did. In Byzantium Morris says it was possible to combine (productively) diverse cultural components:

No beauty in the art has ever surpassed the beauty of those its first days of joy and freedom; the days of gain without loss: the qualities of all the past styles which had built it up are there, with all that it has gained of new.³³

- [24] Byzantium is described by Morris as "a kind of knot to all the many thrums of the varied life of the first days of modern Europe." It draws in the Assyrian and ancient Persian (Chaldean and Sassanian) along with the Greek and Roman.
- [25] The thrum, in weaving, is the unwoven end of the warp thread.³⁴ Good design makes the knot, it is architectural in the sense that Japanese art failed to be. The key to the "architectural" is connectedness: Morris consistently uses the term beyond the context of built forms. This becomes clear when Morris discusses what he sees as the non-architectural design produced in Japan. Design in this context, he argues, fails in meaningfulness, it is perhaps marvellous in its workmanship but is empty. He said "the Japanese have no architectural and therefore no decorative instinct. Their works of art are isolated and blankly individualistic, and in consequence [...] they remain mere wonderful toys, things quite outside the evolution of art, which I repeat, cannot be carried on without the architectural sense that connects it with the history of mankind."³⁵ The knot is the linkage of elements from the past, and from geographically dispersed cultures; it is an expression of linkage possible between members of the community newly freed from tyranny; to make the knot is to bring design into the epic vectors of human history.³⁶
- [26] As we look at Morris's carpets, for instance the large Clouds carpet woven for the Wyndhams at East Knoyle (fig. 1), we can seek the "architectural" aspect of the design that Morris wrote about. Although commissioned for a particular setting we are misled if

³³ William Morris, *The History of Pattern Designing*, lecture 8 April 1879 given to the Trades Guild of Learning, London, published in *Collected Works*, ed. M. Morris, London 1910-1915, vol. 22, cited here from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1879/pattern.htm> (accessed 19 February 2014).

³⁴ Morris's phrase bears an echo of Robert Burns's poem of 1788 with the lines "A bonnie, westlin weaver lad / Sat working at his loom; / He took my heart as wi' a net / In every knot and thrum." The image of the loom as the locus of the amorous trap is discussed in the essay by Caroline Arscott, "William Morris's Tapestry: Metamorphosis and Prophecy in *The Woodpecker*," in: Matthew Hunter and Francesco Lucchini, eds., *The Clever Object*, special issue of *Art History* 36/3 (June 2013), 608-625.

³⁵ Morris, "Textiles," in: *Catalogue of the Exhibition ... Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*, exh. cat. London, New Gallery, 1888, 26.

³⁶ On the range of cultural forms embraced by "architecture" and the triple formula of the epic, the decorative and skilfulness see William Morris, "Gothic Architecture," delivered as lecture 11 February 1889, Corporation Galleries, Glasgow, published as *Gothic Architecture: A Lecture for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*, Hammersmith 1893. It is notable that in "Gothic Architecture" the roof is offered as the brain of the building, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1889/gothic.htm> (accessed 19 February 2014).

we search for explicit correlations to the architecture of the Wyndhams' house: Webb's rectilinear geometrical plasterwork ceiling, and the delicate angular shelving, screen and cabinets of the interior divide a field with junction points but the lines do not correspond to the huge curves of the bold Morris pattern. Morris does not choose to weave in a coded reference to the house by the incorporation of cloud bands as cipher. The pink-buff and dark blue colour scheme of the big carpet known as *Clouds* is slightly more sky-like than the bold red and blue of the Holland Park design rewoven with only minor muting for its position under the skylight in the hall at Clouds. It is possible to point to those square-ish white tendrils that populate the blue field in *Clouds* as in most of his large carpet designs; they are sufficiently random in relation to the dominant geometry of the design to suggest the energetic rolling, knotting and stretching of life-force invested cloud bands (fig. 6). But in establishing the meaning of the design we miss the point if we understand architecture just in terms of building elements, and meaning just in terms of a hidden code.



6 As fig. 1 (detail) (photograph provided by the author)

[27] Morris prepares us to see his own stylistic reference not in terms of selective deployment of historicist elements from a menu, whether Byzantine pavement design, centred medallions or lotus-like palmettes but rather in terms of a knotting of the separate threads into a newly viable organic whole. The palmettes and medallions are important as junction points like so many throbbing hearts in a network of veins. I do think that we have to look through the abstract geometry of the overall pattern, with its interacements and linkages and knots, to recognise literal allusions to floral nature and the joys brought

by its contemplation, and through that to the energetic conflict of competing creatures, and through that to the decisive actions and the joys and terrors of the communal venture of the hunt. The figure in the carpet is findable, the tigress does leap out. The blossoms can be thought of as having leopards' heads and indeed human heads within them, just as the palmettes bear their own flowering plants and the giant meandering leaves of the border spread flat to display flowering branches.

- [28] In this I am not keen to follow Hillis Miller's diagnosis of undecidability as he applies it to Henry James's story.³⁷ Morris with "boundless hope" seeks accretion without loss. Either/Or in terms of "meaningful"/"empty" will not do for Morris's project. Accretion without loss is what was possible for Byzantine art which in Morris's view incorporated and built on Persian, Assyrian, Greek and Roman art. Elements associated with Persia and Assyria were transformed into "strange mysticism" and "richness and mystery [...]" the most necessary of all the qualities of pattern-work.³⁸ Greek accuracy was retained and transformed; gaining a "crisp sparkling richness and a freedom and suggestion of nature." The "straying wreath-like naturalism" also to be found in Greek art "gained a knitting up of its lines into strength, and an interest in every curve, which make it like the choice parts of the very growths of nature." "The great rolling curves of the Roman acanthus" are "not forgotten" but "have life, growth, variety and refinement infused into them." Morris's commitment to a creative combination of diverse forces to produce animate beauty in design and manufacture is one that informs all his practice in a great variety of media. In his design work for carpets though there is a particular enactment in the medium (as well as in the design) of the intelligent knotting together of cultural threads. Carpet making produces a substantial manifestation of the linkage of these historically separated and culturally disparate threads, metaphorically stabilised in the very substance of the textile and visibly alive in the pattern.
- [29] To claim that the area of the design functioned pictorially for Morris is not to suggest that he burdened his design with three-dimensional forms. For him the design was pictorial because to be vital it had to exist as a plane of projection for phenomena in many dimensions: maybe the parallel zone of the sky or ceiling above, certainly the architectural complex, but also the natural world with its changes and contests, the exchanges of human intercourse and the engagements of epic history.

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³⁷ J. Hillis Miller, "The Figure in the Carpet," in: *Poetics Today* 1/3 (1980), 107-118, a deconstructive reading of the novella, identifying catachresis as the formal element deferring any decisive meaning.

³⁸ There is an ambivalence in the text, a refusal to allocate mystery or mysticism to the earlier Persian and Assyrian: these elements are said to spring from the social ferment and political horizons of Byzantium but the Persian and Assyrian are nonetheless said to play a role.

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