"A Language That All Can Understand": William Morris, William Hogarth and the Decorative Arts

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Ray Watkinson has called attention to parallels between Hogarth and Morris: their conviction that art could be understood by and give pleasure to all, their attempts to rescue it from the dreary obfuscation of genteel "taste". It is the purpose of this essay to enlarge upon Watkinson's analogy, and to propose that there are as well stylistic similarities between Hogarth's visual thinking and Morris's art. Further, I will argue that an artist's use of particular style can associate his work with specific social and political positions even though the work itself has no overtly political subject.

Morris asserted that art should "not be an esoteric mystery shared by a little band of superior beings: it [should] be a part of every life ... a language that all can understand." Hogarth's treatise The Analysis of Beauty was meant, he said, to de-mystify art: "however they [his readers] may have been aw'd and overborn by pompous terms of art, hard names, and the parade of seemingly magnificent collections of pictures and statues; they are in a fairer way, ladies as well as gentlemen, of gaining a perfect knowledge of the beautiful in artificial, as well as natural forms, by considering them in a familiar way, than those who have been prepossessed by dogmatic rules." His aim was to "teach us to see with our own eyes." Hogarth wrote of the esthetics of corsets, coiffures, chairs, ships, candlesticks, tulips, parsley, Gothic architecture, and shells, how the forms of these things are experienced, what and how they register on the senses. Morris wrote more widely, about the functions of art in society, about tapestry, carpets, costume, pots, furniture, Gothic architecture, town planning, about the embellishment and enrichment of daily life. Both men worked as decorative artists: Hogarth produced ornamental engraving for silver tableware, book illustrations, trade cards and theatrical tickets with patterned borders and embellishments: Morris made wallpaper, fabric, embroidery, carpet and book designs. They were businessmen who created and sold their own products. They took an active role in improving the societies in which they lived. Both artists vigorously, sarcastically, wittily opposed artistic doctrines which would make art the property of an elite; they detested the speciously learned, the vapid connoisseurs who derived their esthetics from the Renaissance and classical imitations.

There are substantial differences between the two men. The practice of ornamental design was very minor in Hogarth's career. He was primarily a painter of portraits and of modern moral subjects, much concerned with the depiction of individual character and action, a visual satirist. Morris was relatively indifferent to easel painting, was almost
exclusively a pattern designer, and his system of esthetics was informed by medieval art. Moreover, similar-sounding assertions about esthetics, and especially the role of art in society, when uttered by a nineteenth-century revolutionary Marxist and by an eighteenth-century Cockney painter-artisan will have different connotations. But the terms which they used to describe beauty, vital art, and the procedures for achieving it are strikingly congruent. Fitness, variety, simplicity, and intricacy, (these last two by no means contradictory but rather complementary in the minds of the two artists), are the principles to which they refer again and again. They both were convinced of the immediate and basic visual appeal of natural forms: shapes, colors, patterns, derived and abstracted from birds' plume, trees, flowers, clouds, flowing water, and leaves. These were for both men the fundamental sources of visual delight, needing no authority, philosophical or literary, to validate their sensuous appeal.

Given Morris’s dislike of the eighteenth century in general and its art in particular, it is hard to see at first glance how he could have felt any sympathy with Hogarth’s Rococo stylistic idiom. Whenever Morris mentions Louis XV carpets, porcelain, the painting of Boucher, he calls them vile, degraded, hideous. He detested equally styles contemporary with and in opposition to the Rococo: “the severity (that is to say, the unmitigated expensive ugliness) of the last dregs of would-be Palladian, as exemplified in the stone lumps of the Georgian Period” was dismal, a sentiment with which Hogarth in general agreed. So too were the “acres of canvas covered by Sir Joshua Reynolds on which such floods of adulation have been … lavished: I ask you to look at them with your own eyes and not through those of art critics and tell me what you see in them .”

Morris acknowledged that “craftsmen of the [early] eighteenth century still had lingering among them scraps of tradition from times of art now lost” which made their work valuable. In “Art under Plutocracy” he refines this further: “This idea of commerce being an end in itself and not a means merely, being but half developed in the eighteenth century … some interest could still be taken in those days in the making of wares. The capitalist-manufacturer of the period had some pride in turning out goods which would do him credit, … he was not willing wholly to sacrifice his pleasure in this kind to the imperious demands of commerce; even his workman, though no longer an artist, that is a free workman, was bound to have skill in his craft …” There are other hints in Morris’ writings that he considered the art of this earlier period to have some positive qualities. May Morris recorded that he often admitted “implicitly and explicitly, that this … period has spared us much that is pretty and lovable in the humbler forms of art.” He adapted a Queen Anne pattern to use in a wallpaper, and acknowledged that the Queen Anne architectural style had some beauty and excellence. Helen Snowden has drawn attention to Morris and Company’s reproductions of Chippendale and Queen Anne styles in furniture. In British art, the Queen Anne style overlapped and merged with Rococo. There was a Rococo revival fully under way during Morris’s formative years in the 1840s and 1850s. It sometimes merged with the Gothic revival, as it had in the eighteenth century, the appeal in both cases being to a common love of intricacy and exuberant natural forms. Morris, of course, rejected categorically a style which he associated with the French monarchy, but we may tentatively suppose that its stylistic vocabulary may have remained impressed upon his memory, with some positive connotations. Morris’s friends and fellow workers Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Dante Gabriel Rossetti formed The Hogarth Club, an anti-Royal Academy
art group whose name was chosen "to do homage to the stalwart founder of Modern English art." There they exhibited furniture designs, painted furniture, cartoons for stained glass, and paintings with modern subjects.\textsuperscript{12} Morris commended Hogarth in a review of the Royal Academy exhibition of 1884, for his clarity of execution and his direct, blunt narratives.\textsuperscript{13}

The humbler forms of eighteenth-century art which May Morris told us her father liked would have been the those produced by the furniture makers, metal engravers, wood carvers, pattern designers, book illustrators, silk weavers, joiners, that is, the decorative artists living and working in the Soho district of London in the first half of the century. This was the center of British Rococo ornamental art, and Hogarth was a member of this community. These workers certainly produced works for a market, but it was a market which comprised social and economic classes close to and including the artisans themselves.\textsuperscript{14}

During the first half of the eighteenth century in England there was an often noted, often deplored lack of governmental, institutional, and patrician patronage of art. However, this absence, along with the absence of a unified, controlling artistic tradition based on Renaissance and classical authorities, may have allowed the emergence of a relatively free, open situation which permitted practising artists, more precisely artisans-artists, to determine artistic fashion and practice. British Rococo was an artisan's style, produced in workshops communally, meant to be widely available and immediately appealing to those without any special education in esthetics. It was called the modern style by its practitioners. It had been imported into England by French craftsmen, and in France it was also called the modern style. In England the Rococo was by no means an aristocratic or court style. Attempts have been made to associate it with Frederick Prince of Wales, and his dissident politics, but he and his circle were neither exclusive nor consistent patrons of Rococo art.\textsuperscript{15} The customers for and producers of Rococo ornamental art bought and produced works which were very different in style from the those promoted by the neo-Palladians and other classicists. The British Rococo ignored the ideals of edification and imitation of Italianate models, the "cold classicism and turgidity" which Morris so hated. The Rococo was vilified by connoisseurs for being too free, lawless, unrestrained. It did not lend itself to philosophical codification or ally itself with moral ideas. It was unruly.

There were of course traditional patterns which the artisans and artists used as models, but their practice allowed plenty of freedom of variation, imagination and experiment within the constraints imposed by the purpose of the objects they were designing and decorating. These artisans must have thought, as Morris put it 150 years later, that they were making things which they "knew to be useful and believed to be beautiful."

To be sure they were in many cases working within the early workshop system, one which required division of labour into units of repetition, but that system was not then as strict as it became later in the century. In England some forms of the guild system persisted until about 1760, especially among skilled artisans. There is little consolidated research about artisanal practice and life in the years just before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The nature of work, social classes, traditional attitudes toward art, were in the process of dissolving and re-constituting themselves in new forms, so it is difficult to make substantive generalizations. However M. Dorothy George provides some observations: "It was a great age for decorative craftsmanship, more especially in the first
sixty or seventy years of the century ... the London artisan was admitted to be a most excellent workman: Leblanc, a Frenchman by no means prejudiced in favour of England, gives him a magnificent testimonial: he is never content to work below his own standard of workmanship (in this he differs from the Frenchman) and ‘the vilest workman thinks nobly of his trade.’ This estimate of the situation is echoed by E.P. Thompson: “The old elite was made up of master-artisans who considered themselves as ‘good’ as masters, shopkeepers or professional men.” According to Robert Campbell’s The London Tradesman (1747), goldsmiths, jewellery makers, silk weavers, upholsters (the equivalent of modern interior decorators), furniture makers, stucco workers, carvers, designed their own patterns. He says that these are “ingenious” arts, that is, imaginative and inventive. He gives the hours of work for most artisans as six to eight hours a day: the weekly pay of journeymen averaged 30 shillings, while skilled artisans in the luxury trades earned generally a guinea a day. Campbell’s account of these artisans puts them firmly in the middling classes. They not only produced art, but were able to purchase portraits, illustrated books, and prints, and to decorate their houses with furniture, carpets, and silver, and Campbell says that “who sells today becomes purchaser tomorrow.”

A number of scholars have remarked that much of the Morris and Co. furniture was made in the eighteenth century manner. Morris’s business practice bears comparison with that of Thomas Chippendale. Both were practising artists who oversaw the work of their many employees; both were successful businessmen. Their furniture was domestic rather than palatial. It appealed to the middle classes, and had strong vernacular affiliations. Christopher Gilbert has pointed out that “established architects and ‘men of good taste’ remained aloof from ... the Rococo style [the style in which Chippendale primarily worked] which was first celebrated at the tradesman level by silversmiths, porcelain modellers, stuccoists, the engravers of ornamental surrounds and book illustrators.” The majority of Chippendale’s customers were of the eighteenth-century middling classes: rich professionals, merchants, tradesmen, and some gentry, just as Morris’s were in the nineteenth century. Like Chippendale, Morris was a specialist interior designer whose firm offered a complete range of products to its clients.

Morris looked back to a time when a craftsman “worked for no master save the public” and made wares which he himself sold to “the man who was going to use them.” Morris here was speaking of the middle ages, but to a lesser degree his words apply to the early eighteenth century as well. This was certainly the case with Hogarth after he set himself up as an independent artist-publisher appealing as directly as possible to a varied public, and waging a steady campaign against exploitive dealers in degraded old master paintings and other art objects. Morris was keenly aware that only the wealthy could afford his works, but hoped that in a better society his sort of art would be available to everyone, and everyone who wished and could would make handsome objects with which to be surrounded. Hogarth certainly had no such utopian aspirations, but like Morris he was concerned with art made by good craftsmen which he wanted to be readily available to all who really cared for art, implicitly of any social class. May Morris claimed that Morris’s products were “adaptable to the needs of ordinary life ... not the wealth of millionaire but the moderate competence of a middle-class merchant who lives, day in, day out, with the few beautiful things he has collected slowly and carefully.” Morris wanted to sell his wares to the same classes that Hogarth did, to good citizens: “So I say our furniture should be good citizens’ furniture, solid and well made in workmanship,
and in design should have nothing about it that is not easily defensible, no monstrosities or extravagances.”\textsuperscript{23} Monstrosities and extravagances were associated with the luxury and pomp of continental art by both Morris and Hogarth, who liked to characterize themselves as plain, solid, sensible British workmen.\textsuperscript{1} Hogarth says “simplicity, convenience and neatness [in eighteenth-century usage neatness meant elegance] of workmanship … particularly in England, where plain good sense hath preferred these more necessary parts of beauty, which everybody can understand …”\textsuperscript{24}

Hogarth insisted upon the authority of the practitioner’s understanding of art above that of any other claimant to esthetic knowledge: “the only true judge would be the man who make[s] himself master of every[thing] so as to be capable of carrying [the] thing through to the utmost height himself,” and that “the mechanic at his loom will give a better account of the rich brocade he weaves than the mercer …”\textsuperscript{25} Morris preached the pleasure of work for its own sake when not performed mindlessly under a factory owner’s control, when the worker knew what the product of his toil would be, and was free to give his thought and invention to his task. Hogarth asserted that “what would be toil and labour becomes sport and recreation when the mind is employed.”\textsuperscript{26}

We have very few and slight examples of Hogarth’s ornamental work. His attitudes to design must be gleaned from frequent allusions to ornament in \textit{The Analysis of Beauty}, from the wallpaper, fabrics, and, furniture which appear as background in his paintings, from the typical decorative work of his period, that of his artistic associates, and which was the basis of his visual vocabulary. I do not claim that Morris copied Rococo patterns, but rather that Morris’s designs exhibit an approach similar to the imaginative, intricate designs of the early 18th century, which were abstracted from nature.

Before enlarging on Hogarth’s and Morris’s remarks about nature as an inspiration for the visual arts, I want to consider their notions regarding architecture and interior design. Hogarth had relatively little to say about architecture, in contrast to Morris’s sustained and profound concern with it. Both men found Palladian architecture drearily repetitive, bleakly unimaginative. Hogarth called for a differentiated variety of building types, and richer architectural decoration. This embellishment might, he said, derive from “Nature, [which] in shells and flowers, etc. affords an infinite choice of elegant hints …”\textsuperscript{27} Living and writing in a period dominated by classicizing taste, which disdained Gothic, Hogarth was nevertheless able to appreciate the beauties of Westminster Abbey, the fine and artful variations of the gothic spires of London’s churches, as well as the steeple of Strasbourg Cathedral.\textsuperscript{28} And about Windsor Castle: “[it] is a noble instance of the effect of quantity. The hugeness of its few distinct parts strikes the eye with uncommon grandeur at a distance, as well as nigh. It is quantity with simplicity, which makes it one of the finest objects in the kingdom, tho’ devoid of any regular order of architecture.”\textsuperscript{29}

Regarding interiors and furnishing the two men had one assumption in common. Hogarth was accustomed to looking at rooms and their furnishings as integrated decorative schemes, and so was Morris, who saw furniture and ornaments working together to make up a complete unit of a properly decorated dwelling. They concurred in the Rococo assumption that a room should be designed as an ordered arrangement of alternating rich embellishment with plain areas. In the Rococo period paintings were generally meant to be part of the larger fabric of an encompassing design. Paintings tended to echo the color and lines of the rooms in which they were hung. Their frames provided a transition from wall to canvas rather than causing a distinct break with
surroundings. They were usually small in scale so that they did not interrupt too markedly
the flow of the general scheme. Morris saw the role of paintings in a similar fashion: a
picture “ought to be ornamental. It ought to be ... part of a beautiful whole in a room.
...”30 Hogarth’s modern moral histories – *The Rake’s Progress*, *Marriage à la Mode* etc. –
were certainly meant to arrest attention, but his portraits and conversation pieces were
more retiring, more typically Rococo, equal to, but not overpowering the other elements
in a room. Morris’s thinking about rooms was governed by his architectural sense. He
was inclined to decorative schemes which articulated the basic construction of a room, or
of furniture. Thus his preference for solid rectilinear tables, chairs and chests, and his
probable (though not explicitly stated) dislike of Rococo furniture. Morris allowed that
elegant and elaborate ornament – carving, inlaying, painting – might be applied to
furniture, but not so as to disguise its structure. Rococo furniture tended to obscure its
structure, its undulating planes and its flowing curvature denied its architectonic
framework. Here Morris and Hogarth differed. “How inelegant would the shapes of all
our moveables be without [the waving line],” says Hogarth, “how plain and
unornamental the mouldings of cornices, and the chimney pieces ...”31 Yet he too rejects
the curving line used as support: “twisted columns are undoubtedly ornamental, but as
they convey an idea of weakness, they always displease when they are improperly made
use of as supports to any thing that is bulky, or appears heavy.”32 He thought that
serpentine lines should be judiciously mixed and combined with straight lines, that plain
areas provided variety and contrast. Morris too recommended plain white walls and
ceilings, juxtaposed with embellished surfaces for the sake of contrast.

Morris took it for granted that beautiful, satisfying patterns must be abstractions from
nature: “I must have unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields and strange trees,
boughs and tendrils ... those natural forms which are at once most familiar and most
delightful to us ... are the best for our purpose. The rose, the lily, the tulip, the oak, the
vine and all the herbs and trees ...”33 “Now it is one of the chief uses of decoration, the
chief part of its alliance with nature, that it has to sharpen our dulled senses in this matter:
for this end are those wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms
invented, which men have so long delighted in: forms and intricacies that do not
necessarily imitate nature, but in which the hand of the craftsman is guided to work in the
way that she [nature] does, till the web, the cup, or the knife, look as natural, nay as
lovely, as the green field, the river bank or the mountain flint.”34 Hogarth and his fellow
Rococo artists drew on the same kind of inspiration: “the ornamental part of nature ...
The shapes and colours of plants, flowers, leaves, the paintings in butterflies wings,
shells,” cinquefoils, parsley, lilies, irises, roses, these Hogarth continually adduces as
patterns for the decorative arts.35 The Rococo style is characterized by a seemingly
unbounded passion for natural forms. Not since the Gothic period had there been such a
profusion of leaves, tendrils, flowers, birds, and fruit incorporated into ornament. These
forms were not rendered with empirically observed exactitude, but rather translated by
memory and imagination into rich designs suggestive of their models. Rococo decoration
is not meant to be examined searchingly, bit by bit. It does not convey information. There
is a general sense of fantasy, even mystery in its entire effect. Indeed this non-rational
fantastic quality is one of things which its detractors found so objectionable. But to
Morris fantasy and mystery are important and desirable qualities: “in all patterns which
are meant to fill the eye and satisfy the mind, there should be a certain mystery. We should
not be able to read the whole thing at once, nor be impelled by that desire to go on tracing line after line to find out how the pattern is made..."36 Morris wrote in several places of the mystery that comes from abundance and richness of detail. Ernst Gombrich has commented on this notion of mystery in decorative art: "The skill and inventiveness of the master craftsman is not only aimed at our conscious awareness. It rests on the experience that we can sense the all-important distinction between confusion and profusion without piecemeal examination... These may be large claims for an art form which is mostly relegated to the lower ranks of esthetic creativity. But history shows that some of the great traditions of ornamental styles transcended the limitations of pure decoration and were able to transmute redundancy into plenitude and ambiguity into mystery."37

Plenitude translated into variety and intricacy are repeated themes in the writings and artistic practice of Hogarth and Morris. They were both concerned to achieve a sensual, pleasing multiformity while retaining simultaneously clarity and distinctness. The affinities of the two artists are most marked in what they have to say about line and color. Hogarth's explication of the compound curve, his "line of beauty," describes it as two-dimensional and three-dimensional, but concentrates on its two-dimensional aspects. Like other Rococo artists he worked in shallow spatial planes, rather than suggesting spatial depth. That is, his work is characterized by evenly distributed undulating surface patterns. With one exception, the early "Trellis" wallpaper, there are no sustained straight lines in Morris's patterns. Morris's compositions consist of continuously entwining C and S curves, undulating lines interrupted and varied by more and different curves. Morris and Hogarth repeatedly call attention to outline, profiles, and silhouettes, to the deliniation of objects, and the necessary distinctness of subdivided and subsidiary parts. Hogarth: "When you would compose an object of a great variety of parts, let several of those parts be distinguish'd by themselves, by their remarkable difference from the next adjoining, so as to make each of them, as it were one well shap'd quantity or part..."38 Morris advised young artists to "Hold fast to distinct form in art," proceed to design "quite distinctly and without vagueness... Remember always, ... outline, silhouette, before modelling..."39

Next to line, color was for Morris and Hogarth the means of attaining distinctness as well as being immediately pleasing in itself. Hogarth detested the taste for dull hues which the connoisseurs of his day affected: "colours cannot be too brilliant if properly disposed, because the distinction of the parts are thereby made more perfect..."40 And "Observe the well-composed nosegay how it loses all its distinctness when it dies; each leaf and flower then shrivels and loses its distinct shape; and the firm colours fade into a kind of sameness: so that the whole gradually becomes a confused heap."41 Compare Morris: if "colours are too delicate they run into confusion," and "confusion of form caused by timidity of colour annoys the eye..."42

It would be tedious to quote more parallel passages from the two writers. There are many. They both rejoiced in esthetic diversity and variety, in the complexity of experienced life. Yet this complexity was not to be confused with perplexity. They wanted to explain the ways these experiences registered. The breezy, flowery, open meadow of Rococo art was the sunny sister of Morris's darker, tangled woodland. What I have argued in this paper is that Morris's and Hogarth's visual language is similar, and so were their attitudes to the functions of art in society. Both men attempted to wrest art
from its sequestration in the marble halls of those who claimed art as their property. For Morris and Hogarth art was part of the texture of life, daily and familiar, a common property, an understandable language, an easily accessible pleasure. It was meant to be produced by and for those who would not be ruled either politically or artistically.

NOTES

2 Quoted in Paul Meier, William Morris, the Marxist Dreamer, (Sussex, 1978), II, 484.
6 May Morris, William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist, I, 142.
7 Works, XXIII, 178.
8 May Morris, William Morris, II, 631.
13 May Morris, William Morris, I, p. 236.
19 Although they do not compare Chippendale and Morris, a clear analogy emerges in the study by Charles Harvey and Jon Press, “William Morris and the marketing of Art,” Business History, XXVII (October, 1986), 36-54.
21 May Morris, William Morris, I, 49.
24 Analysis, p. 63.
26 Analysis, p. 41.
27 Analysis, p. 62.
28 Analysis, p. 64.
29 Analysis, p. 47. Hogarth and Morris admired the spires of Wren’s City churches, which Morris said relieved the dullness and monotony of the London skyline; “Destruction of City Churches,” May Morris, William Morris, I, 163-4. Compare Hogarth: “[Wren’s] steeple and spires ... dispers’d about the whole city, adorn the prospect of it, and give it an air of opulency and magnificence; on which account their shapes will be found to be particularly beautiful,” Analysis, p. 64.
30 May Morris, William Morris, I, 302.
31 Analysis, p. 65.
32 Analysis, p. 32.
33 Works, XXII, 196, 200.
35 Analysis, pp.34-5.
36 Works, XXII, 109.
38 Analysis, p. 59.
39 Works, XXII, 168.
40 Analysis, p. 133, note 1.
41 Analysis, p. 60.
42 Works, XXII, 103.