Red House Decorated

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The best source of information on the decoration and furnishing of Red House is the notes provided by Burne-Jones to his son-in-law, when Mackail was busy with his life of Morris. But they were used again by Georgiana Burne-Jones in her Memorials and it is to the account as she quotes it that it is best to turn, especially as regards the painted decoration which was to have been so large and spendid a feature:

We fixed upon a romance for the drawing room, a great favourite of ours called Sir Degrevaunt. I designed seven pictures from this poem, of which I painted three that summer and autumn in tempera. We schemed also subjects from Troy for the Hall, and a great ship carrying Greek heroes for a larger space in the hall, but these remained only as schemes, none were designed except the ship. The great settle from Red Lion Square, with the three painted shutters above the seat, was put up at the end of the drawing room ... I began a picture from the Niebelungen Lied on the inside of one of the shutters of this settle, and Morris painted in tempera a hanging below the Degrevaunt pictures, of bushy trees and parrots and labels on which he wrote the motto he adopted for his life, “If I can”. 1

Mackail writing from these notes is not quite careful; he says:

A scheme had been designed for the mural decoration of the hall, staircase, and drawing room, upon various parts of which work went on intermittently for several years. The walls of the spacious and finely proportioned staircase were to be completely covered with paintings in tempera from the War of Troy, to be designed and executed by Burne-Jones. Below them, on a large wall-space in the hall, was to be a great ship carrying the Greek heroes. It was designed, as the rest of the Troy series were also to have been, in a frankly mediaeval spirit; a warship indeed of the fourteenth century, with the shields of the kings hung over the bulwarks. Round the drawing room, at a height of about five feet from the floor, was to be a continuous belt of pictures, the subjects of which were scenes from the fifteenth century English romance of “Sir Degrevaunt”. Three of them were executed by Burne-Jones, and remain on the walls now. Below them the wall was to have been covered with magnificent embroidered hangings. The principal bedroom was hung with indigo-dyed blue serge (then a substance which could only be procured with great difficulty) with a pattern of flowers worked on it in brightly coloured wools. For the dining room embroidered hangings of a much more elaborate and splendid nature were designed and partly executed, in a scheme of design like those of his later tapestries when he revived the art of tapestry weaving, of twelve figures with trees between and above them, and a belt of flowers running below their feet. Yet another hanging, executed by Morris with his own hands, was of green trees with gaily embroidered birds among them, and a running scroll emblazoned with his motto in English, “If I can”. The same motto in French re-appeared in the painted glass with which a number of windows of the house were gradually filled, and on the tiles (also executed at the works in Red Lion Square) which lined the deep porches. In the hall, a second great cupboard began to be painted,
with scenes from the Neibelunglied. There were no paperhangings in the house. 2

Now, Mackail is concerned to maintain his flow of description and keep it stylistically consistent, and he has re-arranged the way in which his father-in-law’s notes present the information. Georgie Burne-Jones, writing five years later, in 1904, from the same notes but with her own memories of the work as it went on in 1860 to 1865, quietly corrects the mistakes which have arisen in Mackail’s use of them. “Below them (the Degrevaunt paintings) the wall was to have been covered with magnificent embroidered hangings”, says Mackail: but this is not what Burne-Jones had written. Georgie quotes him: “Morris painted in tempera a hanging below the Degrevaunt pictures of bushy trees and parrots and labels on which he wrote the motto he adopted for his life.” Mackail has read without observation not just of what was actually in Red House to see (did he ever go there to look?) but of Burne-Jones’s words, and of mediaeval practice, which was sometimes to hang actual embroidered cloths – such as the Bayeux Tapestry which Morris and Jones had studied on their French tour of 1855, or, later or in more opulent circumstances, true tapestries when that art developed: but in less opulent or in temporary conditions, would simulate such hangings by painting on linen or canvas. And this, clearly, is what Morris did. The Degrevaunt paintings remain, protected by glass. The simulated hangings on which some of Morris’s labels (not a continuous scroll) were filled in by Rossetti with the mischievous words “As! can’t”, hung immediately below them to the floor, perhaps only under the three paintings that were finished, but also possibly along the wall where the other four were one day to have gone. These simulated embroideries resumed the design of the earliest piece of embroidery made by Morris, which now hangs, faded but intact, in Kelmscott Manor.

When Mackail was preparing his life of Morris, and inquiring particularly about his beginnings in art and how he came to master the many crafts, Jane told him that shortly after their marriage, Morris taught her the rudiments of embroidery: “We studied old pieces, and by unpicking and so on we learnt much, but it was uphill work, fascinating, but only carried through by his enormous energy and perseverance.” It seems unlikely that Morris did literally initiate Jane into embroidery, which in however simple a form was probably one of the things she would learn at school: but it is clear that what she told Mackail related to mediaeval or at least very old embroideries such as Street and Webb were actively interested in, and Morris too – and so Jane, and eventually her sister and Georgie Burne-Jones and the Faulkner women; all of whom took some part in the decoration of Red House or the design and craft work that flowed so abundantly from it.

Mackail’s account of Morris’s way into embroidery places his first essays among the activities of 1857, plausibly enough: but what Jane’s notes actually tell is different. “He started his experiments before he knew me... got frames made, had worsted dyed to his taste by an old French couple, and began a piece of work with his own hands. This was the celebrated ‘If I can’ bird and tree hanging, of which I still have a piece at Kelmscott Manor. He must have started this as early as 1855.” Another hand has altered this to 1857, but we had better accept what Jane says, which is confirmed circumstantially if we look at what Morris was doing in 1855, two years before they met.

This was the summer of the momentous tour of Northern France, during which, on the night of August 2nd, Morris decided to be an architect. Two days later they were in Bayeux, and on the following day, Sunday, after going to the cathedral, saw in the Public Library, where it had been on display since 1824, the historic Tapestry. Of this, Morris
wrote (to his mother) ten words only: "the tapestry is very quaint and rude, and very interesting." I doubt whether that brevity relates other than inversely to the depth of interest with which he studied it, so different from the great 'true' tapestries already seen in Bruges and the Cluny Museum. It has been often engraved in England and in France and Morris would certainly have seen such engravings. But nothing in any print would have prepared him for its substantial reality as an embroidery. Engraved, it was a document of our history: on the spot, much more; especially to an ardent young man who had just decided to become an architect and was already thinking of Street for his master. Back in England, after a brief visit to his mother at Leyton, a happy fortnight in Birmingham with friends, a visit to Malvern to Shelton relations, and to Clay Cross to see sister Emma, he settled down to every kind of experiment in the crafts which an aspirant gothic architect should know, practise, and design for. His work for Finals must have been kept to the minimum needed for a simple Pass, while he tried his hand at book-binding, modelling and carving, illumination and calligraphy: evidently, from Jane's record, embroidery too. This would be of special importance since the master whom he hoped to join, to whom all this work would constitute an important part of his credentials, was learned in embroidery, had made it very specially his own field, and in 1848, with his sister, published an important book on the art, as part of his campaign for the gothic.

In this connection I believe that the visit to Emma is most significant. She was closest to him of all his family: yet when he wrote to his mother explaining the seriousness of his intentions in becoming an architect, and asked her to explain to Henrietta, no word is said of Emma. To her, I believe, he had already said all he needed. During his stay with her and her husband he had been taken sightseeing in the beautiful Derbyshire Peaks, where as well as some fine churches he saw Haddon and Hardwick Halls, within a few miles of their home. Old Hardwick Hall, ruinous, he would love as gothic, though late: the Countess of Shrewsbury's grand new Hall – 'More glass than wall' – he would detest as architecture, but inside would find much to admire and love: the tapestries and furniture, much older than the building; the painted parapenting of hunting scenes would instantly catch an Essex eye, but above all, the great collection of ancient embroideries made by Bess for the instruction of her maids - and some from her own hand. With Bayeux fresh in mind, talking with a sister who would use the needle often in the service of her High Anglican husband's church, what more likely to have stimulated very particularly the desire to master embroidery? What more likely to have set him off, in emulation, on the "If I can", which has so much more in common, technically, with the Bayeux Tapestry than with anything else? The motifs used come from the same Froissart manuscript as the more familiar Daisy pattern: he was to repeat, with variations, in the dark background of the 'Belle Iseult' painting the bushy trees with flying birds and inscribed scrolls, on which, in this embroidery as well as in his simulated hangings painted at Red House, he set his motto: "If I can."

Mackail makes another similar mistake, which has probably been more misleading since it applies to a painting which does survive where it was made and can still be seen. He picks up Burne-Jones's, "I began a picture from the Niebelungen Lied on the inside of one of the shutters of this settle ..." - that is, of course, the settle from Red Lion Square, and the painting he began was on the back of one of its doors, on the front of which Rossetti had painted his "Dantis Amor", Love between the Sun and the Moon: removed from the settle when Red House was abandoned in the autumn of 1865, and the centre
door now hanging in the Tate Gallery, framed as a separate picture. Burne-Jones painted nothing at all on the shutters (doors) of the hall cupboard, to which Mackail transfers the Niebelungen scene, and in the process makes one painting two. There is indeed a painting on the cupboard doors of the hall-settle: not from Burne-Jones’s hand nor, as some have said, from Rossetti’s: nor yet on any theme from the Niebelungen Lied.

In form, the hall cupboard or press at Red House is, like the dresser Webb designed for the nearby dining room, a variant on Morris’s Red Lion Square settle. Each combines storage spaces of more than one kind with a bench that runs the length of the piece. The dresser was not meant to take any painted, or at least any pictorial decoration, but the other two were, and did. In each case the pictures were painted on large cupboard doors swinging above head height, while below, between cupboard and seat, ran open shelves in the settle, drawers in the hall cupboard. The doors of the hall cupboard, half-painted by Morris and possibly abandoned at an early stage as he became engrossed by the work for the Firm which took him daily to London, remain there still. Much of the painted ornament, which included patterns from Morris’s hand both inside and out, was some time in the middle of this century covered with dark brown paint, but the pictorial doors were not covered, and Morris’s intentions are there to be read. They make an important stage in his work as a painter, and at the same time tell much of the life of Red House and how it generated the Firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., early in 1861. Imperfect as this painting is, and at present in poor condition, it is worth a close examination, as a picture; secondarily, perhaps, for its technique.

The painting begins from the wall, runs forward to the front face, across the doors and back round the other end to the wall again, so that it could never have been meant to be seen at one view, like an easel painting: it was in fact to have the character of a frieze, with some implication of movement if not narrative, a character that will reassert itself when the whole cupboard is cleaned. It is to be read from side to side, and lends itself to the passing glances of its situation. We look at a painting about five feet wide, rather less than thirty inches deep; Morris drew it in fairly completely, though with many details hinted more than finished, and some taken out and redrawn. A first lay-in of paint was begun, some of the faces individualised, patterns on some garments, notably on sleeves, drawn or painted quite precisely. Why sleeves? because sleeves in the fourteenth century were often detachable, and given to knights by ladies as favours or pledges.

Morris had first laid-in a golden sky; against this painted tall slender trees, trunks spaced out but leafage mingling into a continuous band of green, scattered with red apples: below runs a wattle fence, and in the right hand half of the painting polled trunks of other trees rise just above the fence in a rough alternation. Reading the picture from left to right, four figures take up the left-hand door: five the right. At the extreme left stands a woman, in a full pale-red dress, her hair entirely enclosed in a wide bicorne headcloth: her face, hardly coloured, is very completely drawn in pencil, and I think from Jane: a long bench cuts her figure below the waist, her gown-hem appearing below. On it, near her, facing right, is a man who plays a rebec to a younger woman who sits listening, turning left towards him as he towards her: his face is very precisely drawn: I think from Faulkner: the woman has been drawn from Jane, but this head is partly scraped out for a second attempt. Next her stands another woman, her head barely indicated; this woman plays an instrument exactly like the man’s rebec, but holds and plays it like a lute. A tree that at first stood where she now is, has been scraped out and shifted to the right, but its ghost remains.
We now reach the edge of the door, trimmed with a simple angular moulding, with a typically neat Webb door-fastening: then the right hand door begins with another woman, also listening to the music, her body strongly twisted as she leans towards the player, but her left hand reaching behind her and taken by another man who is clearly raising her to him to dance, his right hand passing behind her to hold hers. His head is indicated, the face not drawn; hers, by a pencilled profile and a mass of waving hair suggested by two bold brush strokes from which we may infer Jane again. To his right, we have a group of three. There survives one drawing, a study for the group of three figures in the right hand half, indeed closing the picture at that end, of a man and two women. This drawing, formerly in the Janet Camp Troxell Collection, has been reproduced in the past — as for instance in Gerald Crow’s excellent book on Morris of 1934, where, though, it is absurdly titled ‘Iseult boarding the ship’ — the proper title of another surviving drawing. The three figures are very clearly in a garden; no suggestion of a ship anywhere. This garden is typical of many designs for stained glass, for embroidery, from various hands in these early days and is implicit in more than one of the Oxford murals; is indeed the setting of Morris’s own. The middle figure is of a woman seated on the ground, sidelong: a man kneels at her side, part supporting her with his left arm round her shoulders, and his right reaching something to her lips, not defined in the drawing but clear enough in the painting as a small fruit, perhaps a cherry. Right of her, the woman who closes the picture at the hinge of the door stands, one hand reaching up to the tree for casual support, the other holding the hem of her gown as she looks down at the woman on the ground. The faces of the three are not clear in the painting, but much more so in the drawing. The woman on the ground is looking down, eyes closed, but her hair suggests Georgiana Burne-Jones: the head of the man is that of her husband; for comparison we may take Rossetti’s Lancelot drawing and a likeness made around the same time by Simeon Solomon: the standing woman is surely Lizzie Siddall. All this is consistent with the familiar practice of all the Pre-Raphaelite-associated groups, using friends and family as models, using professionals as little as possible. But something else is indicated in this case.

The theme of this painting is not from the Niebelungen Lied, nor from any part of Malory, nor any part of the Degrevaut romance of Burne-Jones’s painting upstairs. But it does indeed relate to Malory and we can find a passage in his long tangle of romances to point us to the real theme, though to no incident. Nobody in this painting wears a crown, nobody wears armour, nobody is armed: though the man who kneels in the right hand side has a knife hanging from his girdle, it is no dagger, but the pen-case of scholar or merchant: the costume worn by the men is in each case a full gown such as Madox Brown’s Chaucer wears as he reads his ‘Tale of Custance’ to Edward the Third, or Wiclif as he reads his translation of the Bible. The passage in Malory which most fits this scene, a scene purely celebratory of the joys of Red House and the friends who come and go, comes in Book Ten, Chapter fifty-two. Two or three sentences set the scene.

And so Sir Lancelot brought Sir Tristram and La Belle Iseult unto Joyous Gard, that was his own castle that he had won with his own hands. And there Sir Lancelot put them in to weld [govern] for their own. And wit ye well that the castle was garnished and furnished for a king and queen royal there to have sojourned.

And: Now turn we to Sir Tristram and La Belle Iseult, how they made great joy together with all manner of mirths that they could devise; and every day Sir Tristram would go ride on hunting, for Sir Tristram was at that time called the best chaser of the world,
and the noblest blower of an horn of all manner of measures. While there is no hint of the hunt in this painting, and none of the group ever shows any interest in any kind of hunting (Morris's own coarse fishing is the nearest we ever come to that) all else of these passages fits very well. The idea of the noble loving couple, the many joys and pleasures devised, not least the music and implied dancing, all fit perfectly. But there is another reference to be taken up here, equally apt and equally sure to have been in their minds as they decorated Red House, as Jones depicted Morris and Jane as king and queen in his Degreveant murals.

A year or two later they have made and are painting the Seddon Cabinet, designed by Webb, shown in the 1862 Exhibition, with four large panels showing the life of King René of Anjou, as architect, as sculptor, as painter and as musician. The choice of these subjects arose naturally from John Seddon's commission of a piece of practical office furniture that should also be a memorial to his brother Tom, who had been the family firm's designer and become a painter, accompanying Hunt to the Holy Land, and dying of dysentery in Egypt on a second journey which, he had hoped, would win him fame and fortune comparable with Hunt's. Tom Seddon had written to Brown from Paris, in 1852, telling of his joyous discovery there of the book of Good King René for the Ordering of Tournaments; of what a splendid king he had been, lover, patron, practitioner of all the arts. The theme of the hall cupboard painting combines three elements: it relates to Tristram and Iseult, and their life in Lancelot's castle of Joyous Gard; it relates to the court of Good King René; but it relates also to the location of the house almost on the Pilgrim Way to Canterbury, and thus to Chaucer. It is not an illustration of a subject in Malory, or the Life of King René, or any of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: it combines all these references in an idyllic projection of the life of Red House, happy couples embarking on the new life of marriage and family, in places of their own adorning – in Morris's case, own design and building too: of the work they shared and would share, of the pleasures they would make, were indeed making, in those Red House years. I think that perhaps Morris had at the outset of working on the hall cupboard no intention to do more than ornament it with patterns, bright with gold and colour, and this he certainly began, as can be seen. But in those two or three first months after they had moved in, he and Janey had begun the embroideries, the pricking and painting of the patterned ceilings, and been joined by Ned and Georgie, a little later by Faulkner: later again by Lizzie and then however briefly by Rossetti, and surely at intervals by Webb who needed to be there to supervise the work – then, I think, the active life of these friends in this house generated the idea of celebration. In setting up the Red Lion Square settle with its bright paintings by Rossetti, its gallery overhead, its broad cushioned seat, the growing pictures flanking it with Morris and Jane as King and Queen – something of the life of Joyous Gard and the life of René's court at Angers was not merely implicit but was being acted out: the ARS LONGA VITA BREVIS motto painted large on the coving of the drawing-room fireplace declares the life of art in this house, the life to which they were all dedicated. And as Morris worked on this celebratory picture, it became also a projection of a particular future for them all. It celebrates Red House; it forecasts Morris Marshall Faulkner and Company.

Notes
1 G. Burne-Jones, Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones (1904), I, 209.