

Nature and design: thoughts on sources and subjects

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This article takes the theme 'Is nature the best designer?' and, in order to show that nature was historically and remains today a viable, valid and relevant source of design, particularly surface and pattern design, looks at three examples. Firstly it examines the designs of the Victorian designer, William Morris, done for the company Morris & Co., to show the potential of nature as a source of images. It simultaneously investigates his writings, where he expands on the reasons for finding nature so inspiring. This shows that nature has always stood for something more than a source of visual inspiration but has been a symbol of other, more abstract, aspirations, in his case as a beacon for a better social system. The article then investigates two contemporary South African projects producing popular arts, namely Ardmore Ceramics and Kaross, in order to show that nature remains an inspiration, both for visual images as well as for more abstract ideals.

Key words: nature, design, surface design and pattern, image, symbol, popular art

Ontwerp en die natuur: idees oor bronne en temas

Hierdie artikel neem as tema die vraag 'Is die natuur die beste ontwerper?', en fokus op drie voorbeelde van ontwerp om sodoende aan te toon dat die natuur in die verlede 'n praktiese, geldige en relevante bron van ontwerp – veral oppervlak-en patroonontwerp – was, en ook in die hede 'n waardevolle bron is. Die eerste voorbeeld wat in hierdie verband ondersoek word, sluit in die ontwerpe van Victoriaanse ontwerper William Morris, geskep vir Morris & Co. Sy werk verteenwoordig die natuur se potensiaal as bron vir ontwerpe. Terselfde tyd word gekyk na Morris se skrywe, waarin hy verduidelik waarom die natuur so 'n waardevolle bron van inspirasie is. Morris se benadering toon dat die natuur meer as net inspirasie bied vir visuele beelde, maar ook op 'n dieper vlak as simbool van meer abstrakte doelwitte dien, soos byvoorbeeld, as model vir 'n beter sosiale sisteem. Vervolgens ondersoek die artikel twee hedendaagse Suid Afrikaanse projekte wat populêre kuns produseer, naamlik Ardmore Ceramics en Kaross, om te wys hoe die natuur steeds as bron vir visuele inspirasie sowel as nie-tasbare ideale dien.

Sleutelwoorde: natuur, ontwerp, oppervlak-en patroonontwerp, voorstelling, simbool

What is nature? Apart from the word's obvious reference to the natural world that surrounds us, according to the historian Jacques Barzun (2000: 756), nature has of course no intentions, friendly or unfriendly; it does not even exist as an entity; it is a man-made construct from [man's] experiences and for his purposes. But once taken as such, 'it' feedshim, it yields in a thousand ways to his handling, and it is beautiful. The sight of it often gives pure mindless joy.

One of the topics proposed for articles for this issue was the notion that nature is the best designer. My first thought is that nature is not a designer at all, except in an indirect sense and through the long, slow and perhaps inexorable processes of evolution, as Richard Dawkins (2006) argues so persuasively. One can, however, consider nature as a source and subject for design and art, and raise the question of whether it is a good, a suitable, an inspiring and relevant source and subject. The modernists would no doubt answer in the negative, given the tenets of 'form follows function' and the battle cry of the modernist architect Adolf Loos (1998), "Ornament is crime". For nature has, certainly in western art and design, been largely a source of ornament, that is of surface elaboration, rejected totally by many modernists. This article will consider nature as a source and subject for such surface decoration and will endeavour, by historical example and examples of contemporary crafts, to answer in the affirmative, to show that nature was and remains a unique source and subject of inspiration for design. It also aims to consider the topic from an inter-continental and multi-century viewpoint, in order to find interconnectedness in its consideration of nature and design.

Historical examples of nature as a source and subject for design abound in both western and oriental cultures.¹ According to Barzun (2000: 125), the appeal to nature throughout western history resounds as the Great Absolute, with nature seen as the handiwork of God and thus, "never wrong". Its most powerful expression, after the Enlightenment, lay in the natural sciences, and the idea of science as the "best truth" found its counterpart in "living according to

nature' (Barzun 2000: 126). This association still holds: for many, 'natural' foods are the 'best', 'natural' medicines the safest, the natural environment something to be treasured. People have long believed, and still do, according to Barzun (2000: 471) that

[t]he concrete beauty of nature speaks directly to the receptive mind. And from this same source comes... the cult of nature – the love of trees and flowers, gardening for pleasure, bird-watching and camping, and the belief that one must leave the unnatural city at least once a year and restore in the countryside something essential to life.

So nature is an important force, alongside science and humanism, in western thinking. It is associated with other 'great ideas': Truth, Beauty, Reason, and it can thus be considered in relation to various artistic concerns: realism, naturalism and representation being some of these. Nature, as referred to by Barzun and others has, for many westerners, associations not with the primitive, fearsome and untameable forces of nature,² but rather is viewed and used as the domestic, the tamed and the bountiful. It is this second aspect of nature that is so often, and so beautifully, reflected in design.

Nature as a source of design in the work of William Morris

There are at least three reasons for my choice of the designs that William Morris did between 1861 and 1896 for his decorating company, Morris & Co., as an exemplary instance of nature as the 'best' source for design. Firstly, the Victorian era has, it is argued, particular relevance for our postmodern era. In general, there is growing scholarly interest in the Victorian era, not only in Great Britain but throughout the English-speaking world, possibly because, with the demise of modernism, postmodern writers and scholars find certain 'roots', areas of interest and comparable circumstances between the contemporary western world and Victorian England. These include the aftermath of colonization, the results of industrialization and the end of Imperialism. According to Kucick & Sadoff (2000) there was an explosion of interest in, and research on, the Victorian era after the 1980s, as writers found many parallels between the Victorian and the postmodern consciousness. So Victorian design can be seen to be of renewed interest to contemporary designers and theorists, not least because many grew up in homes that still carried traces of Victorian design. Secondly, Morris not only used nature as his sole source of design but he also wrote passionately about it, providing a rationale for his approach. And finally, he was a designer of genius, considered by many as the greatest pattern designer of all time. It has been asserted (Inter alia by Thompson 1967: 112; Watkinson 1970: 196; Fuller 1985: 233,286; Stansky 1985: 38; and Harvey & Press 1991: 95) that William Morris is one of the greatest pattern designers of all time, and certainly the greatest figure in the design world of the nineteenth century, both as a practitioner and a theorist. His skills lay particularly in the field of flat pattern-making, for which he seems to have had an instinctive mastery not attained by any of his contemporaries. Such complexity as resides in Morris's design is found in the surface pattern and not in the forms or shapes on which they appeared. His patterns were applied to many different surfaces: furniture, stained-glass windows, embroideries, wallpaper, textiles, carpets and tapestries, and in each case the patterns were altered and made appropriate to the purpose of the product and the materials and techniques to be used in manufacture.

Nature was a love developed in childhood and it dominated Morris's approach to pattern design and the decorative arts throughout his career. He observed and studied many aspects of the English countryside, including birds, flowers, foliage, plants, growth in general, and had a visual vocabulary of his own from his earliest designs. Morris (In Bradley: 1978: 37) stated that his ideal in decoration was "[t]o turn our chamber walls into the green woods of the leafy month of June, populous of bird and beast; or a summer garden with man and maid playing round a

fountain...”. So, for example, the wallpapers and textiles that Morris designed throughout his career are based on nature (figure 1).

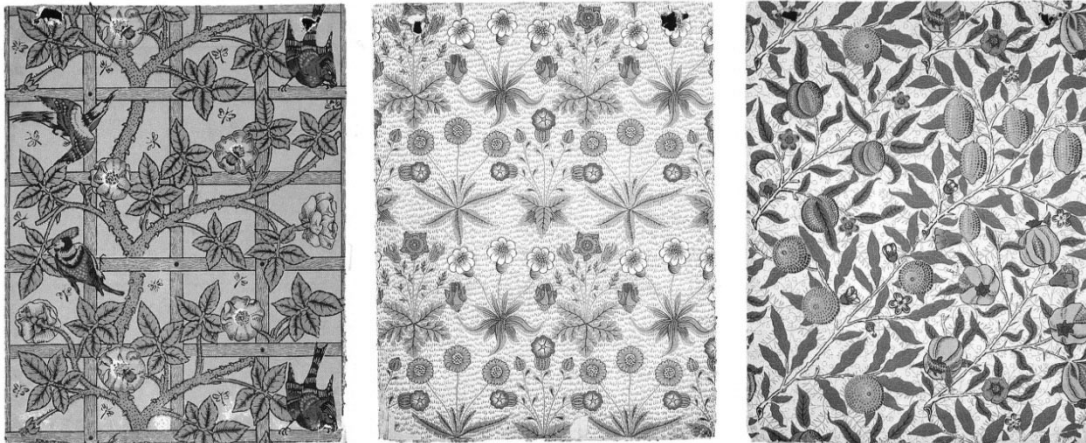


Figure 1

Wallpaper samples, *Trellis*, *Daisy* and *Fruit*. Designed by William Morris and Philip Webb, printed by Jeffery & Co. for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. 1864, 1864 and 1866. Block-printed in distemper colours (Parry 1996: 207).

Morris developed his expertise in pattern design through both practice and theory, as he did in so many of his activities. He stated that “ornamental pattern work, to be raised above the contempt of reasonable men, must possess three qualities: beauty, imagination and order” (Morris 1879a; also Morris 1993: 261-262). ‘Beauty’ meant that a pattern must satisfy the eye, with good colours and proportions. This definition of beauty is no different from a contemporary definition: contemporary art critic David Hickey (1993: 11-12) describes beauty as “the agency that caused visual pleasure to the beholder”, thus, like Morris, linking beauty and pleasure. ‘Imagination’ implied that a pattern must have meaning, must arouse memories and associations in the viewer, that is, it must satisfy the mind as well as the eye (Morris 1993: 260). This could be achieved by looking at traditions of pattern, which would carry historical and cultural associations, but which must not be simply copied without change, as this makes pattern lifeless (Morris 1993: 261). Imagination also implied the use of imagination to overcome the limitations of the material. Morris considered ‘order’ essential to good pattern design, and devoted much time to analyzing the structure of patterns, describing, in *Some hints on pattern designing* (Morris 1993: 257-283, also Morris 1879a), the basic structures and rhythms of pattern, such as squares, chequers, diagonal stripes, meanders, diamonds etc. Within this structured division of pattern, Morris created a deepened sense of order by the pairing and repetition of motifs, such as rabbits, birds or flowers. Order is furthermore a sense of the necessary limitations of pattern, because of the nature of the medium and techniques to be used. Morris knew how to spread his patterns over the whole field, without making any one part unduly important, so that they have an overall flow of movement and are unified (Lindsay 1975: 142). Mackail (1922: 290) describes his best decorative designs as having an ordered intricacy, a free yet precisely adjusted pattern, with all the motifs interlaced to create a unified, single design. Counteracting this order and keeping all designs vivid and lively is an overall sense of swirling movement, of curving tendrils and sweeping vines, carrying the eye across and through the surface and approximating the profusion of nature.

Morris wanted clarity and definiteness in any design, combined with a great deal of detail in the patterns. “Above all things, avoid vagueness, run any risk of failure rather than involve yourselves in a tangle of poor weak lines that people can’t make out. Definite form bounded by

firm outline is necessary for all ornament” (Morris 1993: 278). On embroidery design, Morris (In Marsh 1986: 167) wrote:

Design... should be firm and clear in line, broad in form and colour and finished with such richness and minuteness of detail as suits the dimensions of the work in hand. No scratchy indefiniteness of form or vagueness of colour should be admitted; unless embroidery is clear and bright as the day and fresh as spring flowers it is not worth looking at and not worth doing.

As Morris’s mastery grew, he let the repeat become bolder (Lindsay 1975: 142) and his patterns increased in complexity, for example by layering one motif over another, with variations of scale and weight, so that a major pattern played over a lesser one. Within each pattern, there are vistas within vistas, a sense of infinite complexity and depth, comparable to, but different from, Islamic patterns and reflecting the rich variety to be found in nature.

Pevsner (1936: 48-52) convincingly demonstrates the advances that Morris achieved in his designs by comparing them to typical Victorian design. He contrasts a commercial, machine-made carpet, Pardoe, Hoomans & Pardoe’s Velvet Pile Tapestry Carpet (1851), with its elaborate Rococo pattern, its “coarseness and vulgar overcrowding... [where] we are forced to step over bulging scrolls and into large, unpleasantly realistic flowers”, with one of Morris’s designs. He shows that the typical Victorian design is, by comparison to Morris’s, overdone, dishonest, unoriginal and inappropriate for its purpose. The designs of other countries were no better: a French silk shawl by E Hartneck is similarly full of superfluous motifs, “an incongruous mix of ornament and realism... [showing] the same ignorance of the basic need in creating pattern, the integrity of the surface, and the same sickening vulgarity in detail”. The illustrations Pevsner used irrefutably support his argument: Morris’s *Daisy* wallpaper and even his more complex Hammersmith carpet are models of restrained, unified, structured surface pattern with no recession, having light and clear colours and being without accidental details (Pevsner 1936: 56). They are comparatively simple, coherent and economical. Pevsner argues that it was Morris’s social ideals, as well his skills as designer-craftsman, which enabled him to rise above the society and taste of his day to produce remarkable and innovative designs based on nature.

Nature provided a basis for design that gives unity and cohesion to Morris’s entire oeuvre. He studied not only nature but also the traditions of representation of nature, such as botanical illustrations and old herbal drawings (Lindsay 1975: 142), which provided him with rich source material. His genius was not simply the detail and variety that he found in nature but the way in which these motifs became part of a satisfying whole in each design, with subtle colour and ranges of colour density. He was clear about his aims in design, for example, the degree of naturalism of a design was carefully considered, depending on the medium, the scale of the pattern and the use to which the surface would be put. Morris turned away from the very naturalistic, three-dimensional designs typical of Victorian industrial design in the mid nineteenth century. Nature was imaginatively manipulated to become suggestive, to create rich and complex yet flat and unified patterns, rather than to imitate life. However, Morris at the same time was opposed to purely abstract design: “You may be sure that any decoration is futile... when it does not remind you of something beyond itself” (Morris 1993: 260), and “I must still insist on plenty of meaning to your patterns; I must have unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields, and strange trees, boughs and tendrils” (Morris in Bradley 1978: 38). He saw abstraction, as soon as it became an end in itself, as leading to impoverishment, monotony and emptiness (Lindsay 1975: 129). Thus he had a subject, a specific approach and a vision when he designed.

However, nature stood for more than simply a source of pattern. Morris was not a religious person, so nature was not, for him, a reminder of the Absolute and visible sign of God’s creation, nonetheless it held great significance for him. He was concerned with social conditions and, as a radical socialist, particularly with conditions of the working classes and

the poor under capitalism. He was also against the rampant industrialization that had overtaken Britain. Nature was a symbol of a better life that would be possible under fairer social and economic conditions, a life lived preferably in the countryside, in simple surroundings and while engaged in meaningful work.³ It stood for all that was pre-industrial and non-capitalist. Furthermore, Morris followed Ruskin in his belief that good and beautiful art could only come through joyful labour. As Ruskin (In Meier 1978: 144) states: “I believe that the right question to ask, respecting all ornament, is simply this: Was it done with enjoyment – was the carver happy while he was doing it?” This statement emphasizes the idea of craftsmanship as a kind of joyful and skilled labour. Thus one of Morris’s essential aims, as well as the basis of his practice, was the revival of handicrafts and his emphasis was not only on design but equally on the actual *making* of art, on the work or labour involved.



Figure 2
Tapestry, *Acanthus and vine*. Designed and woven by William Morris. 1879. Woven wool, with some silk, on cotton warp. 191 x 234 cm. (Parry 1996: 286).

Morris took great pleasure in the actual production i.e. the practice of craftsmanship: “Do you think I am such a fool as to let another fool have the fun of doing the spotting [painting in dots] when I have had the grind of doing the design” (Morris in MacCarthy 1994: 359). He was exceptionally productive, both in the creation of new designs and in the actual production, that is, in his craftsmanship. He devoted much time to the making of crafts, for example, in the early 1880s, he set up his own tapestry loom and worked for as many as ten hours a day on the *Acanthus and vine* tapestry (1879) (Bradley 1978: 64), which took 516 ½ hours to complete (Parry 1996: 286) (figure 2). Furthermore, he believed that good design was only possible if the designer understood the subject and the craft of making the intended product.

When one speaks of Morris’s craftsmanship and desire for excellence in the production of goods, one is not necessarily speaking of perfect finish, polish or fine detail. Nature as a subject

has variations, flaws and imperfections. In this also he followed Ruskin (1964: 95-100), who wrote

... in the works of man, those which are more perfect in their kind are always inferior to those which are, in their nature, liable to more faults and shortcomings... Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. Never demand an exact finish for its own sake, but only for some practical and noble end... If the workman is thinking about his edges, he cannot be thinking of his design; if of his design, he cannot think of his edges. Choose whether you will pay for the lovely form or the perfect finish, and choose at the same moment whether you will make the worker a man or a grindstone.

Ruskin “saw, before Japanese aesthetics were known in the West, that free and rough workmanship have aesthetic qualities that are unique” (Pye in Stansky 1985: 33), and he admired the irregularity that showed traces of the hand of the maker and retained a kind of ‘naturalness’. Morris (S.a.(b)), agreed, remarking of Roman ornament that “one almost wishes it were less well executed, so that some mystery might be added to its florid handsomeness”. He equated roughness with inventive suggestion and sought immediacy and honesty instead of perfect finish. The company, from its earliest work, became known for “rough and archaic work” (Marsh 1986: 49). Morris & Co.’s hand-knotted carpets, for example, were much coarser than the Persian examples that Morris examined while learning the craft. He was not interested in the regularity and perfection produced by machines.

Materials play an important role in the quality of a product, and are thus an important consideration in their planning and design. Every material has its own specific nature with which the designer must work, or fail. Morris knew this well and became enthusiastic about the materials associated with each craft with which he became involved. Morris (In Thompson 1976: 100) wrote in 1892,

I have tried to produce goods which should be genuine as far as their mere substances are concerned, and should have on that account the primary beauty in them which belongs to naturally treated natural substances; have tried for instance to make woollen substances as woollen as possible, cotton as cotton as possible... ; have used only dyes which are natural and simple, because they produce beauty almost without the intervention of art; all this quite apart from the design in the stuffs or what not.

Morris thus believed in ‘truth to materials’, under the influence of Ruskin, in ‘naturalness’ in their application and use. Designs thus had to take account of different materials and allow them to ‘express’ their best qualities. For example, his furniture should not disguise the way in which it was made or the materials from which it was made (Harvey & Press 1991: 182). Furthermore, the nature of the material dictated the degree of naturalism that was possible or desirable: the coarser the medium, the more stylized the design (Harvey & Press 1991: 114). It also dictated the limitations of the design:

... [there are] certain limitations, which partly spring... from the materials in which we have to work; and it is a sign of mere incompetence in either a school or an individual to refuse to accept such limitations, or even not to accept them joyfully and turn them to special account... [W]e must remember that all material offers certain difficulties to be overcome, and certain facilities to be made the most of. Up to a certain point you must be the master of your material, but you must never be so much the master as to turn it surly, so to say... You must master it so far as to make it express a meaning, and to serve your aim at beauty. You may go beyond that necessary point for your own pleasure and amusement... but if you go on after that merely to make people stare at your dexterity in dealing with a difficult thing, you have forgotten art along with the rights of your material, and you will not make a work of art, but a mere toy... (Morris 1879a; also Morris 1993: 263).

Morris was not an innovator of techniques in that he did not seek to push the technical boundaries of materials, but instead he rediscovered ancient or lost techniques and was prepared to go to great lengths to master them, or to find those who were skilled in them to produce what he wanted. He was also prepared to use complex and time-consuming techniques in his production, because, for him, quality and authenticity were as important as cost. In 1868,

when Morris decided to print fabrics for furnishing, he would not use the engraved rollers then common in industry, but used the centuries' old method of block printing which, though slower, gave greater control of colour and were made by a more 'natural' labour process than mass production allowed (Harvey & Press 1991: 79). The cutting of the pear-wood blocks was laborious in itself, and the printing was time-consuming. For the quality that Morris required, extensive craftsmanship was necessary. For example, thirty printing blocks were required for the subtle and rich colour gradations of the *Acanthus* wallpaper (Parry 1996: 213), first produced in 1875 (figure 3).

Morris's approach to design must be seen in the context of Victorian design, particularly mass produced, industrial design with its "atrocious vulgarity... sham materials and sham technique" (Pevsner 1936: 20-21). According to Pevsner (1936: 22), Morris was the first artist since the Renaissance to realize how "precarious and decayed the social foundations of art had become during the centuries since the Renaissance, and especially during the years since the Industrial Revolution". Morris, in reaction against Victorian design, developed a new and distinctive aesthetic approach that differentiated the products of Morris & Co. from other Victorian ones. His are distinguished by simplicity of form, with complex pattern and decorative surface, functionality, originality, a vernacular English style and a mastery of aesthetic elements.

For Morris, good design combined beauty, utility and simplicity. "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, not even beauty, lest we weary of it" (Morris in Bradley 1978: 35). He rejected what he called "idiot sham ornament" (Morris 1888). This can be seen as a rejection of typical Victorian taste and of the popular Empire, Neo-Classical and Rococo styles of domestic design. Morris looked back to earlier, vernacular designs, such as English peasant furniture, as a model for his approach to design, particularly of the overall shape or form of a product.

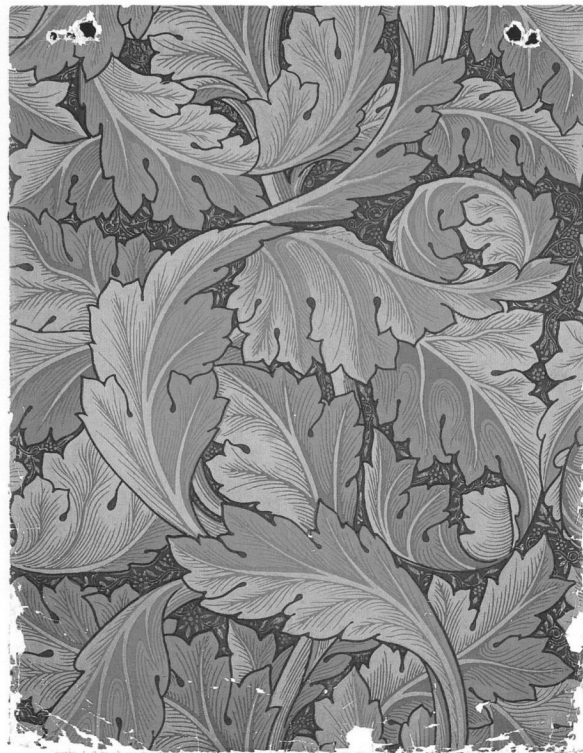


Figure 3
Wallpaper, *Acanthus*. William Morris. 1875. Printed by Jeffery & Co. For Morris & Co. Block printed in distemper colours. (Parry 1996: 213).

For Morris (1882, emphases in original), decoration in the form of pattern had an important role: “[t]o give people pleasure in the things they must perform *use*, that is the one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they perform *make*, that is the other use of it”. Pattern existed to soothe and civilize (MacCarthy 1994: 182). Furthermore, Morris (1993: 260) insisted on use and meaning in pattern: “You may be sure that any decoration is futile... when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol”. This meaning, according to Morris (1879a) lay for him in nature, “for what else can you refer people to, or what else is there which everybody can understand?”, or in history and tradition: “meaning may have come down to us traditionally, and not be our own invention, yet we must at heart understand it... It is no longer tradition if it is servilely copied...” So pattern was a ‘code’, a spur to memory and to feeling (MacCarthy 1995: 182), which Morris (1993: 260) evoked poetically:

Is it not better to be reminded, however simply, of the close vine-trellis that keeps out the sun by the Nile side; or of the wild-woods and their streams, with the dogs panting beside them; or of the swallows sweeping above the garden boughs toward the house-eaves where their nestlings are, while the sun breaks through the clouds on them; or of the many-flowered summer meadows of Picardy?

Thus the motifs, images and symbols chosen should be considered for their associative potential for a particular audience, and those that were too outlandish should be avoided. For Morris (1993: 278) as a designer, this meaning often came first, in the process of designing, and individual pattern grew from this associative intention:

[i]n all good pattern-designs the idea comes first, as in all other designs, *e.g.*, a man says, I will make a pattern which I will mean to give people an idea of a rose-hedge with the sun through it; and he sees it in such and such a way; then, and not until then, he sets to work to draw his flowers, his leaves, his thorns... and so carries out his ideas.

Echoing Morris, the contemporary British art critic Peter Fuller (1985: 220) argues that sound ornament has its roots in a society’s “shared symbolic order”. It gives the individual maker joy in his labour, and allows him to affirm and extend the collective beliefs and spiritual values of the group. Fuller claims that a developing, living stylistic tradition is one of the most important ways through which individuals reconcile themselves to the social and physical worlds they inhabit. He writes of a masterful pattern as giving “the most intensely sensuous visual stimulation... stimulation of a kind which merges into symbolic suggestion, illusion and allusion” (Fuller 1985: 247). Like Morris, Fuller (1985: 221-223) believes that this shared symbolic order has broken down in the west since the Renaissance, and that this has been exacerbated by industrialization and the transformed nature of work. Ornament made by industry, even if designed by artists, does not re-establish the shared symbolic order because capitalism sees ornament merely as a potentially cheap and easy way to increase the exchange value of products. It was this ideal of ‘pattern with meaning’ that Morris sought, inspired by history, nature, innovation and the conservation of traditional craft practices. Morris felt strongly the need for beauty, and that it should be available to more than the rich who could afford luxury goods: “I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few” (Morris 1993: 253). Thus the lesser arts of decoration were vitally important as a means of brightening the daily lives of people. He wrote (In Kelvin 1987: 12) that furniture, for example, should be available that would suit the workman’s cottage as it would the lord’s abode. Aesthetically, Morris sought a balance between simplicity and decorativeness. This shows his disagreement with the Victorian taste for overstuffed interiors. He wanted goods that did not exacerbate the division between classes, so extreme luxury was as unacceptable as shoddy, cheap goods. “[W]e shall at least make up our minds to one thing; not to try to make a poor man’s art for the poor while we keep a rich man’s art for ourselves” (Morris in Kelvin 1987: 17). Furthermore, arts

should be ‘popular’, which means they should be abundantly available to all men (Morris 1993: 259); they should “beautify our labour, and be widely spread, intelligent, well understood both by the maker and the user” (Morris 1882; also Morris 1884), rather than merely fashionable or for the wealthy few. Fashion, for Morris (1882), implied that less attention is given to making the work and more attention to convincing the rich and influential that they “care very much for what they really do not care in the least...”. Furthermore, fashionable goods, “when the first gloss is worn off them do become obviously worthless even to the frivolous – a work of Art, be it ever so humble, is long lived; we never tire of it “ (Morris 1884). Ultimately, for Morris, art could not exist in a capitalist society, based as it is on the degradation of labour in the making of useless, ugly and sham luxury goods for the wealthy and cheap makeshift goods for the poor. He desired “AN ART MADE BY THE PEOPLE FOR THE PEOPLE AS A JOY FOR THE MAKER AND THE USER” (Morris 1880, capitals in original).

Thus, Morris was interested in nature in a deeper sense than merely as a source of designs, important as this was to him. In a broad sense, Morris was concerned with the natural environment, and hated its despoliation by capitalist industry:

Is money to be gathered? Cut down the pleasant trees among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers; hide the sun and poison the air with smoke and worse, and it’s nobody’s business to see to it or mend it: that is all that modern commerce, the counting-house forgetful of the workshop, will do for us herein (Morris 1882; also Morris 1884; 1880).

Thus nature was, for Morris, as source of inspiration, his perfect subject for design, as well as a symbol of a better life under a fairer social system and something to strive to use well, both in the practice of design and in the preservation of the natural environment. This, I would argue, has as much relevance today as it did in the Victorian era.

Nature as a source of design in contemporary South African decorative art⁴

Contemporary South African decorative art, like the work of Morris, often use nature as a source of images, as well as a signifier of more abstract notions, such as social cohesion and improvement, the renewal of crafts and decoration and the development of a typical ‘South Africanness’ in design and aesthetic approach. I will use two examples to illustrate this: the ceramics of Ardmore Ceramic Art and the embroideries of Kaross.

Ardmore Ceramic Art is an enterprise producing decorative ceramics in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. It has been in existence for more than twenty years, since 1985. Fée Halstead-Berning (2007),⁵ who qualified in fine arts at the Natal Technikon, started Ardmore Ceramic Art in 1985 after she married and went to live on her husband’s farm in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, near Winterton, where Ardmore is still situated. A second studio with a museum has since been opened at Lavendula Farm near Caversham.

Because Halstead-Berning (2007) had to earn money, she began working with Bonnie Ntshalintshali, who was a daughter of one of the farm workers, producing ceramics together. Ntshalintshali, although illiterate and uneducated in terms of western schooling, proved to be exceptionally talented and knowledgeable about Zulu customs and practices. Under Halstead-Berning’s training, she became a creative and well-known artist. The two women formed a strong, fruitful partnership. Because the work was noticed by buyers and the art world almost immediately and sold well, more local people joined the studio, making work that initially resembled Ntshalintshali’s. Both Halstead-Berning and Ntshalintshali took part in prestigious exhibitions and Ardmore also began to exhibit as a studio. Individual artists then joined Ardmore, making their own, individual work and the studio also produced certain studio lines

in larger batch productions to cover costs. Ardmore has since become famous both nationally and internationally and has achieved the highest prices ever paid for South African ceramics.⁶ The work is exceptionally creative and of impeccable quality. Ardmore now employs more than 100 people working from its two studios.

In general, while there is an Ardmore style, based on simple vessel shapes elaborated with complex modelled additions and highly detailed, brightly painted decorative surfaces, there is a great deal of individuality in the work of different artists, which becomes clear as one becomes more familiar with the work. The essential Ardmore subject is nature, which it is not restricted to South African topics but reflects natural themes from all around the world. The vessels are covered with modelled animals like leopards, lions, cheetahs, panthers, tigers, elephants, zebra, giraffes, fish, birds such as toucans, flamingos and sunbirds, and many flowers that are indigenous or exotic. These are painted with details that elaborate the forms while the spaces between are painted with decorations consisting of flowers, foliage and abstract, geometric patterns.

The simpler studio line consists of cups, bowls, platters, eggcups, small jugs and candlesticks that all have simple modelling, for example, dishes surrounded by modelled leaves or traditional ceramic forms like teacups which have a sculpted handle based on an animal. They are painted in elaborate and exuberant patterns (figure 4). The 'art' pieces, made by the best Ardmore artists, are kept for exhibitions and are extremely expensive. One type consists of larger vessels with inventive and extravagant modelled additions and very elaborate painting (figure 5).



Figure 4

Butter dish. Thrown by Matthew Stitzlein, painted by Mirriam Ngubeni for Ardmore. 1998. Underglazed and glazed ceramics. 19 x 25 x 25 cm. (Scott 1998: 75).

The modelling of the animals, birds and plants that encrust the vessel shapes is highly naturalistic, convincing, inventive and complex, and has become increasingly so in recent years, whereas earlier works were by comparison simplified and naïve in their naturalism. Around a large jar sits a troop of monkeys, young and old, male and female, busy with many different activities such as grooming, eating and playing, while some have noticed a leopard creeping up the pot and are giving the alarm. On a tall vase, panthers and toucans are intertwined in an attack, while on another, leopards tumble in rough play. The modelling is so impressive and so highly skilled that it is hard to see how it arises from the rather simple visual sources at hand. Halstead-Berning (2007) says that the sculptors, as rural people, have observed nature, for example animals and birds, all their lives and know them tacitly, even if the animals they model are exotic ones that they have never actually seen. They have also modelled with clay all their lives, for example children's toys such as the ubiquitous clay oxen found in many rural communities, so they are familiar with its plastic possibilities. The sculptural aspects of the wares have developed and improved greatly in recent years, for example the animals are now energetic and depicted in dynamic, complex and flowing movement, rather than in static, symmetrical poses. In general, the sculptural aspects of the work have become dramatic, bold and dominate the recent works. This has enhanced the quality and thus boosted the marketability and the prices of Ardmore.



Figure 5
Candleholders. Unknown Ardmore artists. 2007. Underglazed and glazed ceramics. Approx. 700 x 40 x 40 cm. (Photograph Susan Sellschop).

Similarly, Halstead-Berning (2007) claims that the painters bring their tribal sensibility to decoration, being sensitive to the rhythms, textures and colours of, for example, Zulu beadwork and basketry, as well as natural subjects. The painted decoration basically has two aspects: naturalistic details on the animals, such as fur, feathers, markings or scales, and patterns that fill the spaces between. These patterns consist of complex combinations of geometry with naturalistic two-dimensional renderings of animals, birds, flowers and foliage. So the naturalism

of Ardmore takes both two and three-dimensional forms on the vessels. The earlier chintzy 'English' flowers that filled many surfaces have in recent works been replaced by more exotic ones that Halstead-Berning refers to as the "jungle" look. She sees this as a move towards a more 'African' aesthetic in place of a 'European' one.

The aesthetic appearance of Ardmore is in some ways not particularly South African in any traditional or indigenous sense in that the natural subjects are taken from all over the world, its historical precedents are certainly in European and English ceramics and its technologies are western. However, Halstead-Berning (2007) notes that the ability to observe and model from nature and the rhythms, patterns, repetition and colours of African art and artefacts, particularly Zulu aesthetic sensibilities, form the visual foundations of the work. Furthermore, African art often has traditions of figuration and naturalism and Africa is associated for many viewers with its flora and fauna. So nature can be said to be the ideal subject for an art that seeks to situate itself as 'African'. The work of Ardmore is certainly unique and not like anything else being made locally or internationally and can be seen to be part of the formation of a new or invented South African popular or decorative art. It could be said to follow a postmodern aesthetic that juxtaposes widely divergent, hybrid sources in complex ways.

Halstead-Berning's aim and ideal is to enable rural people, with their innate familiarity with nature as well as their indigenous traditions, to be artists and to be creative. The project seems well able to achieve this, given the exceptional quality of the work and the individual approaches that can be detected within a unified Ardmore style. Thus nature is a source of images and a symbol of creative possibilities and ideals at Ardmore.

The second South African example, Kaross, is an embroidery business situated on a farm in Limpopo Province that has been in existence for more than twenty years. It is situated in a rural area near the town of Letsitele in the Guyani District, surrounded by small, scattered rural villages. It was started by Irma van Rooyen, a practicing artist, who moved to the farm in 1985 with her husband, a citrus farmer.⁷ Her intention was to provide employment for the wives of the farm employees and women from villages in the area. They had no work and poverty was rife. They were also largely uneducated, illiterate and unsophisticated. There is no historical, indigenous tradition of embroidery in southern Africa (Nettleton 2000: 20) but these Shangaan women did, however, have some tradition of decorating their houses and clothes, for example the *minceka*,⁸ which were decorated with beads. They also made tray cloths and bed spreads embroidered with flowers in a European style that may have been adapted from Afrikaner traditions of embroidery and quilting. So embroidery skills existed. In order to help the women earn some money, van Rooyen offered them cloth and thread, suggesting that they embroider pictures of their lives, which she would try to sell.

The women were initially not able to do this as they lacked design and drawing skills or even any conception of what van Rooyen wanted. So she made drawings of their homes and villages and the surrounding bush and its animals, which they embroidered. As news of the project spread, more and more women joined, until very soon there were 125 embroiderers. Kaross was established as a business by 1987. Solomon Muhati, a young local man who showed drawing and design skills, came forward and, with some training from van Rooyen about what kinds of designs were suitable for embroidery, began to assist her by designing and drawing the designs onto cloths. Initially van Rooyen's family and friends bought the work, then shops began to buy the embroideries and slowly the enterprise grew. There are now over 1000 employees, mainly Shangaan women, embroidering from their homes, and a small managerial staff working from a converted tobacco barn on the farm, with three young local men, Solomon Mohate and Calvin Mahluale, who have been employed for a number of years, and Thomas Khubayi, who joined more recently, doing all the drawing and designing. They all initially approached van

Rooyen asking to design, showed talent and are now remarkably skilled, fluid and rapid in their designing and inventive in their ideas and their interpretation of subject matter. Mahluale is the best and most confident designer, so he does all the more complex theme and narrative cloths while the others do the simpler designs.

Although Kaross also produces figurative and narrative scenes, the most characteristic design is a relatively simple one of an animal, bird or plant on a decorative and textured ground created by different stitches, surrounded by geometric borders (figure 6). Van Rooyen refers to these as the ‘bread-and-butter’ cloths, because they remain popular and have been made throughout the existence of the enterprise. Other ranges have been introduced through the years. One new range is the limited production of large ‘white-on-white’ cloths, which are complex, all-over designs done on white, grey or other subtle colours of cloth in matching colours of thread. These are visually sophisticated, beautiful and quite distinctive, as the light coloured backing cloth gives them a character different from the work of most other South African embroidery projects, which is done on black cloth. Other large hangings are what van Rooyen (2007) calls “interior” cloths, and these have truly complex and beautiful scenes of intertwined flowers, foliage, birds and animals, in very rich patterns (figure 7). Kaross produces a number of ranges with great variety of themes and colour combinations within each range. New ideas within the existing themes are introduced constantly and, except for the ‘bread-and-butter’ lines, there is little repetition although many cloths may be similar to each other.



Figure 6
Wall hanging. Anonymous. 2007. Kaross. No sizes given. (From Kaross postcard).

Kaross designs are thus very varied in their subject and forms and also in that they reflect the ideas of three designers, yet are strongly identifiable as coming from Kaross, rather than being the work of individuals. Constant visual elements are the use of black cloth as a backing, the type and ranges of rich embroidery colours and the fact that Kaross cloths are almost all completely covered in stitching, with no 'open' areas. This makes them richly colourful and textured, with a full, dense, all-over and complex surface, even on those cloths with relatively simple subject matter and design. Some of the cloths have a myriad of intertwining motifs across their surfaces and are as complex, decorative and beautiful as oriental carpets. They are highly decorative in their repeating motifs, their patterns and their flowing, curvilinear lines and arabesques, and most are all inspired by natural forms.⁹



Figure 7

Curtains. Anonymous. 2007. Kaross. No sizes given. Backing cloth and thread. (Photograph Susan Sellschop).

Each piece is an individual and hand made one, thus different from all others, although some themes are continuously repeated. Although these richly embroidered cloths are highly decorative and would generally be used as hangings with a purely ornamental purpose, many of the products have a practical function as well. They are sewn into cushion covers, table and tray mats or large throws and bed spreads, while the white-on-white fabric is strong enough to be used for upholstery and curtaining.

Van Rooyen describes the style of Kaross as 'South African', and this is a convincing description as the embroideries combine her initial Eurocentric approach with the design

inputs of the Tsonga-Shangaan designers and the aesthetic sensibilities of the embroiderers. They reflect the flora and fauna of Africa, eschewing the more exotic natural subjects that are sometimes used by Ardmore. Thus the approach is a hybrid of sources and it might well be termed 'postmodern'. It, like Ardmore, can be seen as part of a developing South African popular, decorative art.

Van Rooyen's main aim, since she started Kaross, has been to create jobs and generate an income for very poor rural people. She expresses great pride and satisfaction in having provided an income for so many people, as well as giving them creative opportunities and pride in their work. It is evident that she has indeed provided enough employment to make a great difference to large numbers of families and indeed to alter the socio-economic character of a number of nearby villages, such as Risaba, Xihoko, Mavele and Nkambako. Risaba village alone earns approximately R70 000.00 some weeks from Kaross. Often a woman will bring her children and her husband into the project and all will embroider. This gives a family a significant income. So once more, the love of nature as source of design goes hand-in-hand with ideals about improving society, although these may not be as clearly articulated as those of Morris, who expressly associated nature with social reform.

Conclusion

In the light of the examples above, nature can be argued to have been and to remain a source of inspiration for design, particularly as regards pattern and surface. For the creator, artist or designer, its complexity, variety, colour, linear and textural qualities and its associations with growth, profusion and beauty can still be relevant in contemporary arts, particularly popular arts and crafts. It furthermore is a potential source of pleasure for the viewer and can contribute towards the association of art and craft with a particular locality and community. Nature is at present an important source in the development of popular, decorative South African arts where the aim of the designers and creators is to make work that can be associated with Africa. While avoiding the clichés that one associates with debased and overused images from the natural world, such as the 'big five', I would argue that the examples of Ardmore and Kaross, among other contemporary projects, support the idea that nature is an inspiration that remains valid for contemporary arts.

Furthermore, in much the same way that William Morris used nature, not just as source but also as symbol and signifier, in his case of a better, simpler life and improved social conditions that he hoped would arise with socialism, the South African projects are also associated with social ideals, such as the renaissance of crafts, the development of the creativity of craft workers and artists and social improvements such as job creation, poverty alleviation and better living conditions. So, while nature has largely lost its earlier historical connections with the Great Absolute, it remains a potent symbol of ideals and aspirations.

Notes

1. Chinese art and ceramics have used nature as surface decoration for over a thousand years, as a sign of spirituality, while the Japanese sought, under the influence of Zen Buddhism, to make works that appear natural, or 'like the product of nature'.
2. The Romantics, such as the painter Friedrich, depicted the first, fearsome aspects of nature, but this, I would argue, is the less common approach in western thinking and art.
3. In a story such as *News from nowhere*, Morris explains his vision for this 'natural' life in detail. See Morris, W. 1993. *News from nowhere and*

- other writings*. Edited by C. Wilmer. London: Penguin.
4. The term 'decorative art' has been chosen as being the least problematic, but could be substituted simply by the word 'art'. Other appropriate terms might be 'popular art' or 'craft'. It is outside the scope and aims of this article to clarify or distinguish these terms, nor does it want to suggest hierarchies between them. Similarly, I will generally use the term 'artist', although terms such as 'crafts person' or 'decorator' might be equally appropriate.
 5. Ingrid Stevens visited Ardmore over two days, 02/07/2007-03/07/2007, in order to spend time at each of its studios. She interviewed Halstead-Berning formally, as well as various other Ardmore potters, painters and sculptors informally and visited a number of shops and exhibitions that displayed the work of Ardmore.
 6. At an exhibition at Charles Greig, Johannesburg in 2007, a large pot modelled with panthers and toucans sold for R 180,000.00, the highest price ever paid for a piece of South African ceramics.
 7. Ingrid Stevens visited Kaross on two occasions, formally interviewed Irma van Rooyen on 01/02/2007, informally interviewed the designers and embroiderers and visited shops that display the work of Kaross, including its shop in Parkview, Johannesburg.
 8. This is a flat, rectangular cloth often decorated with beads or embroidery that is wrapped around a woman's body as clothing (Becker 2000: 108). Some of the Kaross designs resemble, coincidentally, the textile designs of Morris & Co.

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