

# Analysis on the Design Style of William Morris Pattern

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**Abstract.** William Morris (1834-1896) was a famous artist and designer in Europe in the 19th century, the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement and the father of modern design, with a pivotal position in the design world. The patterns he designed take animals and plants in nature as elements and integrate them into his own pattern design. Through regular arrangement, he created vivid and elegant patterns, which influenced designers from generation to generation. William Morris is of epoch-making significance. This paper analyses the background of the formation of Morris pattern, Morris pattern with plant as motif, color analysis, structural framework and organizational form of Morris pattern.

**Keywords:** William Morris; Morris pattern; Pattern design; Design style.

## 1. The background of the formation of Morris pattern

As a famous artist and designer in the Victorian period, William Morris (1834-1896) spent his life putting John Ruskin's educational theories into practice. The formation of William Morris style was influenced by different periods. John Ruskin (1819-1900) was an English writer, artist, art critic, and art educator. He was a pioneer of art education and made great achievements in it. He believed that art could save society, especially handicraft work.

John Ruskin emphasized that only people with noble morality and inner happiness can design beautiful works, while mechanization and industrialization deprive people of artistic creation and he refused to use machines to make some decorations. He believed that design should serve the public but should find a way out from Gothic style, which were contradictory. He emphasized that art should be divided into big art and small art, and called on artists at that time to care about small art. He emphasized functionalism, developed decoration from natural form and sought the unity of function and form. As an art educationist, John Ruskin's masterpiece, *Modern Painter*, praised the present and future art, and emphasized that all great works must be able to communicate with nature, understand and appreciate nature. The *Seven Lamps of Architecture* tells the seven principles of architecture and the importance of functionalism. The *Stones of Venice* consists of three volumes, supporting the past civilization, and focusing on the architectural technology from the Roman period to the Renaissance. He emphasized traditional handicrafts so much that people now think of him in terms of art education and art criticism.

During the British Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, the successful holding of the Crystal Palace made people see that most of the artworks at that time were products of industrialization, ignoring the principle of reasonable and practical decoration. However, William Morris considered the artworks displayed at the Crystal Palace to be "ugly monsters". In the Victorian style of the 19th century, the design style at that time tended to the superposition of decorative elements of various styles, blindly imitating nature, showing a luxurious and complicated, artificial design atmosphere. William Morris thought that excessive decoration is inconsistent with the function of the product. In the late 18th century to the early 19th century, the medieval Gothic revival period, the separation of technology and art and the excessive elaborate decoration led to a large number of artists who could not solve some of the problems brought about by the great industrialization. William Morris decided to revive the traditional handicraft industry, emphasizing that the designed products should be both practical and beautiful, and believed that Gothic style was in line with what they (Raphael Brothers) were pursuing. At the arrival of the Naturalism era in the 19th century, the design style was biased towards advocating and learning from nature. William Morris replaced the Victorian design style with fresh nature. How to depict nature in order to make the pattern more attractive became a prevalent topic among artists at that time. William Morris advocated obedience and respect to nature,

not blindly copying nature, but recreating on the basis of nature to form new patterns. In the 19th century, during the oriental art trend, William Morris's design was influenced by Japanese Ukiyo-e, whose simple shape, vivid colors, clear and recognizable lines have attracted William Morris's attention, including the form following function advocated by Ukiyo-e, which emphasized form on the basis of function, which was exactly what William Morris needed in his design and inspired William Morris in his creation later.

## **2. Morris pattern with plant as motif**

Morris pattern involves wallpaper, tapestry, glass, sculpture, furniture, carpet, book binding, architecture, tiles, printed textiles and other products. However, except for tapestries (which will be mentioned later), which are designed by combining characters with plants, the rest are basically designed by taking plants as the main elements or combining plants with animals. Many plant elements such as honeysuckle, strawberry, lily, tulip, rose, acanthus, and *Acanthopanax senticosus* and many animal elements such as parrot, thrush, peacock are employed in Morris pattern. William Morris pursues the balance between style and nature in his design and the harmony between patterns and plant forms, with realistic images of flowers and birds. For example, Strawberry Thief, designed by John Morris in 1883, takes the thrush and strawberry as the main elements, with the thrush symmetrically arranged in the main position, and the background is the interlaced branches and leaves of strawberry plants, flowers of different shapes and ripe fruits. The pattern of Rose, designed in the same year, is dominated by rose shapes in different forms, with intricate branches and leaves in the background. In 1879, William Morris designed Acanthus Leaf and Peacock, in which many kinds of birds and peacocks were in the main position, and there were curly acanthus leaves and plant branches around them. The shape of the birds was very vivid, although it was simplified and designed in a plane, it was like a vibrant natural scene through William Morris's design.

## **3. Color analysis of Morris pattern**

Morris patterns bring different visual effects through the changes of hue, lightness and purity. He advocated romantic, light, colorful style, and gets rid of the three-dimensional sense that was prevalent in plane patterns at that time. Instead, he used color changes to express the sense of space, and used line patterns to outline the meaning or symbol of flat painted color surfaces and patterns.

William Morris put forward two ways of contrasting light and dark colors in response to the way the patterns are highlighted. One is to make the background dark and the pattern light, or vice versa, to make the background light and the pattern dark. The other is to use colored lines to outline the pattern and release it from the background, not emphasizing the pattern and dark background, what is required is only the coordination of the background, pattern and line. There are also two kinds of delineating, one is to draw a pattern in advance to linear definition, which is suitable for wider edges; the other is to draw the outline first, and then fill in the pattern, which is suitable for narrow edges. And don't break lines in at the corner with floral decorations. If the middle pattern is clear and complete, you can use a narrow line around the edge. If the middle pattern is damaged by color, or even the filler is scattered, you can use a wide line around the edge, which can make the picture become a whole point.

Morris's first printed textile design, "Jasmine pattern", was made by block printing. At that time, no color dyed by factory can get William Morris's affirmation, so Morris decided to dye it by himself. He first went to Waddell's Hencroft Dyeing Factory to study and set up a second factory to dye the textiles designed by Morris Company. The first factory of Hencroft Dyeing Factory was to produce the textile products of Waddell Company, and then, the Morton Abbey Works was established locally for dyeing again due to technical problems and developed its own dyeing formulas and systems, especially indigo discharge printing. Indigo has always been a difficult dye to control. In the whole dyeing process, the yarn or cloth is dipped into deep vases of the dye that has sunk to the floor. After

that, the yarn or cloth is exposed to the air, according to the desired depth of blue, where the dye quickly oxidizes on the cloth, then becomes insoluble, and finally forms the desired pattern effect. Because vat dyeing is the only method available for indigo, it is not possible to apply it directly to the printing plate, as it will oxidize immediately, making it impossible to print. Therefore, resist or discharge printing is of vital importance. The works *The Rose* and *the Amaranth and Windor* are examples.

Compared with the design of William Morris, Henry Deere likes to use strong colors, like green, red and yellow. But shades of William Morris can also be seen in these patterns designed by Henry Deere, like the way the lines are slanted, the arrangement of the overall composition, the application of elements. But Henry Deere's distinctive design was totally different from William Morris's inherent naturalism, and his interest in historical textiles is also reflected in his design.

#### **4. Structural framework of Morris pattern**

Morris pattern is basically composed of continuous branches and scattered flowers. As the invisible structural line of the pattern, the continuous winding branches form a rich and orderly pattern by the method of flattening layer by layer.

The structural lines of Morris patterns are generally divided into straight lines and curved lines. Straight lines are divided into single-layer straight lines, double-layer straight lines and multi-layer straight lines. The patterns with straight lines as the structure include *Pomegranate Pattern*, *Wild Tulip Wallpaper*, *Apple Wallpaper*, etc. In the work *Apple Wallpaper*, the diagonal line composed of big leaves runs through the whole picture, and then the square continuous line composed of small leaves is used as the background, and the apple pattern is interspersed between the large leaves and the small leaves, and the changes of the pattern of one layer enrich the whole picture, forming a regular and orderly visual effect. The curves are divided into single-layer curve structure, double-layer curve structure and multi-layer curve structure. Because the curve structure shows a sense of light, smooth and smart, especially the "S" type and "C" type, which is more in line with William Morris' design principles, with precise structure and compact arrangement. Curve structure can better express nature and has strong decorative properties. So there are many works designed with curves as the structure, including *Acanthus Leaf*, *Carnation and Rose*, *Chrysanthemum Wallpaper*, *Lily Wilton Woven Pile Carpet*, *Rose Printed Cotton*, *Silk Brocade of St. James*, and so on. In the work *Acanthus Leaf*, the leaves are arranged in an "S" shape and roll freely, showing the flexibility and slenderness of the leaves. The layers between the leaves and the leaves are superimposed and connected from the beginning to the end, forming a visual effect of growing upward. Curves and lines also intersect in pairs to form diamond structures and grid structures. Diamond structure is one of the most widely used patterns in Morris. In the work *Diamond Pattern*, the winding of the branches and leaves form a regular diamond structure, which makes the structural lines hidden but can be distinguished by careful observation. The leaves are arranged along the upward trend of branches, which seems not deliberate. In fact, the designer skillfully uses the characteristics of plants and arranges a single element to form a full and rich visual effect, and thus the overall structure is smooth. The unique beauty of order in Morris pattern is shown by the orderly arrangement of straight lines and curves.

#### **5. Organizational form of Morris pattern**

Morris pattern is a four-square continuous pattern that can be extended up and down, left and right no matter in wallpaper or printed cotton cloth, but two-square continuous ribbon pattern that can be extended left and right in dado ceramic tile. Morris pattern likes repetition as if it were a place in nature and full of vitality.

There are three kinds of square continuous forms in Morris patterns. One is the scattered square continuity, which consists of visible or invisible dots and grids, which are created by combining flowers, plants and animals. For example, the pattern of *Daisy*, designed in 1860, consists of four

groups of bouquets, two of which combined to form a continuous band, and then arranged, finally forming a square continuous pattern. The Morton Printed Cotton designed by Duncan Deere in 1920 is similar to Daisy. The second is overlapping square continuous pattern, which is one of the more complicated patterns, generally two to three square continuous overlapping each other. Taking two four-square continuous patterns as an example, these two are overlapped up and down, with the lower pattern as the background or ground pattern and the upper pattern as the floating pattern. For example, the pattern of Tulips and Willows, designed in 1873, the base is a square continuous pattern composed of willow leaves, the floating pattern is a scattered square continuous pattern composed of tulips, with the floating pattern as the main pattern and the base pattern as the accompaniment, which makes the whole pattern changeable and unified as a whole, with a stronger sense of decoration and a more hierarchical sense. The last is a continuous one, composed of geometry images or plants and other units. For example, the pattern of Willow, designed in 1874, is shown by the twisted variations of willow leaves, which has and only has one layer, but the structural lines is quite clear. Another example is the pattern of Trellis, in which vines are interwoven on the pane to form a square continuity. The whole pattern is also dotted with a few birds, contrasting the quietness of the pane with the movements of vines and birds. The overall structure is clear and the theme is clear.

In addition to square continuity, there are axisymmetric composition, completely symmetrical composition and surrounding composition. Axisymmetric composition refers to the composition in which both sides of an axis are completely symmetrical. For example, William Morris's 1877 design Ceiling Pattern in 1877, contains many plant elements to carry out the symmetrical repetition. The Peacock and Dragon, designed in 1878, designed leaves in a mesh or inverted arch shape, with pairs of birds on the surface. Although the birds are the focus, the pattern is less important than structure in design, thus taking them as a unit and repeating them symmetrically. Peacock and dragon are much larger than vines, pigeons and roses. This pattern is often used in the wall and curtains. Completely symmetrical composition is also a kind of symmetry composition, which is less in Morris patterns, such as Grid Pattern designed in 1895. Surrounding composition refers to the elements surrounding the main body and setting off the main body, which is mainly shown in some tapestries and some stained glass designed by William Morris and personnel in his company. In the design of tapestry, William Morris emphasized the importance of good design and drawing skills, and adopted painting subjects. Usually, Edward Burne-Jones designs the characters, and then William Morris or Henry Deere designs the borders and the plants around the characters. William Morris is more confident and individual than Henry Deere in design, and Henry Deere's designs make the characters in the dominate position, while William Morris's designs have a larger background, which accounts for more of the whole picture, and sometimes inscriptions occur. A Flemish Tapestry, designed in the early 16th century, is composed of women standing around dense flower beds.

Floor covering is more complicated in design. The carpets designed by William Morris have an inherent carpet frame, rather than an assembled frame, with differences between wide and narrow. The wide frame is to decorate cloth for avoiding certain wear and tear, and need to be filled with similar colored patterns in it. The narrow frame is to attract attention, and the color of the lines is not similar to that of the pattern and obviously different. Some famous carpets in Morris Company include Wilton carpet, Brussels rope carpet, Axminster carpet and Hammersmith hand-knotted carpet. Around 1883, the carpet adopted a composition with symmetrical proportions and badges or other devices in the center. Around 1885, some small carpets with leaves, flowers and twigs were made. Around 1887, the carpets showed a one-way axis in the design. The carpet designed by William Morris shows more freedom, while Henry Deere's design has a strong direction. At that time, William Morris's interest has turned to books and tapestries, so Henry Deere was mainly in charge of the design in the company, whose designs formed two typical styles. One is repetition of patterns, usually of roses connected in traditional way; the other is more complicated, in which clusters of flowers are connected with other isolated patterns.

## 6. Conclusion

John Morris has made outstanding achievements in design fields of textile, wallpaper, book, carpet, and ceramic tile. In the design, he pays attention to typesetting and decoration, forming a rigorous and simple artistic style. Most of his designs are based on plants, with natural romance, which fully embodies "learning from nature" in many designs, and also makes his design intriguing artistic effects.

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