

The Nature of Gothic: Reflecting the Natural World in Historic and Contemporary Artistic Practice

Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery 13 September - 13 December

A review by Mike Millward



John Ruskin's phrase 'the nature of gothic' in the exhibition title refers to artistic representation of the natural world. In this important show we see not only how medieval manuscript borders enclosed the words on the page, how similar effects persisted early printed books and how Islamic design influenced western book design, but how this extends to later fine and decorative art.

The revival of medieval practice and design by Ruskin's followers in the Arts and Crafts Movement is illustrated here with private press books, textiles and ceramics which demonstrate the joy of making the medieval in a modern world.

Co-curated by Dr Cynthia Johnston, from the University of London and Anthea Purkis, from Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery, the exhibition draws from the Blackburn collection including from the R E Hart Bequest, together with generous loans from the British Library, Manchester Art Gallery, Cambridge University Library, Chetham's Library, John Rylands Library, Stonyhurst College, National Museums Liverpool, De Morgan Foundation, Gawthorpe Textiles Collection, Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Tullie House Carlisle and Wigan & Leigh Archives..

"The Nature of Gothic" is a powerful example of what happens when a local museum thinks nationally and curates with ambition" says Anthea Purkis. "It's about weaving Blackburn's story into a much larger cultural fabric."

In Cynthia Johnston's words, "Through Blackburn Museum's exceptional collections, we are able to explore this shared cultural theme of gothic decorative art using the natural world, present across books, paintings, textiles and ceramics. Blackburn's collections are astonishing in scope and quality. With this exhibition, we place it within the national narrative of collecting, creativity and cross-cultural exchange. The loan from the



British Library is particularly significant and generous, it includes six medieval manuscripts, including a national treasure, the early 15th century Bedford Psalter and Hours, made in the London workshop of the famous illuminator, Herman Sheere. This is matched by a manuscript from the Museum's Hart Collection, also from Sheere's workshop."



The exhibition occupies the entire Hart and Watercolour Galleries, redecorated and upgraded for the exhibition. They look splendid; the new lighting makes things easier to see, the labels are informative and accessible, but the main thing is the stuff on show – it is fantastic! I have known this museum for almost sixty years, quite a few of them as curator, but I have never seen it home to such a splendid array of wonderful things. If you enter the Hart room from the Victorian Gallery, you are greeted by the spectacular Easter Chasuble made by Helena Wintour in 1655, on loan from Stonyhurst College. Proceed into the room and more and more wonders are revealed.

Many of them are from the Hart Collection, and familiar; they hold their own in some exalted company including the Bedford Hours, truly a national treasure. We can see illuminated psalters and books of hours, some of England's earliest printed books, Henry VIII's own copy of the works of Prosper



of Aquitaine, a rare medieval illuminated Qu’ran and William Morris’s Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, hand written by him with illustrations by Burne-Jones.

Blackburn’s fine collection of Royal Lancastrian lusterware is shown with earlier De Morgan pieces; Morris designs are compared with earlier fabrics which influenced them.

In the Watercolour Gallery, Albert Moore’s “Loves of the Winds and Seasons” looks better than ever, displayed alongside lovely works by him from Manchester Art Gallery. Works by Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Arthur Hughes allow comparisons not usually possible as there are no PreRaphaelite pictures in the Blackburn collection.

Finally, Post-modern work by north west based contemporary artists Nehal Aamir and Jamie Holman draw on medieval and Persian manuscripts and the Tregaskis bindings which can be seen in the exhibition.

All in all, the exhibition holds together well. The curators are to be congratulated on creating a

coherent narrative which connects the extremely varied material on show. It increases understanding of the long and profound influence of the middle ages on the modern world. The excellent and well illustrated accompanying catalogue is good value at £8.

All this is funded by the Brian Mercer Trust and is part of the Museum’s National Portfolio Organisation status, awarded by Arts Council England.

Illustrations:

Opposite page, top to bottom

Bedford Psalter and Hours, English, ca 1414-22 [British Library]

Blackburn Psalter, English, ca 1260-80 [Hart Collection, Blackburn Museum]

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, 1872, handwritten by William Morris with illustrations by Burne-Jones [British Library]

Morals of the Beneficent, Persian, late 18th century [Hart Collection, Blackburn Museum]

Above, left to right

Easter Chasuble made by Helena Wintour in 1655, [Stonyhurst College]

Royal Lancastrian lustreware vase by Walter Crane, 1910 [Blackburn Museum]



The opening talk of new season on 14th October, will be a talk by Cynthia Johnston related to the exhibition:

Floriography: The meaning of flowers in medieval manuscripts



The current exhibition at the Museum looks at the use of the natural world in decorative art from the late medieval period through to the Arts and Crafts Movement. For this talk, I will focus on the meaning of flowers in decorative borders of late medieval manuscripts. The red rose, the lily, the tri-colour or wild pansy, the carnation and many more each had specific meanings for the medieval reader. Artists used the flowers as emblems in a variety of inventive ways in both their illuminations and border designs. We will also look at this practice as sustained in the embroidery of the recusant Catholic community in the 17th century. We’ll look closely at the work of Helena Wintour in the ‘Easter’ or ‘White Chasuble’ from Stonyhurst College which is in the exhibition [illustrated left].

The meeting on 12th November will include a short AGM, followed by another talk relating to the exhibition, when Mike Millward will discuss *Typology - the concept of the Old Testament prefiguring the New*. This is illustrated by some items in the “Nature of Gothic” exhibition, including the Biblia Pauperum in the Hart Collection.