



The Pre-Raphaelite Review



Associate Editor
Nathan Cervo

Editor-in-Chief
Francis Golfing

Assistant Editor
Barbara Golfing

May 1978

Volume I Number 2

Rat & Mole Press



William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung and
the Pre-Raphaelite Visual Aesthetic

Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting share many technical and stylistic similarities, as might be expected when multi-talented artists like William Morris and Dante Rossetti seriously concern themselves with theory. Morris's retelling of the Germanic epic of Sigurd the Volsung, one of the neglected epics of nineteenth-century England, derives much of its power from exploiting the visual devices which mark the drawings and paintings of Morris himself and of other Pre-Raphaelite artists.

The most important stylistic devices employed are strict attention to detail and minutiae, the use of color and light to create mass as well as to serve symbolic functions, the concomitant creation of a heightened surface pattern, and the sequential presentation of fully developed tableaux which sacrifice the sense of movement in favor of a tapestry-like sequence of set pieces. The Pre-Raphaelites are obsessed with minute observation in their work, in direct violation of Reynolds' call to avoid the "accidental imperfections" of nature. In part because the Pre-Raphaelites deal with "spots of time" rather than with a timeless ideal, the details and imperfections of nature or man are of crucial importance to accurate representation. This devotion to absolute accuracy sometimes goes to absurd lengths, and often seems to rob paintings of a freshness which they need; certainly a good deal of the criticism which the Pre-Raphaelites suffered in their own time, and much of the neglect they suffer now, derives from the artists' failure to "see the whole" in paying attention to the parts.

Because the plane of reality with which Ruskin worked was the immediate level of appearance or physical presence, he applauded the Pre-Raphaelite pursuit of detailed artistic study of nature, and called the Brotherhood "the only living figure painters of this age."¹ He noted that "Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only."² But there is an important difference between the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and simple,

"uncompromising truth." In the movement's significant visual works, especially in those of Morris and Rossetti, the artist goes beyond literal transcription into a reconstruction of detail into a patterned, decorative form.

The Pre-Raphaelite insistence on detail, most evident in the first generation of the movement (and largely missing from the drawings of Burne-Jones), explains the omnipresence of the facial features of Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris in the women painted by the Pre-Raphaelites; since these two served as the primary female models, and since the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic required strict adherence to the model's features, these two faces continually reappear in a variety of roles.

Closely connected with photographic realism in Pre-Raphaelite art is the singular use of color and light. The Pre-Raphaelites abandoned the studied use of light and shade in favor of the use of pure colors. This conforms to their approval of the intense use of color mass by a Giotto or a Cimabue, and to their condemnation of the Renaissance use of light and shadow in the creation of modelled volume and depth.

Of all the Pre-Raphaelite writers, Morris probably shows the most skillful and purposeful use of color as a formal and emblematic material. His epic retelling of Sigurd the Volsung exemplifies the Pre-Raphaelite use of color. The landscapes are less those of traditional painting than they are those interior landscapes which in the last half of the century were created as the logical result of the new reliance upon individual consciousness as the source of truth and as the most immediate reality. Color is what most alters Sigurd's landscapes, and it is color, more even than reference to magic, which adds a supernatural tone to the work. Colors are often emblematic in Pre-Raphaelite art, and may also serve to establish emotional tones. Landscapes in Sigurd, depending on which kingdom a particular scene is in, may be dominated by blue, green, gold, or red, and the color choice seems to be made by the emotional content of each color. Red, for instance, evokes a sense of danger and death in this epic while blue evokes tranquillity and peace, and these colors are used to establish the mood appropriate to each kingdom. One key landscape description occurs as Sigurd goes to slay the serpent Fafnir at the insistence of the evil (and black) Regin. It is unusual for Morris to omit mention of some

color for even four or five lines, but here, in nine, he creates a vivid passage that evokes only degrees of light and darkness.

But lo, at last a glimmer, and a light from
the west there came,
And another and another, like points of far-
off flame;
And they grew and brightened and gathered;
and whiles together they ran
Like the moonwake over the waters; and
whiles they were scant and wan,
Some greater and some lesser, like the boats
of fishers laid
About the sea of midnight; and a dusky dawn
they made,
A faint and glimmering twilight: so Sigurd
strains his eyes,
And he sees how a land deserted all about
him lies
More changeless₃ than mid-ocean, as fruitless
as its floor.

The reader who has gone through a hundred pages of Sigurd to reach this passage is aware of the tension established by the lack of mention of color, after such careful and insistent color use, and this is an appropriate reaction for the perilous situation. Nature is displaced, subtly and powerfully; Morris makes the landscape grotesque and cold through carefully chosen natural images and systematic coloration.

Morris writes of many small details and incidental landscape figures with the same direct use of a single primary color that gives a tapestry-like effect to the whole of Sigurd. "...dark-red and worn and ancient as the midnight mountain sides/Is the wall that goeth around them" (p. 152) is one example of the bathing of a scene in a single color. One of the most dramatic distortions of landscape occurs when Sigurd rides through fire to reach Brynhild; the fire, a supernatural conjuring, gradually emerges from a red sunset as Morris slowly intensifies the red-dominated passage. It begins with what appears to be a natural phenomenon:

So they came to the Waste of Lyndale when
the afternoon is begun,
And afar they see the flame-blink on the

grey sky under the sun;
And they spur and speak no word, and no man
to his fellow will turn;
But they see the hills draw upward, and the
heath begin to burn;
And they ride, and the eye is coming, and
the sun hangs low o'er the earth,
And the red-flame roars up to it from the
midst of the desert's dearth.
None turns or speaks to his brother, the
Wrath gleams bare and red,
And blood-red is the helm of Aweing on the
golden Sigurd's head. (p. 185)

This color saturation is typical of all of Sigurd and is so carefully done that by mention of the Wrath (Sigurd's sword) as red (it is normally blue) the immersion of the entire scene by the red glow is given even greater dramatic impact. Only Sigurd's goldenness, emblematic of his heroic nature, remains unbathed in red, just as it is only Gunnar's face that stands out in the night:

Long Sigurd gazeth on Gunnar, till he sees,
as through a cloud,
The long black locks of the Niblung, and the
King's face set and proud:
Then the face is alone on the dark, and the
dusky Niblung mail
Is nought but the night before him: then
whiles will the visage fail,
And grows again as he gazeth, black hair and
gleaming eyes,
And fade again into nothing, as for more of
vision he tries. (p. 188)

That face seen in flickering light exemplifies the strong contrast which Morris achieves through bold coloration and which echoes the descriptive passages on dreams and visions.

The method is, in effect, a simplification through color and its emblematic and dramatic use. The poem's most compelling passages rely largely on the effects of color, and the entire landscape of Sigurd assumes such "unnatural" aspects to be natural. This means replacing the reality of external nature with one which more closely approximates the landscape of a vision. The creation of emotional response through the introduction

of a single color parallels, historically, the French symbolist notion of a direct, non-denotative relationship between color and language. Like the texture of a tapestry, the landscaping of Sigurd must be accepted as the immediate reality by its audience, whether or not color and texture closely resemble those of the "real" world.

It is not surprising that the poet of Sigurd would be interested in the repetitious and stylized patterning of floral wallpaper design. May Morris wrote that her father's wallpapers were thought out or conceived "in mass, as it were, not in line, all the forms are set down with a sure and swift handling...in those patterns which show certain outlining of great leaves it is less as a boundary line than as a breaking of the juxtaposition of colours."⁴

Morris's 1896 Compton design, like his other wallpapers, shows a number of the Pre-Raphaelite devices carried to an extreme. The pattern is purely a surface action, as depth is denied by the lack of any modeling or gradation of colors. Even the cross-hatching on the central blossom is patterned to operate as linear design denying any suggestion of curvature or depth. Those curves which are evident to the viewer are the surface lines, not any which might result from a cylindrical stalk or curled leaf. Colors are solid mass without the shading which would suggest a normal light source falling on a rounded surface.

It is important to establish an approximate definition of literary surface pattern in making comparisons of technique between painters and poets, in such questions as color mass and surface design. Color use may be very much alike in poetry and painting, as the lessons of Sigurd have shown, because the poet may choose to include mention of color with specific dramatic and symbolic intentions, along with the usual literary materials. Similarly, a poem can be made largely "visual" by the description of a scene which the reader may easily reconstruct, as when Dante Rossetti depicts a house interior in "My Sister's Sleep":

Through the small room, with subtle sound
Of flame, by vents the fireshine drove
And reddened. In its dim alcove
The mirror shed a clearness round.⁵

Remarkably, Rossetti uses very few specific objects in this passage, relying rather on the sensations which the room provides: the crackle of the fire, the broken and bright flashes of light through a fireplace grating, the luminous reflection of a mirror. These provide a very strong visual aspect to the poem, without the catalog of furniture or fixtures which would more commonly be used to this purpose.

Unlike such a vivid description as we find in "My Sister's Sleep" is the device of surface pattern which requires some distortion of recognizable sights and shapes. The strong use of vibrant and solid masses of color with little shading, for example, tends to produce a two-dimensional effect in paintings since depth is not modeled; this subtle denial of interior space creates a strong sense of surface pattern. This effect is enhanced by the practice of the Pre-Raphaelites of ignoring atmospheric distortion, the omission of which tends to create a visual fusion of planes.

Surface pattern in poetry may be established when the form supersedes the content or narrative interest of a work by strong metrical construction, for example, in which case the reader's interest in a word's meaning declines, and his interest in the word's sound or musical qualities increases. Surface pattern may be achieved by exaggerated use of rhyme, alliteration, or other sound devices. Strongly descriptive poetry would be difficult to use as a basis for the creation of surface pattern since the reader's mind would have a scene more closely approximating "visual reality" to use as primary contact.

An interesting comparison of several of these methods is possible in Sigurd, especially when that carefully constructed work is compared with one of Morris's straightforward later works, such as the prose romance, The Well at the World's End. Sigurd offers strong metrical interest which at times approaches a chant-like effect apt to lull the reader into ignoring the word content; an effect not likely to be accidental since the passages in which this most strongly exists contain very little to add to the narrative movement or increase the reader's understanding of the events or characters. The Well at the World's End is written in a rhythmless prose, marked by infrequent use of the musical and ornamental archaic language that dominates Sigurd. The prose romance is a tightly constructed

work with a strong narrative line with many events and incidents, unpadded by many words that do not materially add to the plot movement. Descriptive passages and revealed thoughts are rare in The Well at the World's End. Sigurd, on the other hand, is so verbose that at times an extended passage yields no meaning beyond its pattern; like musical compositions these passages exist as interesting and pleasing form without literary content.

The following four lines from Sigurd illustrate one instance of melodic repetition creating a chant-like surface patterning which dominates whatever sparse contributions the words may make to narrative matters. What the words mean is not as important as the overall rhythm and the generalized sense of foreboding.

Quoth the first; "it is grief for the foemen
that the Masters of God-Home would
grieve."

Said the next: "'Tis a wonder of wonders,
that the hearkening world shall believe."

"A fear of all fears," said the third, "for
the sword is uplifted on men."

"A joy of all joys," said the fourth, "once
come, and it comes not again."

Words in passages like this one, which occur frequently in Sigurd, take on an ornamental rather than integral role in the epic. The repetition of certain words, like "sword" or "foeman" or "grim," in otherwise vague sentences, becomes a decorative element which creates moods more by association than by any intellectually perceived meaning. In Sigurd the repetition of archaic words and constructions, and the repeated inclusion of words associated with war and magic, create a pervasive tone of gloom and violence, which well fits the thematic development of the work. The alert reader comes to understand Morris's fundamental pessimism and fear of death in part because of the tone created by ornamental words.

Several Pre-Raphaelite devices are evident in the periodic repetition of scenes in Sigurd. Keeping in mind Morris's belief that no artist should create a tapestry without weaving an epic into it, the reader of Sigurd is made aware of a complementary belief that epics should have the texture and structural qualities of a tapestry. Morris, who considered weaving man's second greatest art, seems to have written Sigurd with

close attention to the principles of tapestry making, or he seems to have achieved the creation of an epic with the appearance of being a literary parallel to a woven tapestry. Primary among the coincident ways of creating are the use of repetition and the overwhelming emphasis on thread-like colors used emblematically throughout the poem. Another affinity between this epic and a narrative tapestry is the thorough establishment of a scene's visual appearance before any narrative recognition is possible. This matches the visual experience of seeing color and composition of necessity, before a story content or plot development is made known. The following two passages are separated by forty-five pages in Sigurd and they give the appearance of being two tapestry scenes set apart by a decorative border:

(1)

But a woman sits on the high-seat with gold
about her head,
And ruddy rings on her arms, and the grace
of her girdle-stead;
And sunlit is her rippled linen, and the
green leaves lie at her feet,
And e'en as a swan on a billow where the
firth and the out-sea meet,
On the dark-blue cloths she sitteth, so fair
and softly made
Are her limbs by the linen hidden, and so
white is she arrayed,
But a web of gold is before her, and therein
by her shuttle wrought. (p. 145)

(2)

And thereon a woman sitting in the golden
place below;
Her face is fair and awful, and a gold crown
girded her head;
And a sword of the kings she beareth, and
her sun-bright hair is shed
Over the laps of the snow-white linen that
ripples adown to her feet;
As a swan on a billow unbroken where the firth
and the ocean meet,
On the dark-blue cloths she sitteth, in the
height on the golden place;
Nor breaketh the hush of the hall, though
her eyes be set on her face. (p. 190)

Both passages show Brynhild, and the only significant detail that differentiates them is the object she holds, initially the "future" she has woven, and later the sword representing fulfillment of her earlier prophecy. The repetition of colors and similes is so complete that the effect is that of juxtaposed and very much alike scenes, rather than two elements from a succession of unfolded events.

A consciously developed iconography and ornamental use of detail tend to coincide in Pre-Raphaelite art, since items and colors are introduced for their symbolic function rather than for their accidental presence in a landscape. The Pre-Raphaelites thus follow the tradition of Christian iconography when they use, for example, lilies and doves, or when Morris uses deep blue for his heroic or divine women, or when white is used as a suggestion of purity. Other Victorian painting does not rely heavily on the iconographic use of colors and objects, so that the decorative and symbolic quality of Pre-Raphaelite art becomes all the more striking.

Morris uses the symbolic powers of color far more than Rossetti, and while Morris is both limited and aided by some traditional associations made with certain colors, he goes further, in his long works, by building an extensive iconography based on colors for people, objects, settings, and moods. In Sigurd these colors act as threads in reintroducing characters or in differentiating locales, as figures and scenes in tapestries are given dominant colors. Among the colors used with this conscious emblematic purpose are white (for Signy and other fair women), grey (for Odin, Sigurd's horse named Greyfell, the appearance of the Norns, and occasions of death and chaos), blue (the edge of Sigurd's sacred sword, the Niblung people), black (the evil Fafnir, Regin), green (Gripir's palace), and the most widely used of all, gold.

The connotations of gold are two-fold and paradoxical. All heroes are presented in an aspect of gold, and incessant mention of gold is made in reference to their clothing and costume. Most of the evil characters lust after gold, so that the color becomes the identifying mark of the good and the objective of the evil people. No other color is mentioned nearly as much as gold, so that the poem may be said to be "in gold" as a tapestry is wrought in one dominant color or, perhaps, as a musical composition is written in a particular key. Reinforcing the color symbolism is the

virtual absence of green and other earth colors in Sigurd's landscaping.

Morris's epic retelling of the destruction of a civilization which he felt to be more crucial to England than the Arthurian world rivals Tennyson's Idylls of the King in the power and scope of its revelation of intrinsic evil in man and society, but probably owes its neglect to the very archaism which Morris so skillfully constructed on the principles of painting and weaving.

Stephen Sossaman

FOOTNOTES

¹William, Michael Rossetti, Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism (London, 1899), p. xii.

²Lectures on Architecture and Painting (New York, 1854), p. 180.

³Works (London, 1910-1915), XII.

⁴May Morris, William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist (New York, 1966), I, 37.

⁵Poems and Translations, 1850-1870 (London, 1949), p. 97.

⁶William Gaunt, The Pre-Raphaelite Dream (New York, 1966), p. 168.