

## WILLIAM DE MORGAN: SOURCES AND SUBJECTS

William De Morgan (1839-1917) was a lifelong friend of William Morris and was the foremost ceramic craftsman of the Arts and Crafts Movement. He was primarily a “ceramic designer” and not a potter in the sense that is understood today as a craftsman responsible for every step in all stages of a pot’s production. Most of the vessels that he decorated were bought in from Stoke-on-Trent; later he employed a thrower who produced the shapes which he had drawn. Apart from the few pieces decorated by his one-time partner, the architect Halsey Ricardo, De Morgan designed everything that the pottery produced. Tiles were the core product; they were in continuous production from 1873 to 1907. The Victoria and Albert Museum has 1248 sheets of designs bequeathed by Evelyn De Morgan after his death in 1917, 820 of which are for tiles or tile panels. Some of the drawings are carefully finished and were probably done for clients’ consideration or for use in the showroom. His design drawings for vessels show all round views, so that they could be directly copied by his painters. Many of the tile drawings are obviously first thoughts of an idea and similarly there are sheets where he was trying out single motifs or strange animals for use in later work.

Much of De Morgan’s work shows that he had considerable knowledge of the ceramics of Islamic countries of the Middle East. In 1832 Washington Irving published *Tales from the Alhambra*; these were imaginative re-tellings of traditional tales associated with the Moorish presence in Granada. Soon after, from 1842 to 1846, Owen Jones published his major work of large lithographs of the buildings and decorations of the Alhambra. As with his later *Grammar of Ornament*, he analysed the geometric structure of the Moorish decorations, the first time this had been done. De Morgan was only marginally influenced by Moorish decoration but Owen Jones’ understanding of the structure of pattern and ornament was widely influential with the more advanced designers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

De Morgan talked about his “Persian” colours but the Middle Eastern influence on his work was from Turkey rather than Persia, particularly the pottery produced at Isnik during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He had the opportunity of seeing and handling Turkish, Persian and Syrian tiles when he was asked by Frederic Leighton to provide additional tiles to be used with his own collection in the building of the Arab Hall at his house in Holland Park, London. It was the ogee that provided the structure of so much Isnik pattern making, used with freely drawn flowers and leaves: carnations, tulips, hyacinths and cherry blossom. De Morgan copied one design that was at Leighton House but all his other Isnik-style designs were “in the style of the 16<sup>th</sup> century”. It was not only on his tiles that he used Isnik motifs; his dishes and vases also had the same flowers and, in addition, the palmette motif was used in many forms.

Flowers were used by De Morgan in the majority of his designs. An important early group was from the period when he was still producing occasional designs for Morris and many of these were Morris style even though made a decade or two later. This group of flowers is always simple English blooms, daisies, buttercups, anemones, wild roses, producing the same simple mediaeval imagery as Morris’s own poetry and textiles. Most of the early designs, such as Bedford Park Daisy, were extremely popular and remained in production until the end of the century.

De Morgan’s humour and his puns were always noted by his friends and there is much evidence of them in his animal designs, which are rarely straightforward depictions of known species. Some designs are stylised, with animals adopting heraldic positions. Others depict purely fantastic and imaginary animals and birds. There are about 60 animals that he appeared to use regularly. These could be in lustre, blue or green on white, black on turquoise or blue on celadon green. Some are in relief. They could be used on plain

backgrounds or on some six different patterned ones. And, of course, the animals could face either left or right to be used symmetrically on both sides of fireplaces. These variants give a permutation of some 6320 possibilities! The same animals used on tiles were also utilised on dishes and vases usually intertwining in some way round branches and leaves. It was clearly economical from the designer's point of view to use and re-use the same basic elements in many different applications.

Snakes and fishes also lend themselves to fantasy. They are easily adapted to fit any shape whether a square tile, a circular dish or the curving surface of a vase. Many of De Morgan's animals are aggressive, attacking other animals, but his fish are self-consciously decorative while the snakes seem to do nothing more dangerous than to hold a fruiting branch in their mouths!

Birds, sometimes recognisable species, were more often decoratively stylised. The peacock with a long history in the decorative arts, much used by the Persians and the Mughals in India, was a favourite, capable of elaboration both in the colours used and in the decoratively displayed tail. Small birds in the branches of shrubs were used in tile panels and around vases but clearly the long-legged species, storks, flamingos and herons were preferred. The dodo was used on tiles and must have been a favourite with the public as it was in production throughout De Morgan's career as a potter.

Ships, when used, are decorative rather than sea-worthy. They are essentially mediaeval or Tudor sailing ships on seas well populated with large fishes. The deliberate naivety of De Morgan's craft is clearly shown in some of the tile panels where the passenger on the deck appears to be a king entertained by a harpist or, occasionally, Sinbad aiming his bow and arrow at a giant Roc flying overhead.

There is a small group of dishes in red lustre whose decoration is atypically symmetrical and formal in the manner of the grotesques of the High Renaissance. One such dish from this series incorporates a caricature of Burne-Jones.

The range of De Morgan's designs was very wide, imaginative, and colourful. It was never too serious yet always technically very accomplished. His place in the history of ceramics is assured.