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GERMAN JUGENDSTIL TAPESTRIES: THE DAILY LIFE OF THE PEOPLE WHO MADE THEM

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of daily life of artists and artisans, I sought to learn about the intimate thoughts, conversations and ideas of the artists who provided the designs for the tapestries of the Kunstwebschule Sherrebek in Germany (1896-1903), as well as those of the artists/weavers who translated such designs into woven forms. Like many an intellectual endeavor, my industrious search revealed little information of this type. Nonetheless, it is possible, though surely only second best without the voices of the artists themselves, to glean some understanding of the founding of the Sherrebek institution, the people who worked there, and the fame of the weavings through historical documents and contemporary literature. While history of this workshop is little known today, it was a world recognized weaving school and thriving textile cottage industry, albeit for a brief period of time.

It is not by chance that Germany's premiere tapestry weaving center was established in a northwest province of Hamburg. There were two logical reasons for this. Tapestry weaving of a regional character had been going on in the Schleswig-Holstein area since the 17th century.¹ Justus Brinckmann, Director of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, himself lamented the pathetic state of tapestry weaving in his country throughout the 19th century, since he knew of the fine quality of historic Nordic tapestries as his museum housed a formidable collection of woven cushion covers from northern Germany and Norway. Stylistically related to the Swedish tapestry tradition, the subject matter of such weavings was that of the standard western European repertoire, -- Christian, mythological or allegorical in nature. The other reason for the establishment of the Sherrebek Weaving School near Hamburg was the fact that Brinckmann held a keen interest in Japanese art, the British Arts & Crafts movement, in the works of William Morris & Company in particular, and the international Art Nouveau movement, of which the so-called utilitarian decorative arts reigned supreme. The museum in Hamburg acquired contemporary decorative arts of an avant-garde nature and today houses one of the premiere collections of what is commonly called Art Nouveau.² Justus Brinckmann also was in sympathy with Morris's view of socialism, which, with regard to art extolled the virtues of hard physical work and high aesthetic standards applied to the production of functional objects for the supposedly "average" person -- the joy of labor and

the goal of a return to handmade objects of beauty was a part of the founding spirit behind Sherrebek. But in the institution of Morris & Company tapestry weavers were male. William Morris himself made a complete *Cabbage and Vine* weaving between May and September of 1879. He maintained that ideal tapestry weavers were artists, good colorists, able draughtsmen, and that only boys or men could accomplish such work. Morris thought girls and women capable only of working "the greeneries."³

The other great tapestry workshop Brinckmann and Morris himself admired was the Gobelins, the French Royal Tapestry Works. There were two aspects of the Gobelins that impressed both Morris and Brinckmann. The system of high quality weavings produced by boys and men after cartoons by some of the leading artists of the day, such as Aristide Maillol, espoused the contemporary application of a medieval tradition.⁴ The second aspect of the Gobelins that had an impact on the formation of the school at Sherrebek was the extraordinary dyeworks studio, led by the great chemist Chevreul from 1824 to 1889. From its inception Sherrebek was dedicated to the production of natural dyestuffs made chiefly with plants collected in the local countryside.⁵ The Schule für Kunstweberei in Sherrebek was started on 18 February 1896. It was the initiation of a select group of people in Brinckmann's circle that brought about the opening of the school. Pastor Jacobsen, Ritter Petersen, J.H.N. Thamssen, W. Jaeger, W. Voigt, Dr. Fredrich Deneken, Lassen and Justus Brinckmann's oldest daughter, Maria Brinckmann, signed the school statutes on 25 March 1895.

Like the Morris & Co. tapestry workshop and the Gobelins, the work at Sherrebek was carried out on high warp or vertical looms. Unlike the situation at the Morris & Co. atelier, and at the Gobelins, the Sherrebek weavers were strictly female. (Though it is known that both Otto Eckmann and Alfred Mohrbutter learned tapestry weaving, they were probably self-taught or had informal lessons -- they did not study at the school.) Maria Brinckmann, who ran the teaching program, was, along with her two sisters, a weaver. The school was originally begun to revive the local traditional craft of handweaving, by training local girls in the techniques of *schichtweberei*⁶ and tapestry weaving. But it is documented that the first class included girls from Spain and Russia. Another founding idea was to revive a kind of national "folk art" -- textiles based on regional designs. Theory quickly waned as the influence of the Brinckmanns and Fredrich Deneken turned the "school" into a sort of cottage industry for the production of what were at the time perceived to be avant-garde tapestries -- heavily influenced by the Japanese aesthetic. This distinguished Sherrebek from the Scandinavian workshops, the work of Frida Hansen (c. 1855-1930) and Gerhard Munthe (1849-1929), all of which were tied to indigenous patterns and regional themes or to Morris & Co.'s designs.⁷

Henry van de Velde, the Belgian artist who worked extensively in Paris, Germany and Austria, was one of the first artists to collaborate with Sherrebek. He was well known to Brinckmann through Siegfried Bing, a close friend and fellow Hamburger who established the gallery *L'Art Nouveau* in Paris in December 1895, where much of the interior was designed by Henry van de Velde. In contrast to the Scandinavian Nouveau style, based on rigid edged medieval forms or the Morris mode, -- van de Velde's best known composition for the workshop is comprised of abstracted vegetal forms in the "new" or "Art Nouveau" style that he helped create in Brussels.⁸

The artist whose work was produced most often by the weavers at Sherrebek was Otto Eckmann. He was responsible, in fact, for designing the letterhead of the Sherrebek school stationery, and for creating the school's tricolor logo which also served as the workshop's weaver's mark (Figure 1). His particular contribution to Jugendstil tapestry design was the pervasive aesthetic of Japonism -- a result, in part, of his early exposure to the extraordinary collection of *katagami* prints at the Hamburg Museum that he was able to study during his youth. Flat, curvilinear and often asymmetrical compositions of highly contrasting colors, Eckmann's designs were those which first catapulted Sherrebek to fame.⁹ (Figure 2)

But what was daily life like for the young girls and women who created tapestry weavings from cartoons by Eckmann, Sperling and other predominantly male German artists? Remarkable as it might seem, students received only two to four weeks training in basic weaving techniques before they embarked on instruction in high warp tapestry weaving after which they moved quickly to weaving the wall hangings that became critically acclaimed. Their training was brief, although the specific intensity of it, the hourly schedules, the exact curriculum, is unknown. By March of 1897 thirty-five students had been "trained." Of these, twelve worked in the weaving hall of the school and all of the others produced tapestries for Sherrebek in their homes.¹⁰

Due to the lack of supervision of the weavers who carried out their work at home, by 1901 it was acknowledged that the quality of the tapestries coming out of the Sherrebek school was "not entirely satisfactory," and that a stock of "unsaleable work" had accumulated. By this time it was clear that the dream of establishing a national weaving school on the order of the Morris tapestry works or the Gobelins was unrealistic. And even though in 1902 the cottage industry aspect of the Sherrebek school was discontinued, the steady decline of fine artistic weaving continued.

Information about the way in which the "weaver girls," as they were called, somewhat disrespectfully in official documents, were treated by the management of the school is taken from the records of 1902.¹¹ In an article about the German tapestries on view at the Turin International Exhibition of Decorative Arts of 1902, concerning the German section, only one line was written about the Sherrebek school, in which the weavings were described as pleasant interpretations of an inherently French art form. But in this same article one of the large scale illustrations depicts a wall hanging credited simply to the Schule für Kunstweberei, Sherrebek.¹² It is possible that this is the weaving mentioned in another contemporary journal as one designed by Maria, Ida and Carlotta Brinckmann described as a weaving depicting plant forms. While the Brinckmann sisters had exhibited weavings and were known throughout Europe,¹³ the weaving illustrated in *Die Kunst*, if of their collaboration shows a retardataire Nordic regional style devoid of the contemporary vigor of the earlier Sherrebek tapestries. It is perhaps this return to more traditionally-based designs that led to the derogatory comments about the quality of these weavings by 1902. The school closed in 1903, due to a collapse of enthusiasm on the part of the Board of Directors as a result of the inability of the institution to sustain the artistic preeminence of the late 19th century.¹⁴

What can be said about the other, lesser-known female weavers who worked for Sherrebek? As with women involved in the arts and crafts movements of other European countries, most were, in fact, of the upper classes. We know, for example, that the wives of prominent and financially well-off artists, such as Mrs. Carl Ludwig Jessen, Hanna Ubbelohde, married to Otto Ubbelohde, and Marie Bock, companion of Heinrich Vogeler, learned to weave at Sherrebek. Ada Nolde, wife of the artist Emil Nolde, who both lived in Sherrebek, wove designs by her husband.¹⁵ Since "ladies" did not carry out repetitive designs, that is, tapestries woven in multiple editions, they were not involved in the pool of paid labor.¹⁶

Despite the early socialist idea of a cooperative workshop, the weavers earned very little vis-à-vis the selling price of the tapestries. Whether or not this had to do with the high overhead of operating the school or with the high salaries of management staff is not clear. Generally, the weavers received about 25-30% of the purchase price. For a pillow cover designed by Otto Eckmann, a weaver made 12 mark when the textile sold for 38 mark; the artist who executed Ubbelohde's *Pair of Owls* tapestry was paid 20 mark when it sold for 75 mark.

Fünf Schwäne (Five Swans) was the most successful of all the tapestries ever produced at Sherrebek. The first weaving to come off the loom was exhibited promptly in a show at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg and purchased for their permanent collection shortly thereafter. It was acknowledged as the quintessential expression of German Jugendstil art and as a symbol of this aesthetic it was coveted by collectors and thus woven many times. Despite the frustration that the voices of the weavers are absent from this brief assessment of the Sherrebek atelier, it can only be supposition that these girls and women felt "the joy of labor," to use a Morrisian phrase, and the pride and self-satisfaction of creating a useful and beautiful object. Whether or not the weavers read every commendation of *Fünf Schwäne* or not, they certainly understood, by virtue of the fact that they were asked to reweave Eckmann's cartoon more often than any other design, that they were deeply involved in something culturally significant and in a sense distributing propaganda for the social and aesthetic revolution of Jugendstil.

We are fortunate to have Otto Eckmann's opinion about this weaving, through interviews and commentaries. He is quoted as having said that the subject matter, swans on water, was at first dictated to him by Hamburg officials, though he gave himself over to the intrinsic lyricism and ornamental possibilities of the sinuous birds on undulating water. On a more personal level, this composition, he said, made him feel free.¹⁷

Shortly after the Hamburg Museum acquired the first example of *Fünf Schwäne*, a version of it was purchased by the Decorative Arts Museum of Copenhagen. This design was exhibited in most major international decorative arts expositions of the period and received critical acclaim in the major journals reporting on contemporary applied arts, such as *Art et Decoration* and *Dekorative Kunst* and *The Studio*. Today, examples are included in many important German museums and in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where it will be on view in the upcoming exhibition, **Early Modern Textiles: from Arts and Crafts to Art Deco**.

1. For a brief account of the tapestry weaving tradition of this area consult, Adolph S. Cavallo, "Two Tapestry Cushion Covers," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. LIX, no. 318, 1961, pp. 135-137.
2. *Europaischer Jugendstil*, exhibition catalogue. Hamburg: Museum fur Kunst und Gewerbe, 1991, pp. 24-31.
3. This information is from a letter to Thomas Wardle from William Morris cited in Fairclough, Oliver and Leary, Emmeline. *Textiles by William Morris and Morris & Co., 1861-1940*. Introduction by Barbara Morris. London: Thames and Hudson, 1981, page 55.
4. It must be noted that William Morris visited the Gobelins at mid-century when touring France and Belgium with Edward Burne-Jones. By the end of the 19th century, while the achievements of the dyeworks produced a vast array of colors able to interpret the colors of the Impressionists' palette, until the colors faded fifty years later, by the 1890s the more progressive artistic tapestries were those made by individual artists working outside the Gobelins, such as those of the Nabis artists Paul-Elie Ranson and Aristide Maillol who carried out a few commissions for Gobelins as well.
5. The tapestries from Sherrebeek were praised for their clear and vibrant colors, a result of the unique properties of the local natural dyes. H. Peters, "Die Kunstgewerbeschule in Sherrebeek," in *Kunstgewerbe Blatt*, 1903, n.14, pp. 225-227.
6. "Schichtweberei" literally translates as "layered weaving." It was distinguished at the Sherrebeek school as a precursor to the more challenging tapestry weaving technique. Design wise, it is described in comparison with pictorial weavings, implying that it was used chiefly to create abstract designs. Technically, it is a compound weave with multiple warps and wefts "in layers." Special thanks to Georg Kirchner for his assistance with some difficult passages in the German texts relevant to this term, chiefly, *Sherrebeker Bildteppiche*, pp. 100-106.
7. The tapestry weavings of Frida Hansen on view at the Turin 1902 exhibition of Decorative Arts were praised by the art critic Vittorio Pica for their "delicious delicacy in the playful color harmonies and gracious stylization of the design" (author's translation), and the lack of Gerhard Munthe's figurative tapestries was lamentfully noted. Pica, Vittorio. *L'Arte Decorativa All'Esposizione di Torino del 1902*. Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1903, page 90. The Norwegian handweaving revival of the late 19th century and early 20th century and the work of Gerhard Munthe and to a lesser extent Frida Hansen is discussed in, Opstad, Jan-Lauritz. *Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseums Vaeuskole og Atelier for Kunstvaevning 1898-1909*. Trondheim, Norway: Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum, 1983.

8. Henry van de Velde was the outspoken leader of the Belgium artistic left in the sense that, like Morris, he abandoned painting for the more practical arts, and, like Morris, he was dedicated to the socialist cause, the POB (*Le Parti Ouvrier Belge*). His disdain for the hierarchy of art, and his feeling that there was no artistic genius only superb craftsmanship was eloquently stated in a series of essays entitled "Déblaiement d'Art," in *Société Nouvelle*, vol. 12, April 1894, pp. 444-456. Illustrations of cushion covers designed by van de Velde in 1896 appeared in the most prestigious art journals of the period. For a color illustration of two of these works see *Räume und Meisterwerke der Jugendstil - Sammlung*. Heinz Spielmann. Hamburg: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, 1977, p. 32.

9. Otto Eckmann was born and raised in Hamburg, but moved to Munich where he became a significant member of the artistic group that abandoned painting for the practical arts, such as printmaking, metalwork and tapestry design. For a concise biography and bibliography of the artist, consult, *Art Nouveau in Munich; Masters of Jugendstil*. Exhibition catalogue. Philadelphia Museum of Art and Prestel-Verlag, Munich, 1988, p. 49.

10. *Sherrebek Bildteppiche*, page 100.

11. *Ibid*, page 104.

12. W. Fred, "Die Turiner Ausstellung" in *Die Kunst*, vol. VI, 1902, pp. 433-453.

13. *Sherrebek Bildteppiche*, pp. 44-45. All three sisters participated in an exhibition of Sherrebek wall hangings in Hamburg, Frankfurt, Brussels and Budapest in 1897.

14. It should be noted that most of the artists who provided the cartoons for the Sherrebek school were aged or deceased by 1902, the year Otto Eckmann died.

15. *Sherrebeker Bildteppiche*. page 104. The largest collection of Ada Nolde's work is at the Nolde Foundation in Seebüll, Germany.

16. *Ibid*, page 105.

17. *Art Nouveau in Munich*, p. 54

Captions

Figure 1:

Detail of Figure 1 showing the tricolor logo of the Sherrebek tapestry workshop above Otto Eckmann's interlaced initials.

Figure 2:

Fünf Schwäne (Five Swans), 1897

Cartoon by Otto Eckmann

Germany, 1865-1902

Wool and cotton tapestry weave

76 x 240 cm.

Otis Norcross Fund, Curator's Discretionary Fund, Charles Potter Kling Fund, and Textile Purchase Fund

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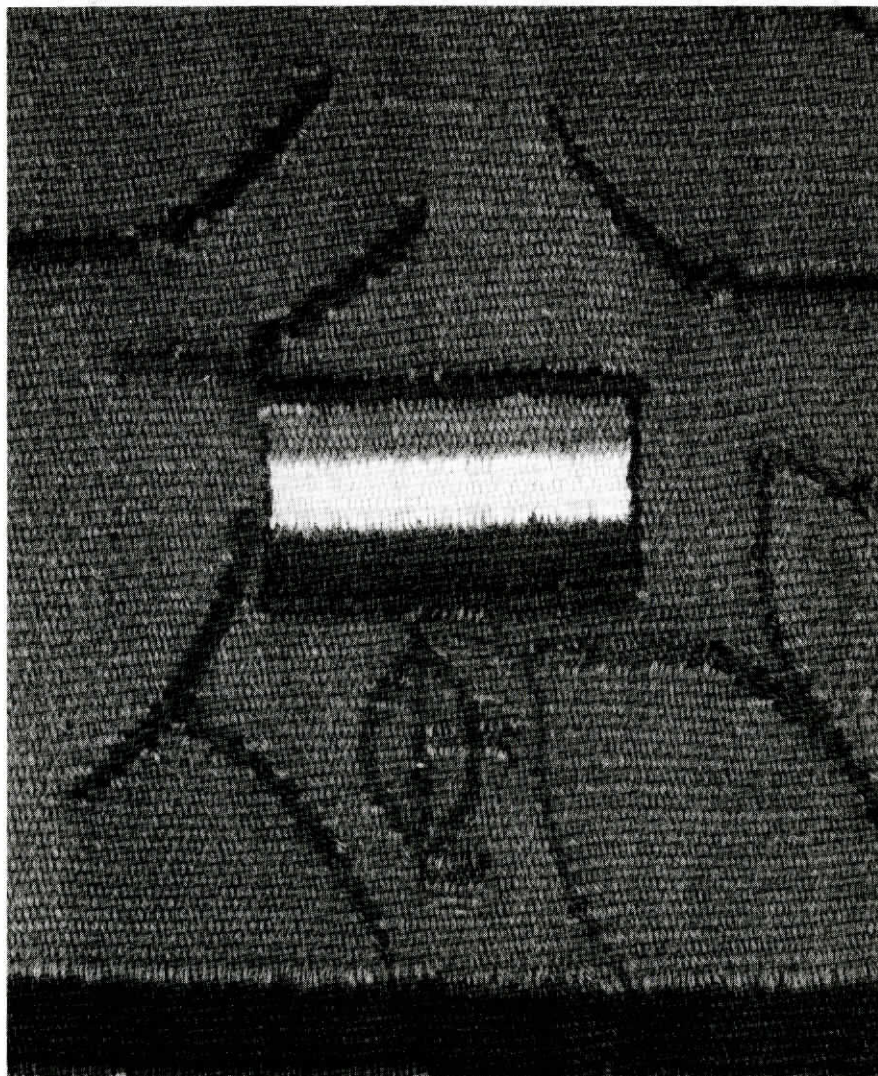


Figure 1



Figure 2