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Gabriel P. Weisberg

book review of

Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian Pioneer of Modernism by Jan Kokkin

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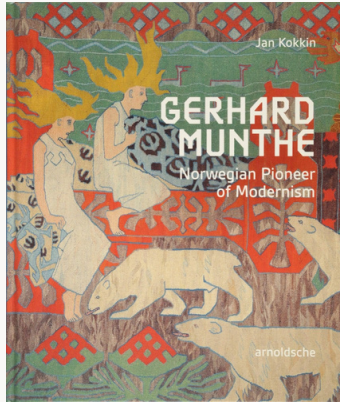
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Jan Kokkin,
Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian Pioneer of Modernism.
Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2018.
296 pp.; 48 color and 200 b&w illus.; bibliography; index.
€45
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With this handsome volume, the diverse work of Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929) receives a fully developed presentation and analysis that places this artist’s work within the context of Norwegian creativity as well as the advent of modernism as it appeared elsewhere. Most significantly, this book provides ample evidence of the important role that Munthe played in advancing the value of the decorative arts, demonstrating where these objects were shown and how extensively they were discussed in the press. In doing this, Jan Kokkin reveals Munthe as a most complicated artist to understand, with roots both in the art nouveau and symbolist movements. Divided into convenient sections, the text (and the excellent images) examines Munthe’s works from his theoretical writings through historical sections that correspond to the way in which his works evolved.

By first examining theoretical texts, Kokkin provides ample evidence that Munthe believed that abstraction was the direction that artists should follow. When the artist viewed his colleagues’ work, he would note whether they were sufficiently abstract or not. He felt compelled to emphasize that artists must move away from imitating nature, and as the author demonstrates, this made Munthe a key modernist figure. This was a rare role to play, especially in Scandinavia.

In another section of the book, “Early Decorative Art and Design,” the question of what qualities constituted a purely Norwegian art come into play. Munthe singled out certain motifs that he wanted to emphasize, seeking forms in nature that would be particularly, if not uniquely, Norwegian. Carefully documenting what Munthe created led Kokkin to locate his first works in the decorative arts, namely the wallpaper patterns presented at an exhibition in Skien in 1891. These wallpaper designs achieved an international relevance in 1897 when some of these patterns were sold to Arthur Sanderson and Sons in London. This had the effect of introducing Munthe’s designs directly into the arts and crafts movement in Great Britain. But it was his earliest designs for ceramics that brought Munthe notoriety. When some of the abstract and stylized designs were used in porcelain plates, they were

perceived as thoroughly radical (e.g., the Blue Anemone plate, 1893), comprehensible only to a very specialized audience rather than being understood by many.

As the text evolves, Kokkin focuses considerable attention on Munthe's fairy tale watercolors, which demonstrated that he was creating a "completely new art" (36 ff.). Often these works were used as the basis for large-scale hanging tapestries, which brilliantly evoked how Munthe was abstracting from unusual sources beyond the texts that inspired him. These included a full awareness of Japanese prints, then becoming the rage throughout Europe and Scandinavia.[1] Munthe showed examples of this type of work in the "Black and White" exhibition in Kristiania in 1893. In locating specific examples of the work shown, Kokkin does justice toward making the most from works that were imaginative, challenging, and frequently sinister. The mood of these images is found in such examples as *The Horse of Hel* reproduced effectively in the book (41, fig. 25). But the most widely reproduced image is *The Suitors* where the artist achieved a unification between Greek myths, the Pre-Raphaelite motif of women's hair, and his own simplified, almost childlike, style. A careful examination of these images reinforces the reasons why Munthe was becoming a "great success in Europe" (53). His imagery suggested a decadent quality found in the best works of some of the French symbolists; he was especially appreciated by the writer Alfred Jarry, one of the most eccentric creators of the symbolist era. Jarry was awed by the atmosphere of Munthe's work, developing three poems that were inspired by the artist's creativity.[2] Munthe was also appreciated in Belgium, as Kokkin notes although he could have done more with this relationship in his text (55). What this segment achieves, however, is to center Munthe within the larger context of Symbolism, adding to his international significance early in his career.

Kokkin also explores the importance of tapestry design in a lengthy discussion, noting that Munthe is seen as part of a much larger renaissance in this field. The author devotes considerable space to the creative work of Frida Hansen (1855–1931), a rival. Inspired by old Norwegian work Hansen and Munthe benefited from each other's ideas and designs, demonstrating that the tapestry revival was a major area of creativity. But a battle ensued between them as some critics saw that Hansen was far more creative, a point especially noticeable after Hansen had criticized Munthe's work. To stay the course, Munthe hired assistants to produce his tapestry designs, thereby increasing his productivity. Kokkin's thorough text identifies Munthe's assistants; having reproductions of this work makes the case that he had an original point of view that was quite different from Hansen's more abstract imagery. The competition between the artists also caused "ripples in other countries" (70). Among these was the work collected by Friedrich Deneken, the Director of the new Kaiser Wilhelm Museum in Krefeld, Germany. Eventually Deneken, who was a very advanced art historian, became one of Munthe's key supporters in Germany (73). Kokkin pursued this examination of arts and crafts through developments in Trondheim, Norway, discussing the establishment of a weaving school there that would parallel what William Morris achieved in Britain. At the Paris World's Fair of 1900 the works from the Kunstindustrimusem in Trondheim were shown to advantage. A recently discovered installation photo of Munthe's works at the Fair reveal how well they were displayed in Paris. The pieces shown in the United States at the St. Louis Fair (1904) further advanced Munthe's international reputation making him one of the most revered designers within this area and a proponent of international art nouveau.

In his effort to show the diversity of Munthe's efforts, Kokkin focuses on his book illustrations. In the 1890s Munthe did illustrations of the Old Norwegian Kings as he focused on specific passages from the texts. Even though these illustrations were inspired by rough passages from the texts, Munthe conveyed an original quality that made these works appear as if they were examples of art nouveau. The value of Kokkin's text is that he has ably found the images that Munthe created, providing clues as to how they were valued at the time as examples of a lost oral tradition. It is here that folk art and art nouveau merge. Although not well known, Kokkin's concise analysis does much to introduce these images to a much larger popular audience. They are superb examples of Munthe's work, deserving of a broader awareness than they have had.

No artist during the art nouveau period who wanted to have a lasting influence could do so without providing interior design for private homes and public buildings. This was certainly the case with Munthe. Among these was Munthe's own home, *Leveld* at Lysaker, outside Kristiania. Built in 1898–99, the house reflected the arts and crafts tradition, both inside and out, although he insisted that his building also reflected traditional Norwegian farm houses. Using color expressively was one of the highlights of the house that influenced architects elsewhere. Munthe based his design on Norwegian tradition, although there was nothing in the building that was directly copied: it was the inspiration that counted most. Since the building burned down in 1982 nothing remains except original drawings that suggest how the color effects were achieved inside (144).

The most famous of the rooms that Munthe created was the Fairy Tale Room at the Tourist Hotel in Kristiania. Using motifs from several "eras," including the creation of a type of Viking effect combined with striking, original colors, provided much discussion around the room. The originality of the furniture, combined with carvings on the wall, demonstrated that Munthe was after a primitive effect. Figurative and abstract elements were combined in the furniture design, and when painted in very bright colors, created a deliberately jarring effect. Nothing was restrained, and there were many who could not grasp what Munthe had achieved (150). The room was itself lost in 1914 when the hotel burned down. In placing Munthe's work in a broader context, the value of this room cannot be underestimated for its role in establishing Norwegian symbolism, design, and links with international art nouveau. But the examination of this room by Kokkin remains somewhat hesitant as the author does not do full justice to the importance of the room as an early example of Norway's emergence into modernist design. Other rooms or interior settings from the same time do not achieve a modernistic impact equal to the Tourist Hotel room.

While exceedingly well researched, later sections of the book examining Munthe's decorative art works in ceramics present imagery that is dull in comparison with much earlier work. Why is this? Had Munthe lost his way? Had he failed to capitalize on his true originality achieved by 1900? These questions are difficult to answer. The author does not venture into this type of assessment as he is happy to examine all of Munthe's later work as objectively as he can.

In the chapter on Munthe's legacy Kokkin returns to larger issues of achievement as he tries to sum up the artist's true heritage and artistic position. He raises significant issues. Was Munthe known to more progressive artists such as Kandinsky? What was his impact on

younger Norwegian artists? And where would one place his tapestry work in the larger sphere of this particular medium? In recent years Munthe's position has been seen within the larger international sphere as he can be considered as one of the most important Norwegian artists along with Edvard Munch or Frida Hansen (272). Kokkin also mentions that Munthe never achieved a great international breakthrough, but he does not fully examine why this happened. Was his work not good enough? Did he not receive the type of press coverage that others received during and after their careers? Although Kokkin does not reach conclusions, his book does an excellent job of trying to see Munthe's work for what it was. He has worked hard to contextualize Munthe within Norwegian creativity. This is a major benefit of this book, which is both painstakingly detailed and often visually persuasive, even if not all Munthe's art rises to the highest level of design and decorative art.

Gabriel P. Weisberg
Professor Emeritus
Art History
University of Minnesota
vooni1942[at]aol.com

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[1] Gabriel P. Weisberg, Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, and Hanne Selkokari, eds., *Japanomania in the Nordic Countries, 1875–1918* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, distributed by Yale University Press, 2016).

[2] For a review of the substantial book *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* by Alastair Brotchie (2011), see [Gabriel P. Weisberg](#).