



# An Unregarded Art

Stylized nature  
from the collection

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Oakville Galleries

in Gairloch Gardens

Curated by Marnie Fleming

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This exhibition takes as its starting point the decorative frieze in the south gallery of Gairloch estate, carved in 1922 for the building's original dining room. Created by an Italian artisan, the curling grapevine design is a superb example of idealized nature brought into the home. The frieze was commissioned by Colonel William Gordon MacKendrick, the first owner of Gairloch (then called Chestnut Point). MacKendrick built his Oakville home following the essential principles of Arts and Crafts architecture: openness to the garden; solidity of form; integration of beautiful craftsmanship into everyday living; and the preservation of English tradition.

MacKendrick's house, with its vistas onto a garden and Lake Ontario, was designed not long after William Morris (1834–1896) advocated for the concept of bringing nature indoors and the revival of fine craftsmanship. Morris, perhaps best known as the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, had followers around the world. In Canada, the Arts and Crafts movement was particularly popular in the 1890s through to the decade after the First World War. The movement's architectural style and "idealized natural landscaping"<sup>1</sup> were fully realized in MacKendrick's house and garden, now known as Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens.

A successful man with extensive land holdings, MacKendrick was also an avid gardener and president of the Toronto Horticultural Society from 1910 until 1913. He regarded his lakeside Oakville property as restorative and well-suited for a new English-style home and garden. It is not surprising that he was drawn to Arts and Crafts design. In nearby Toronto a number of Arts and Crafts companies specialized in stained glass—such as Gairloch's stylized floral window designs—and customized fittings, such as the carved dining room frieze,

intended to relate not only to the dining experience but also to the vines on the pergola outside.

Architectural details such as these are often classified as decorative art, distinguished from the fine arts on one hand and purely functional crafts on the other. Art historian EH Gombrich once called this "unregarded art," referring to anything from ceramics, glass and silver to carpets, linens and tapestries. Gombrich noted, "Usually we walk through life without paying much attention to the infinite variety of patterns and decorative motifs which we encounter all around us, on fabrics and wall-paper ... For normally the decorative motifs which fill our world with such profusion are outside the focus of our attention. We take them in as background and rarely stop to analyse their intricacies."<sup>2</sup> He argued that in many cases objects were intentionally designed this way to create a mood or an atmosphere without intruding too forcefully on our consciousness.

For all the theories put forth by Gombrich and others, this "unregarded art" remains largely in a state of limbo even after two centuries of debate. At one point, it seemed the theoretical conversations about the decorative had come to an end, at least among modernist designers and artists, who dismissed any form of ornament as inessential, superficial and irrational.<sup>3</sup> Decoration was viewed as feminine, and pared-down rational utility as masculine. After the Second World War, the decorative arts had all but vanished from modernist vocabulary, replaced by such terms as industrial art, industrial design or simply "design," which referred to modern design, free from ornamental details. But even in the most starkly minimalist interiors, one would likely still see a vase of flowers or floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto a landscape. As countless art historians have demonstrated,

Cover: Angela Grauerholz, *Flowered Carpet* (detail), 2007–2008, inkjet print on Arches paper, 71.1 x 101.6 cm. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2008.

the desire for the natural in our living spaces can be found throughout history. All cultures — ancient and modern, Western and Eastern — have employed interior decoration that alludes to nature.

Recently the debate over stylized nature in the decorative arts has been revisited by a number of theorists, who have rejected the limited way in which ornamentation was defined by modernists, instead acknowledging it as a carrier of meaning.<sup>4</sup> The artworks assembled in *An Unregarded Art* — drawn from Oakville Galleries' permanent collection — provide us with an opportunity to consider how the decorative has been used in novel ways to uncover some rather potent ideologies.

Over the last two decades, Gairloch has proven to be a fertile site for exhibitions in which stylized nature has achieved many things: elucidating notions of class and taste; speaking to issues of the feminine; embodying utopian moments in art history; and addressing the nature/culture divide. Most of the work assembled here came into the collection after being created for prior solo and site-related exhibitions that mined the cultural values within MacKendrick's former home. In these exhibitions, the artists furthered a dialogue between art and the historical dimensions of this particular place, acknowledging decorative objects as containers of social inscription.

David Mabb's painting, *Fruit* (1999–2000), for example, riffs on the Arts and Crafts architecture to situate the viewer in a space that resonates with the late nineteenth-century influence of William Morris. The painter's ongoing "collaboration" with Morris's textile designs has taken many forms over the last decade to include a deep interest in Morris's socialist theories and commitment to the radical potential of design. Here, the foundational support for Mabb's painting is a reproduction of an 1864 textile design by Morris, also titled "Fruit." The latter's fanciful vision of utopia is manifest in a highly schematized representation of a world in which plants are always flowering, fruits are abundant and the prosaic demands of daily labour seem far removed. Playing with these Arcadian notions, Mabb veils Morris's stylized nature under a skein of white paint that recalls the Russian Constructivist Kazimir Malevich's *White on White* (1918).

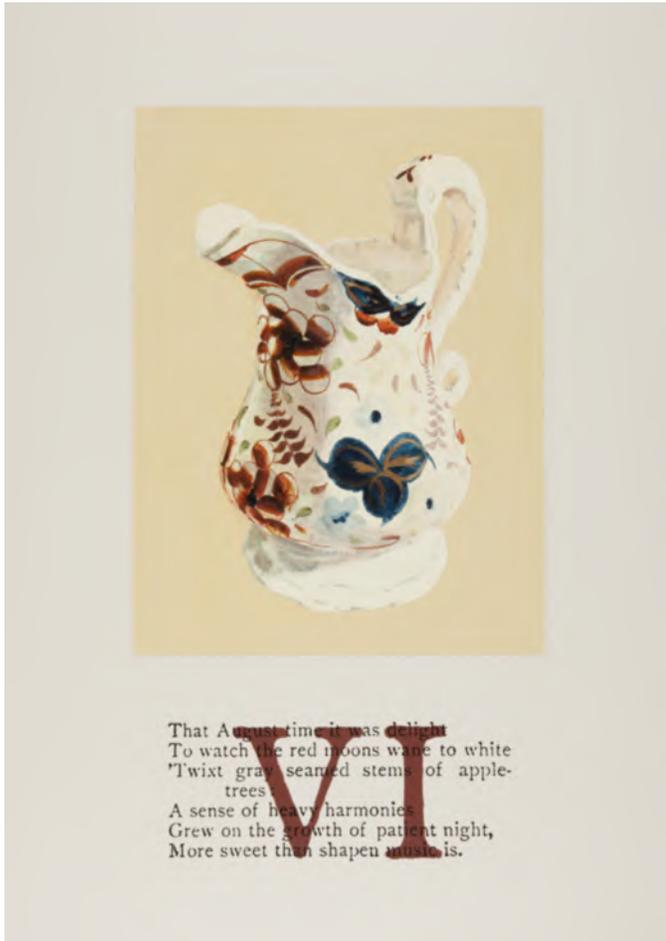
In this way Mabb puts into motion a dialogical pull and contrasts the textile with another form of modernist utopian production. The applied white overlay isolates certain elements of the Morris design that Mabb permits to poke through, creating an unstable picture space. It is as if the modernist simplicity of Constructivism wants to assert itself in the face of all the fuss and decoration of Arts and Crafts design. Mabb conflates not only the aesthetic styles of these two periods but also their radical movements to open up new possibilities for painting.

Also harking back to the Arts and Crafts movement for inspiration is the painter Ben Walmsley, whose touchstone is the British literary critic Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909). A friend of William Morris, Swinburne, too, stood for excellence in design and traditional craftsmanship but was best known as a prolific English poet. Walmsley was drawn to Swinburne's poetry for its florid descriptions of colour as well as his expressions of passing time and implied movement. Fascinated by Swinburne's multiple layers of images and verse, Walmsley set out to construct an interactive dialogue between paint and poetry in which a porcelain water pitcher would be his vehicle to demonstrate the ability of colour and motion to mediate imagery. The artist's two 1993 paintings, *August VI: 200 Degrees* and *August IX: 320 Degrees*, are from a series that depict the vessel — a family heirloom — at various points in rotation. Below each image the painter has reproduced a stanza of Swinburne's poem *August*, a testament to the poet's expressive use of colour, time and space, as suggested by the line: "To watch the red moons wane to white." Image and text circumvent a linear reading in Walmsley's paintings, ultimately presenting a highly self-conscious representation of the "natural."

A romantic desire for a simpler, more integrated life made chintz textiles a decorating staple decades before and shortly after the First World War. Anne Ramsden's over-the-top *Curtain (Investor Confidence)* (1994) is a chintz curtain that cascades onto the gallery floor. Her operatic use of the floral fabric gives Gairloch's former reception room a postwar makeover and metaphorically fills the centre gallery with an early twentieth-century



David Mabb, *Fruit*, 1999–2000, acrylic on fabric, 160 x 160 cm, Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2000.



dedication to overstuffed comfort. In Canada, chintz was embraced for its associations with British taste, luxury and feminine qualities. Flowery chintz textiles were recognized as having a certain foreign cachet, originating as they did from India. Nature, always a source of inspiration for chintz, became increasingly stylized and abstract, especially with the production of machine-printed fabrics. In this work Ramsden's voluminous curtain suggests an emotional abandon and uncontrolled mechanical reproduction. The artist plays on notions of excessive wealth gone awry to create an unsettling image, or as curator Helga Pakasaar expressed it, "an image in which ornament wins over function, sensuality over reason."<sup>15</sup> Located by the bay window looking out on

the garden, the curtain serves as a mediator between the interior/ exterior and the artificial/ natural. Ramsden's window covering thus claims the entirety of Gairloch estate as her theatre of operations.

A chintz wallpaper design printed in Salisbury, England (itself derived from imitating a chintz textile wall hanging) is the central motif of Regan Morris's floral diptych. Morris chose the design in *Untitled (Salisbury)* (1990) for its capacity to elicit personal and historical memories. For the artist, the stylized pattern suggested a past era of splendour and opulence while evoking a strong sense of nostalgia. "I was also thinking of the idea of a decorative tattoo or a scar on aging skin much like old wallpaper. But in a less obvious way, I had also been thinking

Above left: Ben Walmsley, *August VI: 200 Degrees*, 1993, oil, varnish, silkscreen on oak veneer, 106.7 x 76.2 cm. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Oakville Galleries Volunteer Association and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation, 1995.

Above right: Ben Walmsley, *August IX: 320 Degrees*, 1993, oil, varnish, silkscreen on oak veneer, 106.7 x 76.2 cm. Collection of Oakville Galleries, gift of the artist, 1995.



of the AIDS virus as a system, or pattern, invading the body.”<sup>6</sup> Morris’s unique painting technique, which produces cracked and brittle surfaces, involves—like faded wallpaper—a peeling process in which derivative images are peeled away from a “master” image. Each successive layer of the chintz pattern becomes less distinct, which in a sense is analogous to the memory process. While his process is suggestive of physical decline, Morris’s diptych ultimately presents viewers with a meditation on loss itself—of dying friends, of faded memory, of time and place.

Jeannie Thib’s museum-like vitrines containing ladies’ gloves bring to mind a woman who may have lived at Gairloch long ago and whose feminine trappings are now preserved for posterity. *Model/Mimic* (1997) consists of two wall-mounted glass cases, each containing three pairs of vintage gloves. Thib has altered the surface of the gloves by printing them with decorative floral patterns from English copperplate-printed textiles. Displayed on fabric of identical design, the gloves become partially

camouflaged and blend in with the stylized flora and fauna. The artist’s title suggests the behaviour of certain butterflies that protect themselves by adopting the markings and colouration of another species or environment. Here, Thib imagines how the “lady of the house” must have adapted to certain prescribed conditions for conforming to such an environment. Her choice of patterned nature and personal apparel reflects the values and domestic ideals often associated with the bourgeois luxury of such a home. The gloves are presented as natural history specimens, and viewers are thus encouraged toward a reading anchored in the museum’s ordering and classifying structures, prompting a re-examination of codes of behaviour governing both nature and culture.

Joanne Tod’s floral “mattress-scape” paintings similarly address subjects of the feminine and domestic. *American Baroque/Latter-Day Gothic* (1996) is a sensual diptych that enthusiastically embraces the familiar. Details of floral images on satin mattress fabric read

Above: Jeannie Thib, *Model/Mimic (part I: red)*, 1997, linen, gloves, ink, wood, glass, 21.6 x 69 x 116.5 cm. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program, the Corporation of the Town of Oakville and the Oakville Galleries Volunteer Association, 1998.

Overleaf: Joanne Tod, *American Baroque/Latter-Day Gothic*, 1996, diptych, panel I: oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm., panel II: oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm. Collection of Oakville Galleries, anonymous gift, 2004.





like a still-life painting. Presumably the stylized floral elements allude to flower beds or recall the expression “a bed of roses.” Whatever the source, the artist has stated that her attraction to painting mattresses lies in their surface qualities, “composed of two integrated systems, the floral motif on the fabric and the dimensional pattern created by the quilting. The mattress is a ubiquitous item, easily recognizable ... its almost universal availability makes it an apt metaphor for the everyday.”<sup>7</sup> We rarely see these surfaces unless we are making a bed—traditionally a private activity. The intricate floral patterns are based on embroidered designs, while the quilted shapes similarly occupy the realm of undervalued women’s work.

In this diptych Tod turns the tables, deeming the lustrous mattresses to be subjects worthy of the “high” art of painting.

Angela Grauerholz’s photographs also depict images that are commonplace but at the same time unexpectedly sublime. *Flowered Carpet* (2007–2008) demonstrates the artist’s recent interest in colour as well as her return to subjects of interior spaces. Quite simply the camera lens directs us to the floral patterns on a carpet and on lushly appointed chairs. As Grauerholz notes, “I don’t work with a lot of spaces that are widely considered to be important. But they become important through the image.”<sup>8</sup> Both elements, carpet and chairs, feature clashing patterns

Above: Angela Grauerholz, *Flowered Carpet*, 2007–2008, inkjet print on Arches paper, 71.1 x 101.6 cm. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2008.

Overleaf: Spring Hurlbut, *Tree Columns*, 1988, wood and steel, variable dimensions, 20.3 x 179 cm. Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Oakville Galleries Volunteer Association and the Ministry of Culture and Communications, 1990.



rendered in the same warm tonality, suggestive of the fuzzy recesses of a past time, dream or memory. The image is compelling, yet its meaning remains elusive. Like a pared-down detective story, *Flowered Carpet* focuses our attention squarely in the centre of the picture, raising questions of unseen human activity. Puzzling as they are, these objects seem oddly vague and familiar, as if associated with an earlier generation.

Spring Hurlbut's *Tree Columns* (1988) and *Dentil Entablature* (1989) take the exhibition on a lyrical turn, from depicting objects of highly stylized nature to reclaiming the lost vocabulary of nature as the original source of architectural decoration. Hurlbut's extensive research has revealed that all too often nature is stylized to the point where we forget its salient influence on our daily surroundings. Her sculptures revisit the theory that some architectural components have antecedents in natural forms once central to pagan sacrificial rights: a sacred grove of trees (columns), for example, or the display of rows of horse teeth (dentils). It is as though Hurlbut has stripped down all stylization of these decorative forms—familiar to us from neoclassical court-houses and municipal buildings—and has returned them to their ancient origins. She reintroduces the literal, organic materials so that their lineage can be reclaimed and reinvested with symbolic, ritualistic significance. By redirecting us to the ancient ceremonial symbolism that underlies classical ornament, the artist animates and revitalizes these details, bringing to bear forgotten memories and dimensions of the familiar.

If aspects of Hurlbut's work and other work in this exhibition seem dreamlike, it is entirely in keeping with the sense of natural origins and natural things. Carl Jung built his theory of dream interpretation on the premise that symbols derived from the collective consciousness are the result of dreaming across generations of cultures. Using nature as a metaphor, he wrote: "The psyche is not of today, its ancestry goes back many millions of years. Individual consciousness is only the flower and the fruit of the season ... For the root matter is the mother

of all things."<sup>9</sup> In light of these remarks, the residues of sacred groves, utopian images of ripeness, overwrought cabbage roses or a bed of flowers can be considered the stuff of dreams—an imaginary realm, rooted deep within the human psyche.

As this exhibition demonstrates, contemporary artists reawaken in us these forgotten dimensions of the familiar and the conventionally received. Not only do they acknowledge the decorative potential of nature as it relates to our own interiority but they also excavate coded notions of class, gender and politics. Their works are replete with art historical, literary and fanciful allusions, some interacting with the architecture itself to provide new critical frameworks. Each work has a discursive trajectory designed to express values, emotions and attitudes that emphatically rehabilitate the liminal status of the "unregarded."

— Marnie Fleming, Curator of Contemporary Art

<sup>1</sup> Edwina Von Baeyer. *Rhetoric and Roses, A History of Canadian Gardening 1900–1930* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984), p. 105. "Canadians [were] now urged to plan their gardens as if painting a picture; the gardener was to combine lawn, trees, shrubs and flowers into an artistic whole, with nature as teacher and example. But the garden designer was to create nature idealized rather than nature as real." <sup>2</sup> EH Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 1984, p. vii. <sup>3</sup> Llewellyn Nigren, "Ornament and the Feminine," *Feminist Theory*, Volume 7, 2006, p. 220. <sup>4</sup> Ibid. <sup>5</sup> Helga Pakasaar, "Residence," text for a catalogue essay in *Anne Ramsden: Residence* (Oakville, ON: Oakville Galleries, 1994), p. 7. <sup>6</sup> E-mail correspondence with the artist, 16 January 2012. <sup>7</sup> Joanne Tod, "Artist's Statement" (Vancouver: Equinox Gallery, 19 September 1996.) <sup>8</sup> Leah Sandals, "Travelling Time and Space: Angela Grauerholz," *Unedit My Heart* (blog), 8 June 2010, <http://neditpasmoncouer.blogspot.com/2010/06/travelling-time-and-space-angela.html>. <sup>9</sup> C.G. Jung, "Symbols of Transformation," *The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung*, Violet Staub de Laszlo, ed. (New York: The Modern Library, 1959), p. 5.

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