

DAVID MABB

William Morris in Jaipur

the work of art in the context of hand-made reproduction



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an exhibition made possible by

Anokhi, Jaipur

Nature Morte, New Delhi

and

British Council

for

The Jaipur Heritage International Festival 2005





Many of us first saw David Mabb's work in an exhibition called Sidewinder which came to India in December 2002. Peter Nagy who has curated this show then wrote, "the familiar and the foreign can be found both close to home and far away". Much of the work created for contemporary block-print for India's export market finds resonances with William Morris' designs.

This particular exhibition resulted from a series of conversations between the British Council, Anokhi and Nature Morte over two winters, and as many visits by David to India, particularly Jaipur where he was able to show the work in this catalogue, in a spectacular public space where it was visited by large numbers of residents during the Jaipur Festival.

David Mabb has many admirers in India and the British Council is delighted to be able to present his work in the Queen's Gallery. What makes this exhibition special is the fact that it is a collaborative effort between makers/artists from India and Britain and will be viewed by audiences in both.

The British Council acknowledges Nature Morte's commitment to this project, nurtured over time and space. It also thanks David for pursuing the idea of creating work in India for the Jaipur Heritage International Festival and for giving us the opportunity to showcase this exciting partnership.

Chandrika Grover Head, Arts (North India) British Council, New Delhi February 2005

NOTES ON "MORRIS IN JAIPUR: THE WORK OF ART IN THE CONTEXT OF HAND MADE REPRODUCTION"

David Mabb

The Miniatures

The miniatures have been painted with tempera on card by Rajendra Sharma of Jaipur and are copies of my large oil paintings painted onto and around contemporary copies of William Morris' original fabrics and wallpapers.

There are two groups of imagery painted onto the Morris fabrics. The first group is of industrial images, which are reinterpretations of photographs from a group of 120 negatives that were found in a skip in Liverpool, England. The 10"x8" negatives are all views of Liverpool and the Northwest of England from the 1950s and 1960s and were taken by an unknown photographic company presumably as part of a documentary project. As the photographic negatives were found without any documentation, I do not always know what the industrial objects are.

The other group is of paintings of peasants by the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich from the late 1920s. These are highly complex and ambiguous works which can be interpreted as representing a modernised, abstracted and idealised peasantry, radicalised by the Russian Revolution, whereas in reality millions of peasants were facing death and starvation through Stalin's enforced collectivisation. Later paintings, however, have been read as a critique of collectivisation, as the featureless, beardless, armless peasants lose their individuality. The dating of some of the paintings has been disputed in the past, because Malevich dated them retrospectively, as if they were from the pre-Revolutionary period, as he attempted to repaint earlier works he had left behind on a visit to Germany. However, these paintings depart from his earlier work and clearly show the



Truck and Pit
Painted by Rajendra Sharma
Tempera on card; 2004;
7.5" x 9"
From the painting
Truck and Pit
by David Mabb 2001

influence of Suprematism. It is debatable whether they are a compromise with or criticism of Socialist Realism. Malevich, like many intellectuals, found himself criticised and censored. He lost his research position and was arrested and detained for questioning for two weeks in 1930; friends burnt a number of his manuscripts as a precaution. In contrast, Morris tended to look to the past for an idealised, often rural collective that could serve as a model for post-revolutionary society.

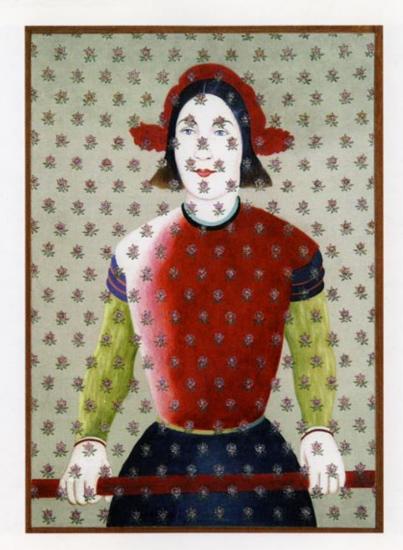
My interest in asking Rajendra Sharma to reinterpret these paintings (originally around 5'x 6'6" or 5'x4') as miniatures stems from the striking resemblance of the Morris patterns when shrunk down in scale to the floral decoration present in many Indian miniature paintings. This is in a sense unsurprising given Morris' role in the collection of decorative arts, including those from India, for the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) and the direct influence Indian patterns clearly had on some of his designs. By utilizing the skills of an Indian miniature painter and by paying Rajendra Sharma a fee I have also replicated the economic relationship between the wealthy West and a developing country, where multinational companies regularly employ cheap Indian labour. This economic relationship of production impinges on the meaning of the miniatures. In the original large paintings meaning is generated in the dialectic between Morris' utopian fabric designs which are full of abundance and fecundity (the trees and plants are always in leaf, often flowering and in fruit) and the industrial images of the North of England or Malevich's paintings of peasants. In these new works, however, Morris' utopian dream is further problematised through reinterpretation and the economics of production. We are made to reconsider Morris' own fetishisation of craft skills and rejection of many aspects of

industrialisation. We might also be reminded of a common critique of Morris, that he produced luxury products for the rich and was a capitalist who lived off the profits generated by Morris and Co. whilst at the same time campaigning for socialism.

The Textiles

The clothing is made from reworked, simplified William Morris designs which have been traditionally block-printed, a craft that is still practised in India, particularly in Jaipur and especially by the firm Anoki, which collaborated in this project. In the West these techniques have long been replaced by machine printing. This return to the hand made is pertinent as it continues Morris' own revival of woodblock printing in the latter part of the 19th Century. He rejected modern industrial printing methods and chemical colours, as he believed that the results were inferior. The material on which the designs are printed is khadi, the simple homespun cloth that became an important symbol of the freedom movement after being introduced by Gandhi as part of a programme to support village economies. Later, however, it became tainted with corruption when worn as a political statement by Congress Party leaders.

The designs, which are altered versions of Morris patterns, are taken from my earlier paintings from around 1999. The fabric Morris called "Medway" has had the "background" removed and replaced by a black ground. This design, which I have called "Tulip", has been made into a sari. Another design, from the painting "Honeysuckle" originally by May Morris, William Morris' daughter, has had everything removed but the honeysuckle flower itself and has been printed onto a cream khadi; this deign, which I have continued



Girl with a Red Pole
Painted by Rajendra Sharma
Tempera on card; 2004;
9.5" x 7"
From the painting
Girl with a Red Pole
by David Mabb 2002



Big Red Propeller Painted by Rajendra Sharma Tempera on card; 2004; 8" x 9.5" From the painting Big Red Propeller by David Mabb 2001



Engineering Object
Painted by Rajendra Sharma
Tempera on card; 2004;
8" x 9"
From the painting
Engineering Object
by David Mabb 2001



Peasant in the Field
Painted by Rajendra Sharma
Tempera on card; 2004;
9" x 7"
From the painting
Peasant in the Field
by David Mabb 2002



Head of a Peasant
Painted by Rajendra Sharma
Tempera on card; 2004;
9" x 7"
From the painting
Head of a Peasant
by David Mabb 2002

to call "Honeysuckle", has been made up into a salwar kameez and dupatta (the traditional long, loose-fitting shirt and baggy pants with matching scarf favored by women in northern India). The third fabric design is taken from my painting "Fruit twigs" from 1999 which is based on the Morris design called "Fruit". It is used to make a Sherwani suit (including jacket, trousers and topi-style cap), a garment popularized in the West in the 1960s, becoming another symbol of India. The leaves and fruit have been removed from Morris' vision of abundance: the design becomes a representation of winter, altering our reading of the suit's meaning.

The Photographs

The photographs are of myself, Mithu Sen and Biba Singh modelling the "Fruit Twig" Sherwani suit, the "Tulip" sari and the "Honeysuckle" salwar kameez respectively. They were taken in the Mandawa Haveli, now a heritage hotel, which has been used as a backdrop or set and where the exhibition "Morris in Jaipur" was first installed. The photographs are printed in black and white to create ambiguity as to the time of production. In the self-portrait in the "Fruit Twig" Sherwani suit, I sit on a chair with an Rajasthani Rajput portrait painting on the wall and a small cannon on the floor, my presence in the suit temporarily replacing the Rajput owner in his haveli. Another photograph shows the three of us in what might appear to be a family portrait taken in the garden of the haveli. However, the relationship between us remains deeply ambiguous due to our ages and different appearances.

The Larger Paintings

The three fabric prints used in the three sets of clothes have also been used to make three larger paintings. The

fabrics have been over-painted around the imagery with designs by Liubov Popova, a Russian artist and designer who was particularly active in the early 1920s. Popova produced a whole series of untitled textile designs, which represented a bold new commitment to modernity and the Russian Revolution. Her political agenda can be seen as in some ways comparable to that of Morris, but the visual results are startlingly different. My over-paintings were produced by a local sign painting business in Jaipur called "Fine Arts". These juxtapositions generate dialogue between the utopian imagery of Morris and Popova. A further layer of meaning is imposed by the large scale of these reinterpretations of Popova's designs, which makes them resemble aspects of 1960s Pop or Op Art. They are entitled "Spots", "Targets" and "Circles".

The Quilts

The two quilts are also made with the same three designs used in the making of the clothes and the larger paintings but printed onto a heavier cotton than the khadi. The fabric has been cut into strips, which follow the repeat in the pattern and are then stitched together in alternating tones. The fronts of the guilts use either "Tulip" and "Honeysuckle" or "Tulip" and "Fruit Twigs". In both quilts the backs are the same and alternate the "Honeysuckle" and "Fruit Twigs" designs. This layout is influenced by quilts made by women from Gee's Bend, Alabama, USA, part of a rural black community who are descendents of slaves. They use simple, bold, abstract designs in their quilts, which seem reminiscent of types of modernist abstraction. My quilts are made, however, using traditional Indian guilting methods. They are a coming together of disparate historical, geographical, economic and political influences.



Circles (after Morris and Popova)
Painted on Twig fabric print by Fine Arts, Jaipur and David Mabb
Paint on Khadi; 2005; 43" x 43"



Spots (after Morris and Popova)
Painted on Honeysuckle fabric print by Fine Arts, Jaipur and David Mabb
Paint on Khadi; 2005; 43" x 43"



Targets (after Morris and Popova)
Painted on Tulip fabric print by Fine Arts, Jaipur
Paint on Khadi; 2005; 43" x 43"





MABB TAKES
MORRIS TO JAIPUR:
THE WHIRLIGIG OF
INFLUENCE

Peter Nagy

India confounds our definitions of the contemporary. More so than most places (though not entirely unique in the world) one can experience a proliferate sense of time, the simultaneity of multiple centuries, the sonorous crashing of past, present and future coming together. Much of what one can find in India's busiest markets, on her chaotic city streets or inside her ancient houses of worship resembles the most avant-garde practices of Europe's or America's most radical artists. Materially and conceptually overwhelmingly rich, the myriad cultures of the Indian sub-continent provide unlimited inspiration but also require a thorough re-evaluation of the principles and values on which Western contemporary art has been based.

For much of the past one hundred years, artistic practice in Europe and America has been infatuated with the concepts of the Readymade and appropriation, originality and influence, the fluctuations of symbolic and exchange values, and the relationship of the Fine Arts with other types of cultural production. Within India, the field of a commercialized contemporary art is relatively new, accommodating a hesitant acceptance of International Modernism and straddling definitions of craft, tradition, innovation and narrative purpose as well as the boundaries between urban and rural. What one thinks one knows (when coming from the West) must be cast aside when encountering India, where most hierarchies will be up-ended and many preconceived notions challenged by entirely different sets of paradigms.

For most of the past ten years, David Mabb's work as an artist has mired through some of the murkiest aesthetic terrain. His production has been centered on both the material and theoretical production of one particularly influential figure from the 19th Century, excavating buried meanings from this

Detail of Sherwani Twig Jacket at the Mandawa Haveli Photograph Dave Dunning 2005



production, juxtaposing it with the production of other historical figures and re-assessing it by way of the most current strategies. David Mabb's maneuvers have self-consciously confused the artistic patrimony of his own works, melding seemingly incompatible schools of aesthetic thought while abruptly abutting the hand-crafted with the mechanically reproduced and the conceptually formulated. His resulting oeuvre has taken the shape of formulae that posit queries of identity and politics against ones of decoration and masquerade.

Reasonable enough then to transpose this British artist and his concerns onto the undulating foundation of the Indian stage. William Morris worked during the Victorian Era, when the sun never set on the British Empire, India was the jewel in her crown and Britain's economy and self-image were inextricably linked with her grandest colony. Morris' program2, both reactionary and visionary, may not have been specifically concerned with India but he did fashion elements sourced from her traditions. Much as the Hippies of the 1960s took advantage of an easy association between decorative styles and philosophical teachings from India, Morris accepted as given a certain alternative to the Enlightenment of Descartes with the patterns associated with the Buddha. One could perhaps call it a Transcendental Materialism on to which David Mabb has now transposed both the critical dialectics and the aesthetic parameters of Post-Modernism.

Framed in this way, India becomes the most appropriate context for David Mabb to continue his interrogations. With a massive human work force that enables hand-made

Facing page: Detail Spots (after Morris and Popova) and Tulip Sari at Mandawa Haveli
Photograph Dave Dunning 2005

production in India to cost less than mechanical reproduction might in Europe, an artist can shuffle the deck of his associative cards. Invited to work in the Rajasthan capital of Jaipur, David Mabb had access to the city's diverse array of skilled craftsmen and honed in on those whose production related most directly to his established lexicon. Block-printed textiles were a logical starting point to reflect on Morris' designs and reproduce Mabb's edited versions of these same designs, previously explored as oil paintings. The minimalized Morris patterns were reproduced on to hand-loomed cotton,3 the meterage then stitched into garments and guilts, used as the canvases for new paintings (a meeting of politicized patterns fusing the organic with the geometric), and the covers of the exhibition's catalog (copying the form of a locallycrafted accounts book). The garments then begat a mock fashion shoot, the artist and his peers aping an ersatz historicity amid the faux-royal accoutrements of a downmarket palace hotel, the exhibition's Jaipur venue. Spinning his references further askew. David Mabb commissioned a local miniature painter, one whose education has predominantly focused on the art of copying, to create shrunken versions of his oil paintings based on Morris' textiles. David Mabb's paintings fused Morris' designs with 20th Century images of industry, commerce and politicized art, resulting in visual conundrums of conflicting aspirations4. Their miniaturized Indian versions further twist this spiral in on itself, forcing an uneasy encounter with post-colonial theory, Marxist politics and globalized responsibilities in the guise of prettified trinkets, almost Laura Ashley-meets-Dr. Strangelove, again bringing us back to the 1960s, when exotic aesthetics influenced radical politics but also packaged them for mass consumption.



Group Photo of David Mabb in Sherwani Twig Suit, Biba Singh in Honeysuckle Salwar Kameez and Mithu Sen in Tulip Sari at the Mandawa Haveli Clothes produced by Anoki with fabric prints after Morris. Photograph Dave Dunning 2005

David Mabb's body of work may trip over itself at times but such can be expected when one is dancing simultaneously with multiple partners and in a variety of styles. Through the seemingly innocuous vehicles of decorative art, textiles, clothing and souvenir kitsch, David Mabb posits tough question that reverberate far outside the cloistered precincts of Art. What does it mean when an artist remakes another artist's work? David Mabb's encounters with Indian craftsmen complicates questions earlier addressed by artists such as Sherrie Levine, Richard Pettibone and Mike Bidlo by extending the dialogue outside of the Western canon, personalizing the exchange and diversifying the production. The conceptual device becomes a decorative trope (and vice versa) while the finished results span the register from handmade crafts and applied arts, unique images, copies of copies, costuming and portraiture, photo-documentation. domestic décor and exhibition design. The anxious death of the author has been replaced by the celebration of multiple authors and the work of art gains fluency and nuance by its refraction through kaleidoscopic mirrors. The parameters and exigencies of an entirely new context have shaped a diversity of responses.

For myself, as an artist who functions also as a curator and a critic, working with David Mabb on this project has proved both provocative and stimulating. In my own practice I am interested in the intersections between multiple roles of cultural production and David Mabb's approach is similarly unrestrained by established jurisdictions. My introduction to his work was through a group of paintings made in the 1990s,⁵ some of which have served as the models for the miniatures produced in Jaipur. From the start, I was taken with David Mabb's involvement with sociological content via the

decorative arts and his continued investigation of the subject in India has produced rich rewards. William Morris never visited India during his life but through David Mabb's art Morris' critique of industrialization can be extended into the present day and into an India that is facing new pressures and opportunities brought on by the globalization of finance, markets, cultures and politics. If contemporary art is to help negotiate these changes it must do so with humor, compassion, intellect and an open mind. David Mabb has shown this can be decorously achieved through observation, play, study and collaboration.

Footnotes:

- For more on the relationship and resemblance between advanced artistic production in the West and traditional forms found in India, see my essay entitled "Acts of Delicate Balance" in the catalog for the exhibition the tree from the seed: Contemporary Art from India, (Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, 2003).
- For more on Morris see William Morris by Fiona MacCarthy, (Faber and Faber, 1994) which is the best rounded biography and Romantic to Revolutionary by E.P. Thompson, (The Merlin Press, 1995) which is good on Morris' political development.
- For the long and convoluted history of the politicized symbolisms of hand-loomed cloth in India, see Clothing Matters. *Dress and Identity in India* by Emma Tarlo, (Hurst and Company, 1996).
- For more on David Mabb's approach to Morris see his published catalogs: David Mabb: The Decorating Business (Oakville Galleries, Ontario, 2000); David Mabb: A Factory as it Might Be or The Hall of Flowers (Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, 2003); and William Morris (The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester, 2004).
- My initial introduction to David Mabb's work was by its inclusion in the exhibition "Sidewinder" which was curated by Gerard Hemsworth, organized by CIMA Gallery, Calcutta, The British Council and Goldsmiths College, University of London. The exhibition included the work of seven Indian and five British artists and was seen in Calcutta, New Delhi and Mumbai in 2002.



Self Portrait in Sherwani Twig Suit at the Mandawa Haveli Suit produced by Anoki with fabric print Twigs after Morris' Fruit Photograph Dave Dunning 2005



Mithu Sen in Tulip Sari at the Mandawa Haveli Sari produced by Anoki with fabric print Tulip after Morris' Medway Photograph Dave Dunning 2005



Spots (after Morris and Popova) and Tulip Sari at Mandawa Haveli Photograph Dave Dunning 2005



Sherwani Twig Jacket at the Mandawa Haveli Photograph Dave Dunning 2005



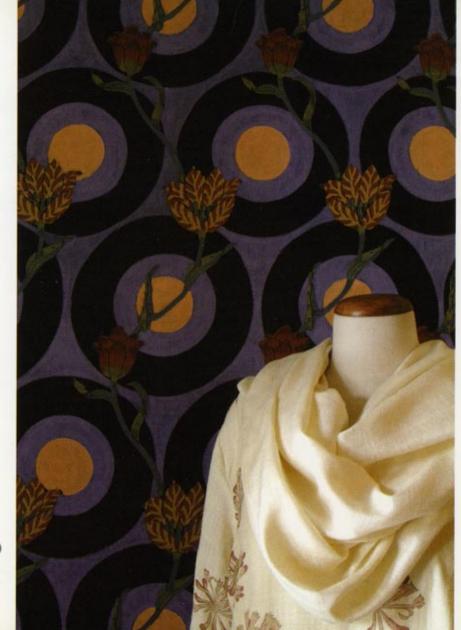
Tulip and Honeysuckle Quilt
Produced by Anoki with fabric prints after Morris
45" x 69.5"; 2005



Tulip and Twig Quilt
Produced by Anoki with fabric prints after Morris
45.5" x 61"; 2005



Big Red Propeller and Tulip and Twig Quilt at Mandawa Haveli Photograph Dave Dunning 2005



Detail Targets (after Morris and Popova) and Honeysuckle Salwar Kameez at Mandawa Haveli Photograph Dave Dunning 2005



DAVID MABB

1976-77 Hastings College of Further Education, Foundation Course 1977-80 Goldsmiths College, BA (Hons) Fine Art 1980-81 Chelsea School of Art, MA Fine Art

One person exhibitions

One person exhibitions		
	1987	First Strike, Art and Research Exchange, Belfast
	1988	David Mabb paintings, Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool
	1989	Eligies to the Third International, Darlington Arts Centre
	1991	Elegies to the Third International, Howard Gardens Gallery, Cardiff
	1993	Unrealised Projects, Holden Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University
	1995	Skins, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, Nebraska, Butler
		Gallery, Kilkenny, Ireland, Cornerhouse, Manchester, Cleveland Gallery,
		Middlesbrough, Street Art of the Revolution, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool
	1998	October after Eisenstein, Sheffield Hallam University Gallery,
		part of Photo 98
	1999	Street Art of the Revolution and Wapping the Movie, Focal Point
		Gallery, Southend on Sea, General Property 1989-1999, Orchard
		Gallery, Derry, Canada seen from a Great Height, Helen Pitt Gallery,
		Vancouver, October after Eisenstein, Wapping the Movie, Watershed,
		Bristol
	2000	Canada is for idiots, you need class war, Latitude 53, Edmonton,
		The Decorating Business, Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, Oakville,
		Ontario
	2003	A Factory As It Might Be or The Hall Of Flowers, Art Gallery of
		Windsor, Ontario, The Hall of the Modern, The Economist, London,
		presented by the Contemporary Art Society
	2004	William Morris, "ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich" an exhibition
		by David Mabb , Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester,
		Manchester, Useful Work Versus Useless Toil, Leo Kamen Gallery,
		Toronto
	2005	Morris in Jaipur, Mandawa Haveli, Jaipur, part of Jaipur Heritage
		International Festival, touring to The Queens Gallery, British Council,
		New Delhi

David Mabb is a Senior Lecturer in Post Graduate Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London,

David Mabb would like to thank the following: Gerard Hemsworth for first getting me to India; Peter Nagy for his essay, managing the project, coming up with lots of ideas and art directing the photo shoot; Rachel Singh and Anokhi for printing the fabrics and manufacturing the clothing and quilts; Rajendra Sharma for painting the miniatures; Faith Singh, Garvita Tanwar and everyone at the Jaipur Heritage International Festival office; Dave Dunning for photography and Mithu Sen and Biba Singh for modelling the clothes; Ranbir Vikram Singh for the use of Mandawa Haveli and Chandrika Grover at the British Council, New Delhi.

Exhibition Dates

Mandawa Haveli, Jaipur as part of Jaipur Heritage International Festival January 14 to 23, 2005

The Queen's Gallery, British Council, New Delhi 19 March to 8 April, 2005



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