

Book Review

Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian Pioneer of Modernism

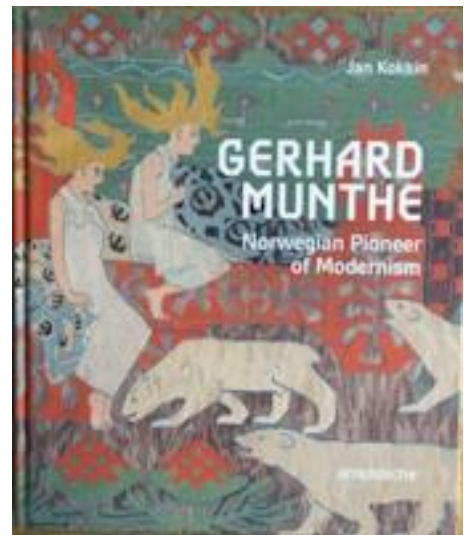
Author: Jan Kokkin (translated by Arlyne Moi)

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Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian Pioneer of Modernism (book cover)

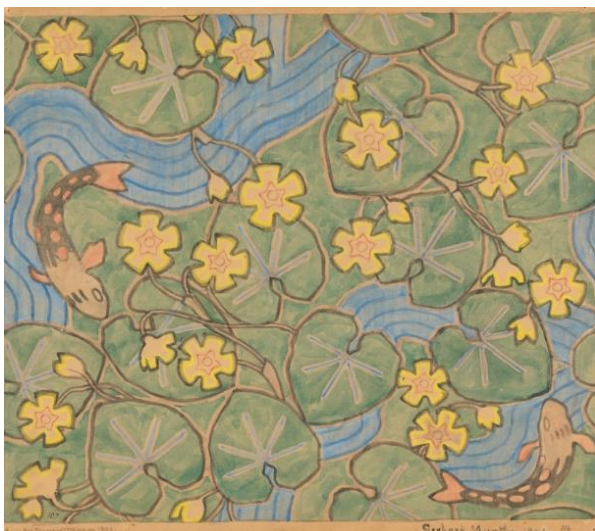
Everyone interested in European Art Nouveau should add Jan Kokkin's richly illustrated book 'Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian Pioneer of Modernism' to their library. Arnoldsche published both the Norwegian and English editions of the book in 2018 to accompany the most comprehensive exhibition of Munthe's work since 1917 (Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, Norway).

Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929) significantly contributed to Art Nouveau's international diversity. His radical, abstract style, partly based on old Norwegian folk art, evolved at a time when artefacts were mostly imported into Norway from Scandinavia and Europe.

Norway was last an independent state in the fourteenth century and only regained independence in 1907, more than half-way through Munthe's life. Like many artists and writers of newly emerged nations, he saw a need to imbue the nation with a cultural identity of its own: "Munthe's work is an essential part of our true national development...because it seeks to build our self-esteem from within and not from outside." (Gerhard Gran in *Samtiden*, 1895).

Sketches, patterns and Munthe's finished artworks translated into the manufactured arts for which he designed them illustrate every page of Kokkin's book. It is particularly interesting to see contemporary photographs of Munthe's interior designs. Although these works are now lost we can get a glimpse of his intention to surround Norwegians with artefacts in their domestic and public lives that were wholly made in Norway by Norwegians for Norwegians.

Like many Art Nouveau artists, Munthe wrote about his theories of style in decoration, not to go forwards but to develop a national Norwegian cultural character.



Gerhard Munthe – Small Trouts and Marsh Marigolds

Nature was his starting point; he'd trained in the Naturalist school of painting, continuing to paint the Norwegian landscape throughout his life. Examples include trout swimming amongst marsh marigolds for wallpaper (1891), a watercolour of blue goats frolicking amongst pine branches (1891), and blue anemones on porcelain dinner services (nd). Munthe also stylised and blended nature with traditional motifs from folk work and art history. "I had to dig into the past... beyond Peasant Rococo and Gothic style of the Bronze Age. I felt that was the most Norwegian... I was also helped by the Assyrian and Egyptian styles and in this way ended up with a rhythmic style I used in *Snorre* and in the fairy tales."

Kokkin focuses in particular on Munthe's Fairytale watercolours and his illustrations for the prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson (Icelandic, 13th century), one of the richest sources of Norse mythology; and the late medieval visionary poem *Draumkvedet* or 'Dream Ballad'.

For readers outside Norway Munthe is perhaps best known for the tapestries based on the Fairytale watercolours, for example: *The Golden Birds*, 1899; *The Three Brothers*, 1902; and *The Yellow Hair*, 1903. Unlike his contemporary, Frida Hansen, he never wove tapestries himself. However, copies of patterns based on the watercolours were much sought after, something Munthe disliked: "All work which is based on copying will always be less clear and poorer – and I cannot take responsibility for that". He used only a handful of trusted weavers, including his wife Sigrun, Frida Hansen, Augusta Christensen (*The Suitors*, 1897; *The Blood Tower*, 1902) and Kristine Johannessen (*The Bewitched*, 1898). He gave them precise instructions to use only coarse, hard yarn to show line clearly, artificial dyes for strength of typical Norwegian colours, and flat, shadowless planes and contours. Ulrike Greve (*The Wise Bird*, 1903) wrote of the difficulties novice weavers faced: "There were two particular ways in which we sinned badly against Munthe's drawings. We did not know that colour values in a watercolour change when the size increases exponentially, and we did not sense the difference in quality when the same colour was painted in watercolour and when it was woven... Goodness, how these tapestries became heavy and saturated."



Categorising Kokkin's book is not easy, which begs the question: Who is the English edition aimed at? Kokkin selects images from Munthe's work to understand his theories on style and the abstraction of nature into decorative design. At the same time, the book is also a comprehensive catalogue of Munthe's artistic work. For an English reader, it is a distinct disadvantage not to have a general index to cross-reference and link the plethora of unfamiliar names with works, places and ideas of Munthe and his contemporaries.

Munthe's designs were successful in early 20th century Norway and were applied across a wide range of manufactured objects: tapestries, porcelains, furniture, tableware, wallpaper, book illustrations, building interiors and monuments. "The intrepid freshness in the colours is unified in his drawings in a very expressive line, dominated by a purity in style that now and then leads towards strictness, such as one can see in the twelve watercolours that are now on show at the *Libre Esthétique*." (Alfred Jarry in *La Revue Blanche*, 1902). For Munthe style was a language to be learned and used to create fresh designs.

It's a pity that the one form that brings all these ideas into a whole work – interior design – now only survives through black and white photographs. Holmenkollen Turisthotell (1896–98) in Oslo Håkonshallen (1910–15) in Bergen was referred to in the paper *Tidens Tegn* as "an attraction that will forever testify to Munthe's unique contribution to Norwegian decorative art".

Kokkin reluctantly concludes in his last chapter, 'Legacy', that: "Despite influencing Norwegian and foreign artists and poets with his pioneering decorative art, Gerhard Munthe had few followers. His work was too idiosyncratic for such an outcome."

Jan Kokkin's book *Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian Pioneer of Modernism* will appeal to everyone interested in the 19th/20th century Arts and Crafts period in Northern Europe, from William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites through Jugendstil to Art Nouveau.