



Weaving Bewitchment: Gerhard Munthe's Folk-Tale Tapestries

by Laurann Gilbertson and Kathleen Stokker

Detail *Liti Kjersti*
(*Little Kjersti*)



Not all stories end happily for everyone — something that proved as true in Gerhard Munthe's life as it does in the Norwegian folklore that his tapestries celebrate. Gerhard Munthe (1849-1929), a landscape painter from Elverum in eastern Norway, played a pivotal role in the 19th-century revival of pictorial tapestry, but he felt that much of his own creative work was not appreciated until it had been transformed in another medium by other artists. Bewitchment — the transformation from one world to another — was a common theme both in folk tales and in Munthe's tapestries. Munthe's own bewitchment into the weaving world mirrored the dark tales of his designs, like the medieval ballad of *Liti Kjersti* (*Little Kjersti*).

Kjersti has been seduced by the Elf King and taken into the underworld. The king's daughter brings a pitcher of wine into which were added three seeds.

In the ballad, the Elf King asks Kjersti, "*Hvor er du født, hvor er du baaren, hvor er dine jomfruklæder skaaren?*" (Where were you born and where were you grown and where were your maiden clothes woven and sewn?) She replies, "In Norway [in the human realm] was I born, in Norway was I grown, and in Norway were my maiden clothes woven and sewn," and then takes a drink of wine. The king repeats his questions, "Where were you born and where were you grown and where were your maiden clothes woven and sewn?" Again Kjersti replies, "In Norway was I born, in Norway was I grown, and in Norway were my maiden clothes woven and sewn." She takes another drink of wine. The Elf King repeats his questions a third time. But now Kjersti answers, "In the mountain [in the underworld] was I born, in the mountain was I grown, and in the mountain were my maiden clothes woven and sewn. In the mountain was I born and in the mountain will I die. In the mountain will I serve the Elf King all my life."¹

Liti Kjersti (*Little Kjersti*) Design taken from a watercolor by Gerhard Munthe, 1899, woven in the early 19th century by an unknown weaver, woven and sold through *Den Norske Husflidsforening* in Oslo. LC746 — Luther College Collection.



Detail of the five wise virgins from *De Fem Gode og De Fem Dårige Jomfruer (The Five Wise and the Five Foolish Virgins)* Woven by professional weavers, probably in Gudbrandsdal, mid-17th century, purchased by Henry Armit Brown while traveling in Norway in the 1870s. 1987.143.1 — Gift of Dorothy Burr Thompson.

From the 1890s to the 1920s, by designing many weavings with images of underworld creatures and scenes of people being bewitched, Gerhard Munthe earned a major place in Norway's long, rich tradition of pictorial tapestry weaving. This weaving technique, called *billedvev*, uses dovetailing to join different colors. Characterized by hatched horizontal lines, the technique is different than the one used in continental Europe, which left slits that needed to be sewn closed. In the 17th century, *billedvev* tapestries usually showed stories from the Bible, but the tapestries woven at the turn of the 20th century more often told Norwegian folk tales.

Many early weavings were associated with the church. For example, Norway's oldest surviving tapestry is a fragment of a long *refil*, or frieze, that hung inside the Baldishol Church in Hedmark in the 1200s. During the 17th and early 18th centuries, tapestries with biblical themes hung in the homes of town officials and wealthy

farmers. Tapestries showed the Three Wise Men bringing gifts to the Christ child, or Salomé with the head of John the Baptist at Herod's feast.

The most popular of the Bible stories captured in tapestry was the New Testament parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins. Typically, a top row shows the five wise virgins holding oil lamps in preparation for the celestial bridegroom, who stands at the left. The five foolish virgins depicted in a lower row did not keep their lamps lit and are shown weeping into their handkerchiefs. The tapestries with biblical themes disappeared in Norway by the mid-1700s. The reason for their decline is not known, but the reasons for the revival of pictorial tapestry a century later are known.

In 1887, a Norwegian woman named Louise Kildal was looking for anything that remained after an auction held when the Baldishol Church was torn down several years earlier. She took home a rag, as she called it, that

Gerhard Munthe.
Collection of Norsk Folkemuseum, Oslo.



was full of clay. Louise washed the textile and hung it in her Oslo home. The director of *Kunstindustrimuseet i Oslo*, the Oslo Museum of Applied Art, saw it there and acquired it for the museum. The great discovery was exhibited proudly as Norway's oldest picture weaving. Inspired by the *Baldishol Tapestry*, and nurtured by a period of increased cultural awareness, many women took up weaving.

In the 1890s Norwegians were looking ahead to the start of the 20th century, but they also were looking back into their cultural past. After hundreds of years under previous Danish rule, and now anticipating independence from Sweden, Norwegians began asking themselves, "What is truly Norwegian?" Certainly Vikings, Norse mythology, and peasant culture with its pure forms of decorative arts, folk costume, music, and dance. The old traditions informed and inspired a new nationalistic style. In weaving, this period saw the revival of traditional designs, techniques, and materials.

Workshops sprang up around the country to teach weaving and natural dyeing, and *Den Norske Husflidsforening*, the Norwegian Home Craft Association, marketed the new textiles.

Gerhard Munthe designed his first tapestry in 1888 for his wife Sigrun to weave. Sigrun Sandberg Munthe (1869-1957) was inspired by the old weavings she saw in farm homes in the countryside where Gerhard was painting, so she acquired an upright loom and learned to weave. Likewise inspired by rural textiles and culture, Gerhard painted a series of watercolors with folklore themes that in 1893 were viewed with great excitement at the *Sort-og-Hvidtudsstilling (Black and White Exhibition)* in Oslo. Norwegians saw the watercolors as representing a new national style. Soon these works were in great demand internationally for exhibition, and in Norway for use as weaving cartoons.



Gullfuglene (The Golden Birds) Design taken from a watercolor by Gerhard Munthe, 1899, woven between 1934 and 1939 by a weaver with the initials O.R., woven and sold through *Den Norske Husflidsforening* in Oslo. LC115 — Luther College Collection.

Ulrikke Greve said that Munthe's designs were "golden treasures, the sound of the trumpet that woke Norwegian textile art up from its long sleep."² Greve headed the weaving workshop at *Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum*, the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Trondheim, where many of Munthe's watercolors were translated into tapestries. *Den Norske Husflidsforening* in Oslo was another major producer.

It is surprising to note that, while his work was greatly admired, Gerhard Munthe was never enthusiastic that his watercolors were used as designs for decorative textiles. He felt that his own work nearly disappeared in the translation. "That which is second-hand work," he said, "will always be less clear and of poor quality."³ He distanced himself from any talk that the weavings were his art. His interest was in the original watercolor designs. He feared that "those weaving ladies" would drown the compositions in wool.⁴ He was a painter, he asserted, not a textile artist. Yet it was for his tapestry designs that he was probably best known, both then and today.⁵

It was not only Munthe's design that made a tapestry unique, his choice of materials did too. He believed the new national weavings should have rough yarn, so that they would resemble the old, homespun textiles. He wanted the colors that he felt were traditional and Norwegian: crimson, red-violet, indigo blue, blue-green, and brass gold. He cared only that the colors were beautiful, lasting, and applied according to the Norwegian national aesthetic. It wasn't so important that the dyestuffs were historical. On this point he differed from other weaving revivalists who were busy promoting indigenous plant dyes. Munthe used his traditional Norwegian colors boldly. His artistic style was flat and two-dimensional, with little shading. Figures and shapes were outlined in one color and filled in with another.⁶ He often filled large spaces with repeating patterns. In *Gullfuglene (The Golden Birds)*, he placed large abstract leaves behind the prince and princess. The blanket on the princess's horse and the cloak of the sorceress are also patterned. *Gullfuglene* also has typical Munthe borders. The motifs often fit

with the theme of the tapestry, but vary so that one or more sides are different.

Munthe based his first design, *24 Kjærringer* (*24 Old Women*), on a folk rhyme, and from that point on traditional folk-tale motifs dominated his watercolor cartoons. He went back as far as Norse mythology for some designs. The figure in *Odin* is immediately recognizable as the wisest of the Norse gods. Although the design is simple and stylized, Munthe captured the very essence of the mythological character. Odin is shown on his eight-legged horse, roaming the world to gather knowledge. He is assisted by the ravens, Hugin and Munin (Thought and Memory), who fly even faster to help him gain more wisdom.

Scenes from medieval ballads appear in Munthe's designs. *Draumkvede* (*Dream Ballad*), a Christian visionary poem, records the dreams of a man who fell asleep on Christmas Eve and slept until Epiphany. He dreamed of the afterlife, saw St. Michael weighing the souls on a scale, and watched the dead crossing the

Gjallar bridge into another realm — where the sinful received their punishment and the virtuous received their reward.

Munthe drew on another medieval ballad, a secular ballad, *Åsmund Fregdegjeva*, for a series of ten cartoons that were expertly woven by Ragna Breivik in Rød i Fana between 1923 and 1949. In the ballad, the daughter of the King of Ireland, Ermeline, has been captured and taken into the mountain by trolls. The king asks the hero, Åsmund Fregdegjeva, to go and bring back the princess. Although many men had died trying, Åsmund agrees on the condition that he can take Olav Tryggvason's magical ship, Ormen Lange, and can have the princess as his wife. When the hero arrives at the troll's kingdom, his men are too frightened to go on, so Åsmund must go into the mountain alone.

In the mountain he walks through several different halls, and in the third hall he finds Ermeline. At first the princess refuses to leave with him, warning him that her mother will devour him as any other human. Åsmund



De Tre Brødre (*The Three Brothers*) Design taken from a watercolor by Gerhard Munthe, 1900, woven before 1908 by an unknown weaver, woven and sold through *Den Norske Husflidsforening* in Oslo. Donated to the Lutheran Deaconess Hospital in Park Ridge, Illinois, by King Håkon VII and Queen Maud in 1908 or 1909 for a fundraiser.
1982.114.1 — Gift of Lutheran Deaconess Hospital through Sister Esther Aus.



Åsmund Fregdegjeva: Åsmund i Kongens Hall (Åsmund in the King's Hall) Design taken from a watercolor by Gerhard Munthe, 1902, woven by Ragna Breivik, 1943. Collection of Hordamuseet, Fana, Norway. Photo: Svein Kojan.

explains that the troll hag isn't really her mother, and that Ermeline is in fact the daughter of the King of Ireland.

Then all of the trolls come into the fifth hall. "I have been in the Christian lands where people call on God. I am stronger than you, I'll cut you in two," cries Åsmund. "You won't get out of here alive," warn the trolls. There is a fierce battle and Åsmund kills all the trolls. Now the halls are flowing with blood. The hero and the princess flee the mountain only to find that the ship is gone, so they must ride across the ocean on a horse that they found in one of the halls. When they return, the hero cuts off the horse's head and before him stands Adelbert, Ermeline's brother and the king's youngest son. Åsmund has saved the princess *and* the prince.

Folk-tale motifs are very common in Gerhard Munthe's designs. In fact, for many of the tapestries he simply combined elements of several folk tales. *Den Kloge Fugl* (The Wise Bird) illustrates the characteristic motif of animals who can speak and often help humans in some way. The tapestry shows an old king who has left his castle to go into the fairy tale forest to talk with his advisor, the wise bird.

Traditional to Norwegian folklore is the repetition of elements by three, a magical number. Munthe's best-

known tapestry design, *Nordlysdøtrene* (Daughters of the Northern Lights), was woven exclusively in the Trondheim workshop at the National Museum of Decorative Arts. For this tapestry, Munthe drew three sisters as in the folk tale, *White Bear King Valemon*, or *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, but turned the tale's single polar bear into three.

The number three appears more naturally in the tapestry called *De Tre Brødre* (The Three Brothers). The tale that this tapestry is based on describes how three beautiful princesses are kidnapped and locked inside the trolls' castle. The trolls throw the key out the window and bewitch the women's sweethearts, three brothers, transforming them into a deer, a fish, and a bird. After years of searching, the bird finds the key and, with the help of the deer and fish, rushes to the castle to unlock the door. The princesses recognize their sweethearts, who then instantly return to their human forms.

Munthe's tapestry designs draw viewers back to a time when the underworld was as real as the human world, and the stories were considered true: Human suitors are turned into animals and denizens of the underworld kidnap and marry human women. While Munthe was



Åsmund Fregdegjeva: *Den A[n]dre Hallen (The Second Hall)* Design taken from a watercolor by Gerhard Munthe, 1902, woven by Ragna Breivik, 1924. Collection of Hordamuseet, Fana, Norway. Photo: Svein Kojan.

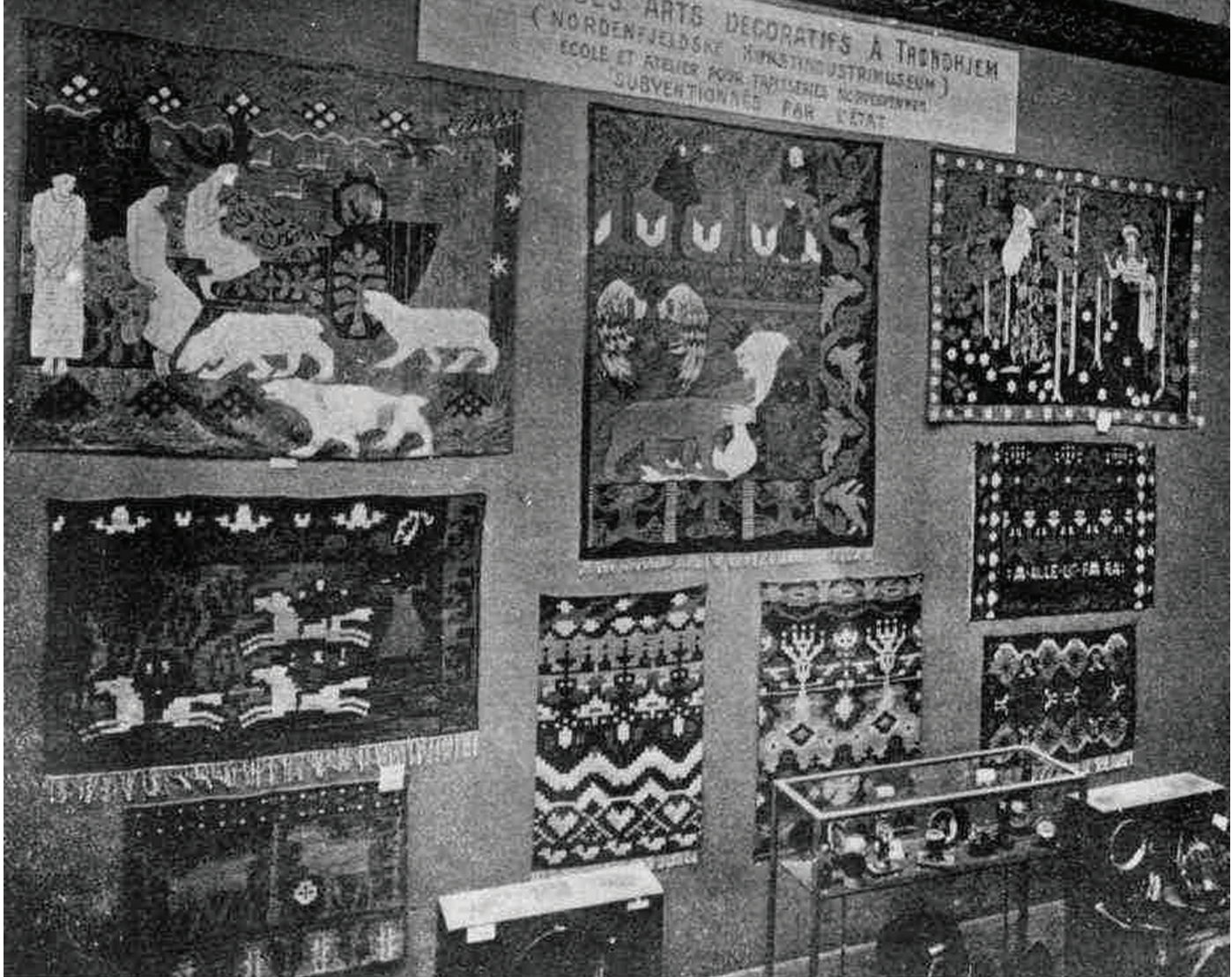
on the cutting edge of modern art, he peeled back the centuries and captured the deeper, darker, primordial feeling of pagan art.

In his book *Minder og Meninger*, Munthe says that in his designs he tried to express “a time that lies far back, a grim time when the trolls never were dumb in any pleasing way, but terrible giants; a time when everything was blood and iron and much more frightful than now. It is this time the sagas and oldest ballads tell about. Likewise we all have a way of thinking, seeing, and imagining preserved from our childhood fantasies in beautiful dreams or strange fears.”⁷

Perhaps Munthe thought himself unfairly bewitched by weavers and was disappointed that his own “beautiful dreams and strange fears” found their most popular expression in the hands of other artists, but in his tapestry designs the deep, archetypal voice of folk lore will speak for centuries.

Gyldendal, 1946) p. 134. Translation of this and other

- ¹ Translations and adaptations of folk tales are by Kathleen Stokker.
- ² Hilmar Bakken, *Gerhard Munthes Dekorative Kunst*, (Oslo: quotations are by Kathleen Stokker.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- ⁵ For more on Munthe’s other artworks, which included landscape paintings, book illustrations (ie. *Norges Kongesagaer*), murals (ie. *Håkonshallen* in Bergen), and furniture design, see *Gerhard Munthe 1849-1929*, Kjell Rasmus Steinsvik and Tone Sinding Steinsvik, eds., (Modum: Stiftelsen Modums Blaafarveværk, 1988).
- ⁶ Many of the weavers copied the solid colors of Munthe’s watercolors faithfully. Ragna Breivik, weaver of the *Åsmund Fregdegjeva* series, used subtle variations in colors to capture the atmosphere that Munthe had intended for each design. Ragna blended dyed fleece before spinning the wool for her tapestries, as opposed to dyeing already spun yarn, so her work is unique. See Åse Enerstvedt, *Ragna Breivik: Et Liv ved Veven*, (Bergen: Eide, 1991), p. 33.
- ⁷ Gerhard Munthe, *Minder og Meninger fra 1850-aarene til Nu*, (Kristiania: Alb. Cammermeyer, 1919), p. 60.



1900 World's Fair Tapestries woven at Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum's workshop on exhibition at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris. Mentioned in this article are: *Nordlysdøtrene* (Daughters of the Northern Lights), top left, *Den Kloge Fugl* (The Wise Bird), top right, and *24 Kjærringer* (24 Old Women), center right. Collection of Norsk Folkemuseum, Oslo.

SUGGESTED READING

Katherine Larson, *The Woven Coverlets of Norway*, (Seattle: University of Washington, 2001).

Synnøve Nord, "Gerhard Munthes billedtepper," in *Norsk Husflid*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1985, pp. 23-26.

Jan-Lauritz Opstad, *Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseums Vævscole og Atelier for Kunstvævning, 1898-1909*, (Trondheim: Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum, 1983).

Aase Bay Sjøvold, *Norsk Billedvev*, (Oslo: C. Huitfeldt, 1976).

About the Authors

Laurann Gilbertson holds a B.A. in anthropology and a M.S. in textiles and clothing from Iowa State University. She has been textile curator at Vesterheim since 1991.

Kathleen Stokker holds a Ph.D. in Scandinavian languages from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is a professor of Norwegian at Luther College, where she has taught for 25 years. She is the author of *Keeping Christmas: Yuletide Traditions in Norway and the New Land*; *Folklore Fights the Nazis: Humor in Hitler's Norway*, and most recently *Marking Time: The Primstav Murals of Sigmund Aarseth*, published by Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum.

This article began as a paper presented by Gilbertson and Stokker at the Ars Textrina International Conference on Textiles in Madison, Wis., on June 27, 1998.