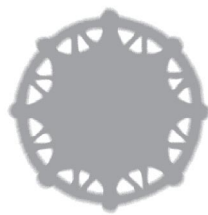


Robert Reviews

07-14-04

SHOCK OF THE OLD: CHRISTOPHER DRESSER'S DESIGN REVOLUTION
MICHAEL WHITEWAY, EDITOR



ROBT EDWARDS

AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS, 1860-1960

POST OFFICE BOX 238

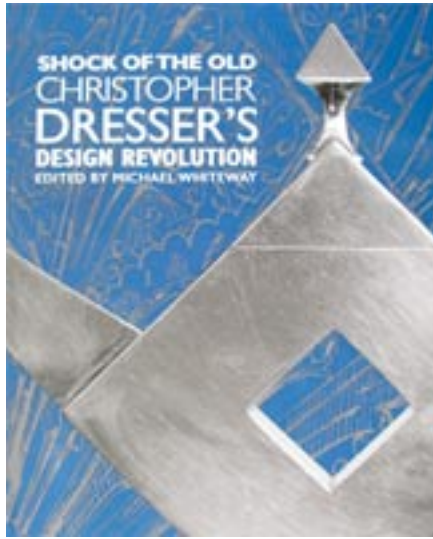
SWARTHMORE, PA 19081

(610) 543-3595

WWW.AMERICANDECORATIVEART.COM

© 2004 Robert Edwards





A friend referred to the objects in the Cooper-Hewitt's "Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser's Design Revolution" as "eye candy."

It certainly is and I see nothing wrong with that. Had the bright, shiny tchotchkes been left on their own without labels and expert theorizing, the experience of seeing all the gold and jewel-like

colors glow against the dark paneling in the old Carnegie mansion could have been sweet indeed. Instead, one is bludgeoned with hectoring, high-tone museumspeak right from the get-go—much of it confusing enough to make a thinking layman's head spin. Fortunately I didn't see anyone paying much attention to the writing on the walls when I was there.

The very first information panel sets the scene by describing Victorian fascination with design reform ideas like those of William Morris. It then blithely states, "It was against this background of debate on design reform and the role of art and industry, technology and consumerism that Dresser's formative years were shaped." The implication is that Dresser's work was "shaped" by Morris. Dresser and Morris were both born in 1834.

The next panel includes a Dresser quote that is contradicted by many of the objects in the show: "We must not be copyists or merely servile imitators; on the contrary, from the fullness of our knowledge, we must seek to produce what is new, and what is accordant with the spirit of the times in which we live; but what we produce must reveal our knowledge of the ornament of past ages." Visual artists shouldn't preach about their art because they risk being held to their pronouncements. The show is full of delightful copies from Dresser's versions of Cycladic urinal-shaped pitchers, Persian glass bottles, and pre-Columbian pots to his ceramic vase that recreates line for line, color for color a Japanese bronze shaped like a used condom. Still, it's a good quote because it pits Dresser's intentions against those of the exhibition's organizers. He wanted his things to be "of the times in which we live" while modern experts want him to be ahead of the times in which he lived as the large case in the center of the first gallery attempts to illustrate.

In that display, real Dresser-designed objects march down the center, each with a corresponding photograph of a non-Dresser object placed beneath it. With the possible exception of a Tiffany vase, the objects in the photographs were evidently chosen for the ugliness the curators saw in them. This appears to be a subjective and misleading attempt to establish a context in which Dresser can be seen as "modern", "progressive", and "innovative"—those all-important justifiers for museum scrutiny

ROBT EDWARDS

© 2004 Robert Edwards



and, indeed, for the very title of this show. Both display and condescending title fail—however much I fancy Dresser, I was not shocked. Disregarding the fact that one photograph of a fairly nasty Douulton vase does not represent that company's total output fairly, a substantial number of us might prefer it over the awkward, mixed metaphor Dresser piece placed above it. I suppose one could argue that the point of such a show is to enlighten benighted viewers who presumably have no taste...or at least not the right taste. There is no essential rightness to Dresser's aesthetic. The curators give much verbiage to wondering why such a marvelous man as Christopher Dresser never achieved the fame of William Morris. I too think Morris wasn't nearly as dynamic and original as Dresser, but he wasn't chopped liver either. Morris like Martha after him invaded every part of the home offering a tepid taste that wasn't very far from what Victorian consumers in the middle and upper classes were used to and comfortable with. Dresser like Tim Burton after him designed things that looked as if they might get up and walk across the dinner table leaving a trail of disgusting droppings behind. What shocks me is that there was any market at all for such bizarre designs. Victorians who could afford to think about such things took home décor quite seriously, particularly the largely ceremonial furnishings of their dining rooms. They might not have been comfortable with the message they got from Dresser's insect devils. Indeed, the curators are also so serious that they don't comment on how funny, perverse, and vulgar some of the anthropomorphic vessels are with their Mickey Mouse feet and lolling tongues.

Something else that shocks me is the intensity of Dresser's signature colors, particularly the peacock blue that he used on ceramics and wallpapers. Reproductions in books don't begin to convey the effect of the almost fluorescent mat ink used by the wallpaper printers who produced his designs. The Cooper-Hewitt installation is a modern museum version of "tasteful" so I found myself trying to envision a domestic setting with walls of electric blue against which were placed mustard-yellow cast-iron hall stands on which were placed huge screaming yellow ceramic pots and red tin candle holders. It would be easy to get everything all wrong even with all the right stuff! You might lose yourself in a room done up in the layered, busy patterns of William Morris, but your eyes wouldn't burn from his mellow colors. The show's curators make no comment on what are, even now, outrageous colors.



The catalogue is a tempest in a square teapot. It is much longer than it needs to be because the authors of individual sections don't seem to have read the other parts so they repeat same information over and over again. If more needs to be said than can be found in Widar Halen's 1990 book then Stuart Durant and Simon Jervis say it. The rest is just redundant filler that gives the book the heft required these days to make an exhibition seem important and to warrant the \$40.00 (paperback) price. I was willing to pay that much just for the photographs, but since they came with all that text, I felt I had to wade through it. Now my copy is bristling with the Post-its I used to mark one silly non sequitur after another. I thought I would pick just the most delicious, but I really can't quote that much of the catalogue here so a small sampling follows in list format.

*Michael Whiteway starts things off by characterizing botany as a "modern and exciting" science when Dresser began his studies. I would have thought the study of botany dated back to the ancient world and could excite only a sexually repressed spinster when she was drawing stamens and pistils.

*He goes on to say, "One of Dresser's great strengths as a designer was his ability to understand the properties of materials and the processes of production, and to adapt his designs and ideas on aesthetics to them. Of course the principles of fitness for purpose and honesty of construction go back to Pugin, but Dresser's scientific training gave him particular insight into the use of materials." Now he has just noted that the

ROBT EDWARDS

© 2004 Robert Edwards



science Dresser studied was botany and he does not demonstrate how such a science might have given him insight about electroplating metal or molding ceramics. We are told later in the book that some of his designs for metal proved too complicated and expensive to put into production. I am still waiting for any one of these pundits to show me the honesty in Dresser's or Pugin's designs or how the famous toast racks are any more fit for their purpose than any that came before.

*According to Whiteway, the designer, having achieved a kind of "global eclecticism," went to Japan in 1877 and upon his return "...almost rejects ornament. Japan taught him that often form is enough to entertain and please the eye; that ornament can distract rather than enhance form." Dresser and his contemporaries drew inspiration from the same international sources and neither Dresser nor the Japanese ever rejected ornament. Does Whiteway mean that Dresser realized Japanese objects were ornamented in a distracting way?

*Whiteway's effusive conclusion reveals a misunderstanding of Dresser's place in the modern world (whose "radical" solutions for teapot designs were not "far in advance of" the designs of his contemporaries like Roebbling's Brooklyn Bridge design), of William Morris (who "made no excuses for the modern world"), and of the Arts & Crafts movement (which did not take over "the initiative in design" beyond the borders of the United Kingdom). But "his influence on the purity of form lived on in industry after his death..." takes the cake. "Purity of form" like "honesty of construction" gets no explanation at all.

**Harry Lyons' chapter is about textiles, wallpaper, and carpets. He writes, "Dresser's innovative approach to textiles, carpets, and wallpapers was to subordinate them to the general decorative scheme of the room." One must read captions and labels to figure out just what in the show is really designed by Dresser, but a black and white photo of a Philadelphia interior shows a circus of pattern that is the "decorative scheme of the room." There are other designs in the exhibition that are not related to Dresser's style. They were made under his supervision, but their wild Art Nouveau patterns and intense colors would dominate any scheme.

* Lyons spends a lot of words on "imagineering" about what Dresser's carpets might have looked like because there is evidently no surviving example. It would have been simple and effective to say we don't yet know much about Dresser's carpet designs. Instead we are given an "acknowledged authority's" long 1934 quote about Dresser's designs in which carpets are never mentioned as "the best testimonial to Dresser as a carpet designer."

*Judy Rudoe's chapter about sources illustrates over and over again how Dresser copied designs from other times and cultures. She points out that he even recommended copies for the adornment of sideboards albeit instead of "the meretricious electroplate which we often see in our shop windows."

*Although the caption for the grand Paris Exposition Universelle vase unequivocally states, "designed by Christopher Dresser," Rudoe seems to have a different idea about it. She says it may or may not be by Dresser.

*There is more imagineering in David Taylor's chapter, "Dresser in the United States." He imagines Dresser might have made notes about the "Philadelphia Centennial

ROBT EDWARDS

© 2004 Robert Edwards

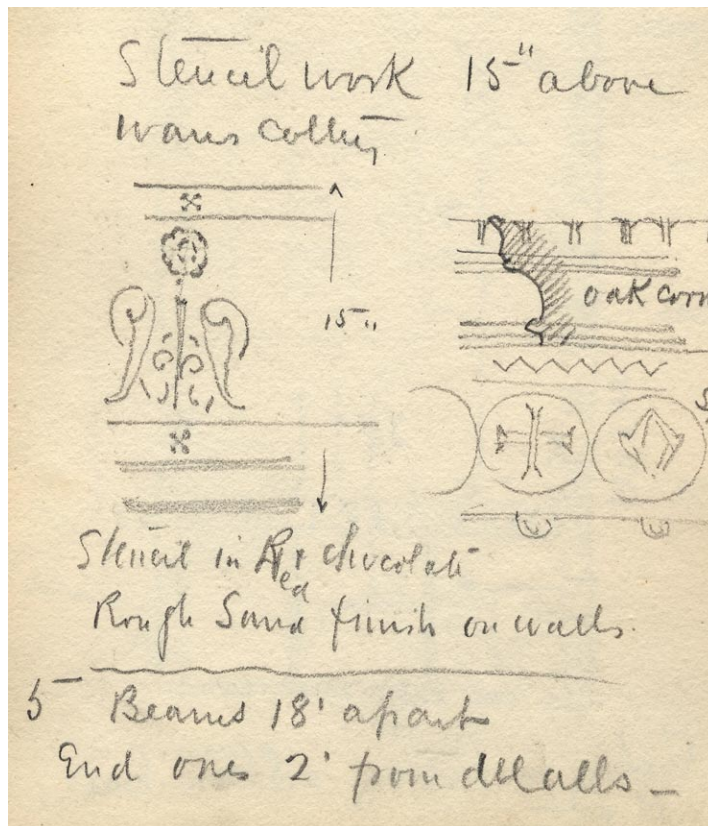


Exhibition.” I imagine Dresser might have used the Exposition men’s room where he would have seen pottery that could have inspired him thus prefiguring Marcel Duchamp.

*While much in Dresser’s work is the result of a botanist’s microscopic view of nature, there is nothing to suggest that he also had a naturalist’s macroscopic view. Still, American Taylor finds it “difficult to imagine that [Dresser] was not captivated by the vastness and the natural wonders of the American West...” so he imagines the designer’s impressions through each leg of a 1,900 mile journey Dresser took from Philadelphia to San Francisco. Since Dresser did not take notes, Taylor cites tourist guides in case we want to know what other people thought about the landscape Dresser might have seen.

*Taylor writes “In 1879 Dresser’s decorative papers were again part of an exclusive American exhibition.” But further on we find that this is only a possibility based on the fact that Dresser’s Philadelphia agent showed at that particular Chicago exhibition where wallpapers and carpets were shown in room settings, which Taylor thinks were a novelty of Dresser’s devising. In reality, room settings had been a part of exhibitions including the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition for decades before.

*After warning us that it is impossible to verify who was influenced by what, Taylor writes, “it is tempting to point to Dresserian ideas in the work of a number of Americans whose creations are emblematic of the Aesthetic Movement, such as architect Frank Furness (who also designed furniture), and the furniture makers the Herter Brothers, furniture maker Daniel Pabst, and the expatriate artist James McNeill Whistler, among others.” Furness and Dresser were looking at many of the same sources so one might imagine the motifs plastered all over the Pennsylvania Academy to be “Dresserian” (I would if only to use the word!) One might just as easily imagine that Furness got his ideas from somewhere else as fellow Philadelphia architect Lindley Johnson did on an 1869 trip to Europe. Pabst got his Dresserian ideas from Furness so I don’t know if he counts. Dresser and the Herters liked Japonese shiny black finishes on furniture but the latter didn’t get that idea from the former and I can’t think of any other influences specific to Dresser. I was surprised by the Whistler connection and checking the endnote, I see that too is only a possibility.



*Even Taylor's conclusion depends on a good imagination because it is based on a report Dresser wrote about a Viennese exhibit for the U. S. government—no copy of the report has been found.

*Catalogue editors would have done Widar Halén a great service had they used the same translator who transformed his odd phraseology into easily understood English for his earlier book.

*Halén claims Tiffany's designer, Edward C. Moore, was influenced by the objects Dresser brought to New York from Japan in 1877. Other essayists correctly note that Moore was already designing in the Japanese style in the 1860s although Dresser's imports might have provided additional inspiration.

*"Dresser himself had incorporated similar [Anglo-Japanese] ceilings in his decorations for Allangate Mansion in the early 1870s, but it was not until the turn of the century that the simplicity of Japanese interiors began to influence Western architects like Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Frank Lloyd Wright." I'm not sure I can unravel this sentence because there are too many problematic assumptions. Halén's modern notion of Japanese style that puts a premium on simplicity is not what influenced Dresser or Mackintosh or Wright. Dresser was but one in a legion of Western designers who created interiors that were knowledgeable interpretations of the Japanese aesthetic in the second half of the 19th century. If there is anything about the work of Mackintosh or Wright that is Japonesque, it is not simplicity for their designs are often complex in the extreme.

ROBT EDWARDS

© 2004 Robert Edwards



*Simon Jervis brings a welcome objectivity to this project perhaps because he has studied a very wide variety of decorative arts for a very long time. Without diminishing Dresser's accomplishments, he establishes a context in which Dresser is allowed to be more a part of his time than ahead of his time:

"Twentieth-century posterity has insisted, and twenty-first-century posterity no doubt will focus on Dresser's identity as an 'industrial designer' avant le lettre. The case is good and plausible one, but it needs to be modulated in two respects: first, it has to be underlined that imposing anachronistic labels has its risks; and second it must be recognized that knowledge of 'industrial design' in the nineteenth century is still in its infancy."

*Jervis has the temerity to illustrate a Fourdinois cabinet made in the Renaissance style for the 1867 Paris exhibition. Dresser disdained Renaissance design and criticized the cabinet. I have never seen the actual piece, but it looks to be extraordinarily beautiful in design and workmanship by any standard except Dresser's. Solon's fantastic Sevres elephant teapot is also illustrated. This is among my favorite things in the world not for its beauty but just because it is delightful. If it were placed next to a Wedgwood jardinière in the exhibit that these curators give to Dresser (the decorations perhaps, the form hopefully not), it would be embarrassingly unremarkable. Jervis attributed an Egyptian revival sofa made for Bushloe House to Dresser in *Victorian Furniture* published by the V&A in 1968. I found an identical piece covered with a Dresser-like fabric in Philadelphia and I believe Lillian Nassau had a whole suite. Objects from Bushloe House are discussed in the new catalogue, but there is no mention of the V&A's sofa. I wonder if such furniture is still attributed to Dresser.

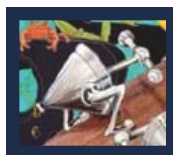


ROBT EDWARDS

© 2004 Robert Edwards

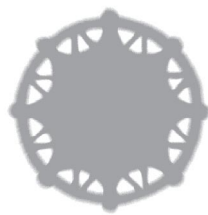


If there is nothing innovative or shocking about this show or the rest of the catalogue, the back cover makes up for it. I've ceased to be annoyed by product placement in movies and on TV, but I was shocked to see similar commercialism on the cover of a museum catalogue. Joseph Holtzman is a major lender to the show so one has to wonder if the pay off for his loans was this ad for "Nest" a once trendy magazine he owns. Goodness, I thought he collected Dresser's pottery because it matches the color of his eyes. But, in the end, he proves to be so much more profound--just like Dresser and the exhibition's curators, he tells us what we should be doing: "Dresser married pure form and pioneering industrial design with an original and wonderful vocabulary of ornament. Isn't that what we should be doing?" Had Holtzman written the catalogue or gotten a longer quote, we might have learned just what pure form is!



Robert Edwards has assembled the information on the web site
AmericanDecorativeArt.com to share his interests.

Important figures like Jane and Ralph Whitehead of the
Byrdcliffe Arts and Crafts Colony and Will Price of Rose Valley
are featured. This site also explores the work of artists
and craftsmen like Daniel Pabst, Frank Furness, A. H. Davenport,
John Scott Bradstreet, Wharton Esherick, Max Kuehne,
Norman Arsenault, and many others who were active between
1860 and 1960.



ROBT EDWARDS

AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS, 1860-1960

POST OFFICE BOX 238
SWARTHMORE, PA 19081
(610) 543-3595

WWW.AMERICANDECORATIVEART.COM

© 2004 Robert Edwards