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exhibition review of

Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser's Design Revolution

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"Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser"
Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York
5 March–25 July 2004
Victoria & Albert Museum, London
9 September–5 December 2004
Michael Whiteway, Editor

Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser's Design Revolution
Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt and V&A Publications in collaboration with Harry N. Abrams,
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The long-awaited exhibition of the work of the British designer Christopher Dresser opened in early March and continued until the end of July at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. The exhibition, which includes some 350 objects, is a visual delight for historians of nineteenth-century culture. Dresser's imaginative conception of everyday goods (wallpaper, ceramics, metalwork, glass, textiles, and furniture) as an endless play of surfaces ready for embellishment will satisfy and confound. Installed in eleven successive rooms that make good use of the Dresser palette and patterns—and indeed remind us that the Andrew Carnegie mansion is fundamentally a late Victorian space—the exhibition nicely showcases Dresser's designs as a study of nineteenth-century taste. At the same time, however, the curatorial vision of the exhibition, which promotes Dresser as a pioneer modernist, forestalls deeper consideration of him in this nineteenth-century context.

Robert Hughes's book, *Shock of the New*, first published in 1980 during a moment of high avant-gardism, is the key reference in the Cooper-Hewitt's title "Shock of the Old." Yet to frame the exhibition of Victorian domestic goods, and the complicated figure of Christopher Dresser, with a limp inversion of a quintessentially modernist text does injustice to one of the most interesting designers of the nineteenth century. Dresser's genuinely creative output is perhaps indeed "shocking" in its variety of color, form, and media. But the implied message—that Dresser's engagement with machine production as a "pioneer industrial designer" is shockingly "old" vis-à-vis the twenty-first century—is neo-Pevsnerian at best.^[1] In seeking to locate Dresser where he is already too often perceived as a precursor to twentieth-century modernism, the museum team (there was no single curator in charge) reinforces rather than questions the received image of Dresser and his works.

The span of Christopher Dresser's life (1834-1904) neatly embraces the reign of Queen Victoria and offers a unique perspective from which to examine how Victorian sensibilities in design, taste, and the broader social and cultural history shifted in the course of the nineteenth century. Born in Glasgow, Scotland, into a family of yeomen and low-ranking government officials, Dresser was sent, at age 13, to the Schools of Design in London, which were established in the 1830s to train artisans to design for industrial production. As the possibilities of machine manufacturing made goods, especially household items, more accessible to the middle-classes, "art workmen" (Dresser's term) created a vast range of

designs for new industrial processes such as vulcanized rubber, and electrotyping. Older methods of manufacture, such as ceramic production, were adapted to satisfy the growing consumer desire for varied forms that proliferated in the mid-nineteenth century.

During his years at the Schools of Design, Dresser was engaged with the debates of reformers such as Richard Redgrave, Henry Cole, and Owen Jones, who sought to redirect the curriculum of the Schools away from strict copying toward freer and, at the same time, more rationalizing interpretations of nature, ornament, and pattern. While the government schools hoped to train workers, the reformers hoped to educate them about the larger "laws of beauty" as a means of self-improvement and national interest. In addition to his training as a professional designer, Dresser studied botany and received an honorary doctorate in the subject from the University of Jena, in Germany, in 1859. After lecturing as Professor of Ornamental Art and Botany at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham and at other institutions, he turned to designing for manufacture. By the early 1880s he ran his own large studio, had launched several business ventures (with varying degrees of success), and was an art consultant to some of the most prominent British manufacturers, including Wedgwood and Minton.

The first gallery introduces the viewer to Dresser through a selection of five objects and the work of his mentors and teachers. With the Ruskinian motto of "Truth, Beauty, Power" emblazoned on the wall (fig. 1), this gallery establishes the British Design Reform context of Dresser's work.^[2] Objects by A.W. N. Pugin, a William Dyce drawing book, and plates from Owen Jones's study of the Alhambra give the visitor a visual and intellectual context for Dresser's formation at the Schools of Design in the years around the Great Exhibition of 1851. A Dresser drawing of an Indian knife shown in 1851 demonstrates not only Dresser's facility as a draughtsman but also hints at the Design Reformers' keen admiration for the handmade Asian and North African exhibits at the Crystal Palace. At the center of this room are the five Dresser objects, placed on a table with a timeline and juxtaposed with photographs of works from Minton, Royal Doulton, Rookwood, Elkington, and Tiffany. While the comparison is apparently about setting a visual context for Dresser's work, the selection of familiar nineteenth-century decorative motifs (animal figures, neo-Renaissance decoration, even the Tiffany favrile example on view has a palmette) is juxtaposed with the angular shapes of Dresser's ornament, saturated colors, and severe forms, revealing the modernist agenda of "shock" at work (fig. 2). To be fair, the Design Reformers advocated a similar pedagogy of comparison between "good" and "bad" examples of design at their Museum of Ornamental Art, but the emphasis on striking contrast again limits a more productive assessment of Dresser and his larger context.^[3]



Fig. 1, First gallery with table of five Dresser objects and Dresser's motto. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Detail of first gallery with five objects and Dresser's portrait in background. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)

The next gallery deals with Dresser's botanical training, and teaching, and his work for Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament*. Here, even the large format watercolor drawings of plant morphology, which were probably used in his lectures, offer a testament to Dresser's sense of design. At the same time, however, Dresser's pale botanical pages for Jones's *Grammar* seem more at home in the context of botanical study than juxtaposed with the glorious printed pages of the rest of the compendium.

Dresser's role as a "Master of Ornament" is addressed in two galleries, a small corridor hung with chromolithographic prints of wall, dado, ceiling, and hanging decoration, and their descriptions from his book *Studies in Design*, and in a large gallery showing his interior designs. Throughout this section of the exhibition, Dresser's role as an "ornamentist" is emphasized, yet there is little discussion of the Design Reform principles of flatness, abstraction of natural motifs, or the broader Victorian interest in ornament as a bearer of moral and social virtue. Still, the visual richness of Dresser's work is powerfully demonstrated, especially in the designs for wall decoration and textiles, of which there are many fine, astoundingly fresh examples. While the experience of any interior is impossible to reconstruct, even a faint sense of how Victorian designers used layers of pattern on walls,

floors, and furniture, and how objects might have interacted in a nineteenth-century room is difficult to apprehend from this display of relatively isolated objects (fig. 3).



Fig. 3, Gallery showing "Dresser's Interiors." Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)

The upstairs galleries present Dresser's designs for the many manufacturers who produced metalwork, ceramics, furniture, and glass. (fig. 4) As might be expected, Dresser's electroplated silver gets the most attention. Toast racks, decanters, soup tureens, and tea pots that Dresser designed as inexpensive (but not cheap) goods for the middle-class household are considered in the context of his trip to the United States and Japan in 1876-7. Like so many other nineteenth-century artists and designers, Dresser's interest in Japan dated from the London Exposition of 1862, and was supported by the proliferation of Japanese goods on the European market. Unlike most enthusiasts, Dresser visited the country, wrote numerous articles and an influential book, *Japan, its Architecture, Art and Art-Manufactures* (1882), and assembled and sold large collections. Dresser's careful study of, and admiration for, Japanese art and household goods appears to have reinforced his own commitment to produce high-quality objects as well as his already established interest in abstract ornamentation. Nonetheless, the plainness of the silvery forms and reduction of surface embellishment on his metalwork from the late 1870s and 1880s suggests a new consideration of the aesthetic possibilities of materials and forms themselves. It is troubling then, to encounter the wall text in this section, which states that this work emphasizes "a machine-made aesthetic and functionalism." While there is ample visual evidence of Dresser's concern for designing goods appropriate to their usage, and which could be serially manufactured, there is little evidence that Victorian designers, even Dresser, admired machine processes for some inherent aesthetic value rather than for their potential to realize a variety of effects, many of which derived from craft work. In fact, some of the tea pots Dresser designed for James Dixon and Sons were too expensive and too difficult to manufacture by machine.



Fig. 4, Upstairs gallery showing works in electroplated silver. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution
[\[larger image\]](#)

To their great credit, the organizers opted for a wide sampling of numerous objects from all periods of Dresser's career. While there is an emphasis on Dresser's japonism in metalwork and ceramics, the informed viewer comes away with an impression of Dresser's playful imagination and his omnivorous taste for the exotic. If there is rather less discussion about his admiration for Egyptian, Roman, Persian, and Peruvian works, then at least there are numerous vases, pots, and jugs that testify to Dresser's interest in the material legacy of these cultures. In some instances, comparisons are made formally but without explanation, leaving the viewer to see the point without any guidance in understanding the historical context, or the significance, of the emulation. A Moche stirrup jug, for example, is slipped into a case of Linthorp pots with similar spout-like forms. Dresser's Clutha glass, whose name derived from the ancient Celtic word for the river Clyde, is juxtaposed with both Richard Redgrave's *Wellspring Vase* and a seventeenth-century Persian water sprinkler, but not with examples of Roman glass, which were highly prized and widely collected in the late nineteenth century. Likewise the forms, decoration, and purpose of the furniture in the exhibition are given surprisingly little attention. While there are multiple examples of Dresser's cast iron benches and hall stands for Coalbrookdale, they are introduced as examples of his "abstract ornament," in spite of the narrative roundel of Boreas on one chair. (fig. 5) There are some fine examples of Dresser's furniture from the Art Furnisher's Alliance, but no mention of their debt to the idea of ancient and medieval prototypes.



Fig. 5, Coalbrookdale armchair with photograph of the cast iron bridge at Coalbrookdale. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)

The last three galleries, which show Dresser's work from the end of his life, tie up themes from his long career. In a selection of textiles from the 1890s we see Dresser revisiting the botanical motifs of the 1850s but applying them in flowing compositions as a nod to the developing taste for British illustration and continental Art Nouveau. The ceramics from the Ault Pottery, which had purchased moulds when the Linthorp Pottery went out of business, show earlier designs executed in new glazes of acidic yellows and greens (fig. 6) Here the use of the grotesque re-emerges but in far more naturalized forms.



Fig. 6, Vitrine of Ault Pottery. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)

The accompanying catalogue, which bears the same title as the exhibition, succeeds in providing a more thorough background on Dresser, his intellectual formation, and his historical context, and is a useful corrective to the bias of the wall text in the galleries. Edited by the art dealer Michael Whiteway, the catalogue includes seven essays by established Dresser scholars, museum curators and dealers, but no new voices. Many of the essays are general and documentary rather than interpretive. The more compelling chapters deal with Dresser's contradictions and the ways that he saw design as a means of investigating the scientific and aesthetic values of his era. Stuart Durant's essay, "Dresser's Education and Writings," shows how Dresser's contributions to science and his writings on science are indebted to German Romanticism. He makes the useful point that the Christopher Dresser we see in print is not the image that prevails in his designs. Judy Rudoë's chapter on "Dresser and his Sources of Inspiration" relies on Dresser's *Principles of Design* (1873) in ranking his ornamental preferences and admiration for non-European objects in the British Museum. Although this chapter helps to round out our understanding of certain objects included the exhibition, it does not address the British middle-class taste for the grotesque, the exotic, and the decorative motifs derived from natural history that would seem to explain their preponderance in Dresser's considerable oeuvre, and those of his colleagues. Harry Lyons looks at Dresser's patterns for textiles, carpets, and wallpaper, which provide a counterweight to the overwhelming number of three-dimensional objects in the exhibition. Lyons's chief aim is to document Dresser's numerous designs, yet in light of Dresser's allegiance to Jones, it is unfortunate that the optical effects of chromomatic juxtaposition with which Jones experimented, are not at least explored in Dresser's ideas for the interior.(figs. 7 and 8)



Fig. 7, Various designs from second half of Dresser's career. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution
[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 8, Linthorp vases installed in the "Teak" Room of the Andrew Carnegie Mansion. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)

David A. Taylor and Widar Halén both provide a useful account of Dresser's travels during the years 1876-77, but with contrasting approaches. Taylor considers Dresser's trip to the U.S. and his effect on the market for japonism and "artistic" goods in America. He presents a well-documented account of Dresser's trip (including the kinds of hotels he stayed in), the professional interest in Dresser, and his business contacts, but he ventures few comparisons with the work of American designers who Dresser probably encountered in his six-month stay. Dresser's fascination with Japan of course predates his actual visit and Halén traces the contexts for Dresser's growing japonism. Halén emphasizes Dresser's sincere and informed knowledge of Japan, but he also grandly credits a serious study of Japanese aesthetics with helping "to dethrone historicism and to modernize art in the West" (128). Together these two essays present a better sense of Dresser as a businessman interested in promoting Japanese goods for profit.

Simon Jervis's article, "Dresser in Context," elaborates on the mid- and late-Victorian culture of design and designers, showing in particular the intellectual and personal links between figures such as Dresser, Jones, Talbert, and Morris in the active design culture of the period. Jervis ends his essay with a thought that seems to undermine the organizers' agenda:

"Perhaps, as one who was forgotten during the heroic years of Modernism, Dresser makes an appropriately ironic Post-Modern hero. But would it not be more illuminating if the 'pioneer' mythology were henceforth set aside and Dresser and his remarkable and varied achievements, not all of them admirable, were to be appreciated and understood in his and their own complex contexts?" (199). This is indeed the question that haunts this exhibition.

The production of the book is handsome with good-quality color prints, but the scholarly apparatus of footnotes, bibliography, appendices and index is uneven. Throughout the book are brief but well-illustrated sections on the manufacturers for whom Dresser worked. These give a useful overview of the wide variety of materials and processes that Dresser encountered. The endnotes and index are substantial enough, but the bibliography is radically limited and a full list of Dresser's own publications is not attempted. In a curious lapse of editing, captions of the photographs refer to the German-French entrepreneur Siegfried Bing as "Samuel" (a longstanding, but also long-ago corrected, error in the scholarship), although the essays do not.

While the essays are helpful, this is not the definitive work on Dresser. Although historians are hindered by a lack of archival material from Dresser's own studio (his daughter burned his papers in the 1950s), surely someone who designed and wrote so much, and who used the motto "knowledge is power," could stand further, and deeper, scholarly consideration. Dealers and connoisseurs have had the heaviest hand in this exhibition, which perhaps explains why the critical engagement with Dresser's ideas and theories is underplayed in favor of documentation. While offering a good long look at Dresser's career, the exhibition, which was delayed and reconceived many times, is a general introduction to his life and work, rather than a sustained examination of Dresser in the context of his time.^[4] We can only hope that the designs on view and Dresser's multifaceted career will inspire others to look again at this complicated figure.

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Notes

[1] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1975). Pevsner's original study, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* was published in 1936. While Pevsner was one of the first scholars to examine nineteenth-century design, his teleological method ignored most nineteenth-century production (e.g. craft, anonymous designers, historical revivals) in favor of the reformers who suited his genealogy of modernism. However, some of his more strident statements from the 1930s were softened in later editions of *Pioneers* and other books.

[2] This is taken from the frontispiece of Dresser's book, *Studies in Design* (London: Cassell, Petter and Calpin, 1876).

[3] The Museum of Ornamental Art (originally called the Museum of Ornamental Manufactures) was opened to the public at Marlborough House in 1852 and taught "true" and "false" principles using specific objects. Set up with profits from the Great Exhibition, the museum was linked with the Department of Practical Art and School of Design. These collections eventually became the Victoria and Albert Museum. See Jules Lubbock, *The*

Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain 1550-1960 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

[4] On the odd history of this exhibition, see Alice Twemlow, "Dressing Down," *Architect's Newspaper*, February 17, 2004.

Illustrations



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Fig. 4, Upstairs gallery showing works in electroplated silver. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution
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