

**Christopher Dresser:  
Influences and Impact of a Victorian Visionary**

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During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the applied arts and architecture movements in England underwent several changes. Objects, interiors and structures ranging from the Neo-Gothic style of A.W.N. Pugin to the Neo-Medieval leanings of William Morris reflected a new, eclectic age of mechanized production.

The challenges encountered by English manufacturers, designers and artisans in assimilating this new technology was evident in the poorly designed products exhibited at the 1851 International Exhibition at London. From his perspective of fifty years later, Hermann Muthesius reminds us that “the tremendous upheaval that this modern phenomenon wrought in every area of life first revealed itself in handicraft – cutting the ground from under it as indeed it still does today by more or less conspiring to its destruction.”<sup>1</sup>

It was during this tumultuous period that Christopher Dresser emerged as an award-winning student at the School of Design in London and became a prolific industrial designer. William Morris rejected and Christopher Dresser embraced the possibilities of the machine age. Dresser could envision superior design co-existing with large-scale manufacturing. Unfortunately, the overwhelming influence of Morris’s Arts and Crafts movement obscured much of Dresser’s oeuvre until critics such as Nikolaus Pevsner rediscovered him in the twentieth century.

Dresser designed in a variety of materials. His work incorporated many futuristic and unconventional components, which would later re-appear as functional objects long after his death in 1904. This essay explores, to the extent possible, sources of

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<sup>1</sup> H. Muthesius. *Style-Architecture and Building-Art*. (Santa Monica: The Getty Centre, 1994) 61.

Christopher Dresser's inspiration and vision, his stated principles of design, and the possible impact of his work on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century design.

### **Sources of Dresser's Inspiration and Vision**

#### **a) Influence of the Henry Cole Group**

Dresser attended the Government School for Design in London between 1847 and 1854, and returned as a lecturer from 1855 to 1868. At the School for Design, Dresser was exposed to the theories of a number of leading artists who taught at the school and who were acquainted with Henry Cole.

When Dresser arrived at the School for Design in 1847, Henry Cole was an ambitious civil servant and organizer who had set up Felix Summerly Art-Manufactures that same year. Felix Summerly Art-Manufactures was an institution set up to encourage artists to design for industry. It may have served as a model for Dresser's own 1880 Furnisher's Alliance. Henry Cole employed artists William Dyce, John Herbert, John Bell, Richard Redgrave and Sir Richard Westmacott as designers.<sup>2</sup> All of these artists taught at the School of Design at one point or another during Christopher Dresser's tenure there.

As an advocate of public education through art exhibitions, Cole later was to retrieve works from the 1851 Exhibition and set up the Museum of Manufactures, which grew in turn, into the Museum of Ornamental Art, and then became the South Kensington Museum and, eventually became the Victoria and Albert Museum as we know it today.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> F. MacCarthy. *All Things Bright & Beautiful*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972) 15.

<sup>3</sup> MacCarthy, *All Things*, 20.

During Dresser's second year as a student at the School of Design in 1848, Cole launched the *Journal of Design and Manufacture* which had a publication run of three years. Articles by Richard Redgrave, Matthew Digby Wyatt, Owen Jones and Gottfried Semper appeared in this magazine, whose stated goal was, "developing sound principles of ornamental art, and to keep (the designer) thoroughly informed of all that is likely to be useful and instructive to him in his profession."<sup>4</sup>

This same group of contributors, as well as Ralph Wornum, lectured at the School of Design while Dresser was enrolled as a student and working as a lecturer. In addition, A.W.N. Pugin and John Ruskin, both dominant voices during the 19<sup>th</sup> century enjoyed wide audiences and Dresser's philosophies reflect an interest in their work.

## **b) Influence of William Dyce**

A policy debate concerning curriculum raged in the political and educational community at the School of Design during Dresser's time there. Originally, the School of Design functioned as a traditional school of fine arts. However, an emergent nationalistic economic policy in Britain and general concern about the direction of machine production, prompted government and school officials to question whether the institution should continue "as a place for Fine Art or a drawing school or a practical training place for industrial designers."<sup>5</sup>

William Dyce, a painter and second director of the School of Design from 1838 to 1843 disagreed with the emphasis on "fine arts" and promoted instead a working relationship between designers and manufacturers. He set up practical studios within the

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<sup>4</sup> H.F. Mallgrave. *Gottfried Semper: Architect of the Nineteenth Century*. (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1996) 194.

<sup>5</sup> W. Halén. *Christopher Dresser* (Oxford: Phaidon-Christie's, 1990) 19.

School of Design for pottery and weaving and brought in a Jacquard machine and loom for the weaving of tapestry fabrics. As part of his educational philosophy, Dyce stated that “the intrinsic and independent excellence of design (is) a branch of art capable of enlisting on its behalf all the heartiness, zeal and enthusiasm which the prosecution of other kinds of art calls forth.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the industrial Jacquard loom did not draw the anticipated number of students because it seemed that training in no way promised a job in the industry. Instead of using the newly trained talent from the School of Design, factory owners apparently preferred to use “old designs and stolen patterns.”<sup>7</sup>

As a proponent of the study of nature, Dyce had stated that “we may be satisfied that in the employment of geometrical forms, we are but following the great example of Nature herself. That same nature which, in the animal and vegetable world, has afforded us every variety of curvilinear form has, in the crystalline, given us the whole range of rectilinear form.”<sup>8</sup>

Although direct association of Dresser and Dyce is not yet possible, one may infer that one of Dresser’s most innovative designs may have been influenced by Dyce’s philosophy, which would have still been relatively current when Dresser entered the School of Design in 1847. (Fig. 1). Based on the crystalline structure of frost on a windowpane, the format of this design foreshadowed the angular motifs of the Art Deco and modernist periods. Dresser apparently developed this design from sketches he had originally done in 1856 while lecturing at the School of Design, and published as a wall pattern in *Studies in Design*, 1874. Even as late as 1886, Dresser published crystalline-based designs for stained glass windows in his book *Modern Ornamentation* (Fig. 2).

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<sup>6</sup> S. Durant. *Ornament*. (London: Macdonald, 1986) 55.

<sup>7</sup> M. Pointon. *William Dyce*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 56.

<sup>8</sup> Pointon, *Dyce*. 55.

### c) Influence of Richard Redgrave

The School of Design was headed by H.J. Townsend as Master of Form, J.R. Herbert Master of Ornament and Richard Redgrave, Master of Colour when Dresser enrolled in 1847. In 1848, Richard Redgrave lectured on “The Importance of the Study of Botany to the Ornamentist.” This may have encouraged or even engendered Dresser’s lifelong interest in ‘artistic botany’.<sup>9</sup> Redgrave stated that the ornamentalist must regard the “absolute laws of natural growth” in his designs instead of applying “naturalistic” ornament. He demonstrated this with reference to a geometric drawing of a sow thistle (Fig. 3). Dresser’s theory of conventionalizing natural decoration appears to have been influenced by Redgrave’s laws of the “strict geometrical and numerical rhythm” in plant forms.<sup>10</sup>

Redgrave also lectured on the quality of restraint in nature and stated that the design student must observe “how nature restricts her true ornaments, the flowers, to the most salient and culminating points of plants, and sprinkles them sparingly, contrasted with the foliage.”<sup>11</sup>

In his 1890 *Manual of Design*, which was based on earlier lectures, Redgrave listed five points as elements of style which are also found in Dresser’s 1873 *Principles of Decorative Design*:<sup>12</sup>

1. (style) should reflect the “mind of the age”
2. proper materials for the construction of the object should be considered before ornament
3. utility has precedence over decoration

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<sup>9</sup> Halén, *Dresser*. 19.

<sup>10</sup> G. R. Redgrave. *Manual of Design*. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1890) 19.

<sup>11</sup> Redgrave, *Manual*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Redgrave, *Manual*, 15.

4. design and ornament must be sensitive to the qualities of material and not mix treatments
5. architecture determines the style and there should be “proper uniformity” of the objects throughout

#### **d) Influence of Owen Jones**

In his major work published in 1856, *Grammar and Ornament*, Owen Jones stated that “although ornament is most properly only an accessory to architecture, and should never be allowed to usurp the place of structural features, or to overload or to disguise them, it is in all cases the very soul of an architectural monument.”<sup>13</sup> In a more radical passage in the same book, Jones suggests that ornament can develop into a new style independent of any new style architecture and that “architecture adopts ornament, does not create it.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1849, Dresser’s second year at the School of Design, Jones gave a series of lectures entitled ‘An Attempt to Define the Principles which should Regulate the Employment of colour in Architecture’ at the School of Design.<sup>15</sup> Dresser was present to hear Jones advocate “intelligent and imaginative eclecticism” and a new style that featured the subtle colouring of the Japanese arts. At Jones’ memorial service in 1874, Dresser stated that “he owed all that he (Dresser) then was to the manner in which Jones led him to think in a course of five lectures delivered 25 years ago.”<sup>16</sup>

Jones had published *Al Hambra* in 1842-44 well prior to his *Grammar of Ornament*, and prior to Dresser’s term at the School of Design. Dresser later referred to

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<sup>13</sup> O. Jones. *The Grammar of Ornament*. (London: Studio Editions, 1986) 154.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Grammar*, 155.

<sup>15</sup> Halén, *Dresser*.20.

<sup>16</sup> Halén, *Dresser*.20.

many of the exotic styles of architecture and design contained in *Al Hambra* in his 1873 *Principles of Decorative Design*. In hierarchical terms, Dresser agreed with Jones that “ornament always has arisen out of architecture, or been a mere reflex of the art-principles of the building decorated.”<sup>17</sup>

Dresser took Jones’s theories a step further and assigned a series of expressive adjectives to various ornamental traditions. He praised Egyptian design for example, for its “power and vigour”. He praised Greek design for its “refinement”, Alhambraic design for its “gorgeousness” and Persian and Indian styles for its “richness”. He praised the “quaintness” of Chinese and Japanese art. In contrast, however, he found the styles of the Renaissance “cold”, the Assyrian “coarse” and Roman “haughty”.<sup>18</sup>

#### **e) Influence of Gottfried Semper**

Gottfried Semper lectured in London in 1853, when Dresser was still a student at the School of Design. He praised the work of Georges Cuvier at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. In his London lectures, Semper discussed Cuvier’s classificatory body of material that illustrated the “scaffolding of the skeleton” and the transformation of a bird’s “forefeet” into wings as “symbolic articulation”.<sup>19</sup> Dresser subsequently adopted the emblem of the skeleton and bird’s wings in many of his designs for Minton. He appeared to equate the symbol of the wing with his notion of “power” (Fig. 4). Dresser commented that one of the greatest principles in the plant world was “the centralization of power, or

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<sup>17</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> C. Dresser. *Principles of Decorative Design*. (London: Academy Editions, 1973) 20.

<sup>19</sup> G. Semper. *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1989) 31.

the exertion of a force in a centrifugal manner from a fixed point,” which is a theory that also seems to be visually referenced in Semper’s drawing of a plant form (Fig. 5).<sup>20</sup>

The principle of symmetry in simple plant forms was, according to Semper, “already present in a latent form in those remarkable small worlds of snowflakes (and) flowers” and which was particularly vivid with plants of the primeval world or *urwelt*.<sup>21</sup> Dresser adhered to the principles of symmetry in many of his designs and used the modern production of a cast iron coat rack to simulate the balanced forms of a growing plant (Fig.6).

While lecturing students at the School of Design on Cuvier’s comparative method in natural history, Semper stated,

“ . . . when I observed this variety of nature in its simplicity, I very often thought by myself that it may be possible to reduce the creations of man, and especially the works of architecture, to certain normal and elementary forms, which, in a comparing method of contemplating them analogous to that of Cuvier for natural history, will enable us to find out the elementary forms and the principles, of which all [of the] million appearances in art are but as much different modifications.”<sup>22</sup>

While himself a lecturer at the School of Design, Dresser published an article in 1858 edition of *The Art-Journal* entitled, “Botany as adapted to the arts and arts-manufacture” which suggested that the laws of science were becoming more “simple and definite” since “apparent mysteries are now vanishing away, being superseded by simple truth. . .”<sup>23</sup>

During this important 1853 London lecture, Semper made express reference to Alexander von Humboldt, the author of *Cosmos*, whose thorough study of

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<sup>20</sup> Dresser, “Botany”, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Semper, *Four Elements*, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Semper, *Four Elements*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> C. Dresser. “Botany, as adapted to the arts and art-manufacture”, *Journal of the Society of Arts* (London: 1857) 17.

Goethe's plant morphological work had led him to support the theory of evolution.<sup>24</sup> It is tempting to attribute Dresser's lifelong interest in botany to these influences. Whether he was influenced by Humbolt's work or not, six years later Dresser had authored numerous published papers on the subject of botany. As a result, Dresser received an honorary doctorate from University of Jena for work on Goethe's study on metamorphosis in relation to plant morphology.<sup>25</sup>

Ernst Haeckel was working in the field of botany in Jena when Dresser received his doctorate there. He would undoubtedly have been aware of Dresser's art-botany work and this connection may have had far-reaching effects. After publishing a book in 1862 on unicellular marine organisms called Radiolaria, Haeckel developed an interest in art botany and subsequently published *Art Forms of Nature*. Haeckel, in turn, influenced René Binet, an architect and a designer, who produced plant-based designs for objects and jewellery, which he published in *Equisses Decoratives* in 1903.<sup>26</sup>

Other botany-related books published by Dresser included *The Rudiments of Botany* (1859), *Unity in Variety as Deduced from the Vegetable Kingdom* (1859) and *Popular Manual of Botany* (1860).

In 1852, Semper applied to Henry Cole for a teaching position at the School of Design. He was invited to and did join the Department of Practical Art offering "masters in training" studios in pottery, metalwork and furniture. Dresser, however, apparently believed that Semper failed to possess the specialized, practical skills necessary to teach

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<sup>24</sup> Semper, *Four Elements*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Durant, *Ornament*, 28.

these courses and three years later, in 1855, Dresser was one of the teachers hired to replace Semper.<sup>27</sup>

During his three short years at the School of Design, Semper lectured on three different aspects of design: 1) geometric principles of design, including perspective; 2) principles of style and 3) ornamental art, in which he encouraged the creative invention of new ornamental objects, so that his students would not “pass the whole of their time copying and making studies after nature, without trying their forces on their own creations.”<sup>28</sup> Semper believed, and taught, that practical and industrial arts were developed in their entirety before architecture and that the prototypical features of object helped to explain the architectural forms and principles.<sup>29</sup> Dresser also references the origins of prototypical objects and the universality of their ornament in “*Ornamentation Considered as High Art*”:

“Ornament is the first art which man originates. The savage carves his war spear, and the paddle with which he propels his canoe, into ornamental devices, and this he does long before he seeks to imitate, in a pictorial or sculpturesque manner, the forms of nature; and this ornamentation which he produces is not a form of art which is to lead up to pictorial work, as something which is higher than it, and then be abandoned; on the contrary it is an art the highest developments of which have been contemporary with the highest forms of civilization. It arose in a far-off antiquity, as a sort of natural outgiving of man’s mind.”<sup>30</sup>

Dresser’s discussion of the origins of ceramic form in *Principles of Decorative Design*, may also suggest the influence of Semper’s “primordial derivation” theories. In *Principles of Decorative Design*, Dresser notes that primitive man used the gourd as a

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<sup>27</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Mallgrave, *Semper: Architect*, 214.

<sup>29</sup> Mallgrave, *Semper: Architect*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> C. Dresser. “Ornamentation Considered as High Art”, *Journal of the Society of Arts*, XIX. (London: 1871) 219.

drinking vessel or bottle, and that this shape was subsequently copied into clay forms made on the potter's wheel, keeping the memory of the origin object intact.<sup>31</sup>

At this same time, in the late 1850s, artisans in China continued to manufacture the bottle/gourd form and Dresser adapted this form for modern consumption with the use of vivid, flowing glazes.

Semper had lectured Dresser in 1852 on the primordial classifications of arts (hearth, walls, terrace and roof) and Dresser subsequently used similar classifications in *The Art of Decorative Design* in a Chapter entitled "Grades in the Decorative Art".<sup>32</sup> He also referenced the division of styles (Egyptian, Chinese and Japanese, etc.) that Octavius Hudson, another tutor at the School, had used in 1854 during his series of lectures entitled "The Analogy of Ornaments" and "The Analysis of the Styles."<sup>33</sup>

Semper had also written about inappropriate imitation and stated that the "basic motive" of an object should not be "obscured by its false application."<sup>34</sup> Dresser echoed this same concept by stating that artificial graining and marbling of wood was inappropriate, presumably in the sense that its basic motive, as Semper would have described it, was thereby obscured by false application. Dresser's taste excluded both the use of ornate inlaying and any dependence on the natural grain of wood for decoration in his furniture that he felt removed "unity" from the work.<sup>35</sup> His radical simplicity is present in an 1879 wardrobe that displays his belief in 'ideal' or 'conventionalized' plant

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<sup>31</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Semper, *Four Elements*, 1989.

<sup>35</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 63.

forms and the grotesque (Fig. 7). The striking colour scheme is a product of the elaborate chromatic theory, published by George Field in *Chromatography* in 1835.”<sup>36</sup>

Dresser himself asserted that ornament and not architecture was his “sphere”, however he believed that the two disciplines were indivisible.(footnote needed here) He stated, “The material at hand, the religion of the people, the climate have. . . determined the character of the architecture of all ages and nations . . . and the nature of the ornamentation of the edifices.”<sup>37</sup> This statement is to some degree similar to Semper’s list of influences that determine basic form: both materials and tools along with “place, climate, time, customs, particular characteristics, rank, position”.<sup>38</sup>

#### **f) Influence of Ralph Wornum**

Ralph Wornum lectured at the London School of Design, while Dresser was a student there, during the years 1848, 1849 and 1850. Wornum based his 1879 book *Analysis of Ornament* on these same lectures.

In *Analysis of Ornament*, Wornum identifies repetition and series as a key “grammar of ornament”, a term also used by Owen Jones in his 1856 book, *The Grammar of Ornament*.<sup>39</sup> Repetition is an exact analog for machine production. Both Wornum and Dresser may have recognized the repetition of ornament and form as imitating or referencing the mechanistic production of the industrial age. In an 1877 article, Dresser paraphrased Wornum’s replication theory and used the same example, that of the kaleidoscope, to illustrate the value of repeating simple materials in a circular

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<sup>36</sup> S. Durant & H. Oorthuys. *The Aesthetic Movement and the Cult of Japan*. (London: The Fine Art Society Limited, 1972) 42.

<sup>37</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Semper, *Four Elements*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> R. Wornum. *The Analysis of Ornament*. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1879). 14.

motion to produce beautiful results.<sup>40</sup> Dresser also extracted a theoretical basis for his theory of repetition from his work in the field of botany. He observed that a system of repetition is how “nature produces her more complex structures.”<sup>41</sup>

Wornum lectured his students at the School of Design on the functionality of objects and suggested that the designer give, “the cylinder a shape which shall correspond with its destined use” and to “give it a pleasing individuality of character consistent with its destination”. Wornum cautioned the designer that it was their duty to “suffer no mere ornamental predilections to interfere with the mechanical or practical excellence of his design.”<sup>42</sup> These lectures may have contributed to the trend towards simplification in Dresser’s designs, particularly for metal and ceramic objects (Fig. 8). J. Jones suggests that Dresser used simple, geometric forms in his ceramic designs, to convey “power.” Dresser’s ceramic drawings for Minton included inverted cones, circular tubes, U-shaped tubes, straight-sided cylinders, or cylinders grouped together, and drum shaped cylinders.<sup>43</sup>

### **g) Influence of A.W.N. Pugin**

In an influential and much admired book *Contrasts*, published in 1836, a decade before Dresser’s attendance at the School of Design, A.W.N. Pugin argued that religious truth must be connected to architectural truth. He believed that the Classical style of

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<sup>40</sup> C. Dresser. “General Principles of Ornament”, *The Furniture Gazette* (London: 1877) 174.

<sup>41</sup> Dresser. “Botany”, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Wornum, *Analysis*, 20.

<sup>43</sup> J. Jones. *Minton*. (Shrewsbury: Swan Hill Press, 1993) 89.

architecture referenced the Reformation in England and was unacceptable for a converted and devout Catholic like himself.<sup>44</sup> He equated Catholicism with Gothic style.

Pugin regularly contributed tableware designs to Minton and may have inspired Dresser to use the motif of the proverb or motto. Dresser's ewer and basin bear the motto, "Wash me and I shall be Whiter than Snow" from Psalms 51:7 and "When Thou fastest anoint thine head and wash they face" from Matthew 6:17. This decoration references Pugin's religious mottos, painted on china, but also corresponds exactly to the purpose of the ewer (Fig. 9).

The central motif on this work by Dresser demonstrates a first step towards abstraction of form. Dresser declared that "if plants are employed as ornaments they must not be treated imitatively, but must be conventionally treated, or rendered into ornaments."<sup>45</sup> Dresser opposed Ruskin's idea that ornament must be "imitative" and cannot be beautiful unless "directly imitating natural form."<sup>46</sup>

From the Gothic or as Pugin would call it, Catholic style, Dresser took the idea of "simple honesty and boldness", a concept which he would use in his manufacturing designs.<sup>47</sup> Dresser eventually discontinued his use of Gothic decoration since, "having passed from its purity towards undue elaboration, it began to lose its hold on the people for whom it was created, and the form of religion with which it had long been associated had become old, when the great overthrow of old traditions and usages occurred, commonly called the Reformation."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> D.Watkin. *Morality and Architecture*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 17.

<sup>45</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 24.

<sup>46</sup> J.Ruskin. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. New York: Lovell, Coryell & Company, 1849. 101.

<sup>47</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 13.

## **h) Influence of John Ruskin**

Dresser developed his motto “Truth, Beauty and Power” while at the School of Design.<sup>49</sup> His definition of Truth required the use of truthfulness or honesty in expression and the sensitive use of materials. Beauty, he defined as “lovable” and “tireless” forms, and Power as “energy” and the implication of the “conqueror”.<sup>50</sup>

It is hard to avoid the obvious derivation from Ruskin’s important “Seven Lamps of Architecture,” a book first published in 1849, during Dresser’s second year at the School of Design. Ruskin had listed Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory and Obedience as the seven lamps of architecture.

Ruskin also defined Truth as honesty and absence of deception in architecture. He believed that architectural transgressions included structural and surface deceits as well as cast or machine-made ornaments.<sup>51</sup> Beauty, according to Ruskin, was achieved by reproducing the “external appearances of organic nature”<sup>52</sup> and power was defined as man’s expression of “living authority and power” which derived from “knowing what to gather (from Nature)” and “how to rule”.<sup>53</sup> All of this resounds in Dresser’s written work and theories.

In 1862, Dresser wrote *The Art of Decorative Design*, which contains an illustrated page with the motto “Knowledge is Power” (Fig. 10). This motto introduces Dresser’s belief that an artist should become acquainted with science as the root of truth, and merges this truth with the beauty in art. As a committed educator of the public, Dresser wrote in the 1857 *Art Journal* that “the ambition of the true ornamentalist will

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<sup>49</sup> Halén, *Dresser*. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Ruskin, *Seven Lamps*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Ruskin, *Seven Lamps*, 100.

<sup>53</sup> Ruskin, *Seven Lamps*, 71.

lead him to occupy his true place, which is by his superior knowledge and skill to lead on the minds of the less enlightened towards beauty and truth.”<sup>54</sup> In another version of this same statement, Dresser acknowledged the appetite of the uneducated masses for objects and states that “the ambition of the artist is not merely to satisfy and please the illiterate and uneducated, but to produce that truth which shall satisfy the educated and learned.”<sup>55</sup>

### **i) Comparison with William Morris**

Christopher Dresser was born in the same year as William Morris and outlived him by eight years, dying in 1906. William Morris believed that his contemporary manufacturers and designers were slaves to the machine and to greed. He advocated a return to the traditions of simplicity, beauty and craftsmanship that he read into the Middle Ages. He rejected machine production and participated in the manual production of good art work “as the expression of man of his pleasure in labour.”<sup>56</sup> Dresser’s work provided a direct contrast to Morris’ pessimistic view of the machine age. In 1862, Dresser stated that the arts must “teach us the perfection of machinery and the greatness of our mechanical skill, and they will also tell in future ages, of the vastness of our power”.<sup>57</sup> Dresser published his theories fifteen years ahead of Morris who never publicly credited Dresser’s influence. Widar Halén believes that Morris may have derived many of his design principles from Dresser.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Halén, *Dresser*. 24.

<sup>55</sup> Dresser, “Botany” 362.

<sup>56</sup> N. Pevsner. *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1936) 24.

<sup>57</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 29.

## **Dresser's Views on Principles of Design**

### **a) Botany**

While a student at the School of Design, Dresser embraced the mandate of the School to integrate science with art, and he decided to specialize in botany. Dresser was undoubtedly aware of Ruskin's writings on imitative ornament and Pugin's 1849 *Floriated Ornament*, and he may have incorporated Redgrave's laws of geometric and numerical elements in nature to evolve his new, abstracted style of rendering plant and animal forms (Fig. 11).

Dresser designed crests and vase designs for Wedgwood & Sons and in 1867 described their content as:

“embodying chiefly the idea of power, energy, force, or vigour; and in order to do this, I have employed such lines as we see in the bursting buds of spring, when the energy of growth is at its maximum, and especially, such as are to be seen in the spring growth, of a luxuriant tropical vegetation; I have also availed myself of those forms to be seen in certain bones of birds which are associated with the organs of flight, and which give us an impression of great strength, as well as those observable in the propelling fins of certain species of fish.”<sup>59</sup>

One of the many lecturers at the School for Design was Professor John Lindley, who was also Chair of Botany at the University of London at the time. Professor Lindley lectured at the School of Design in 1852 and again in 1854 on the then new science of “morphology”, which he had launched in Britain through his book *Introduction to Botany* in 1832. Later, in 1860, while himself a lecturer at the School of Design, Dresser listed himself as Professor of Botany at six different universities and actually submitted an application to the University of London to replace John Lindley as Chair of Botany upon his retirement from that position. Only when his application was rejected, did Dresser make the conscious decision to devote his life to the art of design. Dresser referred to

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<sup>59</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 31.

Professor Lindley in print as “the great Dr. Lindley,” and proudly quoted Lindley as saying “nothing great can be gained in the absence of method, zeal and perseverance.”<sup>60</sup>

This work ethic and undertone of socialism emerges in the Dresser’s 1873 *Principles of Decorative Design*, in which Dresser lectures his students who have “industriously persevered in their studies, and were content to labour for success” to join him as, “Workmen! I am a worker, and a believer in the efficacy of work.”<sup>61</sup>

## **b) Grotesques**

Another characteristic that distinguished Dresser’s work from that of his contemporaries was his idiosyncratic use of “grotesque” ornament. In *Principles of Decorative Design*, he suggested that ornamentation as a fine art can “administer to man in all his varying moods” and serve to “teach, elevate, refine, induce lofty aspirations and allay sorrows.”<sup>62</sup> One of these moods is humour, which he equates with love. He states:

“although the grotesque is widely removed from the beautiful, it has rarely had an existence altogether separate from it; when combined with beauty it gives pleasure to the beholder. The beautiful appeals to our sense of refinement, or to our refined perceptions, but the grotesque addresses our sense of humour; it presents the comic element in art, and when it appears in a very droll form, affects the spirits as powerfully as the keenest wit”.<sup>63</sup>

Dresser’s pattern book contained unusual friezes featuring graphically articulated grasshoppers, beetles, butterflies, cats and chameleons. Much of this work demonstrates a curious sense of the absurd, or grotesque in nature. One example is a match pot designed for the 1867 Paris Exhibition, illustrating a dog with the inscription, “Our Dog Tray in the Spirit, Our Dog Tray in the Flesh”(Fig. 12).

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<sup>60</sup> Dresser, “Botany”, 364.

<sup>61</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, *Minton*, 90

Dresser's interest in grotesques as playful and eccentric elements in his designs may have stemmed from Ruskin's affinity for "Grotesqueness", as one of the Moral Elements of a Gothic Building. Ruskin had listed the six "moral elements" of a building as being "Savageness, Changefulness, Naturalism, Grotesqueness, Rigidity, and Redundance."<sup>64</sup> In his 1853 *Stones of Venice*, Ruskin defended the use of grotesques, stating that 'the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors . . . those ugly goblins and formless monsters . . . stern statues, anatomyless and rigid' were the 'signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought . . . which it must be the first aim of all Europe. . . to regain for her children.'<sup>65</sup>

Dresser's attraction to grotesque drollery was also based on Japanese and Celtic models. The use of the skeleton insect in his designs may have been influenced by an antique Kyoto bottle which was decorated with a human skeleton. In his 1882 book, *Japan, Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures*, Dresser describes a vase which shows a skeleton holding a bamboo rod with a bird on the end of it. An almond tree, the Japanese symbol of youth, beauty and long life, is placed behind the bird. The skeleton symbolizing death has captured the bird with "bird-lime" on the end of the fishing pole and the scene is a satire of the wish for a long life.<sup>66</sup> Dresser's grotesques and skeletal figures may be intended to represent more serious symbolic themes beyond their humorous exterior as illustrated in his "Old Bogey" design (Fig. 13).

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<sup>64</sup> Durant, *Ornament*, 87.

<sup>65</sup> Durant, *Ornament*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Dresser. *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1977. 274.

### c) Japan

Dresser states that he “first formed the acquaintance with Japanese art” at the 1862 London Exhibition after seeing a number of objects brought back by Sir Rutherford Alcock, the first British Consul General in Japan.<sup>67</sup> Dresser was allowed to sketch the items and he studied their assymetrical design, contrasting patterns, and their unusual glazes and simple shapes. In 1873, Dresser set up an authentic Japanese village which he arranged to have transported from Vienna to Alexandra Palace Park. Eventually Dresser became the leading advocate of Japonism, as it came to be called, in Britain. In 1876, Dresser made an extended visit and trade mission to Japan and was the first European designer to visit after it opened to visitors for the first time in 1853. As an honored guest of the “His Majesty the Mikado” for four months, he was allowed to explore sixty-eight pottery production sites.<sup>68</sup> The Japanese government actually asked him to report on development of modern industry in Japan and the result was distributed as the *Dresser Hokoku* in 1877.

In his subsequent lectures on Japanese art, Dresser condemned the random and frivolous collections of Japanese products in English homes as mere “curiosity shops” and appealed for a serious examination of the use and significance of Japanese design elements.<sup>69</sup> Convinced of the value of Japanese architecture as an influence on the development of a new English style, Dresser published *Japan, Its Architecture, Art, and Art Manufactures* in 1882. In this book, Dresser describes Japanese architecture as being, “marked by great individuality for expression, manifesting to a striking degree the nature of the material of which its structure are built, and owing its special features to the

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<sup>67</sup> C. Dresser. “The Art Manufactures of Japan”, *The Furniture Gazette*. (London: 1878) 74.

<sup>68</sup> Dresser, *Japan*, vii.

<sup>69</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 65.

condition under which it exists, and the religions with which it is associated.”<sup>70</sup> However, in relation to its effect on British design, Dresser states, “I do not wish to destroy our art and substitute for it the Japanese style . . . we may borrow what is good from all peoples; but we must distil all that we borrow through our own minds”.<sup>71</sup>

Dresser’s work in Japan influenced American design as well. He returned from this trip with a Japanese collection of six thousand items for Tiffany’s in New York and he was subsequently asked to design new items for their collection. Dresser also imported translucent enamel screens from Japan for Tiffany and the company produced Japanese stained-glass windows in 1877 and 1878.<sup>72</sup> These windows served to popularize the use of stained glass in domestic interiors to enhance the lighting conditions and dispel the Victorian gloom.<sup>73</sup> An 1878 article in the *The Builder* magazine describes how Dresser set up Japanese lattice panels at a meeting of the Architectural Association and encouraged the group to use them as ventilating panels, dado and frieze panels, cabinet doors, window blinds and outside shutters. He wrote that “if we, as architects, do not patronize what is good in art as associated with building, the people cannot do so.”<sup>74</sup>

Widar Halén states that “it was not until the turn of the century, that the lattice panels, ceilings beams, brackets and the simplicity of Japanese interiors recommended by Dresser, began to influence Western architects such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Peter Behrens, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Louis Sullivan Bruno Taut and Frank Lloyd Wright.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Dresser, *Japan*, 225.

<sup>71</sup> Durant & Oorthuys, *Aesthetic Movement*, 42.

<sup>72</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 44.

<sup>73</sup> W. Halén. “Christopher Dresser and the aesthetic interior”, *The Magazine Antiques*, V. 139. (London: 1991) 256-67.

<sup>74</sup> C. Dresser. “Japanese Work”, *The Builder*, (London: June 22, 1878) 654.

<sup>75</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 9.

In 1879, Dresser set up a partnership with Charles Holme to import and promote architectural uses of Japanese products. Holme later founded *The Studio* magazine and in 1906 and that same year published *The Art-Revival in Austria*. Holme's book gives details of English influences on the development of Austrian art, such as Muthesius' *English Home* and the theories of Ruskin and Morris on Josef Hoffman.<sup>76</sup> Although Holmes was obviously aware of Dresser's work, he does not specifically mention him as a direct influence on Austrian art. In praising the ceramic and metal designs of Frau Luksch-Makowsky, however, Holme uses Dresser's "truth" and "power" terminology, stating "in all that she does, whether great or small, there is underlying truth. There is power and there is character in her work."<sup>77</sup>

#### **d) Colour and Psychological effects**

Dresser was aware of the psychological effects of design on the mind Alf Bøe states that like Wornum, Dresser "held that we act in accordance with an inward instinct or passion when we apply colour and ornament to our surrounding objects."<sup>78</sup> In *Principles of Decorative Design*, Dresser stated that use of the scientific method into the "metaphysical inquiry into cause and effect" is of utmost importance to the designer.<sup>79</sup> He stated that one must decide which elements of ornamental composition (form, colour, and surface decoration) to incorporate into an object in order to evoke the terms "soothing", "ethereal", "solid" or "melancholy". He suggested that spiky forms were "more or less exciting" and bold or broad forms "were soothing or tend to give repose."<sup>80</sup> He also

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<sup>76</sup> C. Holme. *The Art-Revival in Austria*. (London: 1906) Dii.

<sup>77</sup> Holme, *Art-Revival*, Dvi.

<sup>78</sup> A. Bøe. *From Gothic Revival to Functional Form*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979) 136.

<sup>79</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 14.

suggested that the objects in a room should harmonize to produce a sense of “repose,” since “in these days of competition, when the brain is ever active, and the nerve force is kept of many hours together in constant play, it is peculiarly desirable that our rooms be soothing in effect and snug in appearance.”<sup>81</sup>

In *Principles of Decorative Design*, Dresser also suggests that his working class students should study the use of colour in Indian shawls and Chinese embroidery found in what was then the South Kensington Museum. Dresser noted that the Indian fabrics used red and yellow were produce “rich, mingled, bloomy, *warm* effects” while the Chinese colours achieved “clearness, repose and *coolness*” with the predominance of blue and white.

Dresser held definite views on colour in apparel and believed that interior objects should be secondary to the inhabitants of the room. He stated,

The living beings in a room should be most attractive and conspicuous, and the dress of man should be of such a character as to secure this. Ladies can now employ any amount of colour in their attire; but poor man, however noble, cannot be his dress be distinguished from his butler; and, worst of all, both are dressed in an unbecoming and inartistic manner.<sup>82</sup>

Another economical source of colour study open to the working class student was the “colour-top” kaleidoscope or a “scientific toy procurable of opticians” which produces beautiful effects. Dresser suggested the observation of lighting or “gas tubes” illuminated by electricity, prisms and even soap bubbles may improve one’s colour sense.<sup>83</sup>

#### **e) Functionality**

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<sup>81</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 90.

<sup>83</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 48.

Functionality of form in objects and architecture was of primary concern to Dresser. He adopted the nautilus shell as a perfect example of utilitarianism combined with beauty. His description of the precision, practicality and internal structure of the nautilus shell in *The Principles of Decorative Design* recalls the concept of the *etui*, where the streamlined case corresponds to the internal shape of the object.<sup>84</sup>

Stating a concept of functionality that would reappear in 20<sup>th</sup> century theory Dresser said in 1873, “with special reference to architecture, we notice that unless a building is fitted for the purpose intended, or in other words, answers utilitarian ends, it cannot be esteemed as it otherwise might be, even though it be of great aesthetic beauty.”<sup>85</sup>

Again in 1877, Dresser stated that “utility must precede beauty, is the spirit of our proposition, and this cannot be too strongly enforced.”<sup>86</sup> In the same article, he stressed that “adaptation to purpose” or “fitness”, a principle taken from his study of the adaptation in the growth of plants in different conditions, be followed in the design of objects.

In *Principles of Decorative Design*, Dresser suggested that the entire form or mass of an object should be considered. He referenced the “sky-blotch” or mass of a building against a sunset as a way of observing overall dimension and magnitude of the structure. Dresser stated in this same work that “the general form of all works of furniture should be first cared for, and every effort should be made at securing to the general mass, beauty of shape” and that the elements of design were 1) general form; 2) detail, which

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<sup>84</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 20.

<sup>86</sup> Dresser, “General Principles,” 174.

must be subordinate to the general mass; 3) material worked in an appropriate manner; 4) utility which precedes beauty.<sup>87</sup>

Dresser's principles of design prefigured early twentieth century design theory in Germany. In 1903, Koloman Moser, with Josef Hoffman, organized Wiener Werkstätte, a design group which held definite views concerning functionality and use of material. Moser stated that "Our guiding principle is function, utility our first condition, and our strength must lie in good proportions and the proper treatment of material. We shall seek to decorate when it seems required, but we do not feel obliged to adorn at any price."<sup>88</sup> In 1902, Hermann Muthesius echoed the same theory of utility and fitness when he urged that designers should be aware that "treating a material in a way contrary to its nature is hardly in accord with the spirit of our time, which is characterized by very straightforward (*sachlich*) and rational thought."<sup>89</sup>

### **Dresser's Impact on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Design**

#### **a) Art Furnisher's Alliance**

Dresser set up the Art Furnishers' Alliance as an interior design store in 1880. It was advertised as introducing "manufacturing, buying and selling high-class goods of artistic design" and producing "all kinds of artistic house furnishing material, including furniture, carpets, wall decorations, hangings, pottery, table glass, silversmith's wares, hardware, and whatever is necessary to our household requirements."<sup>90</sup> The costumes of the female shop assistants were designed to correspond to the colours of the aesthetic

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<sup>87</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 50.

<sup>88</sup> I. Wardropper & L.S. Roberts. *European Decorative Arts in the Art Institute of Chicago*. Chicago: Abrams, 1991. 123.

<sup>89</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 95.

<sup>90</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 47.

movement, which were a “greenery-yallery” (a term of ridicule coined by Gilbert and Sullivan) dress with a “ruby sash and mob cap to harmonize”.<sup>91</sup>

The Aesthetic Movement had started in the 1860s, just after Dresser’s student years at the School of Design, and was concerned with the interior, new colour ideas and “art for art’s sake.” Notable advocates of the Aesthetic Movement included Algernon Swinburne, James M. Whistler and Edward W. Godwin. By the 1880s, the vast influence of the Aesthetic Movement could be felt in architecture and interior decoration. Dresser published his theories fifteen years ahead of Morris and Halén has expressed the opinion that Dresser may have affected the development of the Aesthetic movement and the work of both Godwin and Whistler.<sup>92</sup>

After three years of struggle, The Art Furnisher’s Alliance went into liquidation in 1883. Its major shareholder, the department store “Liberty”, continued to carry many of its products thereafter.<sup>93</sup> The failure of The Art Furnisher’s Alliance was due, among other things undoubtedly, to the fact that the Victorian public was not then ready for its avant-garde designs. Critics of The Art Furnisher’s Alliance stated that the products were unusual and dissimilar to anything currently on the market in London. An article in *The Studio* in 1883 suggested that the failure was due to the store “being before its time. For it was alone in its mission in addressing a popular audience . . . no window in a popular thoroughfare was supporting the movement destined to assume such large proportions later”.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 47.

<sup>92</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 192.

<sup>94</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 47.

Dresser's futuristic designs may also have been victim of unstable public opinion which fluctuated from trend to trend. Pointon has stated that "a typical feature of the age was that any artistic project was mobbed by the public which swung unpredictably from approbation to censure". C.W. Cope, a painter, wrote as early as 1841 that "novel work was written about in the papers and admired by crowds, but allowed to come home unsold".<sup>95</sup>

### **b) Impact on Art Nouveau**

Dresser was concerned with designing for inexpensive materials as an alternative to the extravagance of the Victorian interior. He developed "sugar-paper" or plain brown wallpaper which was based on Japanese brown paper sliding doors. Anaglyptic wallpaper serves as unobtrusive background for interior furnishes with tone-on-tone colour and repetition in patterning. It was similar to a product called Lincrusta, but with higher relief. The paper was advertised as providing a sanitary alternative in bathrooms and was exhibited at the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901. The Modern pattern was favourably reviewed by critics at the Exhibition and its Japanese lattice effect found its way into the Glasgow style developed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh.<sup>96</sup> Macintosh was a botanical draughtsman and like Dresser, treated flowers and leaves in abstract way. It is interesting to note an 1862 textile pattern by Dresser (Fig. 14) that compares favourably to a 1916 textile design by Macintosh (Fig. 15). In later life, Dresser was a leading wallpaper designer and when the Wallpaper Combine was formed in 1899, he

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<sup>95</sup> Pointon, *Dyce*, 57.

<sup>96</sup> Halén, "Dresser and aesthetic," 265.

designed extensively in Germany. Wallpapers designed for the Zuber company have since come to light and were obviously produced for the Art Nouveau market.<sup>97</sup>

From 1862 on, Dresser was the primary proponent in Britain of the integration of Japanese style into modern design. By the time of the 1878 Paris exhibition, other English architects and designers were emulating the Anglo-Japanese look that Dresser had championed decades before. Halén states that Godwin, Jekyll, Talbert and Whistler were publicly praised for creating a Modern English style, which was “one of the precursors of Art Nouveau.”<sup>98</sup>

Another Art Nouveau precursor was Clutha glass, which was a production line of glass vases designed by Dresser. The Clutha technique emphasized the natural, bubbly and streaking qualities of raw glass. Many of Dresser’s designs featured non-traditional flowing necks and wavy rims. Halén states that Dresser’s designs were found in the archive of Bohemian designer, Johann Loetz, who produced acclaimed Art Nouveau glass.<sup>99</sup>

Although there is no documented connection between Dresser and Henry Van de Velde, a comparison of their work and ideas illustrates Dresser’s advancement in new materials and pre-Art Nouveau style.

Van de Velde was director of the School of Applied Arts in Weimar and as Peter Collins states, “a famous exponent of Art Nouveau.”<sup>100</sup> In lectures given around 1900, Van de Velde embraced the new machine age and advocated forms which reflected, “logical structure of products, uncompromising logic in the use of materials, proud and

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<sup>97</sup> Halén, “Dresser and aesthetic,” 266.

<sup>98</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 87.

<sup>99</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 199

<sup>100</sup> P. Collins. *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1965) 266.

frank exhibition of working processes.”<sup>101</sup> Dresser had made a similar statement in 1873 about material,

The material of which an object is formed should be used in a manner consistent with its own nature, and in that particular way in which it can be most easily “worked.” When an object is about to be formed, that material which is most appropriate to its formation should be sought and employed.<sup>102</sup>

Van de Velde believed that wood was not the optimal material for furniture since it could not be mass-produced as easily as cast iron. In 1894, in his *Decorative Art Workshop* near Brussels, van de Velde produced a series of designs for Art Nouveau style cast iron furniture.<sup>103</sup> Dresser embraced machine-produced furniture, for many of the same reasons as had van de Velde, and from 1867 on Dresser also produced a line of tables, stoves, fireplaces, coat stands, chairs and benches for the Coalbrookdale Company.

Van de Velde was a proponent of new materials. He said that, “a great future is prophesied for iron, steel, aluminum, linoleum, celluloid, cement”.<sup>104</sup> Dresser also advocated the use of inexpensive, new floor and wall coverings. Halén states that Dresser “was involved in the first production of linoleum decorations”.<sup>105</sup> Dresser also utilized the new process of electro-plating objects rather than using traditional and costly silversmithery. In a comparison between teapots produced by Dresser (Fig. 16) and van de Velde (Fig. 17), Dresser’s design appears more modern, even now. Dresser’s designs features handles and feet which were usually angular and his inspiration came from Japanese drawing which, he stated, “possessed a crispness of touch, or angularity.

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<sup>101</sup> Pevsner, *Pioneers*, 31.

<sup>102</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 22.

<sup>103</sup> Collins, *Changing Ideals*, 267.

<sup>104</sup> Pevsner, *Pioneers*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 85.

Rounded lines, if used in a sketch, generally produce feebleness of effect; whereas angularity in drawing gives vigour and life.”<sup>106</sup>

### **c) Impact on International Exhibitions**

In the 1870s, Dresser’s career was at its peak, with a full slate of public activity as lecturer, juror, critical writer and designer for International Exhibitions. During this immensely productive period of his life, Dresser published *Development of Ornamental Art in the International Exhibition* (1862), *Principles of Decorative Design* (1873), *Studies in Design* (1874-76), *Japan, Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures* (1882) and, finally, his major work *Modern Ornamentation* (1886).

Dresser also participated actively in following international exhibitions during this period:

1. London, 1862, exhibiting for Minton (ceramics)
2. Paris, 1867, exhibiting for Minton (ceramics), Wedgwood (ceramics), Coalbrooke (cast iron), Cooke, Jeffrey, Woolams (wallpaper), Brinton & Lewis (carpets), Crossley & Sons (carpets), Elkington (metal)
3. London, 1871, Minton (ceramics)
4. London, 1872, exhibiting for Crossley & Sons (carpets)
5. Vienna, 1873, exhibiting for Minton (ceramics)
6. London, 1873, where he imported a Japanese village from Vienna to Alexandra Palace Park.
7. Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, 1876, exhibiting for Minton (ceramics).

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<sup>106</sup> Jones, *Minton*, 89.

8. Paris, 1878. Juror for wallpapers. Exhibiting for Lincrusta Walton (wallpaper), Brinton (carpets), Barlow & Jones (quilts), Minton (ceramics)
9. Chicago, 1893, exhibited The Columbian Celebration Quilt with U.S. insignia.
10. Glasgow, 1901, exhibited for Anaglypta (wallpaper), Lincrusta (wallpaper).

In an 1874 article in *Journal of the Society of the Arts*, Dresser discussed a kettle from the Vienna Exhibition, “sent by the Tycoon’s Government of Austria”, in which the form is a “flattened spheroid, and thus resembles in a shape a common cheese, with its edges rounded.”<sup>107</sup> He praises the utility and the “beauty” of the object, but in comparison with a Japanese kettle, the design of the Austrian kettle falls short. He states,

It is curious that while the kettle is an object in use in every house in the land, we have to go to Japan to learn how to make one as it should be made. But we are a pig-headed, self-opinionated people, we blindly persist in our ignorance. We do not give thought to what we do, but insist upon doing those things which our fathers did, just as our fathers did them.<sup>108</sup>

#### **d) Impact in America**

In 1876, Dresser visited the *Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition*. The *New York Times* called him “one of the most perfect specimens of art intellect which England shipped to the U.S. for the exhibition at Philadelphia . . . He styles himself ‘art adviser,’ and is well know to American designers and art manufacturers by several publications.”<sup>109</sup>

Stuart Durant suggests a connection between Dresser and Louis Sullivan, since Sullivan believed that the process of the seed becoming a plant was an adequate metaphor for the creative process in man and this is strongly evocative of Dresser’s own often

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<sup>107</sup> Dresser, “Eastern Art,” 212.

<sup>108</sup> Dresser, “Eastern Art,” 212.

<sup>109</sup> Durant, *Ornament*, 41.

stated philosophy.<sup>110</sup> Sullivan's theory or 'philosophy of man's powers' was indebted to Goethe's work on *Urpflanze* – the Primal Plant which was the predecessor of all plants. Goethe believed that if the origins of the primordial plant could be determined then any form of plant could be invented from that prototype. Durant believes that Sullivan was not aware of Goethe's work and may instead have been influenced by Dresser's *The Art of Decorative Design* (1862). Dresser had by this time received a doctorate based on his investigation of Goethe's theories, and in this book he stated, "The designer's mind must be like the vital force of the plant, ever developing itself into forms of beauty."<sup>111</sup>

Robert Schmutzler states that Dresser's books on ornamentation were popular in American schools and that decorative details in Sullivan's Rothschild store are very similar to Dresser's design "Force and Energy"(Fig. 4).<sup>112</sup> Schmutzler surmises that since the work of Louis Sullivan, Frank Furness and Antoni Gaudí, "developed their dynamic botanical Art Nouveau forms from the plant-like vigor of the Gothic style" and that they were all influenced by Dresser's work.<sup>113</sup>

#### **e) Impact on the role of the industrial designer**

Dresser was evidently happy that he had been awarded his honorary degree, as he used the title "Doctor" routinely afterwards. Even though his metalwork designs were produced by a manufacturer and not by hand, he insisted that the pieces be stamped with "Designed by Dr. C. Dresser."

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<sup>110</sup> Durant, *Ornament*, 29.

<sup>111</sup> Durant, *Ornament*, 29.

<sup>112</sup> R. Schmutzler. *Art Nouveau*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977) 179.

<sup>113</sup> Schmutzler, *Art Nouveau*, 37.

Dresser emphasized the equality of designer and the manufacturer and he was one of the first European designers to imprint his signature next to the maker's mark. One of his teachers, Matthew Digby Wyatt, may have influenced Dresser in this insistence on signing his work, since Digby had noted at the 1867 Paris Exhibition that for the first time, the artist was individually represented for "his share in the production of the house".<sup>114</sup>

Dresser championed the role and profession of industrial designer. In an article, published in 1873, he stated that,

"structure concerns itself with utility and not especially with beauty; if an object intended to meet utilitarian ends is . . . beautiful, the structuralist says, so much the better, but if it is ugly he care not, for he is a utilitarian only; but on the other hand the artist cares too little about usefulness, he makes the production of beauty his first if not his only care. The ornamentalist should stand between the pure artist on the one side and the utilitarian and join them together."<sup>115</sup>

#### **f) Parallels with the theories of Hermann Muthesius**

There is little documentation as to whether or not Hermann Muthesius noted the work of Christopher Dresser during his study of British architecture and industrial design in 1896. Since Dresser was known as a major British designer during that time, it seems plausible that Muthesius would have been aware of Dresser's work. However, Muthesius credits William Morris exclusively for establishing the "modern English style", which was built on the theories of "sound workmanship, reasonableness and sincerity."<sup>116</sup>

The influence of the Arts and Crafts movement started by Morris, was felt in Germany where it precipitated a new approach to design, according to Muthesius.

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<sup>114</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 29.

<sup>115</sup> Christopher Dresser. "Eastern art, and its influence on European manufactures and taste", *Journal of the Society of Arts*, XXII. (London: 1874) 211.

<sup>116</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 67.

However, instead of looking to traditional references for their inspiration as Morris had, Muthesius stated in 1902 that the German movement took a step forward and developed a “free and unfettered shaping of form. . . which expressed a victory of the contemporary spirit”.<sup>117</sup> But Dresser had used non-traditional forms in his work since as least 1877 (Fig. 18). Furthermore, Dresser stated a similar thesis to Muthesius in *The Furniture Gazette*, “not only must mind be embodied in the ornamental composition, in order that it be satisfying, but the sentiments of the age in which it is created must also be acknowledged.”<sup>118</sup>

Dresser’s work “stressed importance of function, simplicity and mechanical skill, believing that industrial and scientific progress would lead to an entirely new style in art.”<sup>119</sup> In an 1872 sugar basin, he matched the mechanics of the machine with the individual sections of a dissected bird or insect (Fig. 19). Anthropomorphic additions function both as handles and feet for the object, yet display the elasticity and power of a living creature.

In 1902, Muthesius urged that objects should display the “expressiveness” of human movement. He stated that a designer might, “increase the utility of furniture through the rigorous adaptation of form to the physical movements of the human being.”<sup>120</sup> Similar to Dresser’s sugar basin, above, Muthesius thought that furniture would benefit from the application of “human empathy” and therefore “the chair becomes

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<sup>117</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 84.

<sup>118</sup> Dresser, “General Principles,” 174.

<sup>119</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 9.

<sup>120</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 86.

something straddle-legged and crouching, the table leg an elastic line like the weight-bearing human foot.”<sup>121</sup>

In a practical sense, Dresser used the human form in designing furniture and suggested that the height of a chair should be, “determined by the length of the legs of the person for whom the seat is made, or by the degree of obliquity which the body and legs are desired to take when the seat is in use.”<sup>122</sup>

In 1902, Muthesius stated that, “a carpet of however beautiful a pattern or a highly artistic wardrobe has an infinitesimal scope if it does not contribute to the organic structure of the interior.”<sup>123</sup> But as early as 1873, Dresser had proposed neutrality in design and colour of carpets in relation to the whole interior, otherwise floor coverings, “cannot form suitable background to furniture and living objects, for they are positive, and not neutral, in their general effect”.<sup>124</sup>

Dresser believed in an “order of arrangement” or hierarchy within a room which began with humans, then furniture and draperies and finally walls, which should be determined “by the character of the architecture of the building of which the wall forms a part.”<sup>125</sup> Dresser’s attempt to downplay the decorative aspects of carpets and harmonize their effects with other objects in the room, foreshadowed the Bauhaus theory of the merging of separate ornamental pieces into the whole structure of a building. In 1935, Walter Gropius described this incorporation of objects as, “the composite but inseparable

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<sup>121</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 86.

<sup>122</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 53.

<sup>123</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 93.

<sup>124</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 101.

<sup>125</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 90.

work of art, in which the old dividing line between monumental and decorative elements will have disappeared for ever.”<sup>126</sup>

Muthesius may have realized that the exclusivity of Morris’ hand production work did not satisfy the needs of the masses for reasonably priced goods. He stated in 1902 that, “no movement that seeks to be a reform movement can direct itself only to the production of luxury art; its goal, rather, must be to pursue an art suited to middle-class society, which defines the general character of our modern social condition.”<sup>127</sup> Again in 1877, Dresser was promoting a similar theory in stating, “ornament must not only set forth the mind of the producer, but must also be an expression of the collective mind of the people to whom it is addressed, or of the age in which it is created.”<sup>128</sup>

Dresser believed that interior objects should relate specifically to the structure where they would be used. He urged that the design of furniture illustrate that, “its character must be regulated, to an extent, by the nature of the house for which the furniture is intended, and by the character of the room in which it is to be placed.”<sup>129</sup> However, the objects must merge and not dominate stylistically with the architecture. He stated that “a fine work will never have strong architectural qualities – that is, it will not look like part of a building formed of wood instead of stone.”

Dresser’s sensibility to the role of interior objects as stated in 1873, anticipates statements made by Muthesius in 1902 about the fusion of object and interior: “the

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<sup>126</sup> Collins, *Changing Ideals*, 127.

<sup>127</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 85.

<sup>128</sup> Dresser, “General Principles,” 174.

<sup>129</sup> Dresser, *Principles*, 61.

organic relation of the individual object to the artistic whole . . . in the sense of the arts and crafts the whole can only be the interior understood as a unity.”<sup>130</sup>

### **g) Pevsner’s recognition of Dresser’s impact**

In 1937, Pevsner included Dresser in his series entitled, “*Minor Masters of the XIXth Century*” and stated that Dresser’s ideas on the principles of design were “sensible but not especially original” and that he excelled at producing innovative structural forms.<sup>131</sup> Pevsner noted Dresser’s absence of historical references in his work and suggested that might be the reason that they “look so unusual amongst the ordinary period imitation then in fashion”.<sup>132</sup> Pevsner stated that his later work became imitative and lacked his “previous directness of approach” and he suggests that his wallpaper designs in particular demonstrated that he was under the influence of Charles F. Voysey, Mackintosh and Copenhagen porcelain.<sup>133</sup> However, a comparison between two of their fabric designs suggests that Voysey’s 1896 illustration may be derivative of Dresser’s 1890 work (Fig. 20).

### **Conclusion**

Dresser’s daughters attempted to continue his work, but failed. Since Dresser did not create a full-scale workshop or company to manufacture his designs as Morris had, the designer’s popularity faded. The work of William Morris completely eclipsed that of Dresser and Morris’s socialist-leaning polemic, which did not embrace the machine, but

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<sup>130</sup> Muthesius, *Style-Architecture*, 93.

<sup>131</sup> Pevsner, *Pioneers*, 62.

<sup>132</sup> N. Pevsner. “Christopher Dresser: Industrial Designer,” *Architectural Review*. LXXXI. (Westminster: Architectural Press, 1937) 185.

<sup>133</sup> Pevsner, “Dresser,” 186.

stressed hand-work, became the most recognized British design model. Widar Halén suggests the reason for the decline in Dresser's influence was due to the fact that "he appears to have been entirely dependent on the changing fashions in the manufacturing industries."<sup>134</sup> Alf Bøe praises Dresser's earlier work, but concurs with Halén that Dresser, "seems to have exploited the changing fashions of the day, and to a great extent abstained from striking out further new roads for himself."<sup>135</sup>

In his 1904 obituary in *The Studio*, Dresser's contemporaries identify his strengths and influences:

"Mr. Dresser is in a way the figure-head of the professional as opposed to the quasi-amateur designer, and is familiar to the outer world while the very names of some of his worthy contemporaries have never been, and never will be, known outside the trade circles . . . he was among the first to throw over the bondage of dull stylist, and seek in nature new motives, instead of believing that all foliage must hark back to the acanthus, and all pattern find its prototype in certain recognised schools."<sup>136</sup>

With the current trend to re-evaluation of the origins of modern design, Christopher Dresser's visionary principles and designs are now being recognized for their virtuosity. His influence on European and American designers remains poorly documented and cannot be fully mapped, however it is evident that he was an artist that broke out of the Victorian mold and created work that foreshadowed the emphasis on functionality of 20<sup>th</sup> century design.

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<sup>134</sup> Halén, *Dresser*, 18.

<sup>135</sup> Bøe, *Gothic Revival*, 146.

<sup>136</sup> Jones, *Minton*, 98.

## Illustrations

Fig. 1. Frost pattern on window sketch, 1856.  
M. Whiteway. 2001. *Christopher Dresser 1834-1904*.  
Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A: 36.

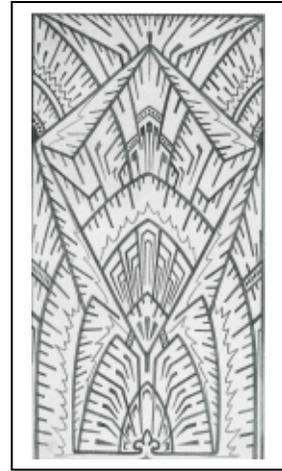


Fig. 2. In no historic style, but was derived from the  
frost on a window-pane in winter.  
C. Dresser, 1976. *Modern Ornamentation*. New York:  
Walnut Grove Graphic Design: Plate 20.

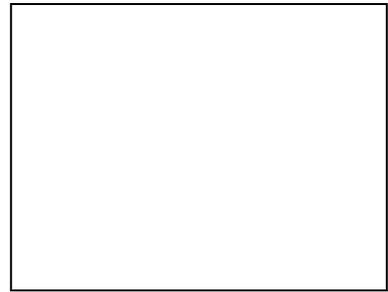


Fig. 3. The plant Soncus or sow-thistle, flattened and  
examined as new motives for ornament.  
Redgrave, G.R., 1890. *Manual of Design*. London:  
Chapman and Hall, 1890: Fig. 18.

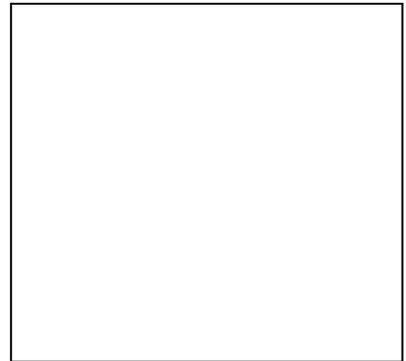


Fig. 4. Christopher Dresser: Force and Energy, 1870.  
Durant, S., 1986. *Ornament*. London: Macdonald:  
Plate 36.



Fig. 5. Symmetry evolves from the peripheral regularity.  
Semper, G., 1989. *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P: 200.

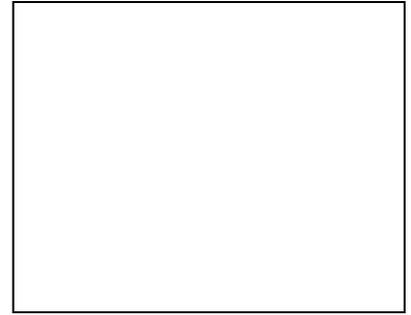


Fig. 6. Cast iron hallstand, circa 1867.  
Whiteway, M. 2001. *Christopher Dresser 1834-1904*.  
Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A: Plate 48.

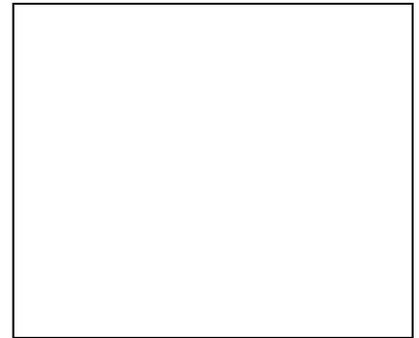


Fig. 7. Wardrobe. Black lacquered pine, the panels in matt bronze green, decorated with conventionalized owls, lotuses and zig-zag designs, the decorations stenciled, with high-lights finished by hand.  
Durant, S., and H. Oorthuys, 1972. *The Aesthetic Movement and the Cult of Japan*. London: The Fine Art Society Limited: Plate 274.



Fig. 8. Ceramic Vase, signed, no. 452HT, circa 1880.  
Whiteway, M. 2001. *Christopher Dresser 1834-1904*.  
Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A: Plate 109.

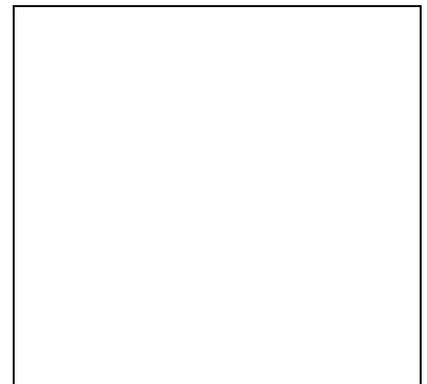


Fig. 9. FROM MINTON BOOK

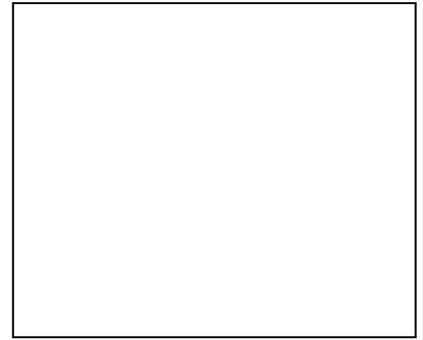


Fig. 10. Page from *Art of Decorative Design* with motto “Knowledge is Power.”  
Whiteway, M. 2001. *Christopher Dresser 1834-1904*.  
Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A: 27.

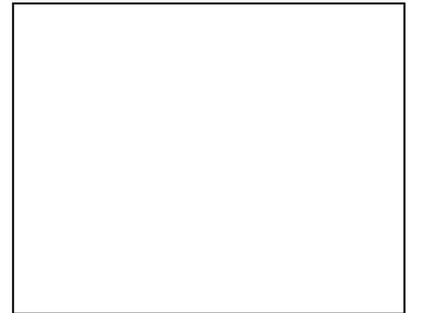


Fig. 11. Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, ceramic vase,  
circa 1867. Whiteway, M. 2001. *Christopher Dresser  
1834-1904*. Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A: Plate 33.

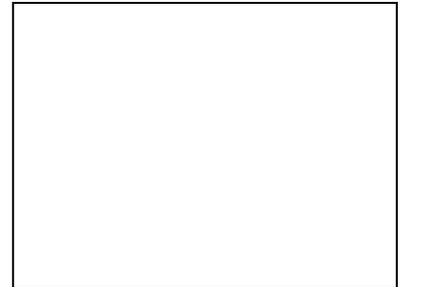


Fig. 12. Our Dog Tray in the Spirit, Our Dog Tray  
in the Flesh MINTON BOOK



Fig. 13. Either Whiteway pg. 54 or Minton Book design

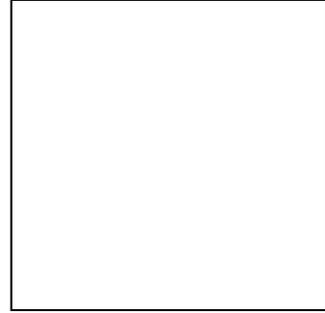


Fig. 14. Textile pattern from *Art of Decorative Design*, 1862. Halén, W., 1990. *Christopher Dresser*. Oxford: Phaidon-Christie's: Fig. 88.

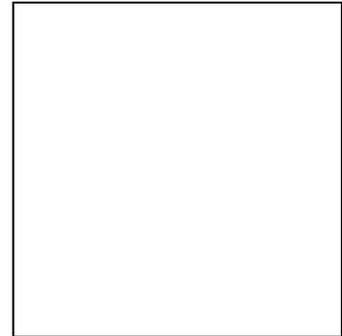


Fig. 15. Preliminary design for textile. After 1916. The Print Room, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Durant, S., 1986. *Ornament*. London: Macdonald: Fig. 10.29.

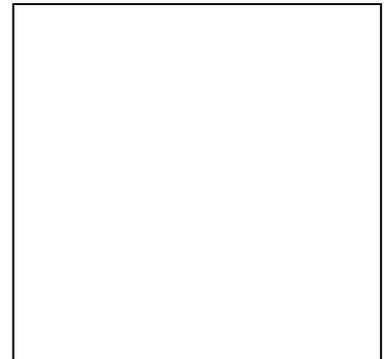


Fig. 16. Hukin & Heath electroplated tea-set with stand and burner. Attributed to Dresser, 1894. Halén, W., 1990. *Christopher Dresser*. Oxford: Phaidon-Christie's: Plate 202.

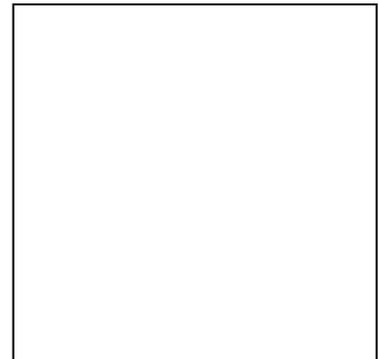


Fig. 17. Teapot, silvered brass, teak designed by Henry Van de Velde (Belgium), 1902/03, German (Weimar) One of the books at home – silver or some exhibition

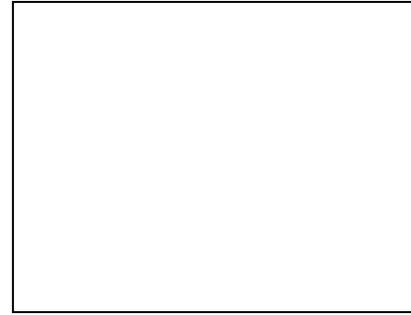


Fig. 18. Silver-plate and ebonoy teapot, signed, marked James Dixon, circa 1879. Whiteway, M. 2001. *Christopher Dresser 1834-1904*. Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A: Plate 89.

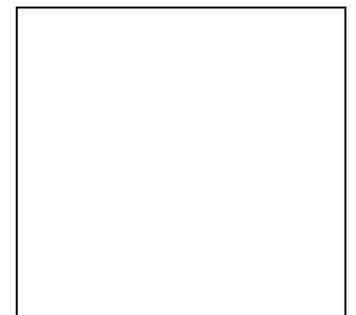
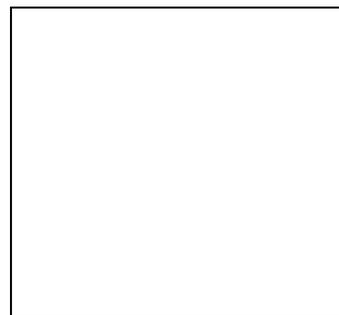


Fig. 19. A page of designs from *The Technical Educator*. Whiteway, M. 2001. *Christopher Dresser 1834-1904*. Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A: 49.



Fig. 20a.(left)  
Voysey: Design for Wallpaper, 1895.  
Pevsner, N., 1936. *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*. London: Faber & Faber: 126.

Fig. 20b. (right)  
Dresser: Textile design produced by F. Steiner & Co., 1890.  
Halén, W., 1990. *Christopher Dresser*. Oxford: Phaidon-Christie's: Plate 116.



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