

FOREWORD

Christopher Dresser was born in 1834, the same year as William Morris. Morris went on to become a household name, while Dresser, despite producing some of the most avant-garde designs of the time and being widely published as an authority on design, drifted into relative obscurity.

In more recent times many researchers have sought to reconstruct his broad 'portfolio' of designs with some success, particularly in the fields of ceramics, metalwork, glass, wallpapers and textiles. The results of this research can be examined in several excellent books.

A number of exhibitions have also sought to bring his work to a wider public, beginning in 1952, when the V & A exhibition *'Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Design'* contained a number of his designs. The first exhibition completely devoted to Dresser was in 1972 at the Fine Art Society, London which opened people's eyes to Dresser's unique creativity. This was followed by an exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre in 1979 touring to the Dorman Museum, Middlesbrough and Cologne. An exhibition in Japan in 2002 advanced the understanding of Dresser's involvement with Japanese design, while exhibitions in Milan, New York and London between 2001-2004 brought together an increasing body of material attributed to Dresser.

I first became aware of Dresser as the designer of Linthorpe Art Pottery when I began working at the Dorman Museum which has the largest Linthorpe collection in public hands. I was immediately struck by the juxtaposition of quite un-Victorian, modernistic designs next to examples quite obviously inspired by ancient and non-European cultures.

While working on an exhibition to mark the centenary of Dresser's death in 2004 I came into contact with Harry Lyons who loaned a considerable amount of material for display. Harry also showed me some photographs of what he thought were textile designs produced for the African market by Dresser. Over a number of years of painstaking research Harry had identified these samples in the patent books of the PODR now in the collections of the National Archives. The designs were amazing, quite unlike anything for the European market with the exception of one depiction of a bird, which was undeniably directly attributable to Dresser. By carefully analysing registration dates as well as motifs Harry was able to bring together a set of seven samples linked to Dresser's known design series called 'The Creation'.

I shared Harry's enthusiasm for the concept of a potential mine of Dresser designs and immediately began talking about how these could be exhibited. That was over two years ago - the result is the exhibition 'Into Africa'. Apart from 'The Creation' series there are many other textile that show, to me, the hand of Dresser, but are simply presented for comparison, we leave it up to you to decide!

My grateful thanks to Harry Lyons for all his hard work in bringing this exhibition, and catalogue, together.

Ken Sedman, Senior Curator, Dorman Museum, Middlesbrough 2007

INTRODUCTION



ILL 001. *Design for a light weight printed cotton registered with the PODR, 10 Nov 1886, no 61001. Registered to Edwards, Cunliffe, Wilson & Co., Manchester and Glasgow. This company was a merchant company selling to North Africa and would have sold the design to local traders for onward sale to sub-Saharan Africa. Later ECW was to extend its own presence to West Africa. The hen is referenced in Yoruba culture as an essential part of the story of “The Creation” and is a recognised symbol generally throughout Africa.. This rendering is adapted from Plate 3 of Dresser’s “Modern Ornamentation”, see ill 002. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

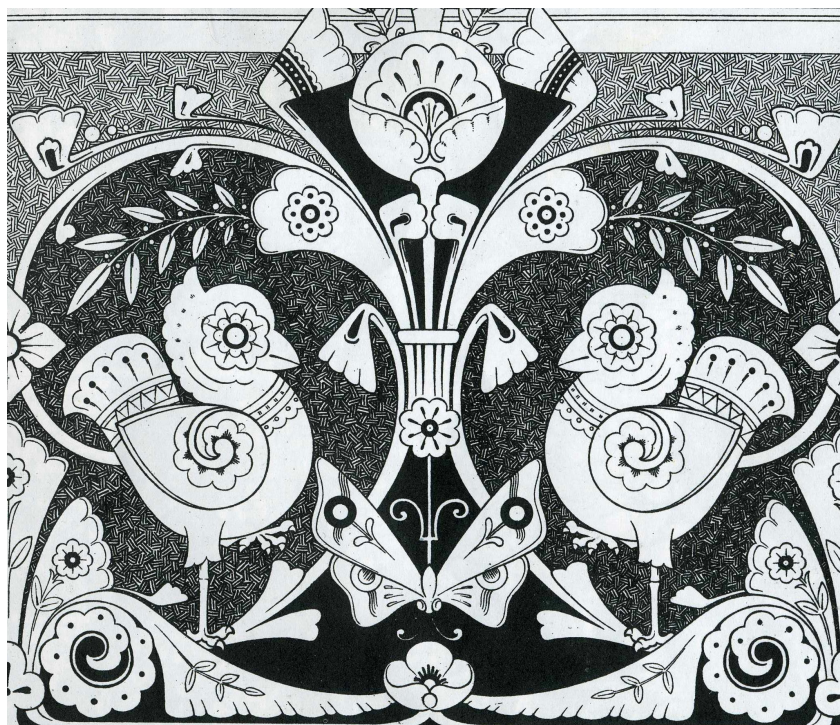
The idea behind this exhibition arose from the discovery of eleven startling textile designs printed on cotton (see ILL 063 – ILL 073) at the National Archives, which were designed by the Victorian designer, Christopher Dresser (1834 – 1904). The first seven of these designs were registered as a group at the Patent Office Design Registry (PODR) in 1886 and produced for sale to the West African market. The samples were assessed as being from a series called “The Creation” that Dresser had originally drawn up earlier in his career but which had failed to attract any buyers.

There were two solid leads about the circumstances surrounding “The Creation” series. A surviving member of Dresser’s studio, Frederick Burrows, when interviewed in 1968¹, revealed the existence of a series of four or five designs entitled “The Creation” which Dresser could not sell until a niche was found in the West African market. Designs from this series were displayed in Dresser’s London studio when Burrows worked there in 1899 – 1901. The second lead came from the design

¹ Stuart Durant. “Christopher Dresser”, p41. “...a series of four or five designs depicting the evolution or the Creation of the World. These, when manufactured were a complete commercial failure until they began to sell to West Africa...”

historian, Nicholas Pevsner², who confirmed their existence and wrote about their “genuiness”, having inspected Dresser’s archive held by his daughter, Ada Dresser.

An effort, over some ten years, to trace these designs in the Patent Office Design Registry archives led to the discovery of the eleven textiles shown between ILL 063 - ILL 073. Strong evidence that the designs are by Dresser is represented by the use of similar motifs in Dresser’s two published portfolios, “Studies in Design”(1876) and “Modern Ornamentation”(1886). Additionally, the fabric patterns show other characteristics of his work, that are evident in the many different media in which he worked, including wall coverings, carpets and graphic designs.



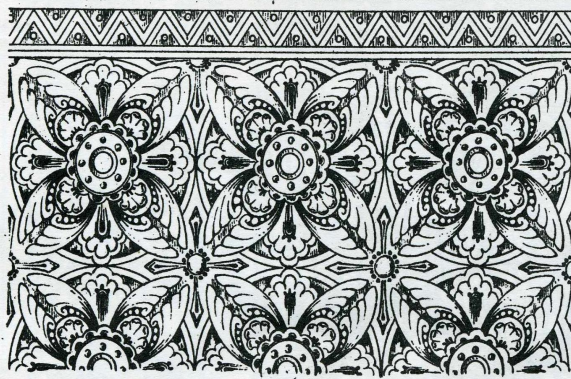
ILL 002. *Plate 3 of Dresser’s Modern Ornamentation. In the Introduction to Modern Ornamentation, Dresser wrote that the above arrangement of the design would be suitable as “a grotesque Border for the Dado of a Smoking Room”. Compare this plate with that at ILL 001, where elements have been arranged to make a design for a cotton print.*

The textile designs in the “Creation” series were registered by a merchant trading company - Edwards, Cunliffe, Wilson & Co, of Manchester and Glasgow, which had established links with North Africa, in an area we now refer to as Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The staple trade with North Africa was “shirtings” which suited the long flowing tunic or burnoos worn by the indigenous population. There were also long established trading routes from North Africa, south and west across the Sahara Desert, to West Africa. The registered designs at ill 063 – ill 073, showing indigo background and vivid colourings would have been produced for the West African markets.

The 1880s was a period of retrenchment for Dresser following a period of prolonged illness. While he still maintained an interest in all aspects of design, he now

² Architectural Review, vol lxxxii, 1937, p 186. “...a series of patterns illustrating the Days of the Creation which still contains that genuineness which one must admit and may admire in his earlier work”

concentrated his work on designing for textiles and wallpapers. In his role as “art advisor”³ to several leading Lancashire printing and weaving companies⁴, Dresser would have been aware of the range of work undertaken by the Lancashire cotton mills, and particularly by the cotton printers with whom he was involved, such as F Steiner and Turnbull & Stockdale, and by weavers such as Tootal, Broadhurst, Lee and Barlow & Jones, all companies referenced by Pevsner². Records⁵ show that these companies were supplying textiles for the West African market in both the 19th and 20th century. It was wholly in character for Dresser to become involved in all aspects of his textile brief, to examine indigenous textile samples, and to ask far-reaching questions about the West African market and the traditions of the end-user, probably with the very merchants who commissioned the designs.



ILL 003.



ILL 003A

Detail of plate 5 of Dresser’s Modern Ornamentation compared with PODR Reg no 60999. Dresser described the design in ILL 003 as suitable for “Carved Stone Work”. The design at I 003A uses a three-petal arrangement suitable for a textile design.

I well remember the thrill on first seeing these textile samples in the National Archives. One instinctively knew that they were by Dresser, but how could one ever find the definitive proof? There was very little research on late 19th and early 20th century Lancashire cottons outside those made for the home market and exports to what we now call the “First World”. The rest, which represented the majority of Lancashire’s production, went to what was then termed the ‘native’ market – Asia, South America and Africa. Spending ten years trawling the PODR records had made

³ The term ‘art advisor’ perhaps needs some explanation. Dresser was primarily a designer of household articles from pots and pans to furnishings, but he also had a mission to improve taste among an increasingly affluent population. To this end he deemed it necessary to influence design and manufacture at all stages of a process to promote “good taste”, from commissioning, through to the advertising and the selling of “good design”. Dresser saw a log-jam caused by manufacturers who would not make objects of good taste, because there was no apparent demand from consumers. The end-consumers, however, complained that they could only buy what was available in the shops. To this end, Dresser offered his services as ‘art advisor’ to manufacturers to help resolve the impasse – and he was later to expand his coverage by becoming involved in the retailing end of the cycle.

⁴ These included F Steiner and Barlow & Jones. Additionally Dresser designs were bought by Tootal Broadhurst Lee, and Turnbull & Stockdale. All these companies produced for the African market

⁵ Patent Office Design Registry Records in the National Archives : Records of A Brunnschweiler, now ABC Wax : records of the Dutch textile company, Vlisco BV, whose archive include a record for 1852, of an order for West Africa.



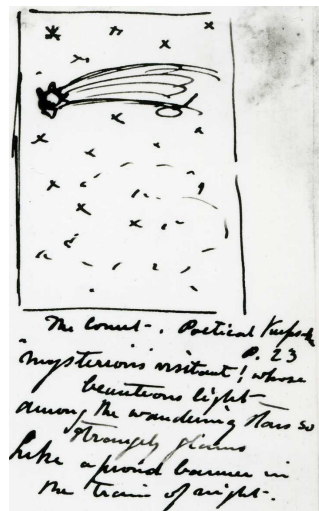
ILL 004. Lightweight cotton print. Design registered at the PODR, 20 Aug 1887 by ECW. Probable design for “The Creation” series. The python is referenced in accounts of The Creation in several parts of Africa.



ILL 005. Lightweight cotton print. Design registered at the PODR, 2 Apr 1888 by ECW. Probable design for The Creation” series.. Volcanoes may be closer to mainstream European accounts of “The Creation”



ILL 006



ILL 006A

Lightweight cotton print. Design registered at the PODR on 30 April 1890 by ECW. Probable design for “The Creation” series. **ILL 006A** is taken from a sketchbook of Dresser, c 1864, held by Ipswich Museum, The sketch illustrated was intended for inclusion in an anthology of verse, “The Poetical Keepsake” (Illustration, courtesy of Ipswich Museum)

me acutely aware of the wealth of design material hidden there. Amongst the most exciting were the designs for export to the ‘native’ market. Grace Lovat Fraser, writing in 1948, lamented the largely anonymous existence of these African textiles:

“These cloths, though produced in enormous quantities, are almost unknown to the rest of the country...To visit a warehouse department where these materials are stored is an unforgettable experience, which transports one into a fantastic and romantic world of strange, heavy colours and exotic design.”⁶

Of course, the PODR contains only designs submitted for registration and thus represents the steady, chronological addition of ever-newer designs. Accordingly, PODR registrations are best seen as an index of design innovation. What PODR

⁶ Grace Lovat Fraser. “Textiles By Britain”. George Allen & Unwin, p103

records do not show is the popularity of any registered design that is reflected by repeat orders from the marketplace.

After I had spent a decade conducting research at the PODR, a colleague directed me to Dr Frederika (Freddie) Launert's⁷ doctoral dissertation about the design process in the West African market for Lancashire cottons. This for me was a significant discovery, because Launert's research made it possible to put Dresser's designs into context with regard to this trade during the latter part of the 19th century.

The idea of putting on this exhibition then became feasible as Ken Sedman, the Senior Curator at the Dorman Museum envisaged, and in a manner that highlighted the qualities of innovation, boldness and fitness for purpose shown in Dresser's designs for Linthorpe Pottery – Linthorpe Pottery being so important to the Dorman Museum collection. Dresser's bold designs for Linthorpe Pottery are second to none when the challenges of good taste and design are raised, but they have a worthy rival in Dresser's designs for textiles.

Another colleague who has given me support in the development of this exhibition is Dr Phillip Sykas.⁸ In many discussions on research into textile history, he made one remark that struck me as being particularly relevant and also drove me to persevere at a time when the task of promoting these designs of Dresser seemed daunting

“The ‘history of design’ has focused only on innovations, and even this with a narrow Eurocentric modernist aesthetic. But it is difficult to move beyond this because it involves rewriting most of art history, and people simply won't have that. I think one can only feed the images into modern consciousness and let them gradually take effect”

I knew then that I must feed these images into “modern consciousness.”

⁷ Dr 'Freddie' Launert was the curator of the Arthur Sanderson Archive until 2000, when she took a break to read for a doctorate. Her thesis on “Design in the Lancashire Cotton industry” used the West African market as a 20th century example of how design ‘worked’ in practice. My thanks are due to Richard Chamberlain for directing me to Dr Launert.

⁸ Dr Phillip Sykas. Lecturer at the Metropolitan University of Manchester and cataloguer of several eminent textile archives.



ILL 007. PODR 60997 registered 10 November 1886



ILL 008. PODR 60998,
10 Nov 1886



ILL 009. PODR60999, 10 Nov 1886



ILL 010. PODR No 61000 10 Nov 1886



ILL 011. PODR No61001, 10 Nov 1886



ILL 012. PODR No 61002, 10 Nov 1886.



ILL 013 PODR 61003, 19 Nov 1886.

ILL 007 – 013. *These seven illustrations were submitted to the PODR for registration in 1886 by Edwards, Cunliffe & Wilson of Manchester and Glasgow, a firm of commission merchants trading with Africa. Registration was granted on 10 Nov 1886. No record of the manufacturing company is given in the registration details. Several companies at this time were known to print such designs, including F Steiner; Turnbull & Stockdale; F W Ashton; and FW Grafton.*