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Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser

Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum will be on view through July 25, 2004.

The exhibition details the evolution and transformation of the work of Christopher Dresser and presents him as both a product of the nineteenth century and thinker whose designs reached far ahead of his times. In this paper I will compare information gained from the catalogue with that of the information presented in the exhibit., and show how the exhibit is ultimately a succinct three dimensional reflection of the book and in some ways it is more successful. Both the book and the exhibition, however fall short in trying to reflect Dresser's distinct genius and do little in developing him both for the American Audience or show his importance to the context of American Design.

Various exhibition catalogues are available to read just before the entrance to the ticket room, on a large oak table in the main entrance hall of the Carnegie Mansion. The catalogue itself is arranged somewhat like the exhibit. The chapters titles are: Life and Career, 2) Dresser's Education and Writings 3) Furnishings, Wallpaper 4.) Sources of Inspiration (and the work he did for manufacturers such as Wedgwood, Menton, Watcomb, etc) 5) Dresser in the Us 6) Dresser in Japan 7) Dresser After Japan 8) Dresser in Context.

From the Catalogue we learn that Dresser and his mentors responded to what they perceived to be the deplorable the state of art education in the manufacturing sector of England in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. This lack of artistic background in manufacturing was seen as limiting the competitiveness of British industry

internationally. Dresser himself studied design and botany and was against human figuration. He believed in the populist notion, like most nineteenth century aesthetic theorists, of the art's ability to "elevate". Dresser's professor, Richard Redgrave believed plants should be studied in nature before being transformed into pattern and ornamental context.

His mentors, Henry Cole, Thomas Pugin and Owen Jones, created set designs for important exhibitions on the art and industry of other cultures held at Alexandra Palace and the Great Exhibition of 1851. The catalogue details the impact of each designer's principles on Dresser: Pugin's interest in Gothic art as means of Catholic revival (they do not mention it in the exhibit, nor to they liken it to the obvious interest in naturalism of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites). They engaged in debates about the ornamentation and pattern and their relation to industry. Just as early twentieth century conversations between artists produced manifestos, the nineteenth century produced journals. Cole produced the Journal of Design and Manufacturers. Although it was short-lived, it had considerable impact on polemical statements on design and how natural forms could be applied to design.

The South Kensington Museum was where Dresser not only curated and taught, but was also educated to some extent. The catalogue does make some reference to the more famous Victorian/Georgian designer and contemporary of Dresser: William Morris. Morris and Dresser, the catalogue claims- where in some ways ideological comrades- interested in a populist form of art, and a return to simplified, natural designs. Both wanted to improve domestic design and make it available cheaply. Access to

workingman is evident in both of their writings that are exemplified in the catalogue.

Neither of the two ever really achieved their aims: they both reached the moneyed middle classed.

Morris never abandoned the Ruskinian faith in supremacy of nature and he championed craftsmanship. To Morris (and to some extent Dresser- if you go by the exhibition installation), less is better in the interior. Dresser, although initially a botanist, was a committed heir of the industrial revolution. According to the catalogue, “he never lost sight the demands of machine production and modernity of materials”(22).

At some point however, the viewer loses sight of William Morris and his relation to Dresser. Although the work of Dresser is well known in Europe, American audiences are familiar to only William Morris. In reference to South Kensington Museum’s director and his support of Morris, the catalogue says “Dresser was obliterated from the story of nineteenth century design from the very institution that nurtured him”(p. 21) But, I would argue that the work of William Morris is representative of Dresser’s period and has so much in stylistic connection to the first half of Dresser’s career, that the American observer might confuse Dresser and Morris, or they might lump them together and not see not only their differences, but also the ways that Dresser and Morris each departed from predominant Victorian aesthetics. Not enough contrasting designs were made evident in the book or show. This would have been accomplished by providing books, perhaps on popular Victorian furnishings and decorative work, along side the catalogues. Or even a brief table distinguishing the two’s designs as well as popular designs of the period. This table could be inserted in the book and placed in the exhibit. This would help

American audiences to see how Dresser's designs were different from what was being produced at the time, and show Dresser in contradistinction to Morris.

One problem, as well as positive element is that the work of Dresser fits so well into the Georgian style Carnegie Mansion where the exhibit is displayed, that it is hard to see Dresser's work as very radical (with the exception of his later, Japanese inspired and metal crafted household designs, which look modern no matter the context). It fits well into the mansion because it is houses of that ilk that Dresser's work would have been originally bought for. The book, with out many contrasting pictures, alludes to his being beyond his times in various ways- saying that his experimentations with color liken him more to Kandinsky than the Pre-Raphaelites who were popular in Dresser's day. Certainly, his scientific genius is made evident in the exhibition by his investigation into the best proportioned, well functioning pot. His diagrams of metal kitchenware view like a physics version of his botanical studies for the plant morphology classes he taught earlier in his life.

In a critique of Dresser's creativity, the catalogue notes that he used judicious "plagiarism", in picking and choosing his influences. It is in the 3rd and fourth Chapters of the catalogue that the real impetus of the exhibition is made. Not only does the exhibition want to introduce Dresser's work as "the first Industrial Designer", but it also intends to showcase him as a genius. It notes his far-reaching interests. For example, his investigations into color and experimentations included the use of gaseous design akin to neon. The catalogue notes that he belongs to another era (possibly ours?), as demonstrated by his incomparable essays on color (p. 58).

What was made evident in book and catalogue was the influences upon Dresser: in the book this is accomplished by writings and pictures of his mentors, and a comparison of how each of his mentors differed from each other. In the exhibit this is shown in the first room with brief biographies and examples of the work of his mentors, and in the second floor, it is evidenced with examples from Japanese nineteenth century design and an occasional pre-Columbian pot. At one point Dresser begins to subsume natural forms into near total abstraction. His aim was to improve design of manufacturers. But he did not intend to change publish life- nor expect them to stop using picnic sets toast racks, coal scuttle, etc.

Dresser started his own company, a retail house that brought together his designs for various manufacturers as well as his own furniture designs. The Art Furniture Alliance, as it was called, was located on 157 New Bond Street that was a home to various adventurous manufacturers. The emporium specialized in showcasing his radical designs, however it was perhaps before its time. Neither the book nor the exhibit elaborate on the Furniture Alliance. In the exhibit references a room dedicated to the Art Furniture Alliance, however what exactly it did or how it functioned was still have some confusion. Perhaps because it was a failure financially, the book and the exhibit did not want to make much mention of it. However, in keeping with the “a man before his time” Theme alluded to in the exhibit and the book, both would have been served to go into the Alliance a little further. For example, New Bond Street was a home to avante-garde artists, could they used this opportunity to show Art Furniture Alliance in context (a picture of other retail stores similar along New Bond Street?) 1881, when the Alliance

was founded, was the outset of one of the world's first major recessions. This could also be mentioned as a reason why his work was ultimately bought by the well to do.

The aspects of Dresser's salesmanship, his importing businesses he maintained (with the aid of a few of his numerous sons) his curatorial work and work as a juror at Society for the Arts, the Philadelphia Exhibition, the Paris Exhibition is not fully explored in the exhibit. The way each room is organized, according to Dresser's artistic development as well as his aesthetic sensibilities: the first floor rooms highlight Dresser's overall design, and interior design interests, including furniture, screens, wall paper (intended to be a backdrop, and not a conversation piece) and items he created for manufacturers, the second floor shows his work in terms of his foray into Japan, with a few pictures of English Trading companies (for which he worked) and examples of contemporaneous Japanese designs.. The final rooms showcases Dresser's turn to color not only in the objects, but also in the wall treatment. Showing his work as a curator and also illustrating how his business was augmented by his interest in the botany and anthropology of art is accomplished in a sideways manner in the exhibit: through the aforementioned design of the rooms, and occasional example of pieces of ethnographic pottery and design. But his curatorial work and work as a businessmen and the effect of his travels is more specifically written about in the catalogue and augmented by his journals, sketchbooks (which are also on view in the exhibit).

Another briefly mentioned in the book, that would have been interesting to elaborate upon in the exhibit was his stay in the us in 1876. A wall text in two paragraphs details the visit: Most of his foray into America is couched in terms of the use of his designs by various manufacturers in their displays, and his bringing of Japanese

motifs and an interest in Industrial design to the US it mentions that after his trip to Japan Dresser brought back thousands of pieces of Japanese works at the bequest of Louis Comfort Tiffany and that that was important (being that he was the first European designer to visit Japan) in the timing and instigation of the craze for all things Japanese at the turn of the century (it could also be argued that Victorians in general had a taste for all things exotic)

However, his talk in Philadelphia was particularly important in that it was the impetus to starting the first school to educate design and manufacturers an education in design and art. So, Dresser was pivotal in bringing the important in the course of design and the importance of Industrial design in the United States. Although the wall text does mention that he was impactful here, it is vague as to how. It might have been interesting to note, both in the book and in the wall text, that in the United States Dresser was most successful at his more populist ideals: Although in England his wares sold to the fairly well to do, in the U.S. he was able to bring the Victorian notion of art's power of elevation, to successful fruition in the context of Industrial Design Education

Neither the book nor the exhibit elaborates as much as they should upon the year that he took a trip across the United States, through the plains and the Rocky Mountains and continuing on through San Francisco, was an important year in American History. Little is mentioned of that year, its bizarre presidential election the fact that a month before his trip across the west, the Sioux had wiped out General Custer. The little that is mentioned in the book is that his view of the Wasatch Mountains from Salt Lake City's Walker house reminded him of Japan.

Although not much is mentioned of this, and perhaps in his overall work this year did not hold a great importance, it should be significant in the show for these reasons: Dresser's talk in Philadelphia was important in the fomentation of art and industrial education in the United States. His effect on the Carnegies, an important family in the support of American culture, and on Tiffany, one of the most significant American designers, was not minor. As exemplified by the many rooms in the exhibit and all seven chapters of the catalogue- Dresser was constantly researching new forms and influenced by his travels. Given his curious mind and his attention to the botanical and ethnographic side to the visual world, one can only surmise that his trip across the US would have been impactful on him. It would have also been worth exploring this as this is the first exhibition on Dresser in the US and it will be hard for audiences, especially non-European audiences not well versed in the history of design to distinguish Dresser, or to see his relation to the US. Although this might seem like a forced fit when touring the exhibit- it was demonstrated in the talk that Katherine and Geanine gave earlier in class that Dresser WAS significant to US design, therefore it might be the best opportunity to explore that visit and its impact further, both in the book and in this exhibit.

Part of the problem and the asset of the exhibit is that it fits so nicely into the finely carved oak paneled interior of the Carnegie Mansion. But that is more of an addition to the exhibit, than it is a subtraction from it. The exhibit itself succinctly accomplishes what the book sets out to do: show the influences and the interests in the design life of Christopher Dresser. Perhaps the first room is the most successful at this. It lines up his influences- their brief biographies, their work, and the aesthetic theorist they read. The first room acts as an introduction to Dresser, giving you not only a sense of his

work, but a sense of the types of debates- religious, scientific, political that these designers were engaging in at the time Dresser was forming his own theories of design. The center of the room displays Christopher Dresser's work for manufacturers from through out his life. I heard people in the exhibit awing over the designs and the color employed. His writing about design, and his teaching manuals for plant morphology are especially informative in viewing the rest of the exhibit because they give a chance for us to see how he not only synthesized his teachers, but where he departed from them and where he used their visual theories as strategies for his own designs- but perhaps rejected their ideologies in other ways.

The exhibit takes the various themes brought up in the first room (and in the book) and shows three dimensionally, through color, display, how Dressers vision transformed but always stayed cohesive: in terms of forms being augmented by color or vice-versa over time. But it does not succeed in separating him from say another designer who might have work similar to him. Therefore the American audience may have needed a little less of a survey of his work and a little more comparison.

If Dresser is already so well known in Europe, as is reiterated in the book and in the exhibit, perhaps it was important to do a general survey of his work. But addressing his work and life to the American context would have been important to do, because there is a reason why he was forgotten in America (and he needs to be introduced to us with that in mind). The exhibit itself is successful. After pouring over the book for two hours before entering the exhibit, I was looking for ways in which the book would fail to give me the information I felt was most important from the book. It never failed, in fact in some areas- such as the second floor Japan area (where his designs are shown along side

their inspirations- Japanese works that he had brought into England by way of his sons and their trading company), and the final room, where his interest in color as a finish on his ceramics is enhanced by the brightly colored walls, it was more succinct than the book. There is little (aside from the Japanese goods) that distinguishes him out of that epoch, because it is not demonstrated HOW he was radical. For example, he is not shown in contradistinction with other works of the period and for example, a video or display of his production process is not available (although both exhibit and book show us his sketchbooks).

The exhibit and book both read like a survey of Dresser's work and influences, but the effect for the person, such as myself who has some background in furniture and architecture, is that Dresser speaks as an epoch himself. They both fall short of conveying his the importance of his work in an American context (which it is evident that his work was impactful) and the distinction of his genius in relation to the period in which he lived.