



NEWSLETTER
August 2021

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Greetings!

You may have been surprised to receive this Newsletter. After all, it has been a while since the Christopher Dresser Society sent out a Newsletter.

After a period in the doldrums, the Society has been reinvigorated by the formation of a new Committee, and this Newsletter is one of the results.

Another consequence is plans for a very exciting event – a plan to hold a Dresser Fest which is a collaboration between two institutions on either side of the Atlantic – the Dorman Museum and the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Art – and to harness technology to make the event available to you wherever you are in the world.

You will also find within this Newsletter details of the exciting attribution of a five-legged chair to Christopher Dresser, a fascinating article on Christopher Dresser and Whitby Jet, and some information about the new Committee.

We hope that you enjoy this Newsletter.



Dresser Fest 2021 Goes Trans-Atlantic!

Saturday 18 September and Wednesday 21 September 2021

Plans are being made for a Dresser Fest with a difference.

- It will be a joint collaboration between the Dorman Museum, Middlesbrough, England and the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Art, Denver, Colorado, USA.
- It will also be accessible across the world.

During the COVID-19 pandemic we have become more attuned to talks delivered via Zoom and other media to audiences across the world. And that is what is being planned. Whilst there will (hopefully) be people on either side of the Atlantic who can attend events in the Dorman Museum and the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Art, we are also making it possible to access the event from wherever you are in the world.

The event has been scheduled to coincide with Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art's new exhibition, **Truth, Beauty and Power: Christopher Dresser and the Aesthetic Movement** which will open with the Museum when it reopens.

Presented by Deputy Curator Christopher Herron, chosen from the collection assembled by Founding Director & Curator Hugh Grant.

Co-curated by Collections & Research Manager Becca Goodrum and Director of Interpretation Maya Wright.

Learn more about this design movement through an exploration of common motifs used in designs from the Aesthetic Movement (c. 1865–1900) and the influence of British designer Christopher Dresser (1834–1904).

Whilst the programme is being finalized, it is likely to include:

- An introduction to the Kirkland and overview of the exhibition by Maya.
- A talk about the exhibition Truth, Beauty and Power: Christopher Dresser and the Aesthetic Movement in the gallery.
- An interview about the five-legged chair in the collection of the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Art
- An introduction to the Dresser Collection held at the Dorman Museum



- A talk about the Linthorpe Pottery
- A Q&A session with Martin Filler, a collector who has contributed to the Truth, Beauty and Power: Christopher Dresser and the Aesthetic Movement exhibition.

It is anticipated that Dresser Fest would end with the live Q&A with the panel/

Full details and booking arrangements will be made available soon.

Christopher Dresser Discovery

In preparation for the upcoming exhibition **Truth, Beauty and Power: Christopher Dresser and The Aesthetic Movement**, Museum curatorial staff, working with international experts, uncovered new research attributing the design of a beautiful five-legged chair to British designer Christopher Dresser.

The chair (see image below) has been on view with Arts & Crafts and Aesthetic Movement designs at Kirkland Museum since May 2018, with no designer identified. Kirkland Museum is likely the first museum in the United States to display this chair with this attribution.

The chair and the story of the attribution will be a central part of the exhibition.

Research in preparation for the exhibition led staff to contact experts at the Dorman Memorial Museum in Middlesbrough, UK, which has the world's largest public collection of works designed by Christopher Dresser. Dorman Museum then contacted Harry Lyons, Dresser expert and author of *Christopher Dresser: The People's Designer 1834–1904*.

"After preliminary research, I started making the connection to Dresser, and, after working with Dorman Museum and Mr. Lyons (both based in the UK), I was thrilled to find a compelling link between Dresser and our chair," states Collections & Research Manager Becca Goodrum. "Dresser and his role in the Aesthetic Movement are an important early foundation of our decorative art collection. The discovery of this attribution further elevates the importance of our chair and enhances our wonderful collection even more."

"In conjunction with our exhibition hopefully opening this summer, we are delighted to announce that per Harry Lyons and Dorman Museum, we believe this chair was designed by Christopher Dresser," says Associate Museum Director Renée Albiston. "The chair was always intriguing, lovely and extraordinarily good design, only enhanced by this connection to one of the central designers of the era."



There is no reason whatever why a chair should have four legs. If three would be better, or five, or any other number, let us use what would be best."

Christopher Dresser, 1873

Knowing Dresser's feeling about chair legs and the timing of Dresser's work, Mr. Lyons believes the Kirkland Museum chair itself, as well as the upholstery (added later) were designed by Dresser, though he notes no definitive proof has been found about this chair specifically.



Christopher Dresser and Whitby Jet

By Susan Stuart

I purchased a jet brooch (see images below) in Whitby several years ago.





Its circles, flower and leaf designs are similar to Dresser motifs used on ceramics, wallpapers and other flat surfaces. In October 1874, Dr. Dresser gave a lecture to the jet manufacturers of Whitby, during which he urged them to simplify their designs. Could this design have been inspired by his talk? Unlike most jet jewellery it has an impressed mark on the back 'No. 1' and a star shaped trade mark. Could these marks offer clues to its date of manufacture and if the trade mark was registered, to its manufacturer? I am grateful to Sarah Steele, director of Ebor Jet works, for taking the images and for the information that about 1891 a scheme was introduced to mark the quality of Jet used for jewellery.

By 1890 the jet industry was in severe decline, largely due to imports of cheap foreign jet. Hard foreign jet was roughly equivalent to Whitby jet, but soft foreign jet was very inferior and had led to a decline in demand for, and confidence in, all jet jewellery of any sort. In the spring of 1890, a series of crisis meetings were held by influential Whitby jet manufacturers. Isaac Langdale became the prime mover and instigator of a scheme designed to protect the jet industry in order that hard jet could be distinguished at a glance from inferior foreign soft jet. Throughout the spring and summer of 189, the same advertisement was published in the Whitby Gazette addressed to visitors and others, informing them that Whitby jet jewellery would be marked and guaranteed by the manufacturers. That all jewellery must have a trademark and the classification of the jet used must be made clear as follows:

'No. A1 Genuine Whitby hard jet
No. 1 Foreign hard jet
No. 2 Soft jet '

A note was added that: 'Only No. A1 and No. 1 will show the trademark'. Therefore, my brooch in the style of Dresser, must have been manufactured no earlier than 1891, seventeen years after Christopher Dresser gave his lecture. According to the mark, the jet was a foreign import.



Sarah Steele, who is doing research for a PhD. on jet, is going to test my brooch in order to see if it is indeed hard 'foreign' jet.

Why then if all Whitby jet manufacturers were from 1891 obliged to mark their jet ornaments with a trademark and the grade of jet used, are any marks on the back of jewellery so rare? The answer can be found in the Whitby Gazette and once again it was Isaac Langdale having already by December 1890 (or earlier) registered his trademark, who gives us the answer. After stating that he guaranteed that the jet he used was A1 from Whitby jet mines, he added that it will be 'printed on the cards on which the articles are mounted'. The 'cards' would have been discarded shortly after the jewellery was purchased. Other manufacturers as well as Langdale, may have pinned jewellery to paper guarantee cards too. Therefore, my brooch is a rare survival because instead its manufacturer engraved 'A1' and his star trademark permanently on the back. It appears that few other manufacturers marked their goods permanently. I have been unable to trace the maker's star trademark yet.

There is a wealth of information in the Whitby Gazette regarding Dr. Dresser's lecture 'The True Principles of Art as applied to the Manufacture of Jet Ornaments', he also presented the prizes on the same occasion 24 October (advert Whitby Gazette, 20-10-1874). I have made a note that he stayed at the Royal Hotel Whitby.

Apparently the President apologized on the meagreness of the audience only about a hundred people, '..it showed that Whitby was not so alive to the importance of the subject...as it ought to be' and added 'If there was a place in the kingdom where the improvement and further development of the jet trade was of importance it was Whitby, and he thought the jet workers would have done well had they bought tickets for the whole of their workmen and compelled them to come and hear Dr. Dresser's address. CD replied he would rather speak to a dozen people who were interested in the subject...than an audience of a thousand who were not interested (WG 24-10-1874).

Dr. D's lecture appears to have been published in full. Just to give you a taste of what he said- He began by comparing objects made of precious materials to inexpensive materials such as jet. He gave the history of design from the earliest times. He made comments such as:

'Egyptian ornament is largely formed of two plants-the blue water lily, and the papyrus (or paper plant), both being the subject of a rigid, conventional treatment. The severity of the drawing in every representation of these plants is an expression of the Egyptian character. The Egyptians were great slave owners, and hard task masters. The priesthood oppressed the people, and it was the priesthood who designed the ornaments'. As he talked, he drew designs on a blackboard for his audience, who even applauded him on some occasions. He thought jet had been too much confined to mourning



ornaments. He thought it might do very well for grotesques-like comical Japanese figures, bas-relief and low relief as shown on the ware of the elder Wedgwood, avoiding stupid excrescences, intaglio, pierced work, scratch work- inlaid with gold, scratching with modulated lines, and inlaying.

'All these modes of treatments were illustrated with fine examples, and as to inlaying he thought something striking might be produced with dissolved sealing wax as more colour was greatly needed. They had a dead surface and a bright surface on which much had been done but on which more might be done.'

As well as the Whitby Gazette, the Northern Echo, 21 October, 1874, page 3 column 6, gave a similar account of Dr. Dresser's talk.

The New Committee

The Society has a new Committee, whose members are committed to reviving the Society after a period in which it went into the doldrums.

Heading the Committee is the Chairman Linda Polley, a former History Lecturer at Teesside University.

Alongside Linda are people who have been involved with the Society for a number of years – Gill Moore, Louise Harrison, Sue Sedgwick, Sarah Welburn, Reba Yuille and Val Harrison - and also a new face Martin Peagam. Gill, Louise, Sue and Sarah all work, or have worked, at the Dorman Museum, whilst Linda, Val, and Reba have been involved for several years as volunteers at the museum, working with the Dresser Collection.

In due course we will be convening an Annual General Meeting to formalize the Society's management arrangements, but in the meantime the Committee members are, individually and collectively, pursuing ideas to bring the Society back to life, starting with Dresser Fest 2021.

What Brought You to Dresser?

We asked the new Committee Members two very important questions:

- What brought you to Dresser?
- What is your favourite Dresser piece?

Here are some of their answers.... Do you agree with their choices?

Gill Moore



I can't recall when I first became aware of Christopher Dresser, but a visit to the Dorman Museum in 1995 convinced me that I needed to know more about him. This was as part of my degree course at Teesside University and I was quite blown away by his innovative designs for Linthorpe Art Pottery.

However, my favourite Dresser piece is not pottery it's metalware. Not the iconic James Dixon teapot or the Hukin & Heath 'Crow's Foot' decanter, but the more mundane Benham & Froud coal hod (See image below).



It's a whimsical creature inching its way towards a blazing fire to warm its feet and it always makes me smile. Dresser certainly had a sense of humour!

Reba Yuille

Whilst studying on the BA (Hons) History of Design and Architecture degree course, Teesside University, 1994-97, probably during a first-year lecture. Studying on this degree course was an absolute pleasure and learning about the work of Christopher Dresser was a highlight for me. Astonishingly beautiful pieces of decorative art. Original, modern and so very desirable.

My favourite piece? I suppose I can't say 'all of them'. If I have to choose it would have to be the Wave bowl as seen in the Tokyo to the Tees exhibition, Dorman Museum. The allusion to natural shapes, the vibrant colour. And anything from Minton. As a would-be grower of things, I love the botanical references, the elegance and detail of the ceramic designs. And, of course, the Claret Vase. Who doesn't love this?!

Sue Sedgwick

I first became aware of Christopher Dresser when I started working at the Dorman Museums in 2002, but only through his connections with Linthorpe Pottery, I didn't really understand or appreciate the significance of Dresser's designs until we got the Dresser collection and needed to find out more when developing the schools programme around the collection.



In choosing my favourite piece, it was a close call between the Crows foot decanter and the soup plate from the Owl service, and I've plumbed for the soup plate.

When working with the visitors/students/ teachers I always try and get across Dressers love of the natural environment, it's such an important message, especially in this day and age, and I ask them what they see, and rarely do they see the Owl, I wait for the intake of breath when I point it to them, I absolutely love their reaction.

"I've looked at that plate a 100 times but never saw that!"

"OMG I never saw that!"

"Wow that's amazing!"

All comments from people whose eyes have been opened.

Membership of the Christopher Dresser Society

We have sent you this Newsletter because our records show that you are a member of the Christopher Dresser Society,

If you do NOT wish to continue as a member of the Society, please let us know, by e mailing martin@peagam.co.uk

Thank you!