

The conservation of a c.1867 cast iron hat stand: a Dresser design and original Coalbrookdale paint scheme revealed.

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The Coalbrookdale Company of Ironbridge, Shropshire is well known for the production of fine quality decorative cast iron wares using powerful design shapes and colour schemes. Christopher Dresser in particular is associated with the use of strong, polychromatic schemes. His designs for silk damasks for James Ward in 1871 and 1873, his designs for wallpapers for William Cooke & Co. in 1866 and his later designs for Minton ceramics provide ample testimony of this. Recent conservation and research work at the Victoria & Albert Museum on a cast iron hat stand designed by Dresser and made by the Coalbrookdale Company around 1867 has revealed an original decorative colour scheme which adds much to existing evidence of Coalbrookdale Company paint decoration. It also sheds new light on Dresser's colour palette and his use of decorative objects in interior design.

Although it was quickly established that the V&A hat stand had been given a modern black overall paint scheme with turquoise highlights on the tips of the coat hooks, it seemed reasonable, particularly in the light of Dresser's own published analysis of colour theory, that the original scheme, if we could establish it, might be as dynamic as the most vivid of his polychromatic schemes in other materials.

Christopher Dresser (1834-1904) was one of the most gifted designers and theoreticians on the use and nature of ornament during the latter part of the 19th century although from his death in 1904 until relatively recently, his reputation was unfairly neglected except by a few cognoscenti. Born in Glasgow, the son of a Yorkshire excise officer, he enrolled at the South Kensington, Government School of Design in 1847, graduating in 1854. It was as a student that he became particularly fascinated by botanical drawing which led to a general academic interest in botany. In 1860, Dresser was awarded an honorary doctorate in the subject by the German University of Jena and in September of 1860, Dresser applied for the Chair of Botany at University College London but in this he was unsuccessful. It was his failure to secure this post that marked a turning point in his career. Thereafter, he devoted himself to being a full time, professional designer. Dresser's analysis of plant structure had a lasting influence on his artistic development and the discipline of this scientific subject encouraged his rigorous and analytical approach to his career as a professional designer. It is clearly evident in the design of this hat stand, particularly with its stylized organic detail in the lower half.

The hat stand was selected for the Victoria & Albert Museum's British Galleries 1500-1900 as an example of Dresser's work for Coalbrookdale. Background research was undertaken before deciding on a suitable conservation treatment, and deciding to include the object in this new display. This took two avenues, investigating the painted surface of the object itself and a documentary search for information about Dresser and Coalbrookdale Company products and other related objects.

No manufacturer's serial number or marks were visible on the object, but the Coalbrookdale Company catalogue¹ of 1875 (**fig. 1**) initially identified it as a Coalbrookdale Company pattern. As advertised in the catalogue the hat stand was available in at least three colour schemes "Antique bronze" "Berlin black" or "Illuminated in colours" (Berlin black refers to a matt black finish characteristic of the cast iron jewellery produced by the Berlin Royal Ironworks in the early 19th century).

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On first inspection the hat stand (**fig. 2**) was not a very inspiring or decorative object since the surface detail was obscured by a thick layer of black paint covered in dust (**fig 3.**) Closer examination of the object where the paint had been chipped revealed several colour schemes (**fig. 4**). At this early stage the expectation was that a multi-coloured scheme might have survived underneath what was assumed to be a later coat of black paint. More evidence of the original paint scheme was revealed when the coat and hat hooks were removed by un-bolting them from the rear of the stand. What was discovered was slightly unexpected; behind each hook was a light gold coloured paint effect which had been preserved in remarkable condition (**fig. 5**). It is reasonable to assume that the hooks had not been removed since manufacture as the other paint colours were not present where hook components were closely bolted to the frame. As this light gold colour was obviously neither “Berlin black” nor “Antique bronze” it was thought it might be part of “Illumination in colours”. Additional exploratory removal of tiny sections of the upper layers of paint also revealed this “gold” paint effect over almost all the object.

As there was promise that the original paint scheme might have survived at least in part, discussions began about the treatment options. The black paint layer was obscuring the fine cast detail, so its removal was desirable. However, it was still not clear what sort of paint scheme was underneath the black paint or its age. It was decided that the differing colours should be identified by paint analysis and dated if possible. It was also necessary to find out what colours the paint schemes described by the Coalbrookdale catalogue actually were. A decision could then be made on the treatment.

Cross sections of paint from different areas of the hat stand were taken and prepared for analysis by optical microscopy.² It was established that the hat stand had at least five separate paint layers: the uppermost was a black paint with turquoise highlights; underneath this a consistent layer of a red varnish containing iron pigment; underneath this a thick layer of white paint and then underneath that, next to the cast iron surface, a “gold” layer (**fig. 6 and fig. 7**).

The approximate dating of the black and turquoise scheme to the 1960’s was established by tracing the last owner of the hat stand before it was acquired by the museum in 1971. After a few letters and calls the previous owner was contacted. He remembered the object but was unsure if he had painted it, “unless it was done clumsily”! However a colleague at the V&A remembered a conversation with the owner at the time of acquisition where he said he had in fact painted it.³ The look of the paint, combined with the recalled conversation were clear evidence that this layer was not part of the Coalbrookdale scheme. It could therefore be recorded and removed if desired. The red and white paint layers were identified by dispersion analysis.⁴ The red layer was a varnish, coloured with a dye or lake containing iron pigment. This was also modern but could not be positively dated. The white paint layer underneath it was identified as a titanium white pigment. This type of paint was not in commercial production prior to 1916-1920.⁵ The removable drip tray at the base of the object was analysed additionally using energy dispersive x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (EDXRF).⁶ The pinkish paint on the inside was identified to be modern primer containing zinc and lead (**fig 14**). On the reverse traces of a grey lead-based paint were found; this paint was thought to be possibly original. The gold paint layer found next to the cast iron surface on the front of the hat stand is the original coating consisting of a brass powder in an organic medium.

Having established that the white paint layer was later than 1916 and that the last possible production of objects from Coalbrookdale was circa 1900⁷ the first stage of conservation treatment was agreed. It was decided that the later paint layers could be recorded and removed, with the aim of revealing the original “illuminated in colours” scheme and the cast detail obscured by overpaint. A number of test methods were tried to remove the upper paint layers, and a treatment method was established. The aim was to remove each paint layer

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separately to expose any polychrome colour schemes; it was still thought at this stage that the “gold paint” might be part of a larger colour scheme under the white paint. It was found that a mixture of solvent removal and mechanical cleaning (careful use of a scalpel) removed the top black and red layers, but the titanium white paint proved very resistant to solvent removal and had to be removed almost entirely by mechanical action. Careful use of a scalpel, though time consuming, has the advantage of being much more controllable than solvent methods, and therefore minimises the danger of loss to any hidden polychrome scheme.

As the treatment progressed it was found that the indications given by the paint sample analysis were accurate for the whole surface. The stand over its working lifetime had been painted in monochrome schemes (**fig. 8**). The anticipated original “illuminated in colours” scheme was not present. The original Coalbrookdale paint surface was found to be an even coat of the “gold” paint. The research identified that this “gold” colour actually fitted in with other objects and documentation found. One example is a card dish in the V&A’s collection (**fig. 9**). This was originally designed by Karl Fredrich Schinkel for the royal iron foundries in Berlin but was also copied by the Coalbrookdale and described in the Art Union magazine of 1 August 1846 in an article on Coalbrookdale wares; it has the same monochrome “gold” finish.

The Art Union article describes and discusses the all over bronzing methods used by the Coalbrookdale Company.⁸ “And here we may notice a circumstance which is a little open to dispute. The characteristic, and what may be called the “natural” colour of those (iron) castings, is a brilliant and beautiful jet black produced upon the casting when dressed ... This is a very delicate operation, and requires great skill in the manipulation, but the results are beautiful. There is however one defect; all shadow is lost on the black surface, and hence delicate tracery and minute details of form run a very obvious hazard of being overlooked. To remedy this defect many finer productions and particularly figurines are bronzed over. There is thus what we hold as a violation of the artistic properties, namely a disguise of material. It is very disputable how far this may be allowed under all circumstances; bronzing of course, gives all the effect of light and shade; it is susceptible to some variations of colour while perfect blackness, even accompanied by a high polish, has a sombering effect, from which the wearied eye in vain seeks for the relief it finds by the introduction of colour.” The article was highly critical of practices that disguise the nature of one material as another.

What the appearance of bronzing was like is further described in the introduction to the 1875 Coalbrookdale Company catalogue, indicating an impressive range of subtle colour variations.⁹

“Bronzing. - Most of the articles in this section are painted and bronzed, and the finish in this respect which we deem most suitable to the design, is quoted in each case: but as this may be varied if desired, and in order that the different kinds of Bronzing may be understood, a short description of each is given, viz:

“Statue” bronzed. - A rich brown or chocolate ground, rich gold and copper.

“Light Statue” bronzed. - A lighter ground and a lighter gold.

“Gold” bronzed. - Similar ground to “Light Statue” but with more gold and no copper.

“Antique” bronzed. - A greenish-grey ground, with a gold, copper and green oxide.

“Moresque” bronzed. - A warm drab ground, with a light gold.

“Florentine” bronzed. - A rich brown or chocolate ground, with copper only.

“Green” bronzed. - A lively green body, with gold.

All the foregoing are “Powder” or “Paint” bronzes, and are varnished, but they are quite distinct from

“Electro” bronzed, which is an actual deposit by electricity of copper or bronze metal.

The colour of this can be varied-“light” assimilating to brass, whilst “dark” becomes richer and of a coppery tone; the rougher or more polished surfaces in each case providing the light and shade.

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“Illumination” - Some few of the following designs are suitable for this mode of treatment. The colours are all flat (i.e. unvarnished), and the gold unburnished. The medieval designs by Dr Dresser, and others, at pages 203, 207, 217, 218, 227, &c &c may be effectively decorated in this manner.”

(The hat stand appears on page 227 of the Coalbrookdale Company Catalogue).

The description of “Light statue bronzed” fits in with both the paint on the hat stand and on the card dish. The paint on the card dish was analysed and found to be a brass powder in a natural resin.¹⁰ The Museum was not able to determine the medium in use for the application of these brass powders and no records of paint recipes survive at Ironbridge¹¹. Nevertheless, technical publications of the time, such as Ernest Spon’s¹² *Workshop receipts for the use of manufacturers, mechanics, and scientific amateurs* published from 1875 onwards, suggest recipes which may be similar to those in use by the bronzers of the Coalbrookdale Company.

“Bronzing iron. - To one pint of methylated finish add 4oz. of gum shellac and 1/2oz. gum benzoin; put the bottle in a warm place, shaking occasionally. When the gum is dissolved let it stand in a cool place two or three days to settle, then gently pour off the clear into another bottle, cork it well, and keep it for the finest work ... Next get 1/2 lb. of finely-ground bronze green, the shade may be varied by using a little lamp black, red ochre, or yellow ochre ... Varnish all over.”

Apart from Spon’s use, in this instance, of a “finely ground bronze green” colour, the use of powder bronzes which are subsequently varnished are identical to the Coalbrookdale Company description of bronzing. It is interesting to note that the term “bronzing” really refers to the paint technique rather than a green or brown bronze colour.

The description of colour finishes in the Coalbrookdale Company catalogue also points out that the monochrome “Light Statue” gold colour found on the hat stand is a Coalbrookdale paint effect in use in 1846 before Dresser’s involvement with the Company. Dresser’s paint scheme of “Illumination” is described as an option for the customer. One assumes that the hat stand and other hall accessories such as the card dish could also be ordered in monochrome to complement and off set the interior design colour scheme of the customer’s hallway. Dresser may have been able to provide both striking designs and a new illuminated colour palette but his influence was not total, and in a business-like way the Coalbrookdale company would provide the customer with what they wanted: an older paint colour such as the “Light statue” or “as varied if desired”, even on new designs.

As the later layers of paint were removed much of the detail of the casting was revealed. The arms of the umbrella holder decorated with animal heads (**fig. 10**) were heavily clogged with paint before treatment and typical of the object’s surface as a whole. Once the over-paint was removed (**figs. 11 and 12**) the small details of casting such as the animals’ teeth were revealed.

The treatment also revealed the Coalbrookdale makers marks, serial or register number and diamond registration mark on the drip tray (**figs. 13 and 14**). The diamond registration mark (**fig. 14**) was introduced with the Design Copyright Act 1839 and Designs Act of 1842.¹³ The Acts gave protection to ornamental designs including manufactured goods in thirteen categories. Registered articles made wholly or chiefly of metal were protected for three years. Though only partially surviving the diamond mark reveals that the design was registered in December, 1867. As the paint removal progressed “Coalbrookdale no 23” was also found on the back of the object (**fig. 15**) (This may refer to a batch number, an earlier version of the 1875 catalogue or a model number).

Once the later overpaint had been successfully removed and no other paint colour traces were found, the final appearance of the hat stand was discussed by conservators and curators. Many areas of the “light statue” gold paint on the hat stand were damaged or lost, especially on the lower part of the object, which had received most wear and tear during its working lifetime. The extent of the paint loss

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suggests one reason why the stand was overpainted. As well as the losses to the original painted surface, the paint itself had discoloured and aged where exposed to the environment (**figs. 5 and 8**). No paint other than the modern primer was found inside the drip tray, except for traces of gold on the very edges of the tray. On the positive side, large areas of the original paint scheme survived, though discoloured, on the upper arms of the hat stand. In deciding how to proceed further with the hat stand's final appearance, a crucial fact had emerged: we could be sure of the colour originally intended because it had survived in near new condition under the coat hooks away from the air (**fig. 5**). We then had two alternatives: one was to show the hat stand with the paint scheme as originally intended, which might have meant painting over original paint, the other was to display as much of the original paint surface as possible even though it was discoloured. This might have meant the object would look unattractive or damaged and not as originally intended. The solution found was carefully to paint in losses to the painted surface around areas of original paint. Except on the inside of the drip tray, where no evidence for any paint was found other than the modern pink; here it was decided to leave the surface unpainted. This may or may not have been painted a "light statue" also. So leaving it unpainted would at least not deceive and would mean that the makers and registration marks were visible.

Applying new paint only to areas of loss to the original painted surface and leaving visible surviving original paint means that the original paint could still be seen. The overall impression, however, is of the object's colour as intended, because the new paint chosen matches the original paint colour found under the hat and coat hooks. Close inspection (**fig. 16**) reveals a slightly mottled appearance between new paint and old; the view of the object as whole, however, (**fig. 17**) gives a faithful impression of how the hat stand originally looked.

Dresser's own admiration for the contemporary ironworker's craft is clearly stated in the chapter on *Hardware* in his *Principles of Decorative Design*:¹⁴

"As a further illustration of a correct and very beautiful treatment of metal, we give one segment of the Hereford Cathedral Screen, the work of that most intelligent of ironworkers, Mr. Skidmore of Coventry. The screen was shown at the International Exhibition of 1862, in London, and from there was removed to its place in the Cathedral. All who can will do well to view this beautiful work which is one of the finest examples of artistic metalwork with which we are acquainted"¹⁵ (**fig. 18**).

Screens were deemed essential to the medieval cathedral, serving as a barrier which separated nave from choir, congregation from clergy. By the 19th Century most had disappeared although the vestiges of one remained in Hereford, only to be removed and replaced by an elaborate Gothic Revival screen in iron designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott¹⁶. Much has been written about Scott's restoration of cathedrals in the mid 19th Century and not all of it has been entirely laudatory. Scott's intention at Hereford was to reintroduce a sense of architectural and spatial cohesion and he was sufficiently confident to introduce modern solutions. The original medieval screens were never made of iron but of stone or wood. Iron would have been far too expensive. But by the mid 19th Century, improvements in manufacturing techniques made iron a cheap and viable constructional material. Scott used it extensively, both structurally and decoratively, and the Hereford Screen, the largest, the most elaborate and most important cathedral screen designed by Scott in the 1860s (the others were Lichfield 1861 and Salisbury, 1869-72) was greeted with universal acclaim when it was first displayed at the London International Exhibition in 1862. The Illustrated London News described it as "the grandest, most triumphant achievement of modern architectural art".¹⁷

The subsequent history of the screen is an illustration of the eclipse of a once great reputation. We have already mentioned that the stature of Dresser fell in the half century after his death: the same fate befell Scott. Celebrated in the 19th Century, the screen fell out of favour in the 20th. Rust, dirt and in places insensitive over painting had taken its toll and the original polychromatic colour scheme was but a mere shadow of its former self. Aesthetically it came to be considered ugly and incongruous in a medieval building. Liturgically it was seen as an unacceptable barrier between the congregation and the clergy in the chancel area. As

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early as the late 1930s, consideration was being given to removing it from the cathedral. In 1967 it was taken out and for the next 30 years it languished in store, firstly in Coventry under the care of the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery and subsequently in London. In 1983, once the Coventry authorities decided they were never going to raise the necessary funds for its restoration, it was given to the V&A. Six years ago, the V&A launched a successful fund-raising campaign which raised over £800,000, thanks to the generosity of private individuals and trust funds with matching support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund. It was the Museum's largest ever conservation project to date in both scale and cost. Thirty-eight conservators from the firm of Plowden & Smith Ltd cleaned, painted and reassembled the screen over a period of thirteen months. It was unveiled to great acclaim on May 21st, 2001.

During the course of restoration, laboratory tests established 21 different colours, many of which were derived from metal oxides. The decision was made at an early stage in the project to restore the colour scheme to its original Victorian brilliance. Unexpectedly, analysis revealed two early colour schemes. The Exhibition scheme (1862) had been improved with a more elaborate one when it was installed in the Cathedral (1863). This included extra stencilling and a range of warmer colours, possibly intended to harmonise with the pink sandstone building. This is the scheme followed in the restoration. However, the wrought iron tracery arches, one of which is illustrated in Dresser's *Principles of Design* remained unaltered so that what you see of these sections is what impressed Dresser when he first saw it at the International Exhibition of 1862.

In the British Galleries, only a few feet away, where the hat stand with its monochrome finish is currently on display, the contrast in colour schemes could hardly be starker. Dresser's attitude to the colouring of ironwork, despite his frank admiration of the Hereford Screen, remained at best ambivalent. In his concluding paragraph to the chapter on *Hardware*, Dresser wrote the following:

“As to the colouring of iron I can say little. In my judgement the best modes of colouring metals were originated by Mr. Skidmore of Coventry, of whom I have before spoken. His theory is this, that materials are best coloured by the tints of their oxides. When a metal, especially brass, is seen in a furnace in a molten condition, the flames where the oxygen of the atmosphere is uniting with the vapour of the metal, present the most resplendent tints. The same thing in a lesser degree occurs in the case of iron but here the colours are less brilliant, and are more tertiary in character. Mr. Skidmore applies to a metal the colours seen in the flames of the furnace where it melts. Without attempting to limit the colourist to any theory whereby his ideas might be restricted, I must say that Skidmore's colouring of the metals is very good.”

Thus while Dresser admires the rich polychromatic language for which Skidmore was rightly famous, on the matter of coloured ironwork he refuses to be prescriptive. Perhaps he was mindful of his designs for the Coalbrookdale Company six years earlier, although no reference is made to them in this chapter. One must also not overlook Dresser's distinctly hierarchical attitude towards materials. Cast iron from Dresser's point of view was an inferior material to wrought iron. The section of the Hereford Screen which Dresser illustrates and discusses is wrought. His Coalbrookdale products are cast.

“Casting is the least artistic mode of treating iron; but if iron is to be cast, the patterns formed should be so fully adapted to this method of manufacture that the mode of working may be readily apparent. It is foolish to seek to make cast iron appear as wrought iron: cast iron should appear as cast iron, and wrought iron as wrought iron.”

There lies the clue to Dresser's acceptance of a monochrome scheme for his cast iron designs. Cast iron should look like cast iron and be decorated appropriately. It should not be decorated in a manner similar to wrought iron which has altogether different structural properties. It was therefore acceptable that cast iron be given a monochrome finish which is

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simpler and plainer than the variegated and polychrome finish appropriate for wrought iron.

Although the final appearance is not what was initially expected and came as a surprise, the hat stand has revealed a great deal more about the art of bronzing. It has also provided new information about the relationship of the Coalbrookdale Company and Dresser, enabling a reappraisal of Coalbrookdale's colour schemes for Dresser designs. Lastly it has identified what Coalbrookdale "light statue bronze" looks like and how effective it was in bringing out the light and shade of Dresser's design.

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NOTES

¹ Letter by J Powell Librarian Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust to Dr J Cheshire V&A British Galleries project 14 October 1999.

² Kosinova A. *Paint analysis report M.22-1971. 22/10/99.* (Victoria & Albert Museum 1999).

³ Personal communication with ARE North Dept of Metalwork V&A.

⁴ Kosinova A. As above. Personal communication with L Burgio V&A Science Section.

⁵ Gettens R J and Stout G L, *Paintings materials.* (New York Dover Pub Inc 1966), pp160-61.

⁶ Burgio L. *Science section EDXRF analysis files 122-124 Dresser1-3.* 16/11/2000 (Victoria & Albert Museum 2000).

⁷ Personal communication with J Powell, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust July 2000.

⁸ Art Union Magazine. *Illustrated tour in the manufacturing districts.* (London 1 August 1846).

⁹ Letter from J Powell Librarian Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust to S Metcalf 10 August 2000.

¹⁰ Ford D. *Analysis of the coating on a fruit dish, M.37-1993.* Science section report no 99/27/DJF. (Victoria & Albert Museum 1999).

¹¹ Powell J as above.

¹² Spon E, *Workshop receipts, for the use of manufacturers, mechanics and scientific amateurs.* (London, 1888) p18-9.

¹³ Public Record Office, *Designs and trade marks: registers and representations.* Information sheet no 42 (London, PRO, 1985).

¹⁴ Originally published: *Principles of Decorative Design* (London, 1873), Cassell Petter & Galpin, Reprinted (unabridged) Dover Publications, New York, 1995 p 144-52.

¹⁵ *Ibid* p.151.

¹⁶ *The Future of the Past*, ed. J. Fawcett, London, 1976 p.110.

¹⁷ *The Illustrated London News* "The Hereford Screen in the International Exhibition". London August 30, 1862, p.24.

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