

VISIT TO THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM BRITISH GALLERIES 1500–1900

4th February 2002

This visit started with a brief introduction by Sarah Medlam, one of the curators behind the recent re-display of these galleries, following which we split into three groups to view them. We were told how it had been decided to interpret and display the galleries according to four themes that had influenced each of the stylistic periods between the dates that the galleries covered. These themes are the style itself, the leaders and patrons of each style, the application of new techniques and materials introduced by the style, and fashionable living within it.

As each group started in different areas of the museum the progression was not chronological for everyone; hence this account begins in the 1840s with the Gothic Revival. Exhibits range from the plain to the complex; a Pugin table is an example of the former, and a sophisticated Burgess washstand the latter.

Comments on the evolution of the flatter painted decoration of pieces in a 'medieval' style, to the grand carved gothic forms of others, led to a discussion on nomenclature and the perceptions of different styles that the revivalists may have had. In many cases no sharp lines appear to have been drawn, and mixed styles, medieval, romanesque and gothic coexist within the same piece. An 1861 sideboard by Richard Norman-Shaw was an example of such a hybrid.

The influence of the Great Exhibition of 1851 is given a section designed to impart some idea of the atmosphere that may have existed within the glass pavilions. Full size translucent drawings of the metal structure are backlit by the Museum's windows, and underfoot, the floor has been recreated to the original specification. However, health and safety would not allow the 3/8" gap that was left between the floorboards in 1851, allowing the debris of the day to fall between them prior to being swept up each evening. Sarah Medlam stressed the influence of Prince Albert in the 'importation' of German ecclesiastic-style carving on some of the furniture in this section, which embraces

the work of both large commercial establishments and individual artisans, in exhibits ranging from Pugin's Armoire that dominated the Medieval Court, to revolutionary elasticated socks and undergarments.

Jackson and Grahame's monumental sideboard surmounted with a mirror, built for the Paris Exhibition of 1855 is shown as an example of the attempt to appeal to and catch up with the French style of the time, when it was felt that Britain was lagging behind. Designed by the Frenchman Alexandre Eugene Prignot, some thoughts were exchanged as to the nationality of the craftsmen that may have made it. Influence from across the Channel is the theme for another area, which shows how in the 19th century every period of French furniture from 1660 to 1790 was copied, and eventually amalgamated into the composite 'French Style'. The emerging popularity of reproducing antiques is characterised on this stand by 19th century marquetry, initially thought to be 18th century when first gifted to the Museum.

The role of antique collecting is given its own section, with the emphasis on showing pieces known to have belonged to collectors, rather than for their authenticity, and an oak chair is used as an example of the faker's work to exploit that market. A plain chest of drawers has been included and visitors are invited to handle it and open the drawers. It is even provided with a turntable to facilitate inspection of the back.

The Arts and Crafts Movement and Aestheticism also feature in the 19th century section of the galleries. A room setting from The Grove, Harborne, Birmingham, illustrates the high standard of work achieved by provincial firms at this time; in this instance a little known company from Leicester.

Our group then passed through a time warp to 1500. We were told how finding suitable exhibits from the earlier period has proved difficult, but some interesting pieces are on display, including a large section of the panelling from the Haynes Grange Room; thought to be the earliest example of an English Renaissance interior. Interestingly the panelling is of pine, yet shows little evidence to suggest that it may have originally been painted, leading to some speculation as to how it may have been finished when new.

A panelled room circa 1606, originally from Bromley-by-Bow, has been recreated and includes a fine plaster ceiling, part of a group found throughout the Thames Valley, and also in Scotland. The diversity of these locations has often been put down to itinerant craftsmen moving from house to house. The alternative explanation that the most skilled aspect of this type of work is the mould cutting, and that moulds, rather than the workers moved around, was suggested as an interesting avenue for future study. Finding suitable furniture for this period had also been difficult, the table on display was apparently the fourth attempt. If anything this table, sporting cusped arched spandrels to its rails and having distinctive octagonal faceted legs,

was felt to be earlier than the setting. A visit to the reserve collections and insight into the decisions made when preparing these displays would make a very interesting day in the future.

The Great Bed of Ware has been re-hung based on research carried out by Charles Kightley. The evidence found in a study of over 1000 inventories was the basis for the red and yellow hangings; an interesting regional variation had shown this to be the most common combination of colours in the south of the country, with red and green prevailing in the north. A claviorgan on display with a case of painted strapwork is a stunning example of this type of decoration, and an interesting view of how many painted interiors might have looked. The pedigree of a draw leaf table caused some doubts, but sitting on top of it is a small cabinet that may represent the origins of cabinet made work which on a larger scale was to have significant impact over the following periods.

A section covering new styles from the second half of the 17th century introduces the gate leg table, the cane chair, the mirror and the longcase clock, alongside a bookcase from Dyrham Park almost identical to those made for Samuel Pepys by 'Simpson the joiner'. A joined walnut chest of drawers with applied mouldings and inlay has been 'cleaned off' to give an idea of its original appearance. This subject, almost controversial to some, makes this the section that embraces the Restoration in more than one sense! This display also draws some interesting parallels to the recent 'After the Fire' exhibition at the Geffrye Museum, as does a section showing examples of marquetry.

The 1698 State Bed from Mellville House is now back on display, having been away from public view for the last 15 years due to the lack of a suitable environment in which to present the original hangings that make it such a remarkable survival. This bed represents a loud fanfare heralding the emergence of the upholsterer's art. Close to the Melville House bed are a pair of lacquer candle stands, one of which is period and the other 19th century. Examination of the turnings, and particularly the technique used, helped to identify each correctly and indicated the benefit of being able to view such pairings as a comparative exercise.

In the space devoted to the 18th century a room setting from 11 Henrietta Street, London is one example of the careful work that has gone into this refurbishment. The replicated fabrics are once again the result of studying appropriate inventories for colour and material. The wall hangings with a wool warp and mohair weft were passed between hot rollers to achieve the finish that they display.

The Galleries deserve a far longer visit than was possible on this occasion, but the benefit of seeing them with those that had been closely involved in their review made the exercise extremely worthwhile. I left pondering several questions that regularly occur when attempts to recreate past interiors are made. The

juxtaposition of the patinated 'graffiti' covered Great Bed of Ware with its fresh new hangings is perhaps a misleading representation as to how it must have originally appeared. Putting the ethical questions aside, the cleaning of the walnut chest of drawers may make the detail clearer, but it is still seen with the fading of some elements, and the darkening of others, that its age has imparted. I found the replica Oyster veneered chest that the Geffrye commissioned for 'After the Fire' a more useful indication of possible original appearance, and carefully tackled, replication can be a valid avenue for research in itself. One also needs to be well aware that a 400 year old panelled room, like that from Bromley by Bow, is now seen with the oxidisation, finish and texture that time has given it. Such a room must have looked quite different when new, as indeed would the furniture it now contains. These questions have been addressed in different ways on a number of occasions, and having heard of the thought and effort that has gone into this project, I am sure that these, and countless other issues have been deliberated over long and hard before decisions were taken for this project. I wouldn't be surprised to find many of the points that we covered are contained in the numerous written and electronic aids that accompany the displays. Sadly there was not time to delve into them on this visit, but fortunately, as Sarah Medlam pointed out, this is a permanent display and not a temporary exhibition and further visits are definitely required.