

Max Donnelly:

South Kensington and the Revival of Painted Furniture

Geffrye Museum, 19 November 2011

Max took us on a lively and accomplished canter through the early history of the V&A and the development of its buildings as the context for the painted furniture in its collections. The armoire shown in the Medieval Court at the Great Exhibition of 1851, designed by A.W.N Pugin and made by J. G. Crace, was the first item of furniture to be purchased for the new museum. It was painted with mock-heraldic shields along its busily carved cornice, but the painting was hardly its main feature.

Soon after, William Burges, inspired by his travels in northern France, began to design wonderfully fanciful furniture in medieval style. The Yatman Cabinet, of architectural form and painted by Edmund Poynter with themes loosely related to writing and printing was one example. A little later he designed his Bacchus Cabinet, painted by Nathaniel Westlake, and only rediscovered in 1998 in a Cambridge house clearance. Around 1860, 'painted furniture went public', and in the International Exhibition of 1862 more Burges fantasies appeared as well as the much criticised St George Cabinet, designed by Philip Webb and painted by William Morris (the Morris firm had opened a year earlier) and King Renée's Honeymoon Cabinet, designed by J. P. Seddon and painted by Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Exotic and colourful though these might seem, they were a clear contrast to the prevailing French-inspired furniture with its lavishly applied ornamentation of gilt metalwork, rich veneers and carving that was the accepted exhibition fare of the time.

Max showed some of the later items of painted furniture acquired for the V&A, such as Henry Cole's piano, painted by James Gamble, the F.W.Moody/Gillow buffet set with painted porcelain plaques by Henry Stacy Marks and T.E.Collcutt's cabinet of 1871 with fashionably ebonised turnings and painted panels. By this time the V&A not only collected contemporary but earlier examples, such as a floral painted cabinet by the late 18th century artist, George Brookshaw. Most famously, of course, the various eating rooms were decorated with different forms of painted decoration. Max conducted us through these too.

He ended on the sobering reflection that much of this furniture and furnishing might have been lost: most languished in Bethnal Green, unfashionable and mostly unregarded, for the first half of the 20th century. In 1933 Pugin's armoire came to notice: a decision was taken that rather than being 'disposed of' it could be useful as an office bookcase. It is now resplendent in the British Galleries.

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