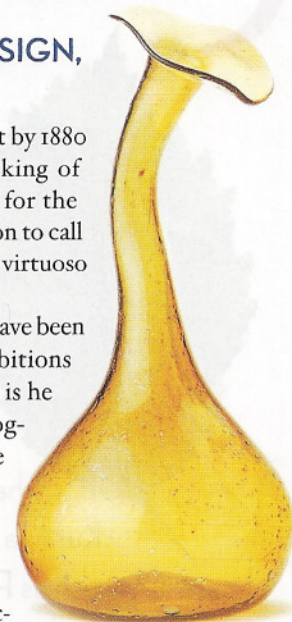


IMPROPER VICTORIAN

THE WILDLY IMAGINATIVE CHRISTOPHER DRESSER,
MULTICULTI MAESTRO OF EARLY MACHINE AGE DESIGN,
DAZZLES IN A LONG OVERDUE EXHIBITION by martin filler



such demonic energy that by 1880 he was the undisputed king of high-style British goods for the home. It is no exaggeration to call him the first great design virtuoso of the Industrial Age.

Since the 1980s, there have been four major Dresser exhibitions in Europe, but only now is he finally getting the recognition he deserves in the United States, where he visited in 1876, lectured, and exerted a powerful effect on other product designers, architects, decorators, manufacturers, collectors, and tastemakers. A spectacular new retrospective, "Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser," at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York from March 5 through July 29, features more than 300 objects in every medium he undertook. It closely follows the 2001 Milan show organized by the London dealer and Dresser expert Michael Whiteway, which caused a sensation in the design world and spurred this much anticipated tribute. ▶

The best-kept secret in modern decorative art collecting during the past three decades has been Christopher Dresser. Ever since a pathbreaking show and sale of this Victorian polymath's work at London's Fine Art Society in 1972, a small but fervent band of fans has deemed Dresser one of the towering masters of his era, and deservedly so. He applied his genius to ceramics, metalwork, glassware, carpets, wall coverings, fabrics, and furniture with

The versatile Dresser, right, worked in many styles. His gilded ceramic vase, above, was manufactured by Minton, and the Clutha glass piece, top, by James Couper & Sons.



Born to a humble family in 1834, Dresser was a prodigy who at 13 won a scholarship to one of the new design schools set up by the British government as talent feeders for the nation's expanding industries. The progressive curriculum included botany, for in the scientific spirit of the Victorian Age educational reformers believed that the close study of nature would yield the finest designs. It was an idea that bore fruit in this country at the end of that century in the organic architecture of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright.

A key influence on Dresser was the design theorist Owen Jones, for whom he later worked and to whose encyclopedic pattern book, *The Grammar of Ornament*, the young man contributed a botanical plate. From Jones he learned that pattern and ornament ought to be stylized and flattened almost to the point of abstraction, rather than being representational, in the prevailing Victorian

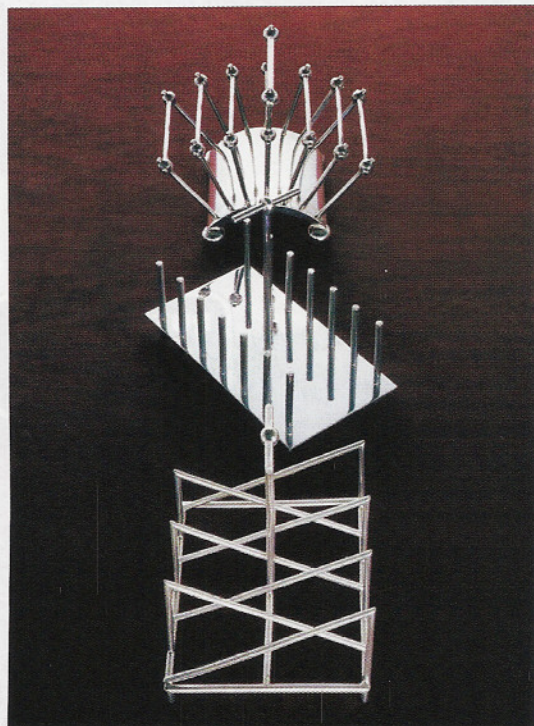
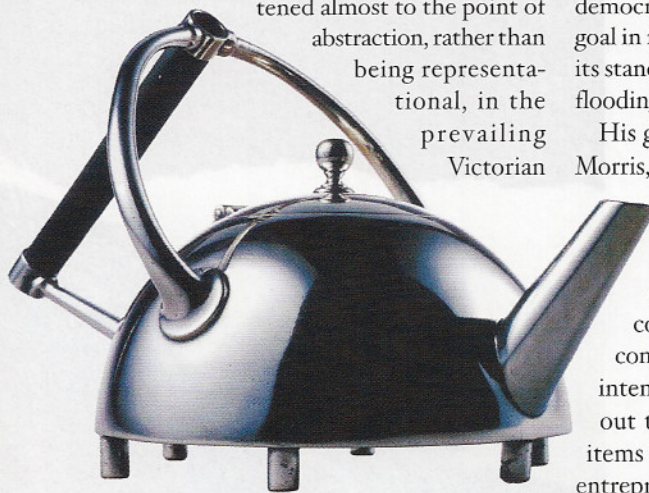
practice. It was a lesson he never forgot.

Dresser's own publications on plant science were so esteemed that they earned him an honorary PhD. But his shotgun marriage at 19 and the subsequent birth of 13 children pushed him toward the more lucrative field of industrial design. Soon he was in demand as a freelancer for a number of top firms, including Wedgwood, Minton, and the Coalbrookdale ironworks, and he prospered. Income aside, the democratic diffusion of good design was Dresser's goal in focusing on mass production and elevating its standards at a time when British factories were flooding the world with cheap monstrosities.

His greatest contemporary and rival, William Morris, fled the machine, while Dresser embraced it. Morris retreated into a medieval fantasyland in which simple, honest workmen would handcraft simple, honest objects, setting a moral example that would combat the twin evils of modernization and consumerism. The problem was that the labor-intensive artifacts advocated by Morris turned out to be so costly that they became luxury items for the rich. Dresser, though a less astute entrepreneur than Morris, ensured that common people around the world could participate in his grand revolution of taste and indulge in the pleasures of advanced style without undue expense.

To retain more creative control than he did as a mere hireling, Dresser set up several companies to manufacture his designs. At this point he invented the idea of signature design, imprinting his facsimile autograph as a seal of approval on the myriad objects that he and his assistants churned out. He also began to import and retail native artifacts from exotic places, especially Japan. It's impossible to overstate the impression that the arts of Japan made on Dresser, a central figure in the mania for orientalism that swept the West after Japan was opened to foreign trade following two centuries of self-imposed isolation.

Dresser's historic sojourn in Japan in 1876-77 had a seismic impact on this first foreigner to make a methodical on-site study of Japanese design. Everything he saw there provided inspiration, and, as he wrote, "while the kettle is an object of use in every house in the land, we have to go to Japan to make one as it should be." He



An ornamental drawing by Dresser, above, and his George Ohr-like earthenware bottle, top right, suggest one end of his design spectrum, while the teapot and toast racks establish his contemporary edge.

also envied the prestige that Japanese artisans enjoyed, unlike his lesser status vis-à-vis fine artists back home: "There is as much pride in Japan manifested by the maker in completing a little cup, a lacquer box, a sheet of leather paper, or even a pair of chopsticks, and by perfect work any craftsman may attain the celebrity enjoyed here by a Landseer, a Turner, or an Owen Jones."

After that revelatory journey of his, Dresser's work crystallized into something stronger, purer, and more daring. But this workaholic overextended his professional commitments and grew sick from stress, and a recession brought his independent business ventures to ruin. He retrenched to his piecemeal practice and stayed incredibly prolific until the end, producing mainly textiles and wallpapers, yet occasionally erupting with other objects of exceptional brilliance.

It wasn't just how much Dresser did that is astonishing, but how distinctive it was to the eyes of his contemporaries and to us today. His multicolored drip-glazed earthenware pots were crimped, dimpled, and crumpled just as George Ohr would do decades afterward, though Dresser's were made by machine, not hand. His boldly tinted wallpapers were printed with intricately tessellated nature-based patterns that bring to mind the eye-teasing graphic fantasies of M. C. Escher three-quarters of a century later. And his severely unornamented metal table utensils predict the industrial aesthetic that the Bauhaus elevated to high art in the 1920s. But by the time Dresser died, 100 years ago this coming November, he had fallen into obscurity, which deepened into posthumous oblivion even as the modern movement drew increasingly on concepts that he championed long before they became commonplace.

The beautifully illustrated "Shock of the Old" catalog (Cooper-Hewitt and V&A/Abrams), edited by Whiteway, now becomes the basic Dresser reference. Its authoritative contributors include, among others, the foremost specialist dealer in the designer's work, Harry Lyons of London's New Century gallery, and the leading Dresser scholars Stuart Durant and Widar Halén. Alas, the text is sometimes redundant, with developments in

Dresser's life reiterated in overlapping chapters on his overall career and its component parts. Refreshingly, the authors were not prevented from being critical of their subject or of one another's opinions. This is unusual in shows about lesser-known artists for whom an introductory case is being made. Yet, rather than these dissenting points of view harming Dresser,

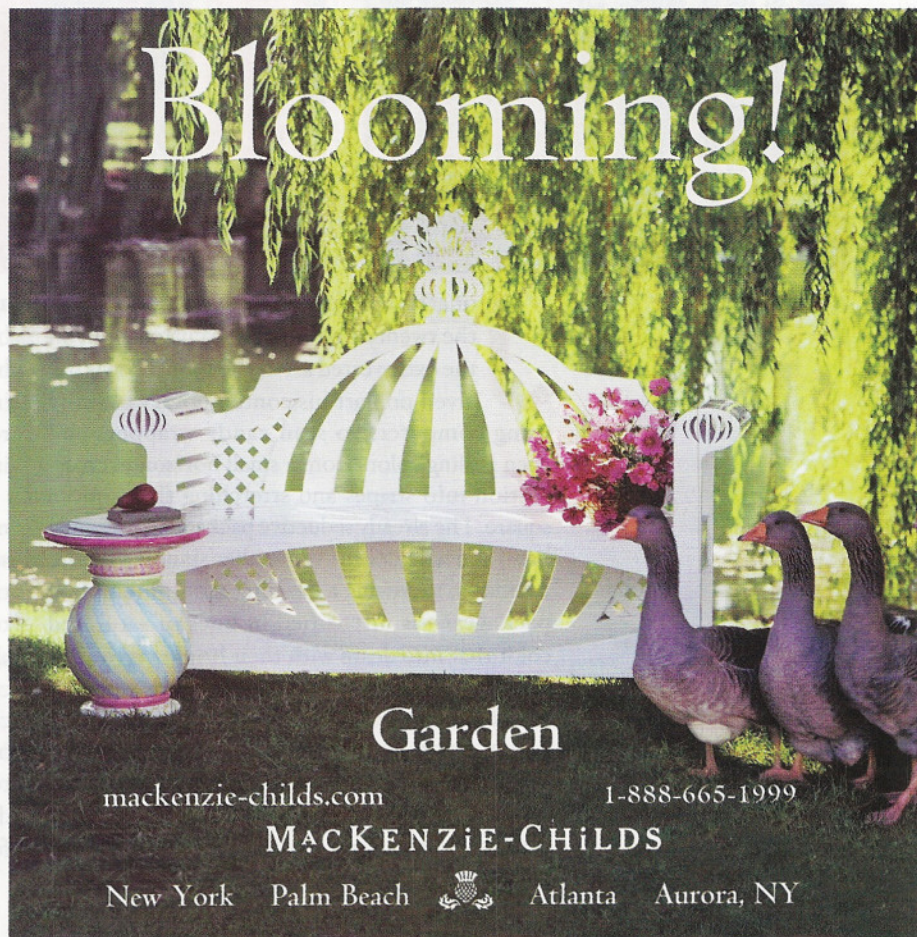
IT WASN'T JUST HOW MUCH DRESSER DID THAT IS ASTONISHING, BUT HOW DISTINCTIVE IT WAS TO THE EYES OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES AND TO US TODAY

the frank tone precludes the kind of over-inflated claims that often undermine the credibility of such celebratory events.

For example, contributor Simon Jarvis addresses the huge disparity between the reputations of Morris and Dresser and concludes that Morris "was simply the bigger man." Perhaps, but much as I revere the visionary Morris, the evidence in this splendid show and catalog demonstrates that Dresser was the more gifted creator of innovative design. His offbeat concoctions could be unsettling, even grotesque,

and were rarely as palatable to the general public as Morris's charming floral prints and country-cottage furnishings, without which there would have been no Laura Ashley. But whereas Morris drew on insular English traditions and turned them into a comforting cushion against rapidly changing times, Dresser absorbed provocative ideas from many periods and diverse

regions—Egypt and Persia, Peru and Fiji, Mexico and Morocco—and transformed them into a challenging, unifying style for the modern world. His achievement speaks so resonantly to us today because it suggests answers to current concerns about the cultural effects of globalization. Dresser urged his fellow designers to "study whatever has gone before: not with the view of becoming a copyist, but with the object of gaining knowledge, and of seeking out general truths and broad principles." That's still excellent advice. □



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