

Collecting Islam: The Kensington Connection

This talk looks at the work of a number of Orientalists of the 19th Century, including Owen Jones, Christopher Dresser and James Wild, and how their links to the Kensington area and the formation of the Victoria & Albert Museum was intrinsic to the eventual acceptance of an Islamic Revival in architecture and design, thus presenting a polychromatic rebuttal to the peculiar whiteness of this period's neo-classical and Gothic Revivalist tendencies.

1. Views in Cairo and Istanbul; Owen Jones; pencil and watercolour; 1833

Museum number: SD533, 532, 542, 543

Owen Jones considered the Arabian architecture of Cairo second only to the Alhambra in Granada, Andalucia – one of the many legacies left by Moorish Spain. It was during one of these visits to Cairo that Jones met Jules Goury, a young French architect. Due to a mutual love of Islamic architecture, the two men decided to travel north to Constantinople and then via sea to southern Spain and the Alhambra.

2. Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details from the Alhambra; Owen Jones and Jules Goury; volume; 1845

Museum number: NAL; 110.P.36 & 110.P.37

These two volumes were the products of Jones and Goury's observational work in Andalucia. The studies include detailed drawings of ornament, translations of all Arabic inscriptions and an in-depth historical account of the Moorish kings of Granada.

To ensure perfect accuracy in the ornament details, plaster impressions were taken of every element of ornament of the Alhambra. Some of these casts were bought by the South Kensington Museum (precursor to the V&A) for students of Oriental art.

Jones worked hard to establish a good standard of chromolithographic printing to do justice to the striking Islamic decorative schemes, and in fact as a result was a major force in pushing forward colour printing in England at the time.

3. Owen Jones's scheme for the decoration of the Great Exhibition building; William Simpson; pen, ink, watercolour; 1850

Museum number: 546-1897

Due to publicity generated by Jones's and Goury's Alhambra volumes, Jones was asked to lead on the interior decoration of the Crystal Palace, the venue for the Great Exhibition of 1851. Jones employed the bold use of the primary colours blue, red and yellow to elevate the building to the same standing as such examples of classic architecture as the Alhambra and the Parthenon, where similar colour schemes were used. By also using brightly-coloured fabric hangings from the iron framework of the building, Jones managed to evoke the atmosphere of an Arabian bazaar and recreate the grandeur and luminosity of the Oriental experience.

4. Grammar of Ornament; Owen Jones; volume; 1856

Museum number: NAL; ND.91.0045 & ND.91.0046

Jones's experience of Oriental architecture informed his utilitarian approach to design, arrangement of forms and harmony of colour. This was reflected in the establishment of the Department of Practical Art, set up immediately after the Great Exhibition and co-ordinated by Henry Cole. This Government department went on to combine with the Museum of Ornamental Art (both administered at Marlborough House) to form the South Kensington Museum, which in turn became the Victoria & Albert Museum. Henry Cole became the museum's first director.

Beforehand, however, Cole worked to assist Jones in developing his 'principles of design' which were used as the teaching foundations for the Department of Practical Art. These went on to be published as a public design manifesto, 'The Grammar of Ornament', and were an inspiration for a whole generation of design students in the 1850s.

5. Original Drawings for Owen Jones, Grammar of Ornament; Christopher Dresser and anon; watercolour, pencil, pen; 1856

Museum number: 1606, 1608, 1610, 1611, 1614 to 1616, 1671

Christopher Dresser went on to become one of the foremost designers of the 19th Century, however while still a student (at Marlborough House, where he would have attended lectures delivered by Jones) Dresser produced the Botanical drawings plate for Jones's Grammar of Ornament. Dresser was heavily influenced by Jones's approach to design, and went on to himself teach at the Government Schools of Design.

6. Truth, Beauty, Power: Principles of Decorative Design; Christopher Dresser; volume; ca. 1858

Museum number: NAL; 603.AE.1553

A clear influence from Owen Jones's Grammar of Ornament – this personal design manifesto of Dresser's discusses such issues as colour circle theory of complimentary/contrasting colours and examples of good design in Ancient Egypt.

7. Diagram to illustrate botanical design lectures at the School of Design; Christopher Dresser; pen, ink, watercolour; 1855

Museum number: 3969

An example of Dresser's method of using abstracted botanical elements to take Owen Jones's theories on flat pattern to its logical next steps.

8. Designs for tiles; Owen Jones; watercolour; ca. 1849

Museum number: 8115:5

Jones soon realised the debt that Islamic design had to geometry, mathematics and astronomy. He was a strong influence in the contemporary development of tile designs, seeing the patterns of tessellation as a key to rationalising the beauty of Islamic ornament.

9. The Alhambra Court at the Crystal Palace at Sydenham; Philip Henry Delamotte; photograph; 1854

Museum number: 39.315

After the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Crystal Palace was dismantled and re-erected in Sydenham where it stands to this day, The photographer Philip Henry Delamotte was commissioned to document the preparation and opening of the 'new' Crystal Palace. Jones was responsible for many of the design courts, in particular the Court of the Alhambra. This photograph shows tile detailing which follows many of the same patterns shown in the design of object 8115:5

10. Designs for the oriental courts of the South Kensington Museum; Owen Jones; watercolour, Chinese white and gold paint; 1863

Museum number: E.3607, 3610, 3611, 3612, 3608-1931

Owen Jones was commissioned to design a number of the oriental courts for the new South Kensington Museum. He was assisted by Christopher Dresser who then went on to buy these drawings at a sale administered by Jones's estate. These drawings were then acquired by the V&A, after Dresser's death.

11. Design for part of the drawing room ceiling, 8 Kensington Palace Gardens; Owen Jones; watercolour; 1843

Museum number: 8352

This was one of Jones's few residential building projects. He designed the house in a Moorish style, with the façade displaying a particularly rich ornamentation of encrusted concrete. Henry Cole visited this house soon after it was completed in the 1850s. By the 1950s the house was dilapidated and was eventually demolished in 1961. Jones however also designed no. 24 Kensington Palace Gardens, which still stands today.

12. Sketchbook depicting ornament on buildings in Cairo; James Wild; pencil, ink, watercolour; ca. 1842

Museum number: 91.A.23 & 24

James Wild was Jones's brother-in-law and another serious student of Islamic architecture. He spent a great deal of time in Cairo and Damascus, undertaking meticulous studies of domestic interiors.

13. Interior of the house occupied by the artist J.F.Lewis, Cairo; James Wild; pencil, ink, watercolour; 1842

Museum number: E.3763-1938

This residence was occupied by the famous 19th century artist John Frederick Lewis who worked on a large number of topographical views of both religious and secular scenes in Cairo and other parts of the near East. When depicting architecture, Lewis would have painted what he

literally saw in front of his eyes, imperfections and all. Wild however would have approached drawings such as this interior of Lewis's house with the eye of an architect and designer. His desire to record structure and ornament would have led him to depict buildings as new, and would have left no room for romantic interpretation. This house recorded here by Wild was visited by the novelist William Thackeray, who was a close friend of Lewis.

14. Design for window in oriental courts in South Kensington Museum; James Wild; watercolour; 1863

Museum number: 94.J.24

Alongside Jones, Wild was also commissioned to design aspects of the South Kensington Museum's Oriental Courts. This window design would have been directly influenced by the many Cairene and Damsacene domestic interiors that Wild had meticulously observed and drawn during his periods of time spent in the near East.

15. Design for Christ Church, Streatham; James Wild, watercolour; 1841

Museum number: E.3648-1938

Jones experienced many problems creating an Islamic experience in architecture that was acceptable to his contemporaries. Many of his competition designs were seen as too fantastical, far-fetched and impractical. Some even thought of Jones as being irrationally obsessed, perhaps even infatuated, with the grandeur of his beloved Alhambra. However, Wild designed Christ Church in an Islamic style, but working more to follow *form* and *function* of near Eastern buildings rather than concentrating on colour, ornament and decoration. This 'softly softly' approach seemed much more palatable to Jones's and Wild's peers, and in fact Wild received significant praise from critics for this Streatham church and its 'new Islamic style'

16. Designs for the Arab Hall, Leighton House, Kensington; George Aitchison; watercolour and gold paint; 1878

Museum number: RIBA; SC124/4(5)

Lord Frederic Leighton's Arab Hall was housed inside what is considered as one of the first examples of a purpose-built studio house. Leighton commissioned his friend George Aitchison to design a room which would essentially act as a combined storage and display solution for the numerous artefacts that Leighton had collected from his many trips to the near East. The design was based on drawings that Aitchison had made in Moorish Spain. The dome was pierced with windows of stained glass from Damascus; Walter Crane designed some of the mosaic friezes, and William de Morgan arranged the layout of the lower tier of wall tiles, also from Damascus.