

# EXHIBITION REVIEWS

## E.W. Godwin

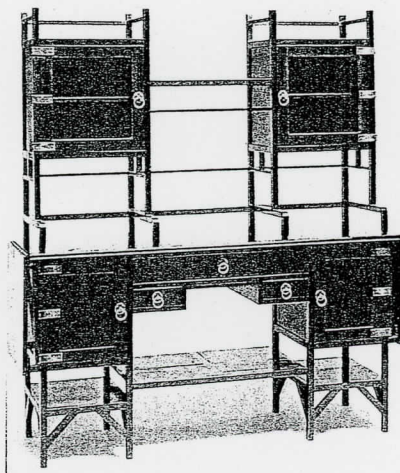
GHENETE ZELLEKE

Celebrated shortly after his death in 1886 as the 'Poet of architects and architect of all the arts', Edward William Godwin (1833-86) was a man of extraordinary accomplishments. In a professional career that spanned more than thirty-three years, this complex polymath was architect of ecclesiastic, civic, and domestic buildings, innovative interior decorator, designer of furniture, textiles, wallpapers and ceramics, writer and architectural critic, as well as theatre designer and producer.

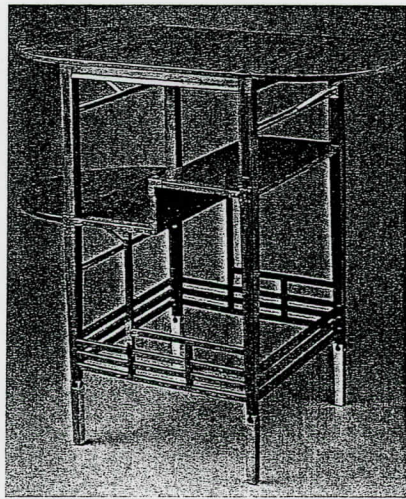
Born and trained in Bristol, Godwin came to London in 1867 and found himself at the centre of the city's artistic avant-garde. He lived, for six years, with artist muse, and celebrated Shakespearean actress, Ellen Terry, by whom he fathered two children. He counted among his intimates the Gothic Revival architect William Burges, the painter James McNeill Whistler, and the aesthete and writer Oscar Wilde, who called Godwin 'one of the most artistic spirits of this century in England.' That he is today less widely known than these eminent contemporaries should be remedied by this fascinating exhibition, which is the brainchild of Susan Weber Soros, the founder and director of the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts. Godwin's remarkable talents are revealed through the one hundred and fifty-four exhibits on show, and in the accompanying catalogue, both of which restore him to his rightful place among his contemporaries.

Antiquarian study was an important component of Godwin's development as an architect. He sustained a lifelong passion for the study of historical styles through which he sought to distill the underlying principles upon which to build a new style, the 'architecture of the future' as he termed it. Godwin argued for the exercise of 'judicious eclecticism' in formulating contemporary style. Two of the most influential currents expressed in Godwin's work are those of gothic and Japanese art. In his review of the 1862 London International Exhibition, William Burges wrote of the essential symmetry of the two: 'If the visitor wishes to see the real Middle Ages, he must visit the Japanese Court', which he also called 'the real Medieval Court of the Exhibition'.

Godwin's first major commission (1861-64) was for the design and fitting out of Northampton Town Hall in the style of the Reformed Gothic. Godwin credited John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* with having



1 Sideboard designed by E.W. Godwin (1833-86), made by William Watt, c. 1877. Ebonized mahogany with brass pulls and hinges, glass panels, 184.2 x 255.3 x 50.2 cm. Private collection



2 Table with folding shelves designed by E.W. Godwin, probably made by Collinson and Lock, c. 1872. Walnut with gilt brass fittings, 74.7 x 40.6 x 81.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

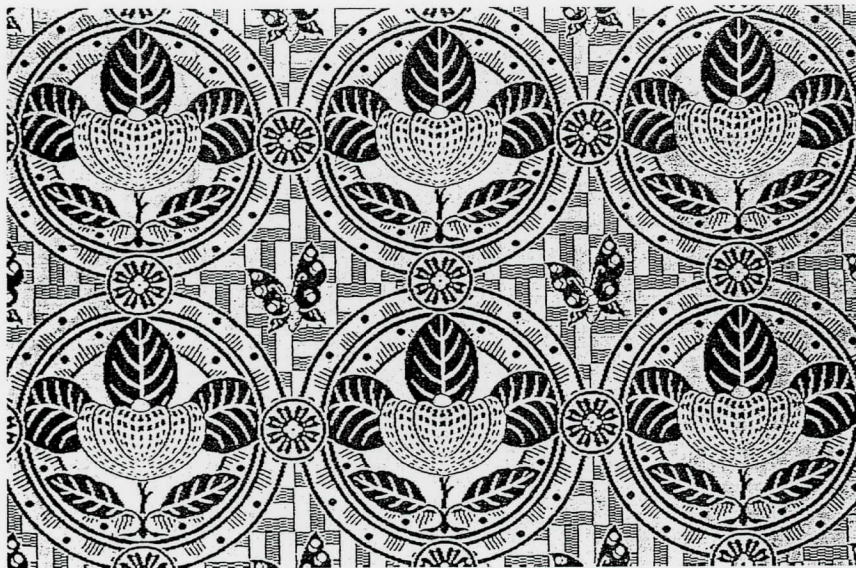
inspired the rich polychromatic facade of the Town Hall, with its alternating bands of different coloured stone, and its use of sculpture and carving to animate the facade.

On the grand domestic scale, Godwin built and furnished Dromore Castle (from 1866 onwards) in Ireland for the 3rd Earl of Limerick in the tradition of Irish medieval castles. The castle's exterior details included stepped

battlements, a round tower and slit windows. All the elements within were also brought under Godwin's direction. A drawing of 1869 (no. 25) for the dining hall of Dromore Castle represents a large buffet. Gothic in inspiration, with a central gabled canopy and panelled cupboards, and massive in scale, the weight of the buffet is visually offset by the balancing of open and closed shelves. One of the most luxurious pieces of furniture for Dromore must have been a chess table, whose appearance is recorded in a design (no. 22), which shows an ebonized mahogany table inlaid with ebony and boxwood panels of latticework enframing carvings of stylised animals below.

Personal necessity acted as a catalyst to Godwin's emergence as an innovative designer of domestic interiors. Godwin was already a collector of Japanese prints and Chinese blue and white porcelains as early as 1862, when he still lived in Bristol. In both his Bristol and London homes, Godwin created a minimalist environment of bare wood floors scattered with Oriental carpets, walls distempered with flat colours, and furnished with simple examples of early eighteenth-century furniture; and from 1867 on, with examples of ebonized furniture of his own design in the Anglo-Japanese style. The simplicity of such interiors, in contrast to the overburdened Victorian norm, struck a deep chord with some of Godwin's contemporaries.

In 1877, Godwin designed a studio house on Tite Street, Chelsea, for Whistler, a house whose exterior, as it was initially planned, echoed the multiple roof lines of Japanese Buddhist temples. One of Godwin's last commissions was for the interior of another Tite Street residence, the home of Oscar and Constance Wilde. Upon its completion in 1885, Wilde wrote to Godwin in ecstasy about the dining room in which 'each chair is a sonnet in ivory, and the table is a masterpiece in pearl.' One of Godwin's most important contributions to the decorative arts was the assimilation of Japanese design principles and concepts of spatial organization into his furniture. The classic example of Anglo-Japanese furniture is of course Godwin's ebonized sideboard, first made about 1867 for his own use and subsequently produced in at least ten versions between 1867 and 1888. The sideboard on view (Fig. 1, no. 57), made of ebonized mahogany by William Watt about 1877, is elegant in the interplay of open and closed



3 'Butterfly' brocade designed by E.W. Godwin, made by Warner, Sillett and Ramm, c. 1874. Jacquard woven silk, 86.5 x 55 cm. Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum

spaces. Less iconic but equally refined is the table with folding shelves probably made by Collinson and Lock about 1872 (Fig. 2, no. 71). In her essay in the catalogue on Japonisme in England, Nancy B. Wilkinson identifies a plate in Aimé Humbert's *Le Japon Illustré* published in 1870 as the inspiration for a sketch by Godwin of a Japanese *tansu* or chest with shelves, which in turn was translated into the irregular shelves of the small table. Godwin also had a facility for creating complex two-dimensional repeating patterns both for wallpapers and textiles governed by these tenets (Fig. 3, no. 54).

The excellent catalogue, which includes thirteen essays exhaustively documenting different aspects of Godwin's life and career, sheds new light on many of these areas. Aileen Reid's article on Godwin's architectural career and the principles underlying that career is the first comprehensive survey of the subject. David Allison's superb photography of Godwin's buildings animates both the exhibition and the catalogue.

Godwin the man remains somewhat elusive. One photograph shows him around 1861-65 in medieval dress (no. 2), and in another taken almost twenty years later he is again in costume, this time as a friar with the cast members of *As You Like It* (no. 135). These are both telling images of Godwin, a man who assumed many professional guises, but whose personality, by accounts charismatic, eccentric, controlling and frustrated, remains still to be fully revealed.

*The exhibition 'E.W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer', is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, New York City, from 17 November 1999 until 27 February 2000. The catalogue, edited by Susan Weber Soros, is published by Yale University Press, 1999, ISBN 0 300 08008 5 (cloth), £50*

## The Flora Danica Service

A. P. LEDGER

This exhibition was opened by HM Queen Margrethe II of Denmark and Dr h.c. Johannes Rau, President of the Federal Republic of Germany, to mark the inauguration on 21 October 1999 of the Danish Embassy within the new five nation complex of the 'Nordic Embassies' following the return of the German government to Berlin. In doing so the exhibition honoured two considerable Danish achievements: the Flora Danica porcelain service, and its inspiration – the botanical work *Icones Florae Danicae*, whilst also displaying examples of botanical painting on the porcelain of five other European countries.

The *Flora Danica*, as the *Icones* is now generally known, was initiated as an economic and scientific project backed by King Frederick V (1723-66) to assist the development of agriculture and the use of natural resources in the joint kingdom of Denmark and Norway and its associated territories. The first ten instalments of sixty plates each were produced from 1761 onwards by a young German botanist, Georg Christian Oeder (1727-91), who had earlier been appointed by the King to establish a botanic garden in Copenhagen. Work on the *Flora Danica* continued under a succession of editors and was only finally completed in 1883 when over three thousand plants had been depicted, making it the greatest and most comprehensive illustrated survey of the national flora of any European country. *Flora Danica* was early on recognised as a work of scientific importance and national prestige,



1 Ice pail pan, liner and cover, Flora Danica, 1803. Porcelain, ht 26.5 cm. The pan is decorated with 'Papaver dubium'

and it was suggested it could form the basis of a pan-European *Flora*. What were effectively supplements to it were produced by N.J. Jacquin with *Florae Austriacae* (1773-81) and P.S. Pallas with *Flora Russica* (1784 and 1788), both works excluding plants which had already or would in the future appear in *Flora Danica*.

A porcelain factory had been established in Copenhagen in 1775, but as a result of debt was transferred into royal ownership in 1779, becoming 'The Royal Danish Porcelain Factory'. Little archival material has survived about the ordering and design of a large eighty-setting porcelain dinner service, but painting of the service probably started in September 1790 when a set of volumes of the *Flora Danica* were carried from the King's library to the factory. The idea of decorating it with plants copied from *Flora Danica* may have been due to Theodore Holmskjöld, who was the director of the factory at the time and had also been appointed director of the Royal Botanical Garden in 1788. The tradition that the service was ordered as a royal gift to Catherine II, Empress of Russia, who was a keen collector of porcelain and interested in botany, seems plausible. However, Catherine died in 1796, and the next year Crown Prince Frederick, on behalf of the King, ordered that the service be increased to one hundred settings. Work was stopped in 1802, when over eighteen hundred pieces had been completed for delivery to the King, of which over fifteen hundred still remain in the Danish royal collections. Production of the design was restarted in 1863 and still continues.

Examples of the famous Flora Danica service have been exhibited before, for example at the Royal Botanical Garden, Edinburgh, in 1994, but this new exhibition offered the largest and most varied number of pieces from the royal palaces in Copenhagen ever shown outside Denmark, displayed in a superb setting. The White Hall, formerly the banqueting hall of the new wing of Schloss