



Silver-and-glass claret jugs, c. 1878.

Christopher Dresser, c. 1900.



CHRISTOPHER DRESSER

This 19th-century Brit was so ahead of his time that his designs, in everything from ceramics to silver to wallpaper, still look totally of the moment. **BY TIM McKEOUGH**



Oak-and-silver bowl, 1880.

With strict geometric forms and unadorned surfaces, Christopher Dresser's silver-plated teapots for James Dixon & Sons appear alarmingly modern, even by today's standards. Featuring bold basic shapes—a clean-lined rectangular box, a circular container, a square set on one of its points—they strip the teapot down to its essential components and turn it into functional sculpture. A casual observer coming across them in an antiques store might assume they were products of midcentury modernism, or perhaps the 1920s Bauhaus movement. But Dresser designed them in the late 1870s and early 1880s—the Victorian era, when ornament was considered an essential part of the decorative arts.

"His metalwork was undecorated and relied on form, which was revolutionary," says dealer Michael Whiteway, of Haslam &

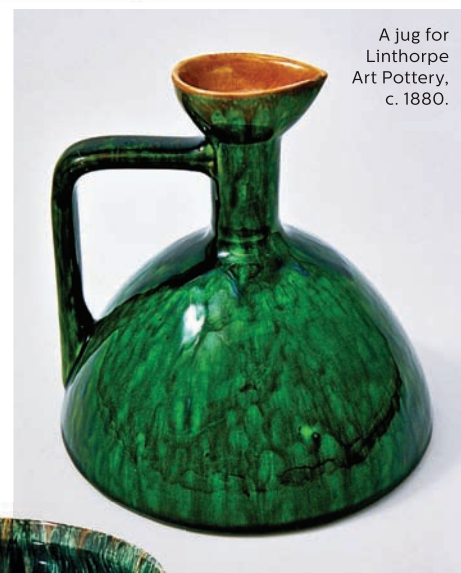
Whiteway in London, who edited the book *Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser's Design Revolution*. "It's at least 50 years ahead of its time. Back then, people decorated things to make them more important."

That isn't to say Dresser never used surface decoration—in fact, at the beginning of his career, he specialized in it. But he was a multifaceted, prolific designer with a long and varied career, over the course of which he created everything from chairs to toast racks. He was arguably the world's first independent industrial designer. "Dresser embraced the work of the machine and the industrial revolution," unlike many of his contemporaries who prized handicraft, says Daniel Morris, a founder of the New York gallery Historical Design. "He really foreshadowed how the 20th century unveiled itself."

Dresser was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1834 and enrolled in London's Government School of Design when he was only 13 years old. For seven years, he studied ornamental design with an emphasis on botany, looking at how natural forms could be applied to interiors. After graduation, he delved more deeply



Silver sugar bowl, c. 1885.



A jug for Linthorpe Art Pottery, c. 1880.



A Linthorpe Art Pottery bowl, c. 1880.

into botanical science, earning an honorary doctorate from Germany's University of Jena. But by the early 1860s, his focus had turned to design. He began writing books on the subject, including the influential 1862 volume *The Art of Decorative Design*, and applied his scientific knowledge to patterns featuring stylized flowers and plants for wallpaper, textiles, and carpet.

At the same time, Europe was experiencing a cross-cultural awakening. A number of major exhibitions brought decorative objects from other countries, such as Japan, Egypt, and India, to the public eye. Their exotic patterns influenced designers of the day, including Dresser, who began reinterpreting their motifs. "He was trying to harmonize and embrace all the various stylistic characteristics of the world that were impacting design of the Victorian age," says Melissa Bennie, a senior specialist in European ceramics at Christie's auction house. "He was trying to come up with a whole new language."

By the late 1860s, Dresser's reputation had taken off, and he was running a large studio, developing hundreds of pieces for dozens of manufacturers across Britain. Long fascinated by Japanese art, Dresser was the first European designer to tour Japan's workshops, in 1876 and 1877 (following a stop in the United States, where 13 of his wallpaper designs were later patented), during which time he gathered about 8,000 decorative objects for Tiffany & Co. Upon his return

WHERE TO FIND IT

Christopher Dresser developed thousands of products, from furniture to fabrics. He was widely imitated, so accurately identifying his work can be a challenge. Fortunately, Dresser's metalwork and ceramics are often (but not always) stamped with his name or signature. Prices range from a few hundred dollars into the tens of thousands.

- 1stdibs.com
- Haslam & Whiteway, London, 011-44-20-7229-1145; haslamandwhiteway.com
- Historical Design, New York City, 212-593-4528; historicaldesign.com
- Sam Kaufman Gallery, Los Angeles, 323-857-1965; samkaufman.com

to London, he produced his most provocative works, including clean-lined tabletop pieces for Hukin & Heath, biomorphic ceramics for Linthorpe Art Pottery, and bulbous copper and brass kettles for Benham & Froud. A few designs from this period had staying power—they are now manufactured by Alessi.

In partnership with some of his most important clients, Dresser opened a London store named the Art Furnishers' Alliance in 1881, which offered all the furniture and accessories needed to outfit a home in Dresser-approved style. Perhaps indicating that his taste was becoming a touch too outrageous,

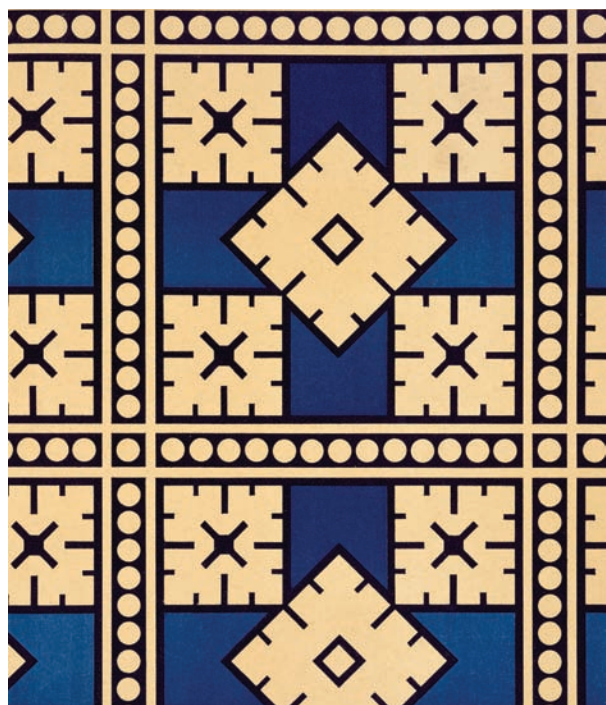


Silver toast rack, 1878.

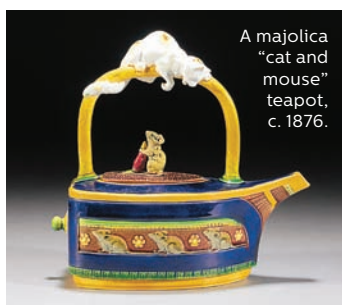
the business failed after only two years, effectively marking the start of the designer's decline. Nevertheless, Dresser continued to work until his death in 1904.

Some scholars believe Dresser still doesn't get the attention he deserves. Earlier this year, Teesside University and the Dorman Museum in Middlesbrough, England, founded the Christopher Dresser Society, to promote study of the designer's oeuvre. Considering his radical ideas, "Dresser is possibly the world's most important under-recognized designer," says founding member Paul Denison, the principal lecturer of design history at Teesside.

That hasn't stopped admirers like Calvin Tsao and Zack McKown, of New York's Tsao & McKown Architects, from collecting Dresser's wares. "We find these great moments in his work where you can see the intersection of different forces—new methods of fabrication and the understanding and knowledge of other cultures—coming together," says Tsao. "We find that very inspiring." And even though the pieces are collectible, he notes, they're just as functional now as they were more than a century ago. "We don't think of them as precious," he says. "We use them every day." ■



Decorative pattern, c. 1874–1876



A majolica "cat and mouse" teapot, c. 1876.



Decorative pattern, 1876.