

DECORATIVE ARTS

# Sunflower star gets to bloom

Clare Henry finds out more about Thomas Jeckyll, the forgotten design genius who laid the foundation for James Whistler's celebrity

Most people know of James Whistler's flamboyant personality, his Venice Nocturnes, butterfly trademark and his elaborate peacock room, which created such controversy in London in 1876. But what of the room's original architect, Thomas Jeckyll, who died in 1881 at the age of 54?

Jeckyll was entirely responsible for the beautiful Tudor-inspired fan vaulting and pendant lamps, panelled dado, intricate walnut shelves, Chinese-style sideboard and 18th-century embossed leather wall-covering - all of which Whistler, in cavalier fashion and completely unbidden, painted over in mottled shades of peacock blue and gold. The owner, shipping magnate Frederick Leyland, was not amused at this surprise transformation but such was the sensation caused by Whistler's audacious gilded peacocks and wave patterns that all too soon Jeckyll was ignored.

Savvy wheeler-dealer that he was, Whistler went along with the adulation. Four years later, Jeckyll's obituaries did not even mention his part in the creation of this extraordinary room, now preserved in Washington's Freer Gallery of Art.

So despite Jeckyll's considerable talents, awards and international showings in Paris, Vienna and the US, his is not a name that rolls off the tongue. This, the first exhibition to focus on the full range of his career, should at the very least put him on the map.

Jeckyll excelled in melding a rich decorative vocabulary with sensitivity to the leading design idioms of the 1870s. He was well ahead of his time in his love of Japonism and was innovative in incorporating the Anglo-Japanese design aesthetic into domestic commissions.

He began his career in Britain as a Gothic revival architect, designing rectories, churches and schools, but soon graduated to renovations for rich industrialists. In 1871 he was working on an extravagant Cambridge townhouse and huge Yorkshire mansion; three years later he was designing villas in London's Battersea and a notable residence in upmarket Holland Park. Sophisticated aesthetic period furniture, (on show here) was designed for these houses, with ebonised

mouldings and inserts of delicate, gilded Japanese lacquer work.

However, it was his epoch-making metalwork: gates, railings, candelabra and altar rails which brought him attention. His 1862 Norwich Gates, (which ended up as the entrance gates to the royal estate at Sandringham) made such a stir that they can be credited with the revival of wrought iron in the UK.

With the help of a Norwich foundry, Barnard and Bishop, he created grand pieces such as the ornate 1876 Philadelphia Pavilion, weighing 40 tons. He shipped in 54 crates, along with small stoves, fenders, fire-irons, benches and other domestic items which were both artistic and affordable. These sold to the new middle class in huge numbers, for, unlike design reformers such as Godwin or William Morris, Jeckyll combined beauty with utility and low cost.

The exhibition contains 160 items, including international loans of furniture, drawings, metalwork, period photographs (many of his buildings have been demolished), textiles, architectural fragments such as decorative bricks and tiles, irons embellished with that quintessential motif of the aesthetic movement, the sunflower, and impressive interior fittings such as cherry blossom sconces.

Jeckyll's career had its highs and lows but with Whistler's overpainting of the Peacock Room it ultimately came to a tragic end, curtailed by mental illness.

The Bard Centre, known for its immaculate exhibition displays and erudite catalogues, specialises in highlighting late 19th-century British decorative arts, especially the work of artists contemporary with Whistler himself. The accompanying book by Susan Soros and Catherine Arbuthnott is a comprehensive, not to say exhaustive, tome. Happy there is also a delightful itemised guide which makes a walk round the three floors a pleasure. Easy to follow, its exemplary layout and cute little pictures, all courtesy of desktop publishing, are something other institutions could well emulate.

Sadly the show does not tour, but it's a must-see for lucky New Yorkers.

Bard Centre, New York. Tel +1 212 501 3000. Until October 19