

ANTIQUES

Wendy Moonan

Quirky Victorian Gets His Due

Highly acclaimed in his own time, the British architect Thomas Jeckyll (1827-1881) is hardly known today. "He has been basically forgotten," said Susan Weber Soros, the director of the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture in Manhattan.

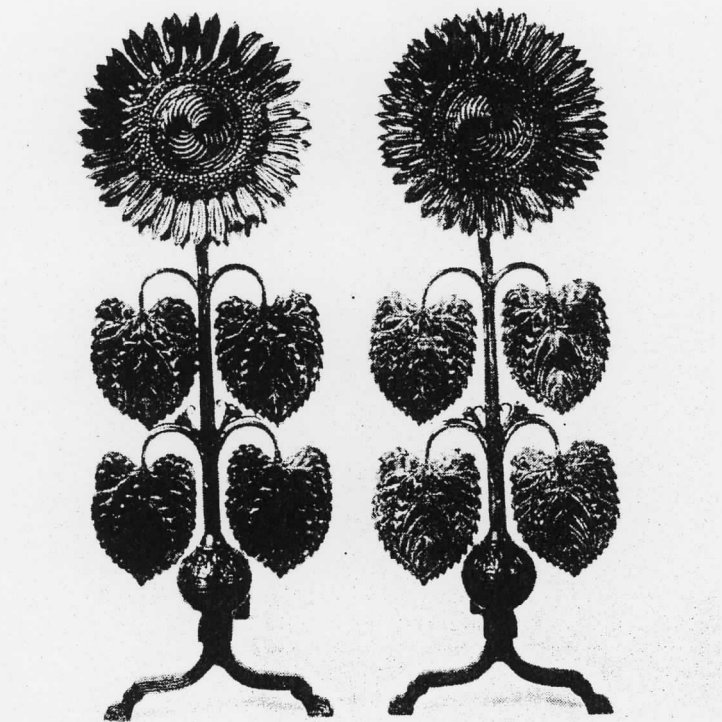
Few know he was the architect of the Peacock Room, an extravagant Aesthetic Movement dining room from England long on display in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington. Jeckyll designed it for the Liverpool shipping magnate Frederick Richards Leyland as a porsellanzimmer (porcelain room), with spindly walnut shelves to hold Leyland's large collection of Chinese blue and white.

The unlucky Jeckyll consulted James McNeill Whistler about wall colors, just as Jeckyll was lapsing into mental illness. Whistler painted Jeckyll's antique Dutch leather walls turquoise and added large gold peacocks. Whistler took credit for the entire scheme, and Jeckyll was in no shape to object. Today it is considered one of the greatest surviving Aesthetic interiors.

Last week Ms. Soros opened the first major exhibition on Jeckyll, with 160 items on loan, including sketches, drawings, furniture, metalwork, architectural fragments, textiles and photos of his architecture. The show runs through Oct. 19, and Yale University Press has published a 300-page catalog, "Thomas Jeckyll: Architect and Designer," by Ms. Soros and Catherine Arbuthnott, consulting curator of exhibitions at Bard.

Jeckyll grew up in East Anglia, the son of a Church of England clergyman. His father was greatly affected by rioting farm laborers, who were protesting low wages with violent attacks on churches in the 1830's, and he left to join a Bible study group that practiced an apocalyptic brand of Christianity. Living in reduced circumstances, the father expected strict piety from his children. It seems that Thomas, who was never formally trained as an architect, learned draftsmanship from his dad.

Thomas Jeckyll was part of the Victorian design reform movement that stressed art in the making of everything from buildings to furniture. He set up his own architectural firm in Norfolk in 1847, when he was 20, and worked feverishly until 1876, when he suffered the first of several



James Austin

Aesthetic: sunflower andirons (circa 1876), designed by Thomas Jeckyll.

mental breakdowns. He never married and died at 54 in a hospital for the insane.

He began his career as a Gothic Revival architect, designing rectories and schools and restoring churches and historic houses. He went on to do architecture in the Old English, Queen Anne and Anglo-Japanese styles. His finest house is probably the lodge in the Old English style that he designed in 1872 for Framingham Pigot in Norfolk, for George Henry Christie and James Brook Christie of the auction-house family.

"The majority of his architectural career was based in Norfolk," Ms. Arbuthnott said. "He was a very hard worker and had a good architectural practice from the beginning. Most of his life he worked alone, without assistants."

It took an American to rediscover him. Ms. Soros learned about Jeckyll in 1985, when she was writing her master's thesis on Whistler. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on the English architect E. W. Godwin, another friend and contemporary of Jeckyll. When she began to investigate him, however, she found that unlike Whistler and Godwin, Jeckyll had left no major archive or written record.

"Thomas Jeckyll was quite secretive about his designs and threw out his office papers every year," Ms. Arbuthnott said. "I've not heard of other architects doing that. Most, like Godwin, assumed the public would be interested in their work after they die."

Four years ago Ms. Soros asked Ms. Arbuthnott to investigate Mr. Jeckyll's life and works. "We knew he was very, very good, but we didn't know how much we could turn up," Ms. Arbuthnott said.

She visited current owners of buildings restored and designed by Jeckyll, talked to descendants of his siblings, saw curators of museums in East Anglia and visited local record offices. Once she and Ms. Soros went looking for a Jeckyll garden building, hacking their way through the underbrush to find it. Their many discoveries are now on display.

Over the years Jeckyll may have been ignored because "Modernists like Nikolaus Pevsner did not like his wildly eclectic, eccentric style," Ms. Arbuthnott said. "It was too quirky."

Critics still try to peg architects by style, but Jeckyll eludes such designations. As a youth, he was an inveterate sketcher of abbeys, medieval buildings and ancient market towns. He collected fragments from old

buildings and was one of the first members of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, established in 1846. At the same time he was always interested in new technologies. He sketched trains, railway stations, swing bridges and paddle steamboats.

Jeckyll was clearly concerned about status. He changed the spelling of his family name from Jeckell, laying a spurious claim to membership in an old aristocratic Essex family. He even appropriated its armorial bearings.

"Jeckyll was an inveterate name-dropper," Ms. Arbuthnott said. "It helped us find several hitherto unknown commissions because Jeckyll could not resist mentioning well-known names in letters to less exalted clients."

Nonetheless he seems to have been popular with his artistic peers after he moved to London in 1857. He socialized with Whistler, Godwin and the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, among others, and was famously generous to his friends.

Today he is most admired for his metalwork and furniture in the Anglo-Japanese style, a combination of fairly traditional English forms with Asian, and particularly Japanese, applied decoration. He is credited with making the style popular in the 1860's, and there are several examples in the show. His wrought-iron and cast-iron gates, stove grates, fences and jardinières are decorated with birds and foliage inspired by Japanese prints.

His favorite motif was the sunflower, beloved by the Aesthetic Movement. The show has a magnificent pair of sunflower andirons from 1876, the year Jeckyll lapsed into the mental illness from which he would never recover.

A Stubbs Record

On July 9, Bonhams in London auctioned off a painting by George Stubbs, one of the masters of British sporting art, that a Bonhams specialist had discovered in a probate valuation. It had been in a private collection for more than 40 years.

The painting, "A Dark Bay Thoroughbred in a Landscape," fetched \$3 million, a record for a Stubbs horse painting without a human figure. The estimate was \$640,000 to \$960,000.

Ray Waterhouse of Fine-Art-Brokers in London bought the painting on behalf of an anonymous New York collector.