

Museum Spotlight

Leighton House: The Commission for the Library Desk

Designing occasional pieces of furniture for Leighton House Museum over the last 30 years has been a little like playing the after-dinner parlour-game, 'In The Manner Of The Word': you are given a fragment of an old photograph then expected to offer an impromptu performance to amuse the assembled company.

So it was in 1982 when the then curator, Stephen Jones, commissioned me to make two black-lacquered glazed mahogany display cases to house some of Leighton's de Morgan ceramics – which had certainly never been behind glass in Leighton's day. Jones found the meagre Borough annual budgets forced on him the commercial letting of the museum for exotic parties, fashion shoots and the making of artistic videos – hardly compatible with the informal 'drawing room display' techniques of his previous curatorial charge, Gainsborough's House in Sudbury. This china clearly needed better protection, regardless of historical accuracy. Jones, always at heart the utterly serious and professional academic, nevertheless rather enjoyed the social exposure fundraising required and took great delight in the tale of his chance encounter with an old acquaintance who, upon being told that he was now running Leighton House, replied 'Oh yes, I heard; it's a sort of night-club isn't it?'

For the 1983 commission, all Jones had to offer for inspiration was a fragment of a late-19th-century photograph into which jutted the small corner of a lacquered side table, the murky details of which offered modest clues, certainly not quite enough to do full historical

justice to any design. I was reassured by the museum's architectural advisor at the time, that scourge of Modernism and towering doyen of the Victorian Society, Ian Grant, as he scribbled some annotations on my proposed sketches, 'The gist, my dear boy, the gist – Leighton was nothing if not theatrical.' I confess to being rather flattered, at a recent Leighton House function, by overhearing a well-known art historian assuring a fellow guest that the now well-patinated bevelled glass cabinets were 'of course, my dear, originally designed for the house'.

The house has had a precarious past. Initially designed collaboratively

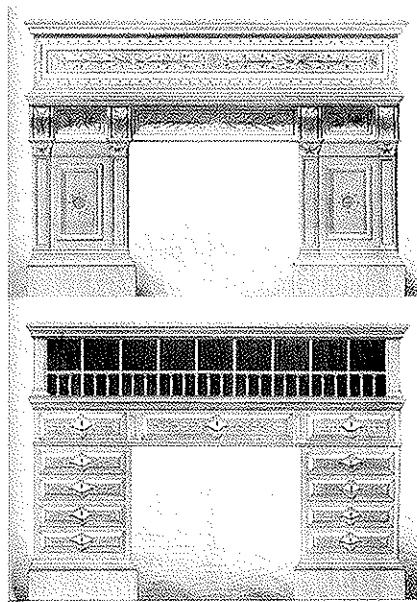
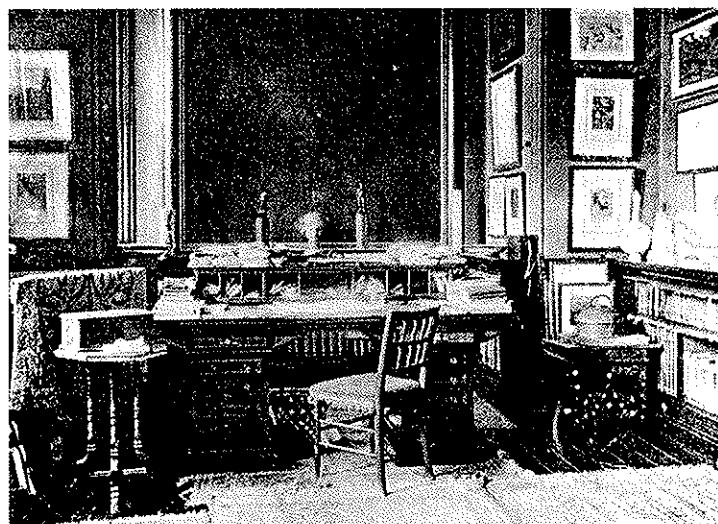
by Leighton and his architect George Aitchison in the 1860s, it evolved and doubled in size over the 31 years that Leighton lived and worked there, becoming one of the most sumptuously exotic interiors of any house in 19th-century London. It is one of a tradition of artist-studio houses in the Holland Park area designed by the likes of Webb, Norman Shaw and Burges, built more like show-palaces than private studios: heavily embellished architectural fantasies, designed to show off personal collections of artefacts as well as display to full effect the works of the artists who lived there. It is an astonishing concoction, the collaboration

between artisans, artists, architect and patron being of the kind that later informed the principles of the Arts & Crafts Movement and, in particular, the foundation in 1884 of the Art Workers Guild. Many of those involved with the Leighton House interior were indeed early members of the Guild.

After Leighton's death in 1896, Christies held an eight-day auction of the contents: most were dispersed, many lost. Since then, the house has been white-washed, bombed,

converted into the children's branch of Kensington Central Library and even earmarked for demolition – in 1960 the Borough actually challenged London County Council's attempts to apply a preservation order. Fortunately, in the 1970s, common sense prevailed and tentative steps were made to recover some of Leighton's extraordinary aesthetic legacy. Further impetus was generated with the inspired tenure (1981–9) of Stephen Jones as curator.

More parlour games in 2010, when Jones's equally talented successor, Daniel Robbins, rang to ask if we could, at short notice, make a new desk to sit in Leighton's library, the first room to be seen from the re-vamped museum entrance, denuded of its centrepiece. The need to re-wire and replace the museum's central heating presented Robbins with an opportunity to push ahead with more fundamental refurbishment (co-ordinated by architects Purcell



1. A contemporary photograph of Leighton's Library. (Photo Leighton House Museum)
2. Designs by George Aitchison for furniture for the Thames Conservancy Board, from *Art Workman Journal of Design* 1874. (Courtesy of Paul Reeves)



Miller Tritton) than had been commercially or politically possible in the 1980s. The results are spectacular, a credit to the vision of Robbins, who has been admirably supported by his architect, colour and conservation experts, lighting designer and a wealth of meticulous historical research.

Towards the end of the project, despite combing the auction catalogues, Aitchison's original desk had still not been tracked down. The only photographic evidence (fig. 1) was fuzzier than most images in the archives, but it did at least give an idea of the scale, configuration and setting of the original. Fortunately our attention was drawn by Paul Reeves, the Arts and Crafts dealer in Cirencester, to line drawings published in the *Art Workman Journal of Design* (1874) of Aitchison's furniture designs for the Thames Conservancy Board Room (fig. 2). There were no drawings of any desk, but they carried sufficient detail to give some guidance about his preferred edge mouldings and carved decorations, readily corroborated by an examination of some of the

incised patterns on the black lacquered architraves in the Leighton House library itself.

There was only a very, very limited budget. So, mindful of Ian Grant's dictum, we agreed to concentrate on the 'theatrical', and cut the costs by omitting all superfluous drawers and other moving parts (allowing for them to be retro-fitted by a future generation should funds ever allow) and using catalogue handles (rather than having the ironmongery purpose-made). We did however adjust the pigeon-hole heights to accommodate modern metric paper sizes (in preference to quarto and octavo), on the off-chance that the desk is ever moved into a more practical role elsewhere in the building.

The production drawings were prepared by Jan Oner, the decorated brackets were carved by Georgy Mkrtchian, and the desk was made by Alan Harvey (who has also made furniture for the Royal Collection, St George's Chapel Windsor, Westminster Abbey and the archive library at the Art Workers Guild).



3. The new desk in situ. (Photo Luke Hughes)
4. Detail of carving. (Photo Luke Hughes)
5. The opening. Left to right: Alan Harvey (cabinet-maker), Luke Hughes, HRH Prince Charles, Daniel Robbins. (Photo Lloyd Dobbie)

It is not a magnificent or original piece (indeed, I find almost all of Aitchison's furniture designs heavy and ponderous) but it appears to fulfil the desired role of completing the internal landscape of that room. The Prince of Wales certainly seemed to think so at the opening reception.

Luke Hughes

Luke Hughes began making bespoke furniture in Covent Garden, London in 1981. The company, formed out of Luke's original craft workshop, now specialises in designing furniture for sensitive architectural interiors. www.lukehughes.co.uk

Arts for Dementia at the Wallace Collection

A new programme at The Wallace Collection, <http://www.wallacecollection.org/learning/communityandaccess> is launching in London this autumn for people in the early stages of dementia.

The social therapeutic intervention of engaging in artistic activity is recommended by Healthcare for London's Dementia Services Guide. As life-enhancing relief from the frustrations of the disease, this can help slow mental decline.

Arts 4 Dementia, set up to encourage the spread of arts activities for people living with dementia from the point of diagnosis, has arranged a series of specially designed tours with The Wallace Collection.

Please contact Veronica Franklin Gould, Arts 4 Dementia: email: arts4dementia@vfgx.co.uk, tel. 020 8780 5217.