

An Examination of William Burges's 'Great Bookcase'

by Jevon Thistlewood

An early black and white image of the Great Bookcase by William Burges exists in the archive of the Royal Institute of British Architects.(fig. 1) Comparing this image to the appearance of the bookcase today, (fig. 2) we can see a number of changes have taken place to its structure and decoration. This article aims to explore evidence of its original production between 1859 and 1862, and the subsequent changes which could be attributed to an accident of 1878.

The Great Bookcase was designed by Burges and incorporates his work with that of other artists,(1) amongst a structure containing different forms of painted and gilded decoration. In his 1865 lectures on 'Art and Industry', Burges discusses furniture in the medieval style. This bookcase would appear to be one of,

those instances where the wood 'is entirely covered. First of all, it may be painted, either plainly or ornamentally; if the latter, there is literally no end to the art and decoration that can be lavished upon it. Two things should be kept carefully in view, viz. that the paintings be kept flat, without landscape-backgrounds; and, secondly, that they judiciously alternate with ornament. (2)

The structure has been principally constructed from wood with all external surfaces treated with a lead-based white coating. (3) Although lead white is highly toxic, it can provide a durable coating, give a high concealment of the underlying wood grain, and act as a barrier to moisture. It is probable that this was a part of the bookcase's initial fabrication, (4) as this would have been seen as a good way of protecting the wood and preparing it for decoration. In contrast, the inside surfaces appear to have been painted directly onto un-primed wood. (5)

The doors all consist of single panels with the grain running in a vertical direction. (fig. 3) In the lower and central sections of the bookcase they are arranged in pairs which open in a bi-fold manner. To counteract warp, each has horizontal battens partly recessed into the reverse. To further constrain any unwanted movement in

the wood and secure the larger doors, there are metal hinges which extend full width and continue as straps around the sides of the bookcase. At some point in the past, a number of the screws securing the metal straps have been loosened or removed to allow the doors to continue to close. (6) Shrinkage across the grain of the door panels is also noticeable.

Where screws have been loosened in the metal straps hinges we can see evidence of a black decoration below. (fig. 4) This was applied directly to the white preparation layer. A sense of the original extent of this decoration can be seen in the monochrome image mentioned earlier, as any remains beyond the metal strap hinges are now no longer visible.

The bookcase has two distinctly different types of gilding. (fig. 5) In the repeated sections of gold arches, columns, towers and castellated battlements, gold leaf has been applied in the consistent, even and unburnished manner of an experienced hand. These sections have a pale yellow coloured bole and are only now slightly disrupted by small lead protrusions from the priming below. It would not be surprising if these sections had been completed by a specialist gilder or decorator who had been commissioned specifically by Burges for this task. (7) In contrast, gilding which provides a background to some of the painted scenes in the upper and central sections of the bookcase has a less even application and an abraded surface which reveals a red under layer. Whilst in part this abrasion may have been an unintended consequence of later cleaning, it could equally have been a deliberate act to replicate the aged appearance of gilding on thirteenth- or fourteen- century paintings. Black outlining covers the edges of the gilded sections.

In designs Burges made for other painted cabinets, (8) we can see that he left blank spaces to be treated separately. These often correspond to sections where he would place painted scenes by himself, or more commonly, other artists. With their monograms, Edward Poynter included the date of (18)59 in *Rhodopis ordering the building of a pyramid* and Simeon Solomon the date of (18)60 in *St John and the New Jerusalem*. These earlier than expected dates perhaps indicate that the stages of fabrication, decoration and invited artists were completed as sections of the bookcase became available. (fig. 6)

Given the varied ages of the artists commissioned by Burges, their level of experience and competence would have differed considerably. It is difficult to know the level of influence Burges would have had on their work, beyond establishing the subjects. In Simeon Solomon's *St John and the New Jerusalem*, there are underlying compositional changes to the positions and size of various elements. (fig. 7) Also prior to painting, each of the Foundation Stones has been labelled with both its material type and characteristic colour to ensure accuracy.(9) Whilst this could be assumed to be the handwriting of Solomon, similar colour notes were found underneath a work by Nathaniel Westlake for Burges's *Sideboard and Wine Cabinet*. (10) Further comparison may indicate it was, in fact, Burges who added these inscriptions.

Edward Burne-Jones's *Art* forms the centrepiece of the upper section of the bookcase and seems more a continuation of his own work rather than that being influenced by Burges. (fig. 8) The execution and inclusion of certain elements, the darkening of the paint media, and the use of a gilded light through distant trees are all similar to those seen in his 'Prioress's Tale Cabinet' of 1858. (11) Objects such as the glass sphere and golden apple appear again his work. Given Burne-Jones's reputation and the prime position of his work, it is possibly not surprising that he would exercise this level of control over his work. His panel, highly portable and not dependent on surrounding decoration, could have been detached and painted elsewhere.

Religion and Love by Nathaniel Westlake, and the seven plus one *Muses* by Edward Poynter in the top section of the bookcase, are all afflicted with disfiguring drying cracks. (fig. 9) This problem is not seen elsewhere on the bookcase, and so it would appear to relate to a particular painting material used.

In sections completed by Burges, most noticeably those on the subject of Aesop's Fables, there is a loosely sketched composition which was further adjusted in the subsequent painting. (fig. 10) Burges used solid outlining, he employed the white tone of the priming layer, and applied colour in a very few tones.

The Apparition of Beatrice to Dante is by Poynter, but possibly with the involvement of Rossetti. The Madonna and Child with surrounding ornament, leaves, ribbons and heraldic shields on the side of the desk was fully realised in a drawn composition but does not clearly feature in the final painting. (fig. 11) In Albert Moore's *Edward I and Torrel* the black outlining of the figures, objects and furniture appears unsympathetic to other elements of the painting. (fig. 12) Perhaps these outlines were added later, possibly by Burges, in order to flatten out the perspective and unify the scene with others on the bookcase.

The general unifying colour scheme of the bookcase is gold, blue and red. Areas of blue, however, vary in shade and execution in different sections of the bookcase. The light blue backgrounds in the middle section of the bookcase seem much lighter in tone than those in the upper and lower sections. In the lighter sections there is also a clumsy application and poor finish which is not consistent with the general standard. As Burges stated, 'an excellent way of painting furniture is to rub down the paint, and every coat of varnish or lacquer, as is done in carriage painting; the result is a beautifully smooth polished surface... (12). These sections appear to have been painted in and around existing work by other artists, which would have restricted the use of sanding back and hindered free flowing brushstrokes. (fig. 13)

The blue areas examined all had a lighter blue upper paint layer but differed in what they were applied over. Those in the lighter blue of the middle section were applied over a white layer, whilst those elsewhere were added over a darker blue. Cobalt was detected in all the blue sections, (13) and as cobalt blue is very poor at concealing darker colours, it is not surprising that the colour of an underlying darker layer can dominate. A possible clue as to why Burges would have used a cobalt blue pigment instead of an easier alternative can be seen in one of his sketches of 1860. In a note about colour he refers to a Robbia blue ground, and we know he regarded Luca della Robbia as a Great Master of the fifteenth century who, 'set to work to discover, or rather re-discover, an opaque stanniferous glaze wherewith to cover his works in terra-cotta ... The colours are simply blue and white.' (14) The analysis of pieces attributed to della Robbia often reports the use of cobalt in their blue colour.

Another change identified from the early black and white image is the major structural one at the bottom of the central section of the bookcase. An area which originally contained inlaid marble from Delhi and eight figures representing metals by John Anster Fitzgerald now has a section of drawers behind doors decorated with figures representing metals by Frederick Weekes. (fig. 14) It is likely that the original junction between the lower and central sections of the bookcase was not strong enough to withstand an accidental fall in 1878. (15) The unit of drawers provides a much stronger base to the central section with internal bracing. The shelf raised to accommodate the displaced marble above the lower section of the bookcase formed a deeper recess to more securely locate to the central section. The new addition containing the drawers was painted red, and the paint was extended onto the outer margins of the rest of the bookcase. (fig. 15) Earlier stencilled decoration had either been removed from gilding or rubbed back to allow repainting. A new, simpler scheme of gold decoration was added.

After the accident in 1878, it would appear that the repaired bookcase was both strengthened and partially redecorated. In the redecoration Burges seems to have taken the opportunity to have a much simpler scheme, perhaps reflecting his changing taste. There may have been an influence from Japan. In Burges' words from 1865, 'the Japanese are great masters in this art, especially in their raised and burnished gildings ... Colour is occasionally employed to assist the gold, but always very sparingly'.(16) Analysis of the red paint used in this redecoration detected a highly toxic mixture of mercury and chromates.(17) Given Burges's apparent appetite for medieval accuracy, it is likely that this was purchased as vermilion paint without knowing that orange vermilion paint could contain lead chromates or chrome red. The appearance of the red paint has darkened with age due to changes in one of the pigments and has a surface blackening in places due to a reaction with air pollutants. It is, therefore, assumed to be darker and redder than originally intended. Perhaps a sign of the times, the potential toxicity of the original painting materials is a continuing theme across the bookcase with a number of the artists apparently choosing to use emerald green.(18) Indeed, if similar highly toxic white, red and green pigments were used in the decoration of Tower House and its painted furniture, could they have contributed to Burges' death? With a chill he returned to

London from Cardiff and three weeks later he was dead, half paralysed, in his Red Bed.

Figures

- 1: William Burges' *Great Bookcase*
- 2: One of the doors in the central section of the bookcase in an open position
- 3: Decoration visible beneath one of the straps of the metal hinges
- 4: A detail of two different sections of gilding adjacent to each other
- 5: Artists' monograms with dates
- 6: Changes to the composition and notes under the paint of Simeon Solomon's *St John and the New Jerusalem* viewed using an infrared filter
- 7: *Art* by Edward Burne-Jones
- 8: The Seven (plus one) Muses attributed to Edward Poynter
- 9: An example of Burges' sketchy underdrawing viewed with an infrared filter
- 10: Underdrawing on the side of the writing desk viewed with an infrared filter
- 11: Black outlining of Albert Moore's *Edward I and Torrel* viewed with an infrared filter
- 12: Blue background of *The Apparition of Beatrice to Dante*
- 13: Draws behind doors and an example of one of Frederick Weekes' *Metals*
- 14: Red paint drip and overlap onto hinges