

THESIS OF DISSERTATION

Péter Gimesy

**THE FIRST TWO PHASES OF  
CHRISTOPHER DRESSER'S OEUVRE (1857-1873),  
OR THE LINKS AMONG VITALISM, BOTANY AND ART**

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Zoltán Gyenge

University of Szeged

Faculty of Arts

Málnási Bartók György Doctoral School of Philosophy

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## Objectives and structure of the dissertation

In my dissertation my research focused on the artistic and art-philosophical aspects of the life's work of Christopher Dresser (1834-1904), the art writer, botanist, designer and industrialist, who is lesser-known in Hungary compared to his theoretical and artistic achievements. My primary aim is to reveal and describe the first two phases of his oeuvre, which have been little or not at all researched yet. The importance of this creative phase, which adds up the first half of the oeuvre, lies in the fact that it constitutes, in my opinion, the whole of the conceptual framework of the Dresser. The dissertation is based on source research and relies on quotations from original sources, presenting mostly sources not yet analysed in literature, and including previously unpublished source texts that have survived only in manuscript form.

The conclusions of my dissertation demonstrate that the *concept of force* in Christopher Dresser's (1834-1904) oeuvre's ornamental theory has a vitalist background, with components related to the period around 1800 – namely the Romantic sciences of the search for *unity*, moreover to the Goethean idealistic botanical morphology of Naturphilosophie, id est the search for an archetype, as a side-branch of the Jenaean constellation.

According to my thesis an important component of Dresser's artistic botany is his knowledge of *Goethean metamorphosis theory*, which also represents a transmission of the influences of the years around the 1800s to the ornamentation, or art of the mid-19th century. The consequence of all this, in Dresser's case, is a unique, purely ideal that is to say an abstract ornamentation, which in this sense is an important pre-modern predecessor of the turn-of-the-century art. The primary aim, therefore, is to prove the above by exploring the connections and links to the period around 1800, the consequences of which, according to my thesis, appear in Dresser's artistic botanical writings and ornamental theory.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation, following the introduction, introduces the basic concepts (Excursus. A brief explanation of the concept of vitalism and Goethe's doctrine of metamorphosis). My dissertation is then divided into two main sections (Chapters 3 and 4). Chapter 3 reviews the first artistic-botanical phase of the oeuvre (1857-1861), from the first appearance of the concept of force and an exploration of Semper's influence, it looks for evidence of Goethe's knowledge of idealistic morphology, the components of the concept of

*vital force*. Thereafter I examine the second phase of his creative phase (1862-1873), complementing what was discussed in Chapter 3, other components of the connection to the period around 1800, the design-artistic implications of the *concept of vital force*, and examples of its implementation (Chapter 4).

The dissertation is structured around the main periods of the oeuvre and describes the first two phases of the oeuvre. I define the boundaries of the periods (1857<sup>1</sup>-1861; 1862<sup>2</sup>-1873<sup>3</sup>; 1882<sup>4</sup>-1904) in relation to the publication of the major theoretical works, furthermore I also give a detailed overview of the early years of Dresser's career (1847-1854), which precede the first theoretical works. The dissertation does not aim to analyse Dresser's entire oeuvre, so I only ~~touch~~ mention ~~on~~ his works on japonisation in his third period after 1873 or on his collaboration as a designer with various firms. However, quotations from the artistic writings of the oeuvre published after 1873 are also included, insofar as they are relevant and related to the subject of the dissertation. The primary aim is to explore the early period of the oeuvre, which lasts until the beginning of his career as a decorative artist and designer and is still characterised by artistic botany. In these early years, i.e. 1854-61, Dresser's career was marked by botanical research and numerous teaching activities. In the meanwhile in 1857 he began to write his first series of studies on ornamentation, artistic botany and the theory of art (*Botany as Adapted to the Arts and Art-Manufacture*, 1857-1858).

The first section of this career presents his most important writings, highlighting the art-botanical writings of his less researched early period (1857-1861). I have considered this important because his early texts on art theory and botany raised many of the fundamental problems of his later work. Most of the theoretical writings analysed in Chapter 4 are based on the presentation of the contexts explored here.

It has not been the aim of this dissertation to analyse professional botanical texts from a botanical point of view, so basic botanical concepts are only included where necessary. The main concern was to explore the author's conceptual network, primarily from an art-theoretical and botanico-philosophical point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> *Botany as Adapted to the Arts and Art-Manufacture* (1857-58).

<sup>2</sup> Publication of *The Art of Decorative Design* (1862) which summarizes the first period

<sup>3</sup> *Principles of Decorative Design* (1873). The Studies in Design (SID), published between 1874-76, is more a chromolithographic pattern book than a theoretical work on ornamentation. I have therefore not included it among the theoretical works of the second transitional period, but I quote from the relevant passages.

<sup>4</sup> *Japan its Architecture, Art and Art-Manufacture* (1882).

Following a detailed biography (1.2.), I begin this dissertation by summarising the research history of Christopher Dresser's life's work (1.3.).

Next, Chapter 2 provides a brief historical-scientific explanation of the concept of *vitalism* and *Goethe's doctrine of metamorphosis* and discusses the links with Dresser. The first subchapter describes the main types of vitalism and the history of the concept up to the period under consideration in this dissertation, i.e. the mid-19th century. Within this chapter, I focus on Dresser's (not comprehensively described in literature) interpretation of this term, which I discuss based on the *Popular Manual of Botany*, published in 1860 (2.2). In the third part of this chapter, I describe the Goethean botanical philosophy and the idealistic morphology, which influenced Dresser's work on the *Ideal Plant* and which has vitalistic components, the doctrine of metamorphosis (2.3).

In the third section of my thesis, which is devoted to the subject in depth, I will describe Christopher Dresser's career from 1847 to 1861, i.e. from his student years to his first theoretical summary and the publication of *The Art of Decorative Design* in 1862.

In the first subchapter (3.1) I describe Dresser's apprenticeship years (1847-54) and the masters who influenced and inspired him, as well as the background to his training in *artistic botany*. The exploration of these influences is inevitable because the new aspirations of English art (Dyce, Semper, Owen Jones, Dresser), which emerged in the mid-19th century within the framework of the London School of Design, sought forms of expression (pattern books, ornamentation and design dictionaries) that added new layers of meaning to concepts already in use (truth, beauty, power, ornament, structure). After a brief summary of the educational programme of Christopher Dresser, the teachers who taught him at the London School of Design and its successor institutions, which renewed his approach to art, in subchapter 3.2 I analyse Dresser's lecture *On the Relation of Science and Ornamental Art* (1857), which survives in the first extract and which shows the influence of Bötticher and Semper, but which is not described in the literature. An important component of this in-depth analysis was that it is in this text that Dresser first refers to the concept of *centrifugal force*, the exploration of which and the investigation of its links with the period around 1800 is one of the main objectives of this dissertation.

Subchapter 3.3 presents a yet not existing in the literature analysis (3.3.1 to 3.3.12) of his 11-part series of essays written for the Art Journal: *Botany as Adapted to the Arts and Art-Manufacture*, 1857-1858 .

This is followed by subchapter 3.4, which aims to explore the links between his oeuvre of 1859-1861 and Goethean botany. Subchapter 3.4 describes the links between Dresser's botanical-philosophical approach and Goethean botany, mainly through the German-English connections. The starting point for this was Dresser's doctorate from the University of Jena.

The background research of the topic focused on the botany of Jena, the historical summary of which is analysed in section 3.4.1. In section 3.4.2, the reception of Goethe's botanical works in England is discussed in relation to *transcendental anatomy*, followed by the writings of John Lindley and Arthur Henfrey, and the influence of these works on Dresser's artistic botany. In addition, I seek to answer whether Goethe's doctrine of morphology and metamorphosis influenced Dresser's theory of art, including the concepts of *vis centrifuga* and *vis centripeta*.

Following a description of the intellectual background of Jena and the reception of Goethean botany in England, in section 3.4.3 I describe a so far not published source, Christopher Dresser's submission to the University of Jena, his correspondence and the background to his doctorate in 1859. Jena's submission included two of the well-known artistic botany books of 1859 (*Unity in Variety*, *The Rudiments of Botany*), relevant parts of which are also mentioned, but I mainly discuss the parts of the submission unknown to the literature, i.e. his seven-page botanical manuscript and correspondence.

The importance of this doctoral thesis and its role in linking Dresser's Jena paradigm with modern design is that it represents both the Romantic, natural philosophical tradition of the early 19th century – including the spirit of Goethe's botany – and the medium that paved the way for the emergence of a mid-century scientific (Schleiden, Darwin) and modern artistic vision of nature. In my opinion, as a legacy of the *Romantic sciences*, Dresser represented both the vitalism of his predecessors – in this case: the underlying, often pantheistic principle of organising matter and explaining teleological force – and, compared to his contemporaries, a more modern abstract ornamentation and functionalism. The main objective of my dissertation is to explore and prove this connection as thoroughly as possible, primarily through the concept of force (*vital force*, *Power*).

In section 3.4.4, I present Dresser's shorter and last lectures on botany. These source texts contain direct links to Goethe and Goethe's concept of the Ancient Plant and are not yet discussed in the literature: *On the Stem or Axis as the Fundamental Organ in the Vegetable Structure*, 1860 and *Stem and Leaf and Their Transmutations*, 1861.

In the remainder of my research I focused on indirect and direct sources of evidence for other Goethean influences. Therefore, in section 3.4.5 I discuss the influence of Alexander Braun's and William Darlington's works in the botanical library of Kew Gardens and I also discuss *transcendental anatomy*. This is followed in section 3.4.6 by a discussion of an important element of the botanical philosophy transmitted by a French master, Pierre Jean François Turpin, namely his visual model of the Goethean *Urpflanze* and its first appearance in the English reception.

In the final chapter, Chapter 4, entitled „Transition to the Design Phase of the Life Work – Further Examples of the Concept of Vital Force in Dresser's Theoretical Writings and Art, 1862-1873”, my primary objective is to describe the layers of the concept of *vital force* and its forms in *artworks* that have not been discussed so far. The chapter primarily details the issues raised in the previous chapters by analysing relevant parts of the *Art of Decorative Design*. After a discussion of the relationship between stylized forms (*conventional design*) and forces (4.1), I analyse the relationship between Dresser's theories of colour (4.2) and the *musical-ornamental symbols* based on them and the concept of vital force (4.3). The main aim of the last section of Chapter 4 (4.4) is to explore the artistic aspects of vital force, with a focus on works written during and after the transitional period of his oeuvre (1873 – *Principles of Decorative Design*; 1876 – *Studies in Design*). In the subsections of 4.4 I aim to reconstruct Dresser's experience of inspiration, as this may further nuance our understanding of the concept of force (4.4.1. Knowledge is Power. Dresser's experience of inspiration). The main objective of the whole of Chapter 4 is to explore one of the most complex motifs of his oeuvre: building on the basic problems analysed earlier, I aim to present the Dresserian pattern of abstraction, i.e. the concept of *pure ideal ornamentation* (4.4.2. Pure Ideal Ornamentation).

## Conclusion

From the beginning of the 19th century, biology as a new science becomes independent and partly drifts apart from its philosophical background (mechanistic aspect), partly uses the unity-seeking efforts of *vitalism* and *Naturphilosophie*. Later – around the middle of the century – biology, and within it botany becomes – in Dresser's case – the representative of vitalistic tendencies and idealistic morphology. There is also a 'Jenaic paradigm' linking the old vitalism with the neo-vitalism of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, with a separate strand represented by scientists from the field of biology (botany, zoology) (Goethe, Humboldt, Dresser, Haeckel, Driesch).

By the middle of the century the geographical, botanical-natural philosophical and biological works (Humboldt, Goethe, Oken) written at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and imbued with *Naturphilosophie* led to applied arts examples in architecture, architectural-theoretical (Semper) and artistic-botanical (Dresser) consequences, all of which were to pave the way for modern art.

In the middle of the 19th century, the consequences of the vitalism of around 1800 and Goethe's idealistic morphology can also be detected. Dresser represents an independent approach, in that he represents on the one hand the botanico-philosophical artistic botany of the vital force, i.e. the search for pure ideal ornamentation, and on the other hand he gives several examples of its application and representation in art. According to my thesis there are connection points where the influence of vitalism and romantic sciences (*idealistic morphology*, *transcendental anatomy*) on Dresser's theoretical writings and art of ornamentation can be clearly demonstrated, and the period in which this transition took place can be delineated. In my thesis, also in the context of the period around 1800, i.e. the Romantic philosophies of nature, Dresser's work can be seen as an influence of Goethe's concept of the "*Ancient Plant*" in botanical philosophy and the *doctrine of plant metamorphosis*. In this case, metamorphosis, as a background concept, is to be understood as an underlying shaping force, i.e. in this context it is a process or force that moves both the organic and the inorganic world. In Dresser's case, the appearance of this unified and mutually transforming formative force as the common background force of crystalline (inorganic) and plant and animal (organic) forms of existence is repeatedly mentioned. In my opinion, what is truly unique about Dresser is that he links all this to the new possibilities of symbolic language expressible through ornamentation, that is, to ideal ornamentation.