

Introduction



Owen Jones is a key figure in the history of British design. He was closely involved with one of the finest achievements of the Victorian age, the Great Exhibition of 1851, and was swept along by the tide of enthusiasm and confidence that it helped to generate. At the same time he shared the concerns of many of his fellow countrymen about the quality of British design. With its sumptuous illustrations, its detailed analysis of individual cultures, and its manifesto of “General Principles,” *The Grammar of Ornament* was meant to redress this situation, offering guidance for the designers of the future. In this respect, the book was a great success, and it is frequently cited as one of the seminal texts of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Owen Jones was born in London in 1809 but, as his name might suggest, he had a proud Welsh ancestry. His father—also called Owen—founded the Gwyneddigion Society of London (1770), dedicated to the study of Welsh literature and archeology, and went on to produce a much-acclaimed anthology of Welsh manuscripts. Young Owen evidently inherited his father’s energy and versatility, for he would excel in a number of different fields. His first love, however, was for architecture, and he was determined to make this his profession.

INTRODUCTION

At the age of 16, Jones began a six-year apprenticeship with Lewis Vulliamy (1791–1871), an eclectic and highly talented young architect. Vulliamy had recently published an influential survey of *Examples of Ornamental Sculpture in Architecture* (1823), illustrating it with many details from European and Asian buildings. Jones coupled his architectural studies with classes at the Royal Academy, where his masters confirmed that he was a skilled draftsman, “but did not master the figure.”

To supplement his studies, Jones began to travel. In 1830, he journeyed around France and Italy. Three years later he undertook a longer tour of Greece, Egypt, and Turkey. This awakened an interest in Islamic forms of architecture, which would exert a profound influence on his career. In the short term, it prompted Jones to embark upon an exhaustive survey of the Alhambra in Granada, which would become the subject of one of his most important books. The *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Details of the Alhambra* (1836–45) was a massive undertaking, lavishly illustrated with 101 chromolithographic plates, most of them based on Jones’s own drawings.

The *Alhambra* project proved a costly business, and Jones had to sell off some land that he had inherited from his father in order to finance it. On a more positive note, he decided to print the plates himself, gaining invaluable experience in the process. As a result, he became increasingly active as a graphic designer and printer. Some of his work in this field was on specialist architectural publications, but he was also employed by commercial publishers, designing a series of elegant gift books. Needless to say, Jones’s intimate knowledge of the printing and publishing world came in very handy when he produced his *Grammar of Ornament*.

At the same time Jones was forging a reputation for himself in other areas of design. In the early 1840s his association with Herbert Minton (1793–1858) led him to design a wide range of tiles and mosaics. He was also busy as an architect and decorator, his most striking creations being two Moorish-style houses in London’s Kensington Palace Gardens (1845–47). More importantly, perhaps, he was starting to move in distinguished circles. In particular, he joined the architectural clique that surrounded Sir Henry Cole (1808–82).

A hugely influential figure, Cole was closely involved with Prince Albert’s most cherished artistic projects and would eventually become the first director of the South Kensington Museum. It was probably through his recommendation that Jones gained the prestigious appointment of joint architect of the Great Exhibition. In this capacity, he collaborated with Joseph Paxton (1803–65) on the design of the Crystal Palace. Jones took responsibility for the interior decoration of the building and also assisted in the arrangement of the exhibits.

The Great Exhibition proved an overwhelming success. The splendor of the event was a source of immense national pride, especially since so many of the objects on show came from places under British control. Nevertheless, Cole and his colleagues were swift to admit that the quality of English design was disappointingly poor. In a lecture of 1853, for example, Jones lamented that, “We have no principles, no unity; the architect, the upholsterer, the paper-stainer, the weaver, the calico-printer and the potter, run each their independent course; each struggles fruitlessly, each produces in art novelty without beauty, or beauty without intelligence.”

INTRODUCTION

Immediate steps were taken to rectify this situation. Attempts were made to introduce more efficient patent laws, protecting the work of designers, and to improve standards in art colleges. In addition, Cole set up an educational program, which he hoped would demonstrate to the public—and to manufacturers, in particular—the value of an informed approach to design. Together with Jones and A. W. N. Pugin (1812–52), he formed a committee that began acquiring suitable objects for a permanent exhibition of decorative art. This “Museum of Manufactures,” initially located in Marlborough House, opened its doors in 1852. In true didactic fashion, it even included a section with “Examples Illustrating False Principles in Decoration,” which Charles Dickens satirized as “a House full of Horrors.” In later years the Museum of Manufactures went through several name changes, becoming the Museum of Ornamental Art, the South Kensington Museum, and, finally, the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In the meantime, Jones had become involved in another, similar project. In 1852, the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park was dismantled and re-erected on a new site at Sydenham. Jones was appointed director of decorations at the revamped building, which was designed to provide a permanent showcase for the architectural styles of many different cultures. Together with Sir Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820–77) and Gottfried Semper (1803–79), he set about creating a series of “Courts,” where the public could marvel at “the history of the civilization of the world . . . examining side by side portions of buildings of every age.” This display was officially opened by Queen Victoria in June 1854.

The Grammar of Ornament was to provide a natural accompaniment to this project. Jones had already started to formulate his own ideas about the basic elements of design in 1851. Six of his “General Principles” appeared in a series of articles entitled *Gleanings from the Great Exhibition* (1851), and the list was expanded for lectures at the Society of Arts (1852) and Marlborough House (1852). The full set was published in a pamphlet the same year.

There was nothing radically new about manifestoes of this kind. The campaigning tone had been set in two of Pugin’s earliest books, *Contrasts* (1836) and *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), and several of Cole’s colleagues produced manuals of ornament, each with its own personal creed about the principles of design. None, however, was as comprehensive or as lavishly illustrated as *The Grammar of Ornament*. In this regard, Jones’s book benefited greatly from the impressive range of architectural casts that were available at Sydenham; from the long list of specialist contributors, who assisted him with the project; and from his personal knowledge of the intricacies of color printing.

The Grammar of Ornament was published in 1856 and proved an immediate success. A review in *The Athenaeum* described it mysteriously as “beautiful enough to be the hornbook of angels.” In more mundane terms, it was rapidly accepted as the definitive source book for ornamental motifs and was reprinted no fewer than nine times prior to 1910. An American edition appeared in 1880, introducing Jones’s ideas to an international readership.

INTRODUCTION

In its day the *Grammar* was hugely influential. William Morris (1834–96) certainly used it, and it is safe to assume that most of the main practitioners of the Arts and Crafts Movement were familiar with it. Its reputation also remained intact into the twentieth century, when Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) and Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959, *see page 324*) acknowledged a debt to it. Some of these figures rebelled against the rigid theorizing of Jones and his colleagues, claiming that designers should enjoy the same artistic liberty as painters, but all of them respected the scholarship, the scope, and the sheer physical beauty of one of the greatest publications of the Victorian age.

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