

Who Trained Australia's pre-eminent Art Decorators?

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Proceedings of:



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Introduction

The nineteenth-century decorating scene was fuelled by wealth derived from mining, pastoral and industrial enterprises. Many mansions and major public buildings were constructed and decorated to high standards by wealthy people. At this time in Britain, Scotland was leading the way in design. Many of the decorators who emigrated to Australia in the 1870s and 1880s had trained with the best firms in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and subsequently rose to local prominence. The Sydney-based firm, Lyon, Cottier & Co. was at the vanguard of artistic developments although others at different times also produced fine works.

It is known that John Lamb Lyon (1835 –1916) established the firm of Lyon, Cottier and Co. after returning from Melbourne on a visit to London and Glasgow where he met up with his friend and former fellow apprentice glass stainer, Daniel Cottier (1838-1891). He was greatly impressed by Cottier's new London Art Decorating enterprise, and encouraged by the potential he believed to exist in Melbourne and Sydney for the same. They began planning an Australian branch of the business to be run by Lyon and supplied by Cottier. The opening of the business would coincide with the opening by Cottier of a branch of the business in New York.

Daniel Cottier

Cottier was a collaborator of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson. He laid the groundwork for Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and was so influential overseas that his work is displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Vincent van Gogh sought his patronage. He inspired Louis Comfort Tiffany, the leading American proponent of art nouveau, and is credited by art historians with being a major influence in the decorative arts in Australia and the US. Yet the

name of Daniel Cottier, Glasgow-born and trained, while celebrated overseas, has been overshadowed in his home city by the great generation of designers led by Mackintosh who gave rise to the Glasgow Style 30 years later (Designer of the old school, 2011).

The importance of Cottier's contribution to artistic developments is usually overshadowed by other, better-known figures of the era but his contribution is now belatedly drawing greater attention in his homeland and Glasgow. David Robertson of Four Acres Trust says: "He is seen as setting a new standard for Scottish stained glass, which was exceptional in the period. He launched a new approach to quality and design (Historic Scotland 2011). The idea of a decorator being an artist rather than a tradesman came with Cottier. What he and his assistants and collaborators created has become known as the 'first Glasgow school' (Designer of the old school). Lyon's biography pales in comparison.

John Lamb Lyon

After training and working with Cottier in London, Lyon emigrated to Australia where he worked with leading Melbourne stained glass artists Ferguson and Urie, establishing himself as chief designer and partner. His designs achieved some acclaim, including winning prizes at local and international exhibitions. The partnership was dissolved in August 1873 when Lyon opened the new business in Sydney.

Shipping records reveal that Lyon travelled from Adelaide to Sydney in 1873 in the company of Charles Gow. It is not known when he travelled to Adelaide but it might be assumed that it would have been for the purpose of seeing work completed there by Gow and possibly also participating in it to some extent. He would have also, no doubt, transacted business in relation to the new venture, probably securing the commission from Henry Ayers to decorate his House.

Quite a lot of information is known about the subsequent life and works of John Lyon, including details of Lyon's domestic life, recorded in personal diaries by his eldest daughter Margaret (Lyon and Stowe papers). For example we know that he mixed with leading figures in Sydney society and played an active role in Sydney art circles. He ran the business efficiently though frugally and indulged a lot of his time at an easel. He prepared most of the designs for the firm's stained glass commissions but left the building decorations mainly to others. He did not prepare designs or decorate an interior in his own right until 1882 (Diary entry 9 August). He lived well into retirement and left the business to his son Bertie.

House-painting developments in Scotland

David Hay was established as the leading artistic decorator in Edinburgh early in the Nineteenth Century with the patronage of Sir Walter Scott, whose new house 'Abbotsford' he was commissioned to decorate in the 1820. Hay developed special painting techniques and trained a considerable number of painter decorators in high quality house decoration over the next few decades. Things took another direction in Glasgow — a free-spirited place where Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, a native of Glasgow, began to design and commission decoration in a classically inspired Greco Egyptian style of his own. Thomson produced buildings of imposing strength and stunning idiosyncrasy. He inspired a coterie of young Glasgow designers to think beyond the constraints of their prior learning about colour and design to create exciting new forms. Daniel Cottier was one of the young designers who fell under the influence of Thomson.

Shipbuilding had become a staple of the Glasgow economy by the time Glasgow was established as the second most important city of the British Empire shortly before Sydney and Melbourne became rivals for that title in the 1880s. Shipbuilding contributed to the development and proliferation of painted decorations in three ways. First, it provided the

wealth for shipping barons and Glasgow society more generally to indulge in decoration of their building interiors. Second, the competition between the shipping lines demanded more elaborately decorated saloons and cabins, from which skills such as the painting of accurate facsimiles of inlaid exotic cabinet timbers were developed for painting surfaces which passengers would pass many hours staring at whilst confined in spaces they paid handsomely to occupy. Third, the contact with the shipbuilders made the step to adventure and travel to warmer climes an easy one for skilled painters whose work in the cold, wet northern climate affected their health. Some of them travelled to Australia in pursuit of a better life.

Australia and the Glasgow Connection

A number of the talented decorators responsible for the most artistic painted decorations in Australian buildings trained in Scotland and in Glasgow in particular. Apart from John Lyon, whose name is associated with high-class work in several Australian cities, the most talented Scottish decorators were Charles Gow, Andrew Wells and J. Ross Anderson. Their names can be linked with the best works of the era in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. The Glasgow connection extended into the Federation period, when the interest in Australian indigenous decorative forms was inspired as much by the Glasgow Style as European *Art Nouveau*.

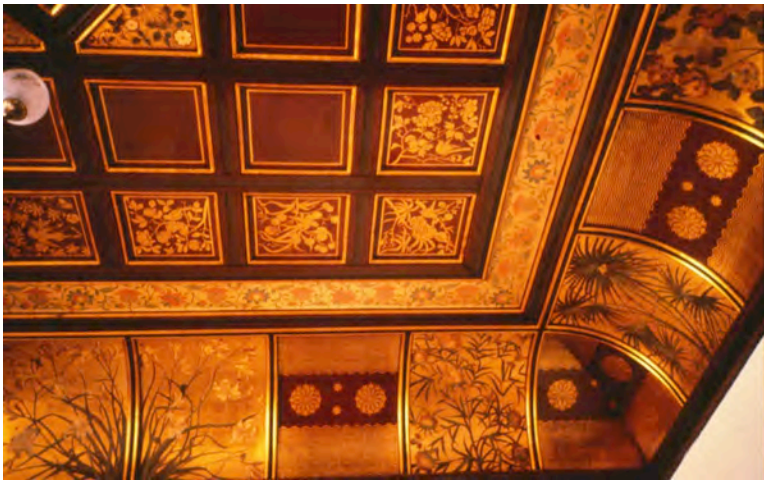
Daniel Cottier and John Lyon trained together in London as stained glass artists and developed a close friendship. Lyon travelled to Victoria in the early 1860s and worked there exclusively in stained glass. He spent much of his leisure time painting portraits and still life subjects on canvas and pottery, winning prizes at art shows.



Dowanhill Church decorations by Cottier with Wells 1867, following removal of overpaint. (Donald Ellsmore photo 1985).

Cottier moved from London back to Glasgow in the mid 1860s to establish a studio. He set it up initially in his mother's kitchen, assisted his young apprentice, Andrew Wells. Wells took over the Glasgow business when Cottier relocated to London and then to New York.

One of the early commissions undertaken by Cottier with assistance from Wells was to decorate the walls and roof of the Dowanhill Church and to provide windows there. His decorative work at Dowanhill for William Leiper (1866-67) reveals a very exciting blend of exuberance, naivety and the strong influence of Alexander Thomson. Other notable early works by the pair, including Townhead Parish Church for J.J. Stevenson (1865-6) and Queen's Park UP Church for Alexander Thomson (1867-69) have not survived. Contemporary reports confirm that they were equally adventurous in terms of their colouring.



Drawing room ceiling in 'Cairndhu', Hellensburgh, Scotland by Cottier and Co. 1871-73 (Donald Ellsmore photo 1985).

During the very productive years from 1865 Cottier established himself as a powerful force in design with a rapidly growing reputation. He trained Wells, Gow and several other assistants, married and had children, gained the confidence and trust of an influential group of professionals connections, contracted rheumatic fever (which eventually finished him in 1891) and moved his main business to London in partnership with Bruce Talbert, J.M. Brydon and William Wallace in 1869, placing Wells in charge of the Glasgow business. He appears to have taken Gow with him to London at this time.

By 1870, when John Lyon called on his old friend in London, Cottier was well established in London and travelling frequently to New York where he would open another branch of the business. Lyon stayed in Cottier's house and got to know the family. He remarked on Cottier's interest in Art Decoration and Japonism, which featured strongly in the Cottier home, and on the artistic talents and interests of each of the children (John Lyon diary). The whole scene inspired Lyon. He found the domestic and business environment to be quite intoxicating since it touched so many of his own interests, including his love of family, his love for what he always referred to as 'The Old Country', his love of art and the fellowship of artists, and the rich potential of their mutual artistic interests in the Australian colonies.

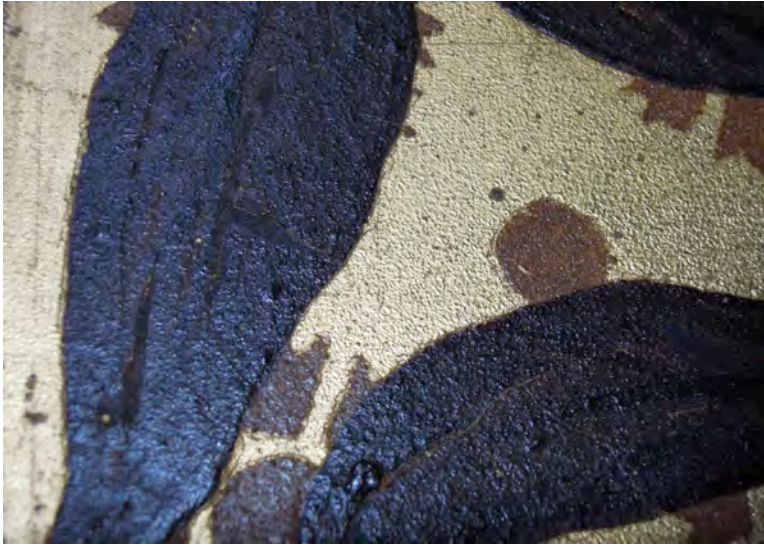
Cottier by then had established important connections with European artists and was dealing in art, which was an interest they shared. It was later reported by Lyon that they agreed during that visit to open a business together in Sydney.

Comments by Lyon have been taken by others to infer that Cottier was active in the Australian business but this was not the case. He is thought to have visited Australia only once, briefly. His contribution to the business was to supply Lyon with everything that he was unable to procure locally, including the services of talented assistants. Charles Gow was the first of these but he was far more than just an assistant to Lyon. He trained him in Art Decoration.

Charles Gow, Ayers House and Para Para

The link between Charles Gow and the exceptionally fine artistic painted decorations in Ayers House and Para Para is revealed in a brief reference contained in a report in 1891 that Gow was relocating from Glasgow to Adelaide. The reference reveals that Gow was returning to Adelaide — to where he had worked on behalf of Lyon Cottier and Co in the 1870s (*Journal of Decorative Art*, 1891).

Charles Gow (1830 – 1891) appears to have arrived in Adelaide on 30 June 1873 from London (*South Australian Register*, 30 June 1873). He travelled from Adelaide to Sydney in the company of John Lyon in August of the same year (*Bendigo Advertiser*, 27 August 1873). It is reasonable to assume that during his stay in Adelaide he undertook work and, on the basis of the surviving stylistic evidence, the work he undertook was the decoration of the dining room at Para Para, with assistance from local painters and possibly also John Lyon. It seems unlikely that he could have undertaken any work at Ayers House in that brief period but it is highly likely that he was engaged by Henry Ayers after Ayers learned of the work at Para Para.



Detail of dado decoration in dining room at Para Para, Gawler 1873. (Donald Ellsmore photo 2012).

The work at both places bears the stamp of one very accomplished designer – a person of Gow's talent. Regrettably little is known about Gow's subsequent movements in Australia. Suppositions are based mainly on the physical evidence with minimal supporting recorded information. The *Journal of Decorative Art* in 1891 provides some detail:

He served the usual six years' apprenticeship to glass staining with Mr John Cairney, Glasgow, and after two years as a journeyman he entered the employment of Mr Daniel Cottier about the time when he (Mr Cottier) began to take up decorating along with his glass staining business, and the next twelve years were spent on high class decorative work in Scotland, England and Australia (JODA 1891).

Cottier significantly shaped Gow's style. When Cottier expanded his business to London late in 1869, leaving the Glasgow business in the care of Andrew Wells, it is highly likely that Gow was one of the assistants who moved there with him.

By the early 1870s, at Cottier's recommendation, John Lyon invited him to join him in Australia to establish a Sydney-based Cottier venture. Gow had the maturity and talent to provide Lyon with the technical and decorative expertise that, as a glass designer, Lyon lacked.

Whilst there is only limited evidence of Gow's movements, there is strong stylistic evidence to link works in Adelaide and Sydney in 1873 and 1874. He returned to Glasgow 1877. In 1891 he accepted an invitation to establish a branch of the Lyon and Cottier business in Adelaide and quit his very successful partnership with Hugh McCulloch, another former Cottier employee, in Glasgow.

The commercial success of that business is evidenced by the impressive showrooms it occupied in 1884 at the prestigious address of West George Street, Glasgow (JODA 1891).

The reason for Gow's decision to return to Adelaide was probably poor health. It is likely that his health was failing and that the Adelaide climate and environment lured him back. It appears that he did not live long enough to enjoy the benefits of life in Adelaide a second time around. There is no record of him working again in Adelaide.

Gow's work was highly regarded by Cottier, Lyon, McCulloch and others. A diary note made by Lyon during a trip to his former home in Glasgow in 1886 confirmed his association and close friendship with Gow (Lyon Diary). The professional respect Gow engendered over his career was confirmed in the report of a farewell dinner to him in 1891 on his retirement from his practice with Hugh McCulloch (JODA 1891). The works by Gow and McCulloch during their thirteen-year association covered the full spectrum of opportunities offered in the rich commercial capital of the north, from churches to steam yachts, and were highly regarded:

It will give some faint idea of the extent of their business operations when we say that we have before us a list of forty-one churches for which the stained glass and decorative work has been executed, and to attempt to number the institutions, banks, public buildings, etc., would be an endless task. Messrs McCulloch and Gow have turned out a great deal of work both in glass and decorative panels for passenger steamers and yachts. Their exhibit at the Glasgow Exhibition brought them both fame and profit (JODA 1891).

Lyon, Cottier and Co.

The business in Sydney was established in August 1873 with a showroom at 333 Pitt Street decorated in the latest London style. Almost certainly Gow and Lyon decorated the showroom in the manner that is illustrated by the work at Para Para. It caught the attention of at least one newspaper:

Messrs. Lyon, Cottier and Co. (a branch of the firm of Cottier and Co., Regent-street, London) have opened an establishment at 333 Pitt-street, and as a specimen of their new style of decoration, have painted their show room. The ceiling is an elaborate design, containing allegorical heads of the seasons, festoons of foliage, grotesque animals, birds, butterflies, &c. The frieze is an adaptation of the Greek pattern, on which are let in heads of the honeysuckle and lotus pattern on which are let in heads of the Greek heroines, painted in colours on gold ground. The wall is powdered over with gold rosettes down to the dado, where the old fashion of a chair (rail) is revived. The dado is a dark inlaid looking work - the aim has been to get a quiet harmony of colour, avoiding all that is loud, raw, or gaudy. The windows contain specimens of their stained glass. One window has the figures of Pomona and Flora in the richest antique glass; the other is very light, having no colour but that produced by the yellow silver stain ; the ground-work is little circles like the old German roundlets. Messrs. Lyon, Cottier and Co., is also makers of art furniture, encaustic tile painters, and importers of real Venetian glass and oriental carpets. The firm has been commissioned to decorate the superior rooms of the new General Post Office, and is now engaged on that work.

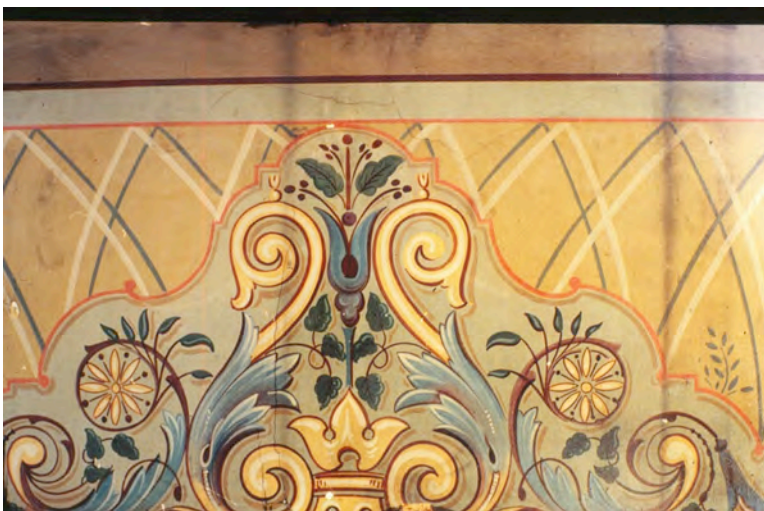
(Illustrated Sydney News, 28 February 1874).

Although there is no surviving image of the work at 33 Pitt Street, there are photographs of the rooms at the General Post Office, which illustrate precisely the same style of decoration as the work as described. They also happen to be consistent with the work at Para Para. No other examples of this class of work at that time are known.

The business that became widely known by the enduring name of Lyon and Cottier underwent several changes in name, location and personnel. It was established as Lyon, Cottier and Co. with Gow as its design anchor (1873-1876) and a small team of assistants. Daniel Cottier's role was to mentor Lyon and provide support by way of trained assistants from Glasgow and London.

Lyon, Cottier and Co.'s list of clients included Colonial Architects James Barnet in Sydney and William Wardell in Melbourne and many private clients. John Lyon travelled frequently and extensively on behalf of the business, making seven visits to Melbourne and Adelaide between 1881 and 1883. Lyon's daughter, Margaret in her diary, recorded these though not their purpose.

During the late 1870s the firm undertook a number of important commissions for the NSW Colonial Architect James Barnet, a fellow Scot. They included Parliament House, Government House and the Garden Palace Exhibition building. Charles Gow left the firm at the end of 1876 to return to Glasgow and begin the partnership with former work colleague at Cottier's, Hugh McCulloch, which went on to become an important contributor in Glasgow in the decoration of churches, public and private buildings and ships.



Upper wall decoration (now concealed) in Sydney's Legislative Council chamber, 1875 (Donald Ellsmore photo 1982).

Charles Gow's departure left John Lyon and his foreman, Walter Marshall to prepare designs for building interiors. They had learned a great deal from Gow about how to design and execute decorations on a large scale. Margaret Lyon recorded her father's design graduation with a personal diary entry, in August 1882, after viewing the painted decorations in the Pitt Street Uniting Church in Sydney. She wrote:

... the decoration of the Church looks very nice indeed, all the better from being done by Papa's men from Papa's own design.

Walter Marshall appears to have been an important contributor. Margaret Lyon makes several references to Walter Marshall in her diaries, referring to him as her father's trusted employee. She recorded that he made an offer of marriage. She also recorded in her diary that Lyon was planning in mid 1882 to return permanently to London, probably in 1885 when the lease on his premises was due to expire. The time between 1882 and 1885 would be used, presumably, to wind up the Australian business and settle the family's affairs, including the children's education. This plan was apparently abandoned when Andrew Wells joined the firm. Wells was Cottier's very first trusted assistant and friend, from Glasgow. He guided and oversaw the decorative work for a very productive decade beginning in 1886, under the name of Lyon, Wells, Cottier and Co.

Andrew Wells trained his son while he was in Australia and returned with him to Glasgow in 1896 to begin a new enterprise in partnership with William Guthrie. The firm Guthrie and Wells excelled in their Art Decoration and Furnishing business, numbering amongst their clients Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Lyon, Cottier and Co. continued under John Lyon's direction into the second decade of the Twentieth Century.

Stylistic Evidence of the Adelaide Works by Gow and Lyon

Lyon, Cottier and Co are known to have decorated the interior of the Adelaide branch of the E.S.&A. Bank for William Wardell in 1881. There is reason to believe that by then their work would have been recognised in Adelaide. Most probably John Lyon already had a small team of painters in Adelaide, some of who would have worked there under the direction of Gow. They were probably still working at Ayers House in minor rooms.

The painted decorations in Ayer's House and Para Para, which are exceptionally artistic, are unquestionably the work of a richly talented decorator, although equally obviously, not the same decorator in all parts of the house. These works were clearly commenced in the 1870s. It is reasonable to conclude that Charles Gow was the decorator at work at Ayers House in the dining room and drawing room and Para Para. It is not possible to believe that they could have been the work of anyone else. No other decorator of comparable skill is known to have been working at that time in the Australian colonies.

Further reasons for attributing these works with reserved confidence include:

- the use of high quality wood graining as a foundation for hand painting and stenciling is not known in any other decorator's work. It derives directly from the work that Gow had undertaken with Cottier and Wells in Glasgow, where they frequently painted decoration onto polished wood.
- the use of random gilding as a background in the frieze in Ayers House State Dining Room is a bold and confidently executed decorative device. It is beyond the range of any other decorator known to be working in Australia at the time.
- the wall filling at Para Para is reminiscent of Hay's wall fillings and designs for later works by Lyon and Cottier.

- the use of a coarse foundation for gilding at Para Para is reminiscent of the work of leading British decorators working in the Aesthetic style. Andrew Wells used the device from 1886 in Melbourne and Sydney.



Detail of ceiling cornice in Ayers House dining room circa 1873. (Donald Ellsmore photo 2012).

Conclusion

Conservation of all painted decorations requires a sound understanding of the artist's intent. It requires an understanding of their technical range and the circumstances under which the decorations were created. The work at Ayers House and Para Para must be seen and understood in the context of an emerging art form influenced strongly by the free spirit of Cottier, and by artistic developments associated with shipping and Lyon's ambitions of bringing to Australia something of the excitement he felt for what he experienced in London and Glasgow in 1870.

At Ayers House it will be important to safeguard the unique character of the work through discrete interventions and minimal change.

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