



Threads of Conservation

Social fabric • Fabric and place • Conserving fabric

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Donald Ellsmore is convenor of the Australasia Chapter of the Association for Preservation Technology International (APT). A conservation specialist and educator with more than 35 years heritage conservation experience, including advising on works to many landmark Australian heritage places for state and federal Government agencies and in his own practice, he trained as an architect in Australia and France.

In 1993 he was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy by the University of York for research focused on the transfer of artistic decorating skills from Britain to Australia in the late nineteenth century. In recent research based on the interior decorations at Ayers House the origins of the Art Movement in Australia have been revealed and add to the body of knowledge about the artists and the Art Decorating phenomenon.

Who trained Australia's pre-eminent Art Decorators?

Paper Abstract

The Nineteenth Century Art Movement produced an astonishing number of beautifully decorated building interiors. Outstanding examples survive in Sydney (Government House and Parliament House), Melbourne (Gothic Bank) and Adelaide (Ayers House and Para Para). These are all works by one firm directed by John Lamb Lyon. This paper will explain how the Art form transferred to Australia from Britain; who trained the artists, and the connection with Cottier, Tiffany and La Farge.

For many years researchers have puzzled over the identity of the artists responsible for the artistic painted decorations in Ayers House and Para Para. These are widely believed to be works by Lyon, Cottier and Co. The author has attributed them to Charles Gow. It can now be established with greater certainty that Gow was the designer and that he trained his new employer, Lyon, in the art form. Daniel Cottier, life-long friend of Lyon and Gow, was mentor to both men.

In 1870 Lyon was inspired by Cottier to plan a new Art decorating business in Australia. Gow was dispatched from Glasgow in 1873 to assist Lyon in setting up the new venture. Cottier, meanwhile, was lured to America, where he opened a branch of the business in New York, developing associations with Louis Comfort Tiffany and John LaFarge.

Several key factors explain how this story evolved. At its root is the charisma of Daniel Cottier. He became a global figure, travelling frequently between London, Glasgow, Paris and New York, while supporting the business in Australia. Lyon operated in a smaller pool in which he was no less influential, operating across Australia, cultivating strong relationships with influential patrons and installing trusted assistants in key locations, operating simultaneously in several states.

Over the past forty years there have been attempts to preserve the Lyon and Cottier legacy, some mediocre and few informed by a clear understanding of the significance of the art form. With a better understanding of the background it will be now possible to achieve better conservation outcomes.