

LINES *of* BEAUTY

ROCOCO PLASTERWORK AND THE ART OF GEOFFREY PRESTON

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THE FOUNDLING MUSEUM

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GEOFFREY PRESTON is one of the UK's
leading architectural sculptors. After studying
sculpture at Hornsey College of Art he trained
as a stonemason and carver. He was a founding
director of two of the country's most respected
conservation companies, at the helm of many
significant projects including the restoration
of the eighteenth-century hand modelled
plasterwork at Uppark House.

In 2000, Geoffrey set up his workshop in
Devon to concentrate on sculpture and
modelling. He leads a small team of sculptors
who produce fine new decorative plasterwork
for clients all over the country.

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LINES of BEAUTY

The Foundling Museum's Court Room and its connection with the painter William Hogarth take us to the heart of English Rococo in the mid 1740s. By this time the early influences of the Swiss stuccodores – workers in stucco – and French painters had been absorbed and a national version of Rococo had developed. The designs of ceilings such as William Wilton's Court Room might look as if they were executed extempore, but they were carefully planned and used a repertoire of modelled elements including the S-shaped leaf, the C-scroll and shell-like forms. Flowers, birds and animals are also characteristic of a period that looked to the natural world for inspiration. Rococo developed from the Baroque style and is sometimes known as Little Baroque; many of the forms are similar but of a smaller proportion.

The values of the Rococo were rooted in natural philosophy and religion. Hogarth tried to explain these ideas in his book, *The Analysis of Beauty*. As he saw it, the *Line of Beauty* can be found everywhere in nature, from the shape of the thighbone to the steps of country dancing. These flowing lines are apparent in the 1745 Court Room ceiling, in the copy of the Ottobeuren Abbey vault (displayed in the adjacent room), which also dates from the 1740s, and in the design of the Staircase Hall ceiling at Uppark House from 1750. There are strong parallels between the forms found in Rococo decoration and those found in the crockets of medieval sculpture, in the serpentine line of Art Nouveau and in Celtic art. They are an affirmation of living through grace and spontaneity. Their aim is to uplift the emotions and create harmony. They are expressive and immediate; joyful with a love of flowers and birds, a love of the flowing inner vitality of nature exemplified in the sea and seashells; the 'rocaille' of Rococo.

Geometry is very important in design. In plasterwork it is obvious in the earlier Tudor and Jacobean styles, with rib patterns derived from medieval vaulting. Later, in the Neoclassical work of the architects Robert Adam and James Wyatt, the geometry is easily seen. But in these Rococo ceilings it is less apparent. When the designs are analysed, however, certain underlying geometric 'nets' can be found. These are usually based on the octagon and the hexagon. These nets provide simple proportional systems for the composition of the design and later can be used to 'set out' the design onto the ceiling prior to modelling. I now use these methods for my own work. In the new ceiling for the Great Drawing Room at the Grade I listed Devonshire manor, Great Fulford, every element conforms to the underlying geometry, even the central relief panel from the painting of *Bacchus and Ariadne* by the Italian Renaissance artist Tintoretto. In the exhibition visitors can see a photograph of the Foundling Museum's Court Room ceiling, on which is drawn the geometric net. The fact that the geometry works so accurately is a tribute to the care with which the ceiling must have been removed and reassembled in its present position, in 1937.



In the eighteenth century, two families – the Artari and the Francini, stuccodores from the Ticino region of Switzerland – came to work in England and Ireland. They created an amazing body of original sculptural plasterwork in houses such as Moor Park in Hertfordshire, Clandon Park in Surrey and Carton, near Dublin. They had a great influence on British plasterwork. The Artari worked in England between c.1720 and 1760, and returned to Germany between projects (they worked at Schloss Brühl, Fulda Abbey and Poppelsdorf Palace during these years). Plasterers such as William Wilton would undoubtedly have known their work in London at St Martin-in-the Fields, St Peter's, Vere Street and Orleans House in Twickenham.

In the 1750s, architects travelled to Greece and Rome to study the antique. They published books of engravings and stimulated an interest in classical forms, which were less sculptural and more purely decorative. Probably, the use of gypsum for making moulds for porcelain production led to its increased availability for cast plaster decoration. Prior to this, many Rococo ceilings were made from papier-mâché pasted into metal moulds (William Wilton himself being a major manufacturer). The lower relief and repetitive motifs of Neoclassical design could be easily cast, which facilitated speed of production but often led to a decline in quality. The role of the artist became negligible and the word “plaster” gradually became synonymous with something of little value.

Twentieth century architecture generally abhorred surface decoration and the ideal of ‘beauty’ or ‘grace’. However, Rococo furnishings, porcelain and paintings have always retained the affection of interior designers and collectors. Various artists have worked in and developed the style, such as Aubrey Beardsley and Rex Whistler, while the pioneering writing of Sacheverell Sitwell about Bavarian Rococo drew attention to ‘...a school of architects and sculptors that has had no equivalent since the Middle Ages’. The work of these artists was truly innovatory, and Sitwell hoped that

One day the century between 1650 and 1750 will be recognised as a period in which every detail of workmanship was more perfect than at any other time save the twelfth century when the medieval world was growing into ripeness.

Some books and exhibitions have also led to greater understanding and appreciation of Rococo plasterwork; notably Joseph McDonnell's *Irish Eighteenth-Century Stuccowork and its European Sources*. The books of Geoffrey Beard are invaluable as a survey of the history of plasterwork and as a source listing the artists and craftsmen who did the work. In 1984, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London put on a major exhibition called *Rococo, Art and Design in Hogarth's England*.

The last thirty years have seen a revival of Palladian architecture following concern about the loss of great houses and Georgian city centres. The rediscovery of lime mortars and the effort to conserve buildings using traditional building techniques has coincided with many new buildings being built to Palladian principles. This has brought with it the opportunity to create new plasterwork. The restoration of the ceilings at Uppark, a National Trust property heavily damaged by fire, was a rare opportunity to look at the art of modelling and learn the languages of Rococo and Neoclassical form.

Clay modelling is fundamental to sculpture: the fluidity of clay allows great gestural freedom and the possibility of thinking and drawing in three dimensions. It is what gives the final work in plaster its energy, movement and individuality. My new work is created by developing both the design ideas and the modelling style in clay and seeing where they go. The *New House* stucco panels, designed for a contemporary home in the Palladian style, are a good example because the leaf forms have become satisfyingly dense and complex through working them out in clay first. There is no repetition and each area is different without disturbing the balance of the designs. Much of the work in the exhibition is modelled in clay and then moulded and cast. This way of working has many advantages, but it is important to avoid the temptation to repeat elements, particularly when the overall design has twofold symmetry. In stucco this is never an issue because all of the work is hand-modelled in situ.

Essentially, stucco is a lime mortar with the addition of gypsum. The set of the gypsum controls the shrinkage of the lime and allows the modeller to create more detailed and considered modelling. But it is a difficult medium, and still some techniques used by the Artari and the Francini are not understood. It can be a superior medium – the equal of bronze or marble – but it requires considerable practise to gain fluency with it. Artists will develop their own distinct style and find their own way of handling the material.

For me, this exhibition is an opportunity to look at plasterwork as sculpture. I hope it shows some of the potential of modelling and that it is possible to create new work with vitality and originality. The designs for many of the recent projects are mine, but making them is very much a team effort. I am grateful to the modellers who have worked with me for their talent and their skill and their good will. I would also like to thank the Foundling Museum for the opportunity to show my work in the context of an extraordinary building and an outstanding collection.

