

# Lines of Beauty

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*Lines of Beauty* investigates the rich tradition of decorative plasterwork. Inspired by the Rococo splendour of the Foundling Hospital's Court Room ceiling, the exhibition focuses on the contemporary designs of sculptor Geoffrey Preston. *Lines of Beauty* illuminates the art of modelling in clay and stucco and shows the sculptural potential of these expressive materials. It also considers the design of eighteenth-century ceilings and demonstrates how their lively designs were guided by proportion and geometry.

The exhibition title *Lines of Beauty* comes from William Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty*, published in 1753. A copy of the book is in the Foundling Museum's collection. Hogarth used the term to describe the graceful serpentine forms that are typical of Rococo design, and which can be seen throughout the work in this exhibition.

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# *Uppark House*

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In 1989 a fire ravaged the National Trust's Uppark House, in West Sussex. The fire caused the roof to collapse, taking with it five spectacular eighteenth-century stucco ceilings. Many of the priceless contents were rescued in an heroic effort during the fire. Once the ruins had stopped smouldering, the National Trust took the decision to rebuild. The restoration of the plasterwork was among the most challenging tasks. George Jackson, the oldest plastering company in England, was able to produce beautiful flatwork and mouldings, but the skills and recipes associated with hand-modelling in stucco had been lost.

Fortunately, the National Monuments Record had a complete set of photographs of the ceilings as they were before the fire. Fragments of original plaster also provided vital information about the stucco; what it was made from and how it was applied, as well as the style of the modelling. Geoffrey Preston led Cliveden Conservation's team of sculptors that recreated the hand-modelled stucco. They spent 14 months working on site, modelling directly onto the ceilings. In the process they reinvented the art of hand-modelled plasterwork.

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# Geometry

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When Geoffrey Preston saw the Little Parlour ceiling at Uppark he realised the design had an underlying geometry. The semi-circular wreath at the bottom of the corner panels provided the key to the whole ceiling, which is based on seven circles within a circle. Further study revealed that the position of each passage of modelling was often governed by the same system; even down to the curve of an individual leaf. The geometry acts like an invisible skeleton, informing everything from the smallest detail to the ceiling as a whole, and allowing every element of the design to be related by proportion. Preston discovered that the other four ceilings also used proportional systems in their designs. The understanding of the geometry behind the designs provided a guiding principle that could be used to 'set out' the new ceilings. Many Rococo ceilings share this underlying geometry, including the Foundling Hospital's Court Room ceiling.

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# *A Short History of Stucco*

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Hand-modelled plaster, or stucco, is a type of plaster that is usually modelled in situ, directly onto the wall or ceiling of a room. Its heyday was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it is now a rarely-used technique. Hand-modelled plaster has an illustrious place in the history of art and architecture. The Romans learnt about stucco from the Persians. It was used for Buddhist sculpture in Afghanistan, Hindu sculpture in India, and early Renaissance sculpture in Western Europe. In the mid-1600s artist and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini used stucco in many of his spectacular interiors, exerting a profound influence on the use of the material for the next hundred years. In Britain it reached its full glory in the first half of the eighteenth century.

The use of hand-modelled plaster started to wane in the mid to late eighteenth century as the fashion for Baroque and Rococo gradually gave way to Neoclassical. A more reserved style, its shallow relief and use of repeated motifs were technically suited to casting. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution was gathering pace. Developments in materials and techniques made it possible to mass produce ornament. Stucco fell out of favour and by the twentieth century the recipes and techniques associated with it had disappeared.

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# *The New House*

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The New House was designed by George Saumarez Smith of Adam Architecture and is Palladian in style. In 2009, when the building was nearing completion, the owners commissioned Geoffrey Preston to make four wall panels for the dining room.

Preston's designs were inspired by the long, curling leaf forms which are often seen in historic, hand-modelled plasterwork. Variations in these leaf forms were associated with particular modellers such as the Artari and Franchini families, who came from the Ticino region of Switzerland and worked across Europe. Their designs include astonishingly inventive, elegant forms that create energy and movement.

A little owl and a peregrine inhabit two of Preston's panels. On another, two finches squabble, a blackbird looks on curiously, and a starling calls from the sidelines. Each panel is over two metres high and they were modelled in stucco in Preston's workshop by a team of three sculptors.

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# *Modelling, Moulding and Casting*

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## *Clay modelling*

Today the most common method of producing plaster ornament is to make a model in clay and then mould it and cast it. Clay can be used to model in a fluid and immediate way, sketching out shapes roughly and quickly. It can also be finished to a high standard, with sharp detail and a smooth surface. When the model is complete it must be fired or moulded, otherwise it will disintegrate.

## *Mould making*

Historically, moulds were made from a variety of materials including lead, boxwood (carved in reverse), gypsum plaster and gelatin, but today silicone is often used. The silicone is mixed with a catalyst and poured onto the model, setting in a few hours. Silicone moulds are flexible and durable, enabling many casts to be made.

## *Casting*

Many of the objects in the exhibition are made from gypsum plaster, also known as plaster of Paris. The plaster powder is added to water, mixed to a cream-like consistency, and poured into the mould. Sometimes hessian scrim is added for strength (this is known as fibrous plaster). The plaster takes about half an hour to set, after which it can be removed from the mould.

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# Great Fulford

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Great Fulford is a Grade I listed manor in Devon, the home of the Fulford family for over 800 years. The Great Drawing Room dates from around 1700, but disastrously the roof collapsed not long after it was built. The gradual restoration of this room has been the work of three generations of the family. Francis Fulford commissioned Geoffrey Preston to design and make the new ceiling. Devon has a rich tradition of late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century plasterwork, and the design works in this spirit.

The central panel is after the painting *Bacchus and Ariadne* by Italian Renaissance painter, Tintoretto. Ariadne was abandoned on the island of Naxos by her lover Theseus, whose ship sails away in the distance. She is discovered on the shore by Bacchus, who asks her to marry him, and offers her the sky as a wedding gift. The panel depicts their marriage, as Venus crowns Ariadne with stars.

The decoration was modelled, moulded and cast in Preston's workshop before being installed. The high relief of the modelling, together with the running mouldings, give the ceiling its bold, sweeping sense of drama.

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# Rococo

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The word Rococo comes from the French *rocaille*, which refers to the rock or shell motifs that are prevalent in Rococo design. The Rococo style was international and manifested itself in all the decorative arts. A lighter and more delicate development of the Baroque style, Rococo was popular from about 1730 to 1770, when it gave way to the more formal Neoclassicism popularised by the architect Robert Adam.

In England, Rococo was disseminated through prints and pattern books by artists such as Hubert François Gravelot, a French illustrator and engraver, and Jacques Dumont le Romain, a French painter and designer for the Aubusson tapestry factory.

Rococo interiors were designed as complete works of art, with furniture, sculpture and textiles complementing architecture, plasterwork and paintings. Often playful and witty, Rococo designs are usually asymmetrical and quite elaborate.

S-shaped leaves and C-shaped scrolls are a central theme, as are shells and natural forms. Flowers, birds and animals are often incorporated into the designs.

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# *The Foundling Hospital's Court Room Ceiling*

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The Foundling Hospital, which continues today as the children's charity Coram, boasted a magnificent Rococo ceiling in its Court Room. The ceiling dates to 1745 and was donated by William Wilton, who is often described as an 'ornamental plasterer'. Wilton also ran a successful business creating papier-mâché ornaments for chimney pieces and frames, with premises in Cavendish Square and later Charing Cross. He was one of many artists and craftsmen who supported the Hospital through donations of work.

Wilton was paid for some of his work at the Foundling Hospital but the Court Room ceiling, valued at 93 pounds, was his gift. It is thought that Wilton designed the ceiling and he organised its construction using his own workmen.

Remarkably, when the Foundling Hospital was torn down in the 1920s, this ceiling was saved and preserved, to be reinstated in the charity's new London headquarters, constructed in 1937. The ceiling, as can be seen today, is within a faithful reconstruction of the original Foundling Hospital Court Room.

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