

The Decoration of the Victorian Organ

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This paper explores painted decoration on organ pipes, gilding, polychrome, diapering and powderings; also the tools and materials used. All these are discussed from a practical perspective.

These comments are dedicated to the visually aware.

The average painter in the latter part of the 19th century was well versed in painted finishes and the sundry materials used in the profession. Painted finishes today have returned to fashion as well as the colours used in Victorian and Edwardian decorative schemes. The 19th century painter was expected to be able to write a sign, to be able to paint fine lines, to decorate coach work, to be able to imitate any wood and marble imaginable, as well as to be able to gild, to stencil and powder, to lay out and transfer designs and perhaps even *trompe l'oeil* effects as well. *Trompe l'oeil* is a French term meaning a deceit or a trick of the eye. Shopping malls have modern examples, so you might have a blank wall which you paint in imitation of bricks or marble and then paint a doorway to see beyond, done so that it is absolutely realistic to the viewer. These are all fairly standard skills - more or less - for the average painter. In Victorian times these paint finishes were in high demand.

The painter had to be able to do almost anything, and so his shop would accumulate various pattern layouts, colour books, books of recipes for paints, varnishes, polishes, etc., shelves to store stencils, and designs for wall ornaments. It is therefore not surprising to find the same colour schemes being used to decorate a house, a theatre or even a church. To economise, the same schemes were designed for use everywhere possible. A number of common stencil designs could be used in an organ facade. Any of the pillar, vertical running ornaments or any of the small, individual motifs could be incorporated. In some cases special stencils needed to be produced to deal with the conical feet and the areas around the mouths. Where separate stencils have to be made to deal with the different sizes and diameters of pipes, they were made in sets, each one becoming smaller or larger in one or two dimensions. So, depending on the need, you might reduce a design from top to bottom, you can do it in both directions, or you can stretch it the other way. This will ensure that the design does not disappear around the back of the pipe, or look ridiculous by being too small. Occasionally special motifs were produced. In particular for Catholic churches where IHS or MR cyphers were used as decoration. A very good example of this sort of specialist stencil is that used on the Halmshaw organ in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Christchurch.

Stencils as they were produced are reasonably simple affairs, being made of paper, vellum or thin card, the design to be drawn and then cut out with a fine, sharp knife. In order to make the stencil more durable, especially for use with distemper and tempera, common linseed oil was brushed on to render the design waterproof and tougher. A word of explanation: Distemper is mainly pigment and chalk together. Tempera is a similar sort of thing. Chalk is also added to the pigment, but instead of animal glue, egg is used, and you can use either the egg yolk or the egg white. When it dries it is very tough and very long lasting.

To make a smaller or larger copy of the same pattern, the stencil can be used to stencil another piece of card or some such material, and then cut out just inside or outside the line. So it was easy enough to make up a whole collection of sizes. I've got one example here of a small stencil that was used on the [Alfred Fuller organ in Fawkner](#), Victoria. That was made in 1988. We started off with a cartoon which is a basic tracing of the design, and a few notes as to what colours you might want to use on it. And then you start off with the stencils. Now, instead of using card or paper, we have got a wonderful substance called mylar, which is a plastic film.

[One sheet of a three-part stencil was handed around for inspection.]

This stencil was used for one colour only; it is part of a three-coloured design. Once this has been taken off, the next stencil is put in place and registered so that it is accurate. The little "V" nicks in the corners are to make sure that it lines up absolutely exactly. The three stencils are cut out, one on top of each other, with the nicks first, then separated, and then positioned once more.

[The crossing motif was shown, and the position of a few red dots. I think there is even a gold dot in the centre of that, and that was later done by hand. This was also passed around and a request was made to handle them carefully as the stencils are quite fragile.]

Oil paint was used, and most likely prepared in the workshop. Basic colours were purchased to which were added some tint or other form of pigment. Colour schemes were often followed because they were fashionable combinations, had been used before, or the effect was a known quantity. It would be most unwise to play around lest you missed the mark and produced some ghastly or unwieldy result.

If the facade design was not supplied by an interior designer, or an architectural firm, for example, that for St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne: Lyon, Wells, Cottier and Company, then the client was given a sample pipe to the suggested design. Sometimes a colour sketch was also produced, but that was much more expensive and probably was not used as often. Once all was agreed upon, the colours prepared and the stencils cut, work could begin on the facade pipes.

I do not know if the pipes were decorated on site, were done in the organbuilder's factory, or transported from the painter's workshop. If that were the case, then they would have to be carefully packed in hay on the back of a cart to transport them, bubble wrap being unknown in those days, the most expedient way being chosen.

Special racks must have been made to hold the pipes while being decorated, as there are no original paint marks on any of the cases that I am aware of. So the racks greatly facilitate the decorating work and also prevent damage through knocks and scrapes to the fragile paint.

The backs of the pipes are rarely painted as they are not seen, so that about two thirds of the surface is decorated. The unpainted backs offer a place to support the pipes when wet. This is very important when you are trying to get them through the workshop. It is a problem where to put them, once you have painted all round them. This is important as oil paint is slow drying, the entire body can be painted at the one time and that is also time-saving. You can paint from the top to the bottom in one colour and rest it neatly on the racks. In our case, this is a long piece of thick timber in which we cut deep grooves, and then it is lined with felt. It can be laid on the floor or where ever you need. Another point is that, by not painting the backs, you can also reduce the cost and the time involved in diapering the facade, and so you can reduce the time by about 25%.

Original decoration is deftly done and rarely any great care was taken to cover up mistakes or runs. I can think of a wonderful mistake: a diapered band was put on incorrectly and sloped the other way, thus ruining a tower. This was done on a Fincham organ at the Black Street Uniting Church in Brighton, Victoria.

Exceptions to this deft style of finish usually were small chamber organs or facades that would be closely inspected, and here, not only greater care was taken, but often more refined and intricate designs were used, for example with Positive Organ Co. instruments. That is very much the case. You find a lot of decorative, very fine, intricate handwork on facades that could be seen close up.

Now we begin with the painting. Mark Wicks suggested that the zinc should be well rubbed down with turpentine to ensure that the paint would stick. After this preparation, a single coat of undercoat was literally slapped on, which we discovered while working on the Fincham organ at South Port Parks Uniting Church, South Melbourne, Victoria. After examination of the original paintwork, the pipes were cleaned and revealed a rather thick and grainy undercoat just quickly slapped on. They didn't waste time as there was no great occasion for doing so.

When dry, the chosen colour was applied. If the painter could get away with just one coat, it was left at that and the next stage started. The pipes were then marked out in the field colours, and where bands and diaperings were to be applied.

In some cases the pipes were fitted into the facade and the positions of canopies, corbels and transom rails marked on, this being the easiest way to ensure accuracy. So the pipes of the pipe-maker or the organbuilder would be fitted into the facade and a brushmark of paint laid along the rails, just to find out where you didn't need to paint. You let that dry and then you put your next coat of paint over the top. What happens is, you have a very faint ridge underneath the ground colour, which you can see by running your eye along the pipe. So that it is invisible unless examined closely. The South Port Parks Fincham organ reveals a thick black paint was applied to the pipes before the undercoat and colours showing up as a faint mark through the ground colour. It's a rather interesting technique. It's the first time I've

come across that on a facade. In other areas pencil was commonly used, but after the ground colours have been applied.

When all the backgrounds and fields are dry, the stencils are secured in place. I've often wondered how they did that. Masking tape is a godsend in securing stencils today. They might have used a gummed paper tape, perhaps even string. If the stencils were small enough, and you had enough apprentices around, then you would get the apprentice, on pain of death, to hold the stencil absolutely steady.

[A stencil brush was shown.]

Once the stencil had been secured in the right spot, these brushes were used. The brush shown is a large size; you can get any number of them. The important factors: the metal ferrule here is to hold it very, very securely. It gets a lot of tough treatment. The handle is short so that you can use a lot of brute force; it's not a delicate painting brush. The bristles are packed very closely together; it's very short and stiff and cut to an absolutely flat top. That's important. The artist would work with a palette. The brush would be dabbed on. You would take the paint up on to the tips of the bristles only, and you would virtually hammer it through the stencil on to the pipe. We've done a few facades like that, and it produces the most horrific migraines! There are other techniques. Some modern decorators use sprays, and so on. It doesn't quite produce the intensity of colour. We can use smaller brushes, and smaller striking motions are easier, producing fewer migraines! I will also pass the brush around; you might care to have a look at it.

Once you have stencilled the desired colour onto the pipe, the stencil is removed and runs cleaned up immediately. At this point the ligatures are painted out, either by hand or by using stencils. The ligature is a bridge of the stencil material that cuts across the design in order to strengthen and keep the various shapes together.

The gold stencils and gilded parts are wisely done last, in order that they not be knocked around during handling. Gold size is a varnish, sometimes with a pigment added, so that you can see it a little more clearly. When this is applied, it is left to dry, and when it is ready - which is tested by running your knuckle across the varnish - the gold leaf is then positioned and patted down. Sometimes a stencil is used for this process, in which case you just stencil on the varnish. You remove the stencil when it is ready and then put the gold leaf on. There is a trick to that, because, if you don't use a resist on the paint surface, you are going to get the gold absolutely everywhere. The resist would be something like egg white or talcum powder. The talc is dusted on and it means that the whole surface is covered in talc except for the area that is covered in size, so that any excess gold leaf will not adhere to the talced surface. Gold leaf is very, very fine. In fact, you are able to see through it. You can hold it up to the light and see this very deep blue-green colour. So it is translucent. Being so thin, it is fragile. You cannot touch it with your fingers, because putting your fingers near the gold leaf, the heat and the moisture of your fingers will attract the leaf; it will leap up at you and wrap itself around your finger! So there are very special techniques used for handling gold leaf.

When gold is applied on to a coloured ground, or coloured paint is stencilled on to gold, that is of poor contrast, then the edge of the design must be emphasised, otherwise the pattern will be unclear. Lining of the design in

paint also covers up any ragged edges. This process requires the greatest skill and a very practised hand. Examination of painted work easily reveals whether the artist is a master, a practised hand or a novice. Where the brush strokes start and stop can be discerned, or even if the painter is right or left handed. I know it sounds rather bizarre, but when you are painting endless lines and patterns of the same type, your mind tends to wander and you can be amused by deciphering existing paintwork and trivial details. The South Port Parks Fincham painter was right-handed!

After all this has been carried out, the pipes should be dusted down and any faults removed.

Now the pipes can be placed in the facade of the organ. With considerable expense, a colour plate was produced to grace the book *Organ Building for Amateurs* by Mark Wicks. This effort was considered worthwhile, because of the contribution that painted decoration makes to the visual design of the Victorian organ. Several factors encouraged painted decoration. One: the use of zinc for the larger pipes gave the advantage of strength and also a financial saving for the organbuilders. However, the tone they produced was often criticised and, more importantly, zinc's visual quality was not generally admired. Two: factory production techniques. Less simplified casework provided greater profits at the expense of visual appeal. This trend reached the pinnacle of non-achievement in the middle of this century when a sheet of plywood was the organ case! So you can see, something was needed to engage the eye. Painted decoration was a much welcomed, inexpensive way of beautifying the organ, at once giving delight to the eye, whilst detracting from the simplistic casework and removing from view the poor quality pipe material.

Often, when the Victorian organ was repaired or rebuilt, the dirty facade pipes were painted out, rather than go to the expense of cleaning and restoring them. Modern fashion is rather fickle, so that if the design is over-painted in silver frost, the pipe facade can look like an enormous radiator! Or if white is used, in particular coupled with gold bands at the tops of the pipes, a convincing likeness to cigarettes can be achieved. Think back to the Adelaide Town Hall organ or the Congregational Church at Ballarat. In any event, the visual proportions and balance have been lost and the integrity of the design compromised. If you are lucky enough to have the original colour plate in the front of the book, where you see yellow, you have to substitute gold leaf. They couldn't print gold, so yellow is gold, and red is vermilion.

Pipes No 1 and 6 in their lower halves show a diaper in the textile sense. Now: what does 'diaper' mean? 'Diaper' has two meanings. One: In a textile sense, it is used to describe the diagonal patterns of little squares, and it is produced by mixing the warp and weft threads of the fabric on the loom. So you get patterns like an Argyle or a Gingham, something like that. It is an even repetition of small squares producing nice patterns. In the architectural sense, it was any small pattern of a conventional nature, repeated evenly and continuously over the surface. The pattern could be anything. It could be geometric, foliate or zoomorphic in inspiration. With this particular plate, he must have had a great deal of fun doing these designs. They are not really practical ones to reproduce for organ pipes, however. A lot of them have very, very small dots of gold, which, when you are doing it on a piece of paper, reads wonderfully to the eye, but in reality, if you were to do a facade like that, it would look too fiddly. So the best patterns for stencilling

are ones that are bold and simple, and ones where the outline is the main focus of the design.

Mark Wicks was well familiar with the effects that good decoration can produce. With loving care he produced his own designs, hoping to inspire his reading audience. He advises us wisely that colours and designs be *harmonious with their surroundings* just like the music from the organs that he wrote about.

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