

## Decorative Plasterwork in New South Wales, 1800-1939

JOANNA CAPON

*This paper is based on a 1988 MA thesis, God is in the Details, which examined internal applied decoration made from plaster and composition, in the form of ceiling roses and cornice enrichments, in New South Wales from 1788-1900. The paper outlines the development of decorations in the context of successive building styles and briefly traces the progression of the craftsmen from convict plasterers to self employed modellers.*

Two of the questions which were posed in the original thesis were whether it was possible to date a house by its decorative plasterwork and what influence the economic situation had on the changes in the design and styles of the enrichment.

To answer the first question an accurate method of dating the decorations had to be found. With scant documentary or pictorial evidence concerning them it was necessary to devise a method by which this could be done. It was therefore decided to base the study on an analysis of an extensive photographic record of existing decorations in a number of houses built during the period. The houses, in the main, were taken from those in the classified listings of the 'Register of the National Trust (NSW)' which gave accurate or relatively accurate dating. Every ceiling rose and cornice in the chosen houses was photographed. The date of the house was written on the back of each photograph, the prints were then turned face up and sorted into groups by style and form. When the dates on the back of the groups were examined the evolution of stylistic development became clear. It was noted that until the mid 1880s a decorative style represented by a ceiling rose or cornice enrichment was only used for a ten year period, often less. It also became obvious that between 1788 and 1900 three major changes occurred in the styles and shape of the decorations, in the 1830s, the 1850s, and the 1880s. Later work revealed another change around 1910.

The answer to the second question was searched for amongst documentary evidence including unpublished diaries and letters, catalogues, newspapers and journals. The result of this research showed it was an economic situation which stimulated the four changes observed in the photographic research. By marrying both pieces of research together and using the photographic evidence to observe how the styles of the decorations evolved between the four changes it became clear that it would be possible to date when each decoration had been placed in a building including those added at different periods.

Neither the photographic nor the documentary research showed any plaster decorations added to houses in the new colony before the beginning of the nineteenth century. The reason for this absence was twofold. The uncertain economic future which faced the settlers when they arrived and the lack of two important building materials, limestone and gypsum in the immediately explored regions.

In eighteenth-century England lime plaster, made from limestone, and plaster of Paris made from gypsum were used to make the decorative plasterwork. While the lack of gypsum was not vital to the colony's building plans, the lack of limestone was a major disadvantage. Initially it was not needed to plaster and decorate the simple houses that were being built but to make mortar to hold the stone and brick buildings together. With no deposits of limestone to mine, shells, with a similar mineral composition, were gathered from around the

harbour shore and later from Aboriginal middens, and burnt to provide lime. There was no substitute for gypsum.

In the first years of the colony the meagre production of lime was needed for mortar. Only as the supply became assured when a thriving shell lime industry developed along the waterways around Sydney was it used to make lime plaster, to plaster walls and ceilings. Although the local shell industry continued to prosper through the nineteenth century as the colony grew local shell lime was augmented by imported limestone from Tasmania, New Zealand and even England. It was not, however, until the second decade of the nineteenth century that undecorated cornice and ceiling rings, made from soft, slow setting lime plaster, began to appear.

The earliest recorded plasterwork embellishment dates to 1816. It is a cornice with a relatively simple profile in The Mint building, Macquarie Street, Sydney, originally the south wing of the Rum Hospital (Fig. 1). Similar cornice and ceiling rings were found in a number of contemporary houses such as Glenfield Park, Leacock's Lane, Casula, c.1817, and Bowman's House, Windsor Street, Richmond, c.1815. However, as plasterwork was the most expensive building cost, the number of houses constructed between the second decade of the nineteenth century and the 1830s without decorative plasterwork greatly outnumbered those to which it was applied. The latter were generally built by the wealthier members of society.

George Bowman for whom Bowman's House was built, was such a man and the decorations in the house provided some valuable information about early added plaster work which proved consistent with data gleaned from examining other contemporary houses. This showed that even the wealthier members of society were inhibited by the high cost of plaster from adding decorative plasterwork with abandon. Cornices and ceiling rings were applying only to the public rooms. No decorations at all were added to bedrooms, other domestic rooms or passageways. Although the cornice and ceiling rings were undecorated, they were made in a variety of differing profiles which ranged from the relatively simple to the very complex. The profiles of the decorations differed in each room following an English precedent practised since the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In New South Wales the custom was observed until the late 1850s.

There was no apparent attempt in Bowman's House, nor in most similarly decorated houses of this period, to add enrichments to the lime plaster cornice and ceiling ring. But at another Richmond house, The Oaks, also known as Onus Farm and Moxey's Farm, Francis Street, c. 1818, there was found what has subsequently proved to be the only decorated lime plaster ceiling rose to be discovered during this research. Crude, handmade, with the central leaf decoration surrounded by a circle of balls, it is set within a complex profiled ceiling

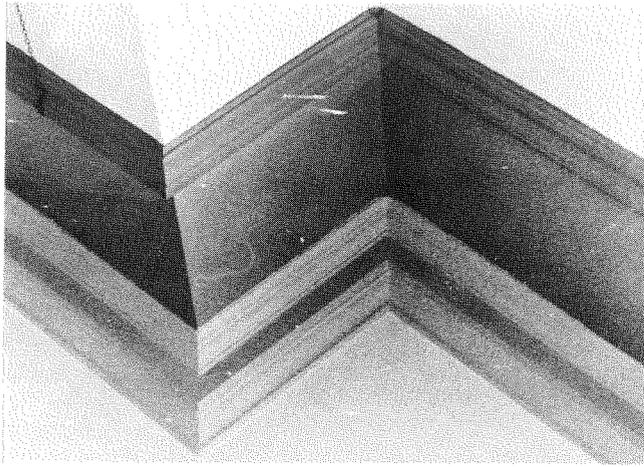


Fig. 1: The earliest known plaster cornice, 1816, in *The Mint*, Macquarie Street, Sydney.

ring (Fig. 2). The owners were extremely generous (and unique) in allowing one of the balls to be removed for scientific analysis, in order to identify which material had been used to make the decorations. The test proved conclusively it was lime plaster. It was not possible to prove whether the plaster had been made from limestone or shell, as tests on both materials provide the same result.<sup>2</sup> However the house stands close to the banks of the Hawkesbury River, originally lined with Aboriginal middens, and it was noted that during renovations a quantity of shells, some of which had been burnt, were found behind the house. Examination of the fragment by microscope revealed that no less than 42 layers of paint in nearly as many colours had been used to decorate the balls, an implication to be considered when attempts are made to return decorations to 'historically correct' colours.

A second decorated lime plaster ceiling rose was initially identified at Cleveland House, Ormond Street, Surry Hills, c. 1823. The decorations of the elliptical rose in the hallway of the house were also crude. The leaf motif was surrounded by a ring of what looks like the classical grape and vine motif. It was not possible to take a sample for analysis and the crudeness was equated to lime plaster. It was not until after the publication of my book *A practical Guide to Plasterwork*, where it was illustrated, that the correct material was identified during renovations undertaken by the present owner.<sup>3</sup> It is made from wood. While there is some documented evidence to show this material was used for some ceiling decorations, no detailed research has yet been made on its general use.

This discovery emphasises one of the problems which can occur when trying to identify which material was used to make a specific piece of decorative plasterwork. With no documented evidence and without permission to make a close examination, it can be difficult to be completely sure of the material. Lime plaster, plaster of Paris, wood, papier mâché, carton pierre (the latter two were introduced in the 1830s) and metal can all look remarkably alike from the floor, particularly when covered with layers of paint.

While plain lime plaster cornice and ceiling rings continued to be used as decoration throughout the nineteenth century, the photographic survey revealed the appearance in the mid 1830s of a few ceiling rings enriched with stiff, crisp, classical motifs and some cornice with 'bedded' bands of decoration. These enrichments on the ceiling rings and cornice were completely different to the crude lime plaster decorations seen at Moxey's Farm, for they were made from plaster of Paris.

Documentary evidence revealed that quick-setting plaster of Paris was first imported into the country in any significant quantity in 1833.<sup>4</sup> Enrichments made in this material were cast in plaster of Paris moulds, not laboriously fashioned by hand. The ceiling roses were 'piece moulded', a single mould being made for each decorative element, then an adequate number of

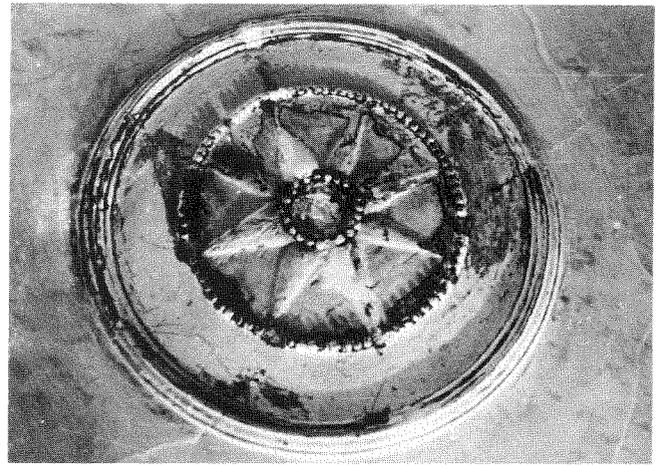


Fig. 2: Lime plaster ceiling rose, c.1818, *Onus Farm*, Francis Street, Richmond.

casts made from each model to complete the decorations. The pieces were then joined together on the ceiling to form the rose (Fig. 3). Cornice decorations were cast in lengths of 15 cm. These too were re-cast until there were sufficient pieces to decorate the whole cornice, the pieces being then bedded into a concave band of a pre-run lime cornice.<sup>5</sup>

Since plaster of Paris had been the principal material used to make plaster decorations in England from the late eighteenth century, why had it not been imported into Australia sooner? The answer was cost. Until the 1830s the colony had encountered numerous economic problems which restricted imports to essential goods only. In the 1830s the colony of New South Wales experienced its first economic boom, and an extensive range of luxury goods and materials were imported for the first time, plaster of Paris amongst them.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the buoyant economy there were a number of factors which hindered even the most wealthy members of the society from following all the latest English fads and fashion of architecture and decorative plasterwork. Building costs were considerably higher; the economy was not stable (the flourishing economy of the 1830s was followed by a severe depression in the 1840s); plaster of Paris had to be imported; there were an insufficient number of skilled craftsmen and the climate and mode of living in the new country differed considerably from that in the old, all preventing the houses built here being complete replicas of their English counterparts. Nonetheless the latest English styles were followed closely by the wealthier members of Sydney society through pattern books and magazines, such as J.C. Loudon's *Architectural Magazine*.

As plaster of Paris was even more expensive than lime plaster only the wealthy were able to add decorations in this new material to their homes. Even then, in general, the cost limited the decorations to one room or to a single decoration, in all but the very grandest of houses. At this time only some first grade houses had decorated cornice and ceiling roses or rings, the majority having none at all.

Although the introduction of plaster of Paris produced high quality cast decorations, there were restraints to the form of the enrichments, because of the lack of skilled craftsmen, and the nature of the moulds which limited the decorative repertoires. Between 1833 and 1858 both plaster of Paris and wax were used to make the moulds for the comparatively flat and small decorations.<sup>7</sup> Both were inflexible materials, although wax was slightly more malleable.

The first plaster of Paris decorations were made in a limited range of classical Greek Revival style ornaments. Ceiling roses were decorated with stiff acanthus leaves, sometimes combined with a second leaf decoration. Cornices were decorated with narrow bands of motifs including acanthus leaves, water leaves and the simple egg and dart pattern. Those

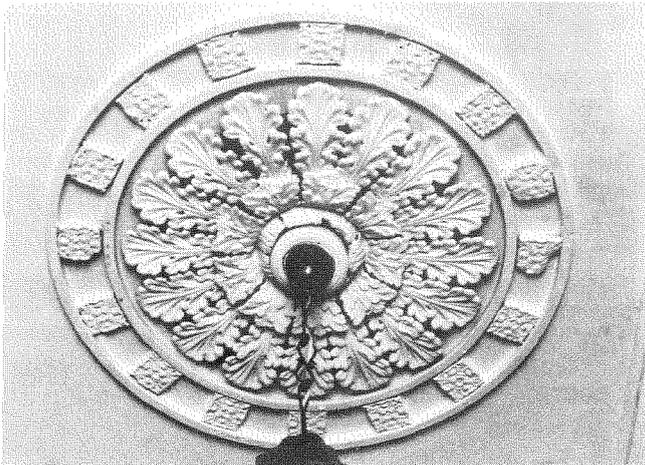


Fig. 3: Plaster of Paris ceiling rose, c.1836, Tempe House, Arncliffe.

decorations too were limited to the public rooms. Private rooms either had plain cornice or ceiling rings or nothing at all.

As the number of skilled plasterers in the Colony increased more motifs were added to their decorative repertoire. By the 1840s a few Gothic Revival decorations were used to decorate some rooms, such as those in the drawing room at Vacluse House, Vacluse, dated to 1847 (Fig. 4). While the majority of decorations continued to be cast from plaster of Paris moulds, the two-dimensional effect of these enrichments demonstrated what the plasterers could achieve by casting them from back and front wax moulds. Also during the 1840s the bands of cornice enrichments increased from one to four. Although flat and bedded into the pre-run cornice they began to dominate their host rather than sinking into it, as those made in the 1830s had done.

However, few houses were built in the 1840s as a devastating economic depression brought a halt to most building projects. It was not until the economic situation improved in the mid 1850s that wide scale building began once more. The economic change was brought about by the diggers, who went to the gold fields to make their fortunes in the early years of the 1850s, then moved to the cities when their Gold Rush dreams were not realised. This influx swelled the urban population and stimulated the economy.<sup>8</sup> New dwellings were soon needed to house the increased population and during the late 1850s and in the 1860s domestic building became one of, and at times the greatest, field of investment.<sup>9</sup> As jobs became plentiful a number of migrants arrived in the country, including members of the building trade, plasterers amongst them, who went to the cities seeking work.

As the economy continued to improve there was a greater demand for housing for the middle income earners. The occupants of those houses began to expect cast plaster of Paris decorations to be added to their homes.<sup>10</sup> This demand encouraged the plasterers to look for a material with which they could speed up production and lower the cost of the decorations. In 1858 they found it. It was gelatine. Unlike plaster of Paris, gelatine was not used to make enrichments, but the moulds from which they were cast. The material did not have to be imported, nor was it expensive to make, as it was manufactured from a glue made from animal bones, hide and hoofs and fish skins.<sup>11</sup>

Gelatine moulds had been used in England since the late 1840s and there is no reason to doubt that they had been known to plasterers working in Australia from that time but it was not until the economic situation warranted it that they were used in this country.<sup>12</sup> The flexible quality of the moulds allowed the plasterers to cast even the most complex design from a single mould. As the hot liquid gelatine was poured over a clay model it seeped into every surface forming a perfect impression of each indentation including undercutting and perforations. The ability to cast complex decorations from a single mould

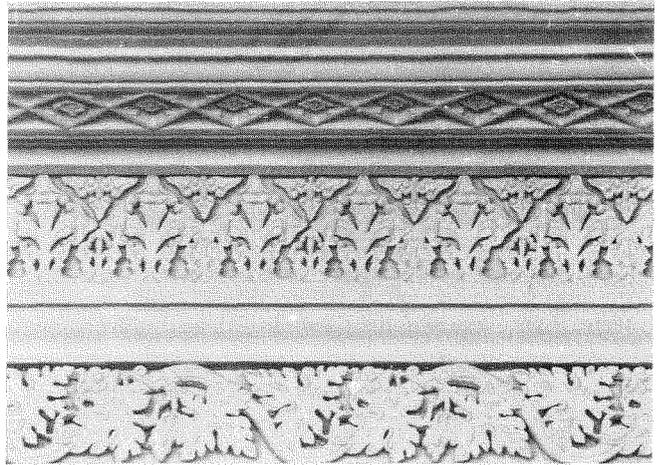


Fig. 4: Plaster of Paris cornice, 1847, Vacluse House, Vacluse. Moulded from back and front wax moulds.

accelerated their production and helped to reduce their cost.

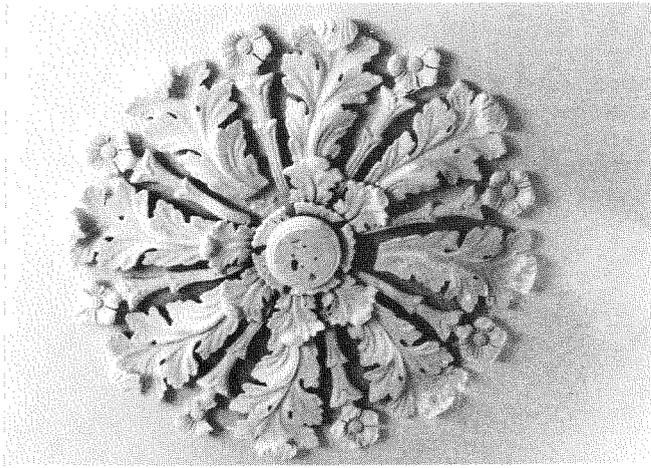
One visible result of gelatine moulds was an increase in the number of motifs and designs which were used as well as a variety of sizes and shapes in which the ceiling roses and cornice enrichments were made. By the 1860s cornices ranged in size from a width 22 cm to 60 cm, although the number of decorated bands still varied from one to four.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 9 October 1858 recorded the first use of gelatine moulds in Australia. A Mr Parish used them to cast the decorative plasterwork which embellished the interior of the English, Scottish and Australian Chartered Bank, designed by Edmund Blackett, at the corner of King and Cross Streets, Sydney. The building is still there but the decorations have vanished. This is to be lamented for not only were they the first enrichments to be cast from gelatine moulds, they were also the first decorations using motifs of Australian flora. Though a number of examples of contemporary enrichments made from gelatine moulds exist, there are no early examples of Australian flora decorations. Today the earliest remaining ones to be found in New South Wales date from the late 1870s or early 1880s.

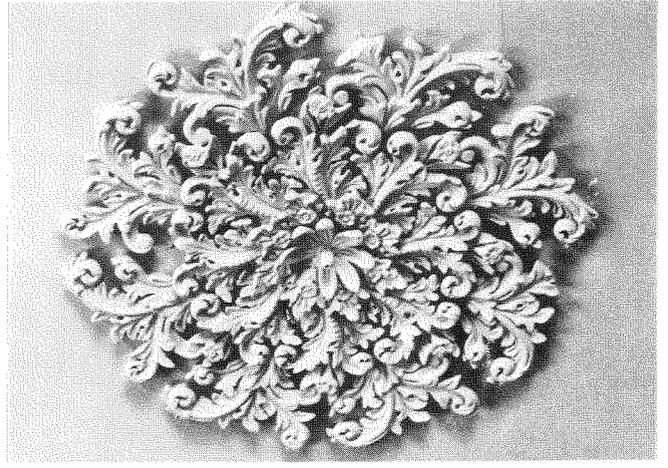
Although gelatine moulds lowered costs and widened the possibilities, decorative plasterwork still remained an expensive item in building costs. As Richard Twopenny said in his book *Townlife in Australia*: 'everything ornamental not only costs twice as dear in actual money, but the money itself is worth at least twice as much in England.' As this passage indicates, even with a strong economy, the high building costs continued to restrict the size of the houses which were built, the styles of architecture and the decorative enrichments.

In the late 1850s and through the 1860s classical motifs were still the most usual enrichments added to ceiling roses and cornice, although more Gothic motifs were used. On the whole ceiling roses were made up from a combination of acanthus leaf and floral motifs. From the 1850s they were made with a rococo curve (Fig. 5), which by the 1860s had developed into a full swirl (Fig. 6). An increasing number of bands were planted into pre-run lime plaster cornices. In smaller houses hall cornices were made up from bands of acanthus leaves, and other classical motifs, such as the egg and dart pattern (Fig. 7); the hallways of larger houses were often enriched with a full Corinthian cornice (Fig. 8). An increased number of naturalistic renderings of floral motifs were used from the late 1860s, with flowers such as convolvulus becoming increasingly popular, while twining grape and vine motifs were frequently used for cornices (Fig. 9).

After the introduction of gelatine moulds an increasing number of rooms in the houses had applied decorations added to them, although this number was dependent on the scale of the house and the client's pocket. In the late 1850s decorations were added to the main bedrooms in the more expensive houses, then gradually to corridors and secondary bedrooms as



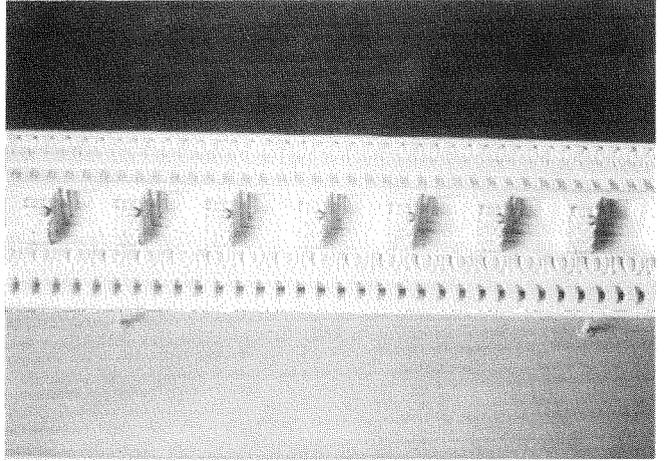
*Fig. 5: Beginning of the rococo swirl. Ceiling rose, c.1860, Strickland House, Vaucluse.*



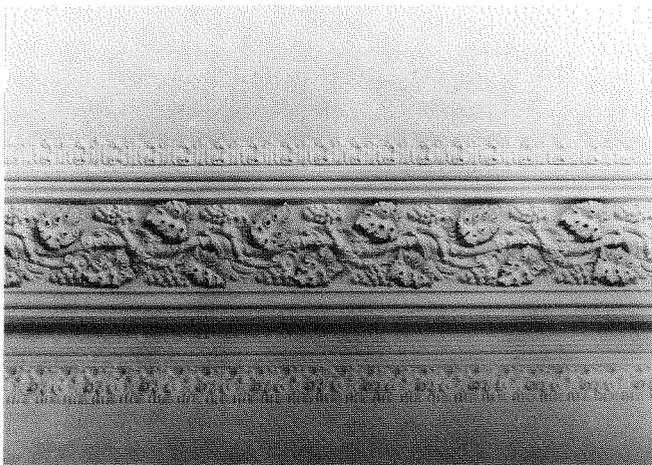
*Fig. 6: Ceiling rose with full rococo swirl, c.1865, Cranbrook, Bellevue Hill.*



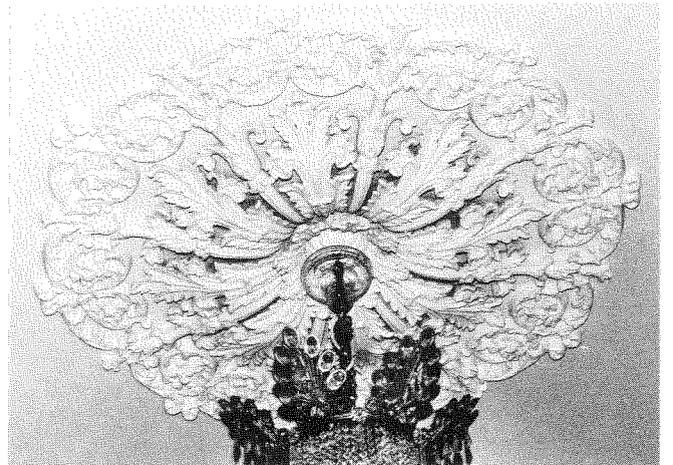
*Fig. 7: Hall cornice, c.1860, Margareta Cottage, Glebe.*



*Fig. 8: Hall cornice, c.1860, Cranbrook, Bellevue Hill.*



*Fig. 9: Cornice, c.1860, Cranbrook, Bellevue Hill.*



*Fig. 10: Ceiling rose covering entrance to duct, c.1869, Callooa, Darling Point.*

well. By the 1870s in such houses only servant quarters were left undecorated. In less grand houses, suburban villas, town houses and terrace houses, ceiling roses were added to public rooms and main bedroom and, occasionally, to secondary bedrooms and downstairs corridors. Upstairs corridors were in general left undecorated.

The practice of adding different decorations in each room was also modified after the advent of gelatine moulds. From the late 1850s it became general practice to repeat identical decorations in a number of rooms. Indeed in speculative buildings, such as a row of terrace houses put up by the same builder, identical decorations were added to corresponding rooms in each house.

The introduction of gas lighting in the late 1850s was another influence on the design of the decorative plasterwork. By the mid 1860s the use of gas lights in domestic houses was widespread in Sydney and centrally hung gas-lit chandeliers began to replace those lit by candles. To facilitate the escape of the fumes, ducts were built into the ceiling running from the centre of the room to an external wall, the aperture being hidden by a ceiling rose (Fig. 10). The ceiling roses which covered the entrance to the duct had perforated designs, which disguised the duct entrance but allowed the gas fumes to escape from the room and out of the house. (This was not always the case: at Iona, Darlinghurst, 1890, the dining room central rose had no duct as the ceiling formed the floor of the bedroom above; no doubt the gas fumes seeping through the floor boards ensured the upstairs occupant a good night's sleep). From the 1870s cornice decorations in larger houses often had pierced designs, allowing the gas fumes from wall brackets to pass through the cornice and out of the house through air bricks set behind them.

By the 1870s the plasterers' repertoire enlarged still further and the general application of decorative enrichments was more widespread. The Grecian Revival and Gothic Revival styles together with the Italianate style were the predominant forms of architecture. Plaster motifs were made in both Revival styles although there was a preference for classical motifs. Bolder and more competently executed than before, these were added to ceiling roses and cornices alike and included the honeysuckle pattern and palmettes. Despite the introduction of new motifs the acanthus leaf continued to remain the most favoured decoration.

Naturalistic floral motifs became increasingly popular in the 1860s and 1870s, particularly fern leaves. In the late 1870s and early 1880s Australian flora once more began to be used as decorative motif. An excellent example, complete with its original paint, is a ceiling rose decorated with scallops full of christmas bells, flannel flowers and waratahs, nestling in a bed of native ferns. Originally at Kirnbank, Arncliffe it is now the property of the Historic Houses Trust and is held at their Resources Centre. Flannel flowers and waratahs were very popular native motifs and were used to illustrate what is arguably Sydney's most beautiful decorative plaster ceiling, the ballroom at Abbotsford House, c.1880. The whole ceiling is covered with clumps of flannel flowers and waratahs, bordered by traceries of roses.

But what of the people who were making the decorative plasterwork? Names of plasterers who worked in New South Wales were recorded from the first year of Settlement, beginning with James Thady and William Hubbard who were among the convict labour brought to the colony on the First Fleet.<sup>13</sup> But there is no evidence that makes it possible to correlate a plasterer with specific pieces of existing plasterwork until 1860. Throughout my research I found that when the name of a plasterer was known, the plasterwork had gone and when plasterwork existed no name could be attributed to it. There is, for example, a drawing of a cornice made for the Windsor Parsonage in 1829 by the convict plasterer Frederick Wilson, but the cornice is no longer there (Fig.11).<sup>14</sup>

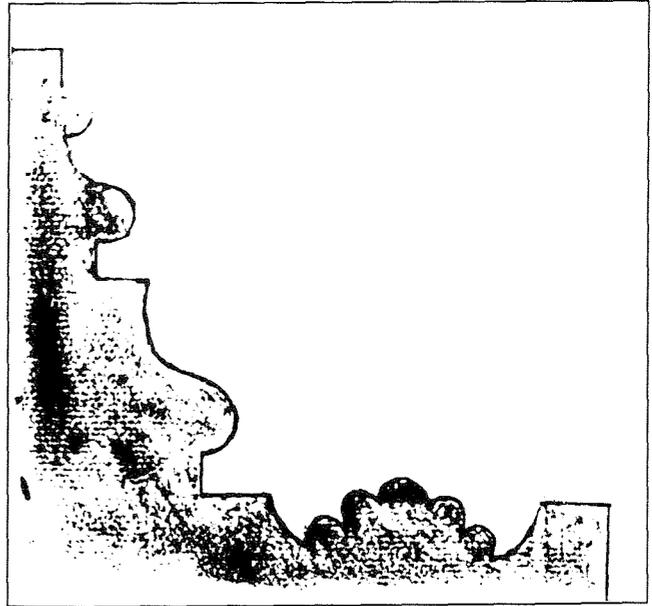


Fig. 11: Drawing by Frederick Wilson of a cornice profile for the drawing room at the Parsonage at Windsor, 1829. (By kind permission of the AONSW).

It was the photographic study which made it possible to identify with near certainty the name of the plasterer responsible for identical decorations in the hall of the substantial house Lanyon, ACT, c.1858 (Fig.12), and in the living room of a small workman's cottage at 27 Ann Street, Balmain, 1860 (Fig. 13). Although there was no documentary evidence to identify the plasterer of either piece, there is evidence to show that the first owner of 27 Ann Street was William Rayment Reeks, a plasterer. The style of the decorations at Ann Street are consistent with the 1858-1865 period, but the elaborate and fine enrichments are not in keeping with what is outwardly a modest workman's cottage, whereas those at Lanyon are appropriate to a house of its size and class. These points, together with the known fact that plasterers never dispensed with their moulds during their lifetime, provides strong evidence to conclude that Reeks was the author of both pieces.<sup>15</sup>

From the 1860s it was plasterers like Reeks whose son, brother and, possibly, cousin were also plasterers, who began to change the structure of the plastering industry. Originally plasterers had been responsible for all forms of plasterwork in a house. However with the demand for more and finer decorative plasterwork the roles began to separate into two groups of plasterers and modellers. Plasterers, on the whole, were responsible for plain plasterwork, while modellers supplied the decorative plasterwork. Before the advent of gelatine moulds the enrichments were made *in situ* but from the 1860s modellers began to establish their own 'shops' or factories where they modelled and cast their work and built up a stock of ready made decorations for their clients, builders, architects and designers.<sup>16</sup>

Although the separation between the two sides of the trade happened slowly by the 1880s modellers' firms had become well established. In 1880 modelling courses were started at East Sydney Technical College because it was felt that they would 'be found to be of great service to branches of architecture'.<sup>17</sup> The class was under the tutelage of Lucien Henry. This was the beginning of a prestigious training course for many of the apprentice modellers in the Sydney region, which continued well into the twentieth century.

There was good reason for the modelling firms of the 1880s to want well trained employees for these were boom years. More people than ever before were living in Sydney and its suburbs and large numbers of interstate and overseas migrants continued to swell the figures.<sup>18</sup> By 1885 Sydney was overcrowded and as a result of the increasingly good local

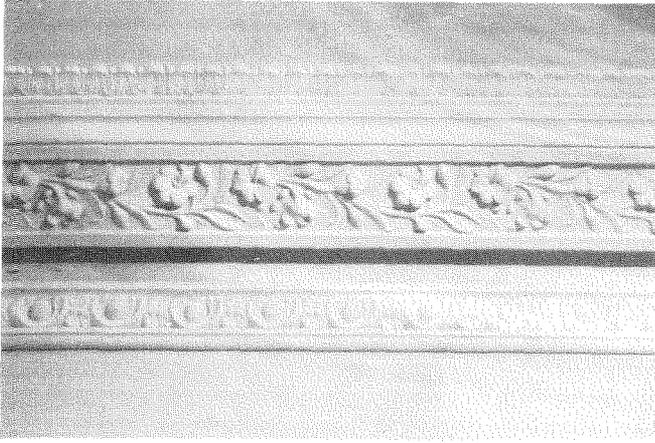


Fig. 12: Hall cornice, c.1858, Lanyon, ACT.

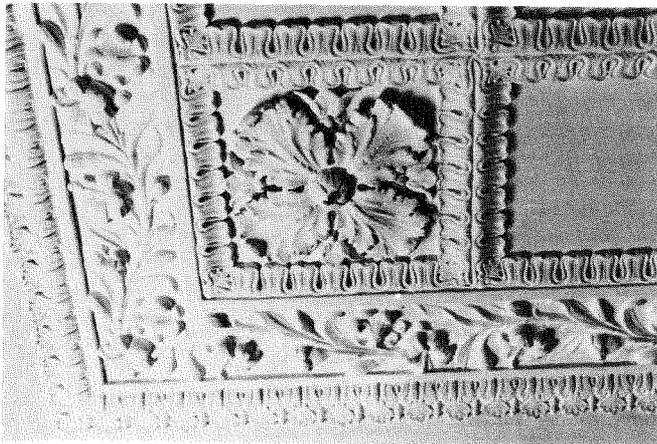


Fig. 13: The very elaborate plasterwork at 27 Ann Street, Balmain, 1860, with an outer moulding identical to the cornice at Lanyon, ACT.

transport system it was the suburbs which accommodated the major part of the growing residential population and experienced the full extent of the building boom. There the 'hideous stretches of terraces and wildernesses of villas' appeared.<sup>19</sup> Rapidly built by jerry-builders, their numerous shortcomings were disguised under a welter of decorative plasterwork, made in an increasing range of styles and shapes. Ceiling roses were made even larger and in a range of different shapes, including ovals, quatrefoils and octagons. Elliptical ones in varying sizes were added to hallways and passageways. Cornices became more decorated and wider. The popularity of the ubiquitous acanthus leaf waned and a wide range of other floral motifs, including Australian ones, began to be used. Decorations based on the Queen Anne Revival style of architecture, started in England by a group of people led by William Morris in the 1860s, began to be seen in Sydney. Decorations in this style were limited to flat plaster ribs which divided the ceiling into squares sometimes enriched with flat geometric patterns. Unlike the more rumbustious decorations which were added to large and small house these were seen only in the very grandest of houses.

The demand on the modellers was immense. Once more it was a building boom, the result of a buoyant economic situation, which compelled the plastering industry to search for a material which would allow them to produce enrichments faster and more cheaply. Once more they looked to England for the answer and found it in canvas plaster, known also as rag and stick and fibrous plaster.<sup>20</sup> Casts made from canvas plaster revolutionised decorative plasterwork. These were made by reinforcing the plaster with layers of canvas, which strengthened the pieces and decreased the amount of plaster of Paris required to make the enrichment. This in turn helped speed up production and lowered the costs.

The first canvas plaster decorations in Sydney were used to decorate Rowe and Green's Y.M.C.A building, which opened on 7th September 1885 in Bathurst Street.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately the interior was destroyed by fire in 1981 and no photographic record of it exists. However there are a great many more examples in many houses throughout Sydney which well illustrate J.W Facey's observation 'the tendency of the age is to decorate'.<sup>22</sup> Decorate they did with an amazing range of designs.

Using this material the plasterers were able to make pre-decorated cornice in lengths of 60 metres. No longer was it necessary for embellishments to be set into pre-run lime plaster cornice, for the whole cornice could be cut from a single length and attached to each wall in one piece. Ceiling roses became even larger with decorations ranging from low relief to ones which were deeply undercut and incised. They were added to most rooms in most ranges of housing. Identical ceiling roses and cornices were found in houses as diverse as grand town houses and workers' terraces.

The number of designs seemed limitless. There is a report of a modelling factory where the writer saw one thousand ceiling roses, made up from one hundred and fifty different designs in sizes ranging from 60 cm to 180 cm.<sup>23</sup> Flowers, fruit, leaves, thistles, ears of wheat, androgynous children, emperors' heads, winged putti, festoons, garlands and occasionally Australian floral motifs were added to cornice and ceiling rose in hedonistic abandonment.

The modeller whose factory had such a ready supply of stock was George T. Cross, credited with the introduction of canvas plaster to Sydney.<sup>24</sup> He had two factories and in 1890 published a catalogue of his enrichments, the first modellers' catalogue known to have been published here. No copy of this has been found but two pages from it were illustrated in the *Building and Engineering Journal* of 12 July 1890 (Fig. 14) and two in the *Australian Builders' and Contractors' News* of 30 May 1991. These demonstrated the range of the designs produced by his factories. When they were examined in conjunction with the photographic survey it was possible to identify a number of extant decorations from the Cross factories. Such attributions are always a shade dubious as plagiarism was well known in the plastering industry: it was said a modeller could be identified when he entered a room as he was the one who always looked up to take note of what another modeller had put there, in order to copy it later.<sup>25</sup> The study of the four pages of Cross' designs showed two taken from designs in English books, and the photographic study revealed a number of similar decorations which could well have been plagiarised.

Though architectural worthies like Howard Joseland decried the decorations as 'cheap and misplaced' and claimed that the motifs used showed an 'ignorance and reckless originality ..[which].. seem almost to have been adopted as an Australian style', there is no doubt that the 1880s were the golden age of decorative plasterwork.<sup>26</sup>

It did not last. The boom ended in a deep economic depression which lasted from 1891 to 1895 and brought immigration and building almost to a stop. Many modellers, including Cross, left the business. However, as the century grew to a close the founders of new modelling firms such as Grounds, Winters and Lumbs arrived from England and established their factories which were operated by their descendants until the 1980s and in some instances the 1990s.

The architecture of the late 1890s reflected the economic situation. The stolid Queen Anne Revival became a favoured style, as did the equally ungarnished American shingle and timber style. Although there are examples of very rich decorative plasterwork in houses built in the last decade of the century the demand for decorative ornaments was limited. By the turn of the century it had all but vanished.

The new century, Federalism, an improving economy and the introduction of the Art Nouveau style saw a renewed interest in



Fig. 14: Page from George T. Cross' catalogue illustrated in the Building and Engineering Journal 30 May 1891.

decorative plasterwork. However, from the 1880s modellers had to compete with the metal ceiling made by Wunderlich which were attached to ceiling joists in pre-decorated panels and squares. Canvas or fibrous plaster as it had began to be called was an ideal material in which to meet this challenge and from the 1890s modellers began to make pre-decorated ceiling panels.

By the turn of the century those decorated ceiling panels together with lengths of moulded cornice which melded into the ceiling decorations had on the whole replaced individual ceiling roses and bedded decorations in pre-run cornices. Decorated plaster panels were a particularly good medium in which to express the graceful sinuous style of Art Nouveau and a number of fluid floral designs in this style began to be seen. The national pride was also reflected in numerous stylised designs based on Australian flora and fauna which included waratahs, gum nuts, flannel flowers, wattle, ferns, lyrebirds, swans (presumably black), and kookaburras (Fig. 15).

Metal ceilings, however, became increasingly popular and began to rival the fibrous plaster panels. In order to survive the decreased demand for their work modellers began to explore the possibility of replacing canvas with another material which would allow them to produce a light, strong but thin plasterwork panel at even less cost in order to compete with the

metal ceilings. A number of experiments were tried with different additives, including straw, sugar cane (manufactured under the name Bagasse), cotton wool and even a product known as 'bull's wool'. Some had a degree of success but teased hemp or sisal fibre proved to be the best. The first true fibrous plaster was made in 1912 by Otto Waschatz, a German-born modeller, in his factory in West Richmond, Victoria. His formula, in which a layer of plaster was reinforced by a layer of teased hemp then sealed by a second layer of plaster, rapidly became used throughout the country. It remained unique to Australia until the 1920s when it was copied by the Americans and later by the British.

While the earlier changes in materials used to make decorative plasterwork or its moulds had been brought about by the need to keep abreast of the demands placed on the plastering industry by a buoyant economy, this change was introduced to fend off economic ruin.

The introduction of the new material boosted the industry which continued to thrive until Australia became embroiled in the Great War, in 1914. Its effect on the plastering industry was devastating. Although large deposits of gypsum had been found, principally on the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia, only a small amount of plaster of Paris had ever been made in Australia and there was no established industry, the material



Fig. 15: Fibrous plaster kookaburras, c.1912

having been imported, mainly from Germany. When the war began this source was stopped and a local industry hastily developed, but the material produced was poor and difficult to use. Faced with material of an inferior quality with which to make the decorations and a vanishing market as building came to a virtual halt as the war progressed, many modelling firms were forced to shut.

After the war there was a revived demand for decorated fibrous plaster panels from the building trade and a number of modelling firms re-opened. In general the panels they made were used for less expensive housing. The fashionable architectural styles of the 1920s and 1930s for larger and more expensive houses were the Spanish and Art Deco styles, neither of which required much decorative plasterwork.

In the less expensive houses all rooms, including kitchens and even verandahs, had decorated panels. In Sydney fibrous plaster factories, such as Jeskies Bros, Weine & Hodson and Lumb Bros, competed for the market with a wide range of decorative styles which they advertised in their own catalogues. Most of the designs could be adapted to fit rooms and passageways of any size. Australian flora and fauna were popular as were the 'Adam style' decorations, embodied by flat swags and garlands and the 'classical style' often represented by diaphanously clad women and scantily clad putti (Fig. 16). There was no sign of acanthus leaves.

Although the introduction of Art Deco produced some beautiful examples of flat, geometrically patterned fibrous plaster cornice and ceiling centres, the financial depression of the 1930s limited building costs and these decorations were gradually superseded by plain stepped fibrous plaster ceiling panels which used under-lighting to provide the decoration. Economic considerations allied with architectural trends effectively brought decorative plasterwork to an end in 1939, thus ending a century and a half of experiments.

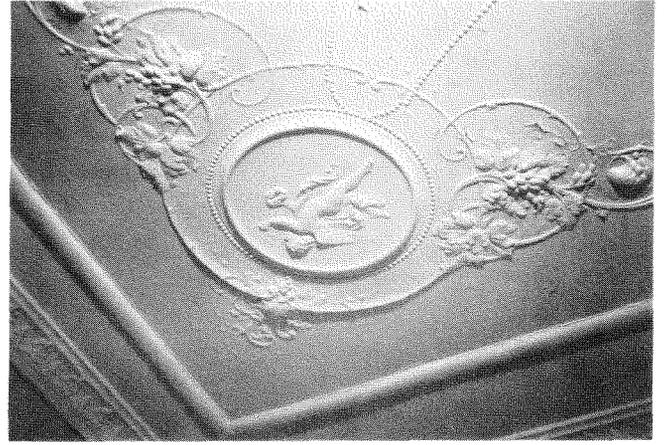


Fig. 16: A scantily clad putto holding a victor's wreath frolics among vine tendrils on a 1930s fibrous plaster ceiling panel.

## NOTES

1. Encouraged by the British architect Robert Adam.
2. Capon 1988.
3. Capon 1991.
4. *New South Wales Government Gazette* 1833.
5. Capon 1988.
6. Roe 1974.
7. Capon 1988.
8. Butlin 1965.
9. Irving 1974.
10. Capon 1988.
11. Millar 1899.
12. Millar 1899.
13. Chapman 1981.
14. Clergy and School Land Corporation 1829-1831. Letters received from Architects and Mechanics.
15. Capon 1988,
16. Capon 1988.
17. *Report from the Committee of the Technical College and Sydney Mechanics School of Art* 1881.
18. Coghlan 1888.
19. *Australian Builders' and Contractors' News*, 12 August 1892.
20. Millar 1899.
21. *Australian Builders' and Contractors' News*, 18 June 1887 and 2 July 1887.
22. Facey 1886.
23. *Building and Engineering Journal*, 12 July 1890.
24. *Australian Builders' and Contractors' Price Book*, 1891.
25. *The New South Wales Contract Reporter*, 4 July 1951.
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