

MADE TO IMPRESS

A REMARKABLE CABINET

Yvonne Jones

Like many articles displayed at the Great Exhibition, this remarkable cabinet was made to impress.

Manufactured by McCallum & Hodson, one of Birmingham's leading makers of japanned *papier mâché*, it was clearly designed to show their familiarity with new technical developments, like steam-moulding which made possible the acanthus leaf motifs on its cabriole legs, and above all, to demonstrate their decorative expertise.

The firm was first listed in a Birmingham directory of 1835. James McCallum had been apprenticed to Jennens & Bettridge, the best-known of Birmingham's nineteenth-century japan factories, while Edward Hodson was a businessman. Together they built up a successful factory which became well known for its extensive foreign and home trade, as well as its supply of 'blanks' or undecorated articles to other jappers.

McCallum & Hodson tended to concentrate on less expensive goods than Jennens & Bettridge, but it appears they were equally as ambitious, producing large pieces of furniture such as wardrobes, dressing-glasses and sofas. Thus, among the goods they sent to the Great Exhibition, was a work-table with a view of Kenilworth Abbey, a table - some four feet (122cm) across and decorated with pearls and flowers - together with a range of smaller goods including trays, inkstands and tea caddies. But the highlight of their display was, surely, the cabinet illustrated here.

The Cabinet Itself

Although not stamped with their name, an engraving in the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue* of the exhibition leaves no doubt that this was the cabinet shown by McCallum & Hodson. Combining a chess table, backgammon and drafts boards, a desk, and drawers for jewellery, coins, deeds, and much else, it celebrated the firm's expertise in making complex *papier mâché* objects.

Moreover, painted throughout with royal subjects, it was clearly designed to attract members of the royal family when they visited



Image by courtesy of Otto von Mitzlaff, Antiques and Works of Art, Wächtersbach, Germany

Papier mâché cabinet on stand, made by McCallum & Hodson of Birmingham, and exhibited at the Great Exhibition, in 1851.

the exhibition. The front shows a portrait of Queen Victoria, after a painting by the American artist Thomas Sully (1783-1872), facing one of Prince Albert - the moving force behind the exhibition - while on the sides are portraits of their eldest daughters, taken from the painting *The Four Princesses* by Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805-1873).

In addition, there is a view of Osborne House, after a watercolour by Thomas Allom (1804-1872), and inside, a painting of Windsor Castle. The paintings are not signed, but among artists known to have worked for McCallum & Hodson was James Hinks, who painted landscapes and copies of well-known pictures, and another, named Berks, who painted royal portraits.

Post-Exhibition History

There is no evidence that royalty purchased the cabinet directly from the exhibition but, nevertheless, it has a distinguished provenance. Tsar Alexander II gave the cabinet to his wife's relatives in Hesse, probably at Sorrento in 1873 where he met his brother-in-law the Grand Duke Ludwig III of Hesse, and Princess Alice whose portrait as a young child features on the cabinet.

The Princess, by marriage to Prince Louis of Hesse, was niece of both the Tsarina and Ludwig III. The cabinet has since been sold and is now in a private Russian collection. ●

Yvonne Jones is a free-lance researcher, lecturer and author.

Further Reading

Yvonne Jones, *Japanned Papier Mâché and Tinware c1740-1940* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2012).