

**Zeitschrift:** gta papers  
**Herausgeber:** gta Verlag  
**Band:** 6 (2021)

**Artikel:** From pattern to product : the recasting of the ornament in Victorian London  
**Autor:** Jones, Emma Letizia  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007010>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 06.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## From Pattern to Product: The Recasting of the Ornament in Victorian London

### Emma Letizia Jones

**Emma Letizia Jones** is an architectural historian working on the global impact of nineteenth-century European building publications. Her research is currently supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Swiss Institute in Rome, and Hong Kong University.

Plaster casts and cornices of all descriptions multiply ever upward into an iron-framed firmament. They hang festooned from balconies, beams, and columns; they are stacked among furniture on either side of narrow paths. Offcuts lie strewn on tables; smaller arrangements are stapled like badges to all available wall space. The photograph that captures this sublime profusion **fig. 1** is reminiscent of Sir John Soane's Cast Court — the centerpiece of the architect's London home — as depicted by Joseph Gandy: lit by a shaft of light piercing through the dome above, with fragments emerging from the gloom. **fig. 2** In Gandy's picture, Soane's casts overwhelm the viewer with their number and variety, verging on an expression of the sublime. Suspended over a narrow crack in the

**fig. 1** Workshops of George Jackson and Sons, n.d. (latter half of the nineteenth century). Ornament library display room and workshop  
Photographer: unknown  
Source: George Jackson Ltd., Company Archives



**1** The dating of the photographs is difficult, but clues do situate their production. For example, George Jackson acquired a patent for the technology of fibrous plaster in 1864. Since one of the photographs (**fig. 5**) depicts stacks of cornices made using the fibrous plaster method, this would date the group of photographs to well after then. I thank David Serra, the present director of George Jackson and Sons, for his assistance in deciphering the photographs of the Jacksons' workshop during an interview that took place on February 19, 2021.

building, they hang precariously in place, and one could imagine them about to topple forward onto the observer. The photograph, one of a surviving series of undated prints documenting the late-nineteenth-century workshop of the London plastering company George Jackson and Sons, recalls some of Gandy's sublimity. This is due to the overwhelming accumulation of detail both images share but also to the implicit lesson — inherent to photography — that the world it captured has irrevocably passed away. **1**



When this and the other photographs of the workshop that illustrate this article were taken, the Jacksons were a busy, established firm operating out of two conjoined workshops at 49 and 50 Rathbone Place, Soho. Clearly a functioning workshop as well as a place of display, the room may have been the area through which



other craftsmen, architects, or clients were led to select ornaments from a seemingly endless library of options produced by the firm.

**fig. 2** J. M. Gandy, *View of Part of the Museum at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, Section through Dome Area and Basement*, 1811. Watercolor on paper  
Source: Sir John Soane's Museum, London, ref. P384

A fundamental difference separates Soane's Cast Court from the Jacksons' workshop, however. Soane's casts, though they may be fragments, are firmly embedded within the idea of a historical continuity. They are intended as pedagogical instruments to aid in the grand project of the reconstruction of the past and as proof of the veracity of the reconstructed classical orders. The Jacksons' workshop ornaments – or rather, “decorative enrichments,” as they were often called in the trade – are citations irrevocably detached

from their reference points. Severed wholly from the narrative about the past they were once a part of, these uncoupled signs are displayed as products. Read against each other, the two images, the antique cast court and the Jacksons' workshop, illuminate a great paradox of the nineteenth century: that the mania for *reproduction* that drove architects like Soane and the antiquarians, collectors, and connoisseurs of the era was ultimately undone by the parallel drive for *production* – represented by the commercial workshop of George Jackson and Sons. Both spaces – the Cast Court and the workshop – may have been engaged in the multiplication and display of ornament, but to entirely different ends. Where Soane's Cast Court attempted to recoup the past (and thereby perpetuated the logic of the Renaissance), George Jackson and Sons were already in an industrialized future.

During the first half of the nineteenth century George Jackson and Sons pioneered the use of mass-produced architectural ornament in England using a variety of newly discovered materials and techniques. They amassed a vast library of

ornaments in their workshops and advertised them in the pages of a new genre of building publication: the trade catalog. The Jacksons were among the first plastering firms to issue trade catalogs and did so at regular intervals until well into the early twentieth century. The development of their workshops was deeply intertwined with that of their catalogs. As the invention of new building manufacturing processes made certain book genres redundant and gave rise to new forms of print, developments in trade catalog publishing aided new methods of organizing ornament production and export. At the same time, the development of early intellectual property law cemented the need for copyrighted company libraries and patented manufacturing processes, and the catalogs helped workshops to assert ownership over designs and products. The story of the Jacksons' rise is a story that encompasses law, company history, and the history of printing, but it is also a fitting preface to the end of ornament. For it can be argued that ornament's commercial ubiquity was a precondition of its twentieth-century demise.

<sup>2</sup> These migrations have been researched extensively by Christine Casey, *Making Magnificence: Architects, Stuccatori and the Eighteenth-Century Interior* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Wren Society, ed., "Being Designs by Sir Chr. Wren for Westminster Abbey," *Wren Society* 11 (1934): 74; Geoffrey Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain* (London: Phaidon, 1975), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Moxon, *Mechanik Exercises, Applied to the Art of Bricklayers-Works* (London: Printed for D. Midwinter and T. Leigh, 1703), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England, 1660–1820* (New York, NY: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 12. The study of such books was discretionary and self-directed. About a century would pass before the first institutions formed outside the apprenticeship system. One of the first was the Philosophical Institute, set up by the self-taught architect and cabinetmaker Peter Nicholson to offer evening classes to tradesmen in mathematics, architecture, surveying, and engineering. Nicholson also wrote numerous instruction manuals for a variety of trades.

## The Law

The circumstances that led to the growth of firms such as George Jackson and Sons precede the rise of empire and can be traced as far back as the Great Fire of London. In the wake of the fire, the acute shortage of labor led the Crown to open previously protected professions to competition from workers outside the City of London, much to the displeasure of the trade guilds. This led to the immigration of craftsmen, not just from within Britain but from across Europe, notably from Ticino, the impoverished Italian-speaking region of Switzerland. <sup>2</sup> Plaster workers from France, Italy, and Switzerland brought with them books and sheets of engraved model designs and precious original carvings or reverse molds in wood, revealing a weakness in the training of British craftsmen. This was pointed out at the time by the architect Christopher Wren: British craftsmen, though manually skilled, lacked originality and innovation because of their inability to draw or work from designs. <sup>3</sup> To remedy this, the printmaker Joseph Moxon suggested that British workers might become competitive with foreigners through the study of those pattern books that provided instruction in the design of classical ornament. In his own building manual, *Mechanik Exercises* (published in parts from 1677 to 1684), he suggested volumes by authors such as Sebastiano Serlio, Andrea Palladio, Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, and England's own Sir Henry Wotton. <sup>4</sup> These books became a supplement to the education of plasterers and a tool of communication between architects and decorators. <sup>5</sup>



The dissemination via print of what had once been restricted, guild-based knowledge, coupled with the influx of foreign craftsmen offering a new repertoire of technique and decoration, led to a proliferation of technical inventions. Transformations in the trade of plastering that George Jackson and Sons would later exploit provide good examples of this. Before the eighteenth century, plasterers worked with techniques and stucco and plaster recipes that were almost unchanged since Giorgio Vasari wrote them out in his Renaissance text *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550).<sup>6</sup> But in the latter part of the eighteenth century, members of the Worshipful Company of Plaisterers, the London guild that had controlled the plastering profession since its establishment in 1501, began to lose business to firms dealing in new types of plaster composition and papier-mâché. These cheaper and faster technologies and methods could be taught outside the seven-year plasterer's apprenticeship.

<sup>6</sup> Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, 12–13.

"Composition" or "compo" ornament was developed from the 1780s onward. These were usually smaller ornaments intended for decorative enrichment and cast from wooden molds. A "composition" of pine resin, whiting, animal glue, and linseed oil was mixed to make a putty, which was pressed into the mold by a screw press. The formed putty, pressed into the required shape, could then be directly applied to the surface to be decorated. Composition ornaments dried quickly and significantly reduced the labor- and setting-time required for older methods of lime-based decorative plasterwork and Italian stucco (both hand-modeled and solid-cast). This resulted in quicker and cheaper installation, since the decorations could be fabricated off-site. After finishing and painting, various types of composition ornaments expertly imitated plaster or wooden forms at a fraction of the cost. However, this new, more automated process did not entirely eliminate the need for a highly skilled workforce. The molds that were used for the casts were highly prized and protected items, reverse-carved by specialists, usually from durable boxwood, and reused for multiple jobs. George Jackson and Sons became well known for the supply of compo ornaments, the firm's first major architectural commission being for the embellishment by subcontract of some rooms at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. The Jacksons had their molds made by carpenters in-house. fig. 3

These wood craftsmen, out of all the men in the workshops, most closely approached the status of artists, and this is reflected in their hierarchical position in the company. A comparison of this photograph with the others, for example, suggests a social hierarchy. The well-dressed older man closest to the camera, working with a chisel (therefore on a carving, not

a casting) on the ornate form in front of him, is unmistakably of higher status than the other workers. A black neck tie and starched collar are visible beneath his full-length smock, and against the back of the room, hanging in a proprietary manner, is a black felt homburg and matching overcoat.

**fig. 3** Workshops of George Jackson and Sons, n.d. (latter half of the nineteenth century). Carpenter's workshop  
Photographer: unknown  
Source: George Jackson Ltd., Company Archives



How the George Jackson company acquired the knowledge for making composition is not entirely clear. Company lore suggests that the recipe was invented by George Jackson (1779–1850) himself. This is likely a shorthand for the complex historical reality around the acquisition of patents as well as the necessary practical skills. The increasing popularity of compo ornament was paralleled by the rise of legal activity around intellectual property, which encouraged inventors of new composition recipes to seek legal ownership over their mixes. Recipes for composition were to prove easier to patent than the ornamental designs were to copyright, and so the domain of patent law was where many of these legal struggles took place. One of the most famous—because it led to a legal tussle in 1778—was John Liardet's composition cement. Liardet took out a patent on his recipe in 1773, and the architect Robert Adam subsequently purchased the rights to use it, in the process renaming it "Adam's new invented patent Stucco." Adam took legal action against another architect using a similar recipe and won, reaffirming his near exclusive monopoly (along with that of his chief plasterer, Joseph Rose) over composition cement in Britain and, by extension,



the design and production of the popular, durable cast ornaments that could be created with it. <sup>7</sup>

With its emphasis on symmetry and repetition, the increasingly popular neoclassical style practiced by high-profile architects like Adam and his professional rival, William Chambers, countered the freer excess of the baroque and rococo styles through the provision of strict decorative schemes carefully controlled by their architects. This meant, in contrast to the earlier profusion of plant-like rocaille flourishes, that the new plasterwork had to be exacting and precise. This new repertoire of repeated ornament also lent itself better to off-site manufacturing with composition, and thus Adam sought to control the trade in precast composition ornaments through patents. By the 1840s, notifications of new patent cement recipes, often named after their inventors, appeared frequently in the pages of a popular new building industry periodical, *The Builder*. This in turn sparked further competition, resulting in legal proceedings initiated by owners of patents against other manufacturers of similar products, which they determined had infringed on their ownership rights. <sup>8</sup> While this new flurry of patents and corresponding legal action might be taken as a sign of the rapid progress of industries over which the old City of London trade guilds had definitively lost their stranglehold, the reality was somewhat different. The knowledge disseminated through the circulation of pattern books and building manuals, and the liberation of industry, was rapidly circumscribed by the new monopolies and cartels that the company patents helped secure.

In this litigious environment, Jackson, according to his account books, began his independent professional activities, initially as a glue supplier in 1804. George also worked for his father, Thomas Jackson, a frame supplier, producing reverse box-wood molds on Tottenham Court Road. By 1811 he had begun to produce “composition” ornaments not only for picture frames but also for cornices and other smaller pieces of architectural decoration for building interiors. A late-nineteenth-century history of the plastering trade states that a “John Jackson,” perhaps George’s grandfather, had discovered the compo

<sup>7</sup> The facts of the trial are summarized in two anonymous pamphlets: *Observations on Two Trials at Law, Respecting Messieurs Adams’s New-Invented Patent-Stucco: With Additional Remarks, by a Practical Plaisterer* (London, 1778); and *A Reply to Observations on Two Trials at Law, Respecting Messieurs Adams’s New-Invented Stucco; Containing Mr Wallace’s Reply to Mr Dunning with the Summary of the Evidence and Charges to the Jury, as Taken Down in Court* (London: Printed for Fielding and Walker, 1778). The basic facts are also summarized in John Swarbrick, *Robert Adam and His Brothers* (London: B. T. Batsford, ca. 1915), 278–80.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *The Builder* 5, no. 207 (January 23, 1847): 37, an article relating the legal proceedings of a Mr. Stevens, who owned a patent for “Martin’s cement,” named after its inventor, against a Mr. John Keating, who had invented a new product called “Parian cement.” Stevens alleged that Parian cement infringed on his own patent and went to court to obtain an injunction preventing its manufacture. He was successful, for a time, but by 1853 Keating’s Parian cement was widely available (it would be used at Westminster). I am indebted to Miles Lewis for identifying this reference.

<sup>9</sup> William Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1899), 397. If Adam did buy ornaments from a Jackson, it would probably have been George's father, Thomas, a frame maker. Geoffrey Beard presented the story that George Jackson had set up his business in 1780 and had been a supplier of composition ornament to Adam for his interior works. Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration*, 266. However, later research by a descendant of the Jackson family, Marion May, revealed that George was probably born in 1779 and began trading only in the early nineteenth century. Adam died in 1792. Thus, the founder of the business in 1780, the Jackson whom Adam would have been a client of, might not have been George but his father, Thomas Jackson. The precise chain of events, however, remains unclear, as does George Jackson's exact date of birth. See Marion R. May, *The Ornamental Jacksons: A Brief History of George Jackson & Sons Limited, Ornamental Composition Manufacturers* (Guildford, UK: privately printed, 2001), 7, from information found in the archives of George Jackson and Sons.

<sup>10</sup> The Jacksons completed moldings for Buckingham Palace and later for Queen Victoria's State Banqueting Hall at Osborne House, as documented in the Royal Household appointment books held in the UK National Archives, LC 3/69, 77 and 159.

<sup>11</sup> The Jacksons' account books, in V&A Archive of Art and Design, AAD/2012/1/2/1–3.

<sup>12</sup> Great Britain patent no. 2494, 23 October 1856, L. A. Desachy. For more details, see Historic England, *Historic Fibrous Plaster in the UK: Guidance on Its Care and Management* (Swindon: Historic England, 2019), 4. Another manufacturer of fibrous plaster was C. F. Bielefeld, who patented fibrous slabs in 1851. These were used by Sydney Smirke in the dome of the British Museum reading room. However, Desachy appears to be the first to have used the technology for complex ornament rather than flat sheets.

<sup>13</sup> Desachy had a showroom on Great Marlborough Street, London, where he exhibited casts of ancient and modern sculptures in fibrous plaster. Historic England, *Historic Fibrous Plaster*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> The first international patent conventions did not take place until the 1870s. For a useful overview, see B. Zorina Khan, "An Economic History of Patent Institutions," *EH.net Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert Whaples, March 16, 2008, <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/an-economic-history-of-patent-institutions/> (accessed May 2, 2021).

recipe from some Italians employed as plasterers on Adam's Portland Place and subsequently became Adam's composition supplier, though this is probably apocryphal, as the legal history attests that Adam acquired his composition patent from Liardet. <sup>9</sup>

However he came upon the technology, in 1817 George Jackson's business was successful enough that he was able to acquire 50 Rathbone Place, and in 1833 number 49 next door, which would remain the Jacksons' workshop until the business was sold in 1934. In 1825 he was appointed composition manufacturer to George IV, and about 1834 he and his children began trading as the family company George Jackson and Sons. <sup>10</sup> By 1836, the majority of the firm's business was in producing all kinds of molding and decoration for interiors. <sup>11</sup>

## The Workshop

The Jacksons continually searched for novel ways of mass-producing decorative items. By the mid-nineteenth century, a new technology of fibrous plaster became available, and the Jacksons were quick to adopt it. Fibrous plaster was a molded veneer based on plaster of paris (a type of quick-setting gypsum plaster); it was applied onto a reverse mold in thin layers, alternating with layers of hessian reinforcement, timber laths, and cross-bracing embedded into the material. When the plaster hardened, the thin plaster skin was removed from the mold. The French craftsman Léonard Alexandre Desachy (1817–1886) patented this technology for ornaments in the United Kingdom in 1856. <sup>12</sup> Although first exhibited by Desachy in the form of cast copies of ancient statuary, fibrous plaster was also ideal for producing light, nonstructural surface ornamentation and moldings, particularly interior cornices and large decorated ceiling panels. <sup>13</sup> Being precast, it was ideal for producing multiple complex decorative shapes off-site, and it became synonymous with the fructuous, fantastical excess of theater decoration.

This was a period in which French and British patent law was not yet harmonized, leading to a continual traffic of inventors seeking to try their luck on the other side of the Channel. <sup>14</sup> Desachy worked



with the architect Owen Jones (1809–1874), author of *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), on the Jones-designed St James's Hall in Piccadilly (1858, demolished 1905) and the new Royal Italian Opera House, Covent Garden (also 1858), designed by Edward Barry (1830–1880). Although these commissions were high-profile,



Desachy struggled financially and ultimately returned to France in 1864, but not before selling his fibrous plaster patent to George Jackson and Sons.<sup>15</sup> This arm of their business soon became so successful that, even after the expiry of their patent in 1870, the company continued to advertise themselves as a “Carton Pierre, Papier Mâché, and *Patent*

**fig. 4** Workshops of George Jackson and Sons, n.d. (latter half of the nineteenth century). Plasterers running moldings  
Photographer: unknown  
Source: George Jackson Ltd., Company Archives

<sup>15</sup> Historic England, *Historic Fibrous Plaster*.

Fibrous Plaster Works,” demonstrating how loose and murky the still-developing world of copyright law could be.<sup>16</sup> By 1880, fibrous plaster became ubiquitous when other companies, finally realizing that no exclusive patent existed, began to produce it themselves.

<sup>16</sup> Historic England, *Historic Fibrous Plaster*, 10. Emphasis by the author.



**fig. 5** Workshops of George Jackson and Sons, n.d. (latter half of the nineteenth century). Workshop with fibrous plaster cornice lengths  
Photographer: unknown  
Source: George Jackson Ltd., Company Archives

Apart from direct commissions from architects, fibrous plaster was also sold by the yard directly out of showrooms for application in more modest domestic interiors. Cornices could now be produced in fixed lengths and screwed into place, as opposed to being “run” on-site with a zinc-profiled metal horse in layers,



**figs. 6 and 7**

Workshops of George Jackson and Sons, n.d. (latter half of the nineteenth century). Two views of an ornament display room and workshop, showing workers drafting ornament designs and featuring press machinery for composition ornament. Photographer: unknown. Source: George Jackson Ltd., Company Archives



**17** Before the nineteenth century, plasterers in Britain typically worked in situ on scaffolds running long cornices or carving other moldings requiring complex undercutting, while their assistants worked on a table at ground level, making smaller or repetitive enrichments that could be precast in molds. In this sense some kinds of ornaments had always been “prefabricated,” although this was not done in a workshop but on demand and on-site, according to the individual needs of a particular decorative scheme. Plaster offcuts from these exercises have frequently been found strewn beneath the floorboards of great houses during twentieth-century restorations. See Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration*, 87.

while wet, by plasterers balancing precariously on scaffolding. <sup>17</sup> Previously, the accessibility of ornament had been restricted by the enormous costs of working in situ on an individually specified decorative scheme. But as a result of these developments in prefabrication, architectural ornament became common in more diverse settings — for example, in middle-class homes — and more interchangeable. A third photograph from the Jacksons’ workshops depicts the preparation of these multiple lengths of cornices in fibrous plaster. **fig. 4** It shows a wet plaster running room, in which each worker prepares segments of cornice typically somewhat less than two meters long — the length that a worker’s body, arm, and plastering tool could be stretched across a table in one movement. The men worked face down — rather than face up, suspended on a ladder with their arms raised to the ceiling — resulting in quicker production times and more comfortable conditions. A third photograph shows workers in a larger hall, performing the cleaner work that follows the wet plaster preparations, applying the finer details to their cornices’ profiles, which are stacked up around them waiting for finishing. **fig. 5** On the left side of the table at the front, two men decorate prefabricated enrichments (on a plaster and hessian backing) that will likely form part of a ceiling. Other fibrous plaster tiles are stacked up at the rear. We have entered a world of utilitarian ornament.

Each of the photographs in the Jacksons’ set demonstrates just how completely the division of labor had entered the plastering



trade by this time, resulting in a labyrinth of rooms devoted to different tasks in the preparation of ornament, staffed by specialists and requiring the provision of vast premises and storage facilities.<sup>18</sup> Like many other specialist building trade operators at the time, George Jackson and Sons increasingly became subcontracted suppliers to other, larger building firms. This occurred in part as a result of the efforts of the builder and developer Thomas Cubitt (1788–1855), who practiced and popularized a system of competitive tendering – familiar to anyone working in the English-speaking building industry today – in which a builder contracted to the client offers a price for all the work (generally, the lowest is accepted). Previously, each individual craftsman was selected by the architect and contracted directly to the client, and their prices were often high. With competitive tendering, the process of building was separated from the process of design, and the builder had the ability to control supply chains, leaving them free to source the cheapest materials and products.

Even as the industrialization of the subcontractor marked an end to the autonomy of the architect, it also led to the establishment of large, standardized ornament libraries. In the Jacksons' case, these libraries were cast in plaster. Ornament during this period survived and thrived in new environments beyond the aristocrat's country house, aided by the immense repository of elaborate trade catalogs that were printed to help sell it. Mass-production "democratized" ornament inasmuch as it played an

<sup>18</sup> George Jackson's workshops were modest in comparison to the "enormous" mid-nineteenth-century workshops of Bielefeld (a plastering rival to the Jacksons), which had, perhaps surprisingly, been designed by Sir Robert Smirke, the eminent architect of the British Museum. A description of Bielefeld's workshops can be found in "Destruction of Bielefeld's Papier Mâché Works," *Morning Post*, March 10, 1854, 5. As a result of the reporting of a fire that had broken out at the premises on Wellington Street facing Waterloo Bridge, a full description of their spatial organization was published. In the *Morning Post* article about the fire, the writer describes an "enormous" establishment of five floors designed by Smirke. The ground floor was the showroom where the ornaments were displayed for the benefit of clients; the first floor was Bielefeld's family home; the second floor "was devoted to the gilders and finer class of workmen; the third to the molders and mounters; and the fourth floor, which was lighted only from the roof, was used as the carpenters' shop."





essential role in negotiating the sublime horror of middle-class speculative housing in England. Cheaply made enrichments were deployed as a grounding, personalizing force in the new, repeating rows of terrace houses emerging across London from the late eighteenth century onward. Three further images

**fig. 8** Workshops of George Jackson and Sons, n.d. (latter half of the nineteenth century). Ornament library display room and workshop  
Photographer: unknown  
Source: George Jackson Ltd., Company Archives



in the Jacksons' photographic archive show how their cast object library functioned in the context of a working environment. **figs. 6–8** The first two images capture two views of one of the rooms in the A-frame warehouse, seemingly used for pressing composition ornament putty into the molds (the heavy press machinery is visible on the bottom left of figure 7). The room contains rows of tables where workers are arranging the ornament onto backing pieces or laying out new compositions for the ornament in drawings—as evidenced by the French curves lying on the drawing boards. Above them, the ornament library hangs from every surface of the building frame.

What is immediately evident, and in keeping with the collapse of stylistic rigidity in the nineteenth century, is the lack of visual continuity to this reference library. The image shows baroque rocaille cameos, flourishes, and suits of armor; neo-classical “Adamesque pieces” lying at the bottom left near the presses; mannerist grotesques and faces; and strange overgrown hybrids characteristic of the heavy, fecund excesses of the nineteenth century. The other striking observation—which the third image demonstrates most visibly—is of the complete disjunction



between the world above and the world below. **fig. 8** Hanging from the rafters is a forest of ornament. Plaster rocaille is suspended like rainforest tendrils, engulfing fragments of maidens and cherubs, small icons, drapery: fragments of classical orders. At the rear left of the image, the lower half of a nymph dissolves into a grotesque acanthus leaf pattern. Every possible surface is festooned with ornament, most of it in immaculate white. Meanwhile, below, the young workers are in a world of labor and dust. Their smocks are stained. They look down, fully absorbed in their tasks, seemingly indifferent to the celestial riot taking place above their heads. Here, quite literally, the die is cast.

## The Catalog

The trade catalogs produced by George Jackson and Sons were of a particularly lavish kind, incomparable to the mail-order catalogs of the late-twentieth century. Heavily illustrated, carefully set, and well bound, they embodied the material wealth of early Victorian Britain. Trade catalogs had first appeared in the 1770s in Britain and were at that time mostly associated with the West Midlands and Sheffield metal trades. <sup>19</sup> They remained specific to those industries until the 1830s, whereafter they became popular advertising tools for all kinds of professions. The Jacksons' first major self-published trade catalog was released in London in 1836 as a thirty-two-plate engraved set of prefabricated ornament designs. Regular editions continued to appear, updating the products as the firm adopted new plaster ornament-making technologies. From 1846, George Jackson and Sons began advertising such publications in *The Builder*, their first advertisement being for a catalog containing "a series of eight designs for shop-fronts, in the Elizabethan, French and Italian styles." Advertising their stylistic versatility, they offered an "extensive assortment of enrichments executed in the highest style of art, and with the strictest integrity to the beautiful characteristics of each period." They also advertised their low prices, "far removed from the antiquated estimate of decorated works," owing to their "extended operations and facilities of machinery." <sup>20</sup> Both the catalogs and their contents could be ordered by mail, facilitating sales abroad. <sup>21</sup> The result was that trade catalogs spread libraries, and eventually exports, of standardized ornament around the globe. These documents were circulated more widely than any architectural or building literature before them, and though in their countries of origin they may have been viewed as having only a commercial purpose, in the distant locations to which they traveled they became germinal documents for emerging local architectural identities. <sup>22</sup> Catalogs by George Jackson and

<sup>19</sup> Susan Lambert, ed., *Pattern and Design: Designs for the Decorative Arts 1480–1980*, exh. cat. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983), 24.

<sup>20</sup> *The Builder* 4, no. 180 (July 18, 1846).

<sup>21</sup> In his immensely successful late-nineteenth-century history and manual of plasterwork, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, the master plasterer William Millar confirms that trade catalogs were explicitly intended for serving the export business. In the case of the fibrous plaster advertised in the Jacksons' catalogs, he asserts that the material was "light and tough" as well as cheap and therefore "sent abroad in large quantities to our own colonies and other countries." Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, 343–45.

<sup>22</sup> George Jackson and Sons had a notable profile in the British colonies. On the strength of a showing at the London Great Exhibition of 1851, they secured an important Australian client, Thomas Mort, who commissioned George Jackson in 1856 to 1857 to provide moldings for his home "Greenoakes" in Sydney, designed by Edmund Blacket. See *London, Great Exhibition, 1851*, catalog, sect. 3, class 26, 730. The demand for their products in Australia was high enough that the Jacksons took the trouble of making a showing of carton pierre decoration at the Centennial Exhibition of 1888 to 1889 in Melbourne. *Centennial Exhibition 1888–1889*, Official Record, 443.

**23** Trade catalogs have been more often conserved in their adopted countries than in their countries of origin. Two such catalogs, found in Australia and Canada, have been digitized and are available to view online. In the Sydney Living Museums collection, see *Part of the Collection of Relievo Decorations as Executed in Papier Mache & Carton Pierre* (London: George Jackson and Sons, 1849) (online facsimile), <https://archive.org/details/Jackson30197> (accessed May 31, 2021). In the collection of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, see *Examples of a Few Architectural Ornaments, &c.: Manufactured in Fibrous Plaster, Carton Pierre, and Wood* (London: George Jackson and Sons, 1902) (online facsimile), <https://archive.org/details/ExamplesOfAFewArchitecturalOrnamentsc.ManufacturedInFibrous> (accessed May 31, 2021).

**24** Examples of this phenomenon are painter and decorator Gaetano Brunetti's designs, featuring extravagant rocaille flourishes, which circulated widely in England from 1736, during the years of the fashion for rococo interiors. See Gaetano Brunetti, *Sixty Different Sorts of Ornaments Invented by Gaetano Brunetti, Italian Painter, Very Useful to Painters, Sculptors, Stone-Carvers, Wood-Carvers, Silversmiths Etc.* (London, 1736). For details of this publication, see Michael Snodin, *Rococo Art and Design in Hogarth's England*, exh. cat. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984).

**25** Sources for Adam's decorative schemes included Montfaucon's popular pattern book *L'antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, 15 vols. (Paris: Florentin Delaulne et al., 1719–1724), as well as a set of drawings after antique Roman examples executed by Francesco Bartoli, part of the collection of the antiquarian Richard Topham that was held already by 1736 at Eton College Library. See Adriano Aymonino, "The True Style of Antique Decoration": Agostino Brunias and the Birth of Adam's Style at Kedleston Hall and Syon House," in *Robert Adam and His Brothers: New Light on Britain's Leading Architectural Family*, ed. Colin Thom (London: Historic England, 2019). Beard has also inferred other sources—including Robert Wood's *Palmyra* (1753) and *Ruins of Balbec* (1757)—for ceiling designs executed in plaster by Joseph Rose on behalf of Adam at Norfolk House and Osterley, among other locations. See Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, 17–19.

**26** As documented in Giovanni Volpato and Giovanni Ottaviani, *Loggie di Raffaele nel Vaticano*, 2 vols. (Rome: Stamperia di Marco Pagliarini, 1772–1790).

**27** Quoted in Jacob Simon, *The Art of the Picture Frame: Artists, Patrons and the Framing of Portraits in Britain* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1996), 144.

Sons, along with the occasional discovery of the exported ornaments themselves, have, for example, been found scattered throughout the United States, Australia, and Canada. <sup>23</sup>

These trade catalogs must be treated separately from those pattern books that had been circulating since the sixteenth century. The authors of the pattern books of engraved designs for copying that Moxon advocated were architects and antiquarians or well-regarded craftsmen rather than companies. <sup>24</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century, architects strictly directed the decorative schemes of the plasterers by setting out drawings to be replicated, and for these they were heavily reliant on pattern books. The "Adam" style of Adam and his brothers was, for example, indebted to redrawn or printed eighteenth-century documentations of the "grotesque" decoration uncovered in the ruins of Rome and Pompeii, such as those by Francesco Bartoli, Robert Wood, Bernard de Montfaucon, and Giovanni Piranesi. <sup>25</sup> These decorative schemes were also fed to them through Renaissance reinterpretations, such as the Vatican loggie decorations by Raphael. <sup>26</sup> Adam had spent time in Italy, but the Adam style nonetheless still relied heavily on quotations from these esteemed pattern books copied after the antique by other authors, the quotations serving to mark the architect's—and client's—learning and connoisseurship.

Nineteenth-century trade catalogs deviated from pattern books in a fundamental way: they advertised products not idealized models. An ornament shown in a pattern book was intended for copying, but an ornament sold in a catalog was a sample of a saleable item, made and owned by the company, and its use could be restricted by copyright. The Jacksons were conscious of this fact, as even from the earliest years of trading they made sure to trademark their decorative output in their account books. In the account books of picture-frame maker and dealer John Smith (1781–1855), for example, we find creatively named references to "Jacksons rich shell moulding [*sic*], Jacksons egg, Jacksons frilled edge," and so on, describing complex ornaments supplied to him by the Jacksons. <sup>27</sup> This naming practice is



also found in the Jacksons' own account books, beginning in the year 1812, and appears to be without precedent in records from earlier periods.<sup>28</sup> Thus, despite the replication and sharing of designs among manufacturers, the written evidence suggests, even if unofficially, the notion that an ornament might be deemed to "belong" to its manufacturer by virtue of being named after them instead of bearing its classically sanctioned, archetypal name. This was paralleled in George Jackson and Sons' printed output. If the pattern book shared knowledge and had aspirations that were (at least in part) educational, then the trade catalog commodified that knowledge and was the logical continuation of the patent system.

<sup>28</sup> The Jacksons' account books, in V&A Archive of Art and Design, AAD/2012/1/2/1.

In the mid-eighteenth century, examples of trade-catalog/pattern-book hybrids appeared. Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* (1754), for example, was simultaneously an instruction manual, a pattern book, and an advertisement for Chippendale's wares.<sup>29</sup> However, in the nineteenth century the divide between pattern books and company-authored trade catalogs became increasingly pronounced, and it was the catalogs that multiplied. As trade catalogs spread, a curious corollary emerged: pattern books stopped being circulated for practical use and instead became rarefied objects heavy on text and confined to the domain of the scholar and the "cage" of high literature. An example of this is Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1856), which, though ostensibly a pattern book, was nonetheless infused with what Susan Lambert describes as an "intellectualizing historicism" of far more interest to the academic than to the working craftsman, as it attempted to chronicle and theorize on the arc of ornamental development across various cultures and epochs.<sup>30</sup> Echoing the fate of the pattern books, the trade guilds that had been so powerful in Wren's London also ceased to be practical organizations and became more akin to gentlemen's clubs.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Chippendale, *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* (London, 1754).

<sup>30</sup> Lambert, *Pattern and Design*, 3–4.

Since the intent and presentation of these catalogs is so wholly unlike that of any building literature that preceded them, they cannot simply be dismissed as pale imitations of earlier pattern-book genres. To demonstrate their unique anatomy, we might compare some plates from William Chambers's eighteenth-century neoclassical book of ornament, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (1759), with those of the 1849 product catalog of George Jackson and Sons.<sup>32</sup> *Civil Architecture* is both a pattern book for copying and a guide to the decorative and compositional principles of classical architecture. As such, it contains a great deal of text that focuses not on the architectural orders' mythological origins but on the way their proportions have been interpreted and

<sup>31</sup> C. W. Brooks, "Apprenticeship, Social Mobility and the Middling Sort," in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800*, ed. Jonathon Barry and C. W. Brooks (Basingstoke: Red Globe Press, 1994), 81.

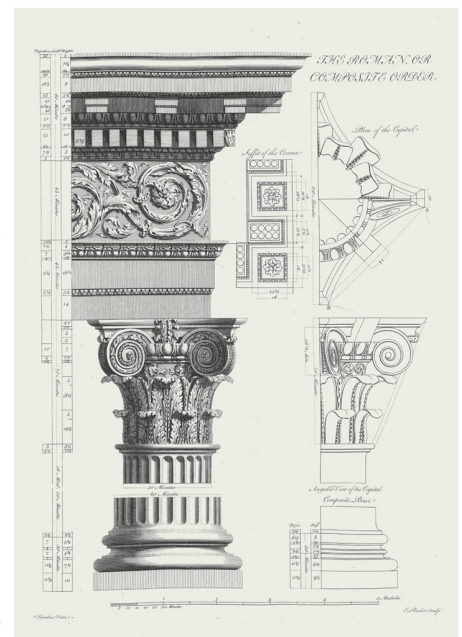
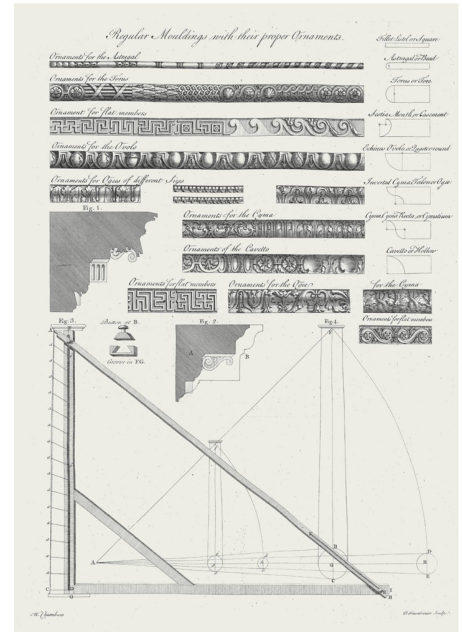
<sup>32</sup> William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (London: J. Haberkorn, 1759), later revised and expanded in 1791 and retitled *A Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture*. See also *Part of the Collection of Relievo Decorations*.

**fig. 9** "Regular Moldings with Their Proper Ornaments," plate in William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (London: J. Haberkorn, 1759)  
Source: ETH-Bibliothek, Zurich, Rar 1218

**fig. 10** "The Roman or Composite Order," plate in William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (London: J. Haberkorn, 1759)  
Source: ETH-Bibliothek, Zurich, Rar 1218

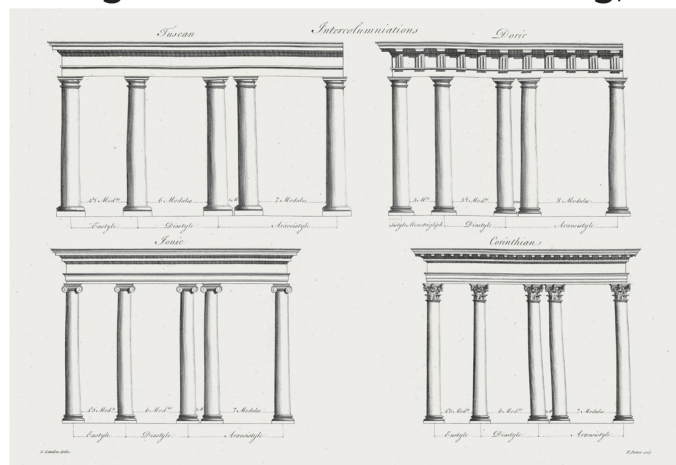
varied over the previous centuries by architects such as Vignola, Vincenzo Scamozzi, and Roland Fréart de Chambray. Myth in Chambers's text gives way to the scientific norm, as the orders become the median sum of previous architects' interpretations. The Jacksons' catalog, by contrast, is almost text-free, save the numbers beside the decorative elements that indicate their library reference numbers in the company archive. The orders are no longer grouped into their standard types and named as such (Corinthian, Doric, Ionic, etc.), but identified and classified instead by a system of numbers. The numbers reflect the new emphasis on consumer choice: all architectural styles are presented as purchase options and could even be mixed together by an individual customer. The cornices in figure 13, for example, are amalgamations of existing profiles held in the company library, where they had become an assemblage of collected references or citations. Each partial profile that makes up the whole is numbered and interchangeable. Photographs of the company workshop bear this out: the library of references hangs suspended above the workers, always in ready reach for the creation of new amalgams of patterns. For Adams, Chambers, and their followers and clients in the late-eighteenth century, a strict Greco-Roman ornamental regime was not an option but a mandate, a reflection of social and political standing and clout. But by the time of the publication of the George Jackson and Sons catalog of 1902, the Jacksons were advertising (by this point, in photography as well as in etching) "Adams' Friezes" for sale by the length as one numbered style choice among many, including "Elizabethan" (English Renaissance), baroque, and rococo.

Cornices in Chambers's text are connected to other elements that both support and are supported by them: columns, capitals, and friezes, for example. The explanation of their composition proceeds from their individual horizontal elements, which are named and identified according to their Vitruvian





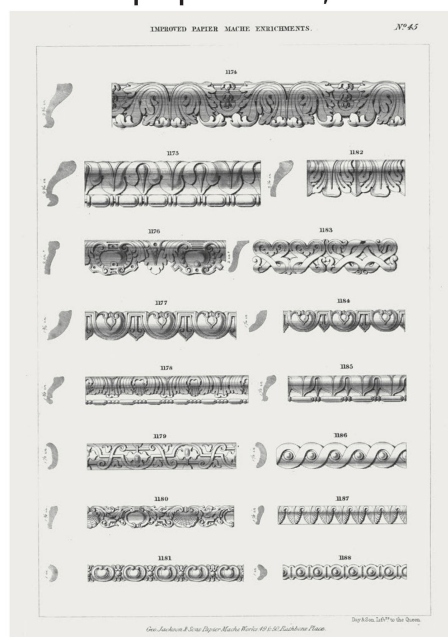
names (recta, cyma, ovolo, etc.) on the second plate of the publication; fig. 9 to these elements' position in the orders; fig. 10 to their position on a trabeated partial facade; fig. 11 and eventually to their place in an entire building facade. Cornices in the 1849 George Jackson and Sons catalog, fig. 12 by contrast, never proceed



beyond Chambers's second plate. We never see them as part of the buildings, hypothetical or real, in which they will be installed, and they are not grounded on the page. They float, support-free and backing-free, not solid stone like Chambers's

fig. 11 "Intercolumniations," plate in William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (London: J. Haberkorn, 1759)  
Source: ETH-Bibliothek, Zurich, Rar 1218

cornices but paper-thin and light. 33 fig. 13 The disappearance of all solidity in their representations reflects the trends in their manufacture. As figures 4 and 5 show, fibrous plaster cornices were run in paper-thin, hessian-reinforced layers supported entirely



by an armature of backing frames and materials of wood, tying wires, rods, battens, and further hidden wads of plaster. As the ornaments became ever flimsier, more structure was needed to pad them out until the substructure formed the majority of the ornament's depth. In this sense, the development of plaster ornament in the nineteenth century followed the same trajectory in microcosm as that of architecture itself, which was characterized by an ever-increasing separation of (iron) frame structure and skin.

33 In a novel moment of demystification not visible in the catalogs, two of Millar's illustrations from *Plastering Plain and Decorative* that explain how fibrous cornices are made also reveal the complex frames behind the moldings' surfaces. Millar, *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, Plates 16–17.

fig. 12 George Jackson and Sons, *Part of the Collection of Relievo Decorations as Executed in Papier Mache & Carton Pierre* (London: George Jackson and Sons, 1849), Plate 35  
Source: Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection, Sydney Living Museums

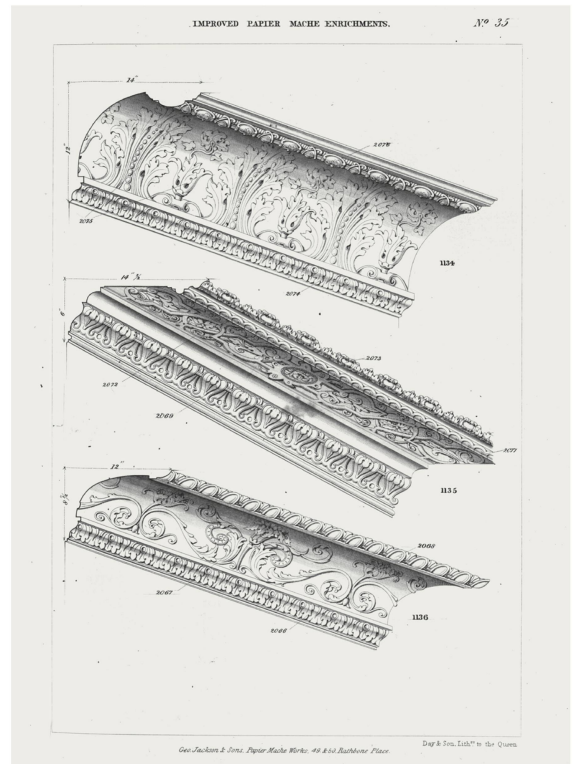
As the ornaments in print became lighter, they also became more abundant. They were often shown in repetition, or stacked, with only minor variations between them. The illustration of "stacked" cornices reads as an explicit intention to present the ornament in all its fecund multiplicity, as an homage to production and plenty, and in particular to the materially productive capacities of the company on show. The repetition of their forms without architectural context—reduced, refined, and standardized until they contain only the ghost of the examples from which they were derived—point to the trade catalog's role in taking the vocabulary of classical architecture laid out by Chambers

and stripping it of its past associations, making of it a commercial language of abundance.

The introduction of perspective to show cornice “lengths” also distinguishes the Jacksons’ plates from those of Chambers, whose cornices are never shown in perspective because they are treated not as objects but as universal types. The type is identified by Chambers in section and elevation, but its representation in perspective is omitted. Perhaps this is because a cornice in perspective, even on the page, becomes a situated object: less an archetype serving as the model for the making of other types and more a thing unto itself—a thing that has been made and can be purchased. The consistent use of perspective to present ornamental cornices in the Jacksons’ plates conveys upon them an expression of singularity and distinguishing objecthood befitting of their new status as a product. This demonstrates that what is perhaps most significant about the ornamental plates found in trade catalogs is how they retrospectively change and render redundant the repertoire of architectural representation in the books that came before.

**fig. 13** George Jackson and Sons, *Part of the Collection of Relievo Decorations as Executed in Papier Mache* & Carton Pierre (London: George Jackson and Sons, 1849), Plate 45  
Source: Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection, Sydney Living Museums

**34** In 1974 the Italian architect Luigi Moretti attributed the reduction of profiles in the early twentieth century—cornice or otherwise—to an “empty repetition of forms” and to a certain “academic neoclassicism” that stripped these profiles of their original formal and expressive meanings. This academicism can be traced back to the eighteenth century, particularly to French architectural education, although this is not the whole story—and perhaps attributes too much blame to academic developments. Moretti does not, for example, make mention of the nineteenth-century industrialization processes at the more “popular” level that I discuss here. For example, by the nineteenth century, “good taste” no longer signified a proper set of architectural rules (including appropriate moldings), as it did in the eighteenth century. Taste was now simply a function of what was available on the market. This phenomenon of market-level eclecticism in ornament likely contributed far more to modern architecture’s rejection of profiles and moldings than did any sense of reductionism at the academic or expert level. See Luigi Moretti, “The Value of Profiles,” trans. Thomas Stevens, *Oppositions* 4 (October 1974), 109–39.



## Epilogue

George Jackson and Sons’ trade catalogs offered a set number of ornamental models for easy purchase. In doing so, the catalogs organized and preserved existing ornamental patterns, allowing them to endure in spite of industrial developments and to multiply in middle-class homes across England. They took the free-market eclecticism of the nineteenth-century building world and reorganized it into a new standard for a global economy, one based not on the provision of a freely reproducible pattern but on the protection of a saleable singularity. Seemingly, this transition of its status from pattern to product marked the final subordination of ornament-as-an-expression-of-culture to the spectacular forces of the market. <sup>34</sup> But it also aided in democratizing the arts: the same kinds of ornaments, produced in exactly the same manner, could be found equally in the Brighton Royal Pavilion and in the anonymous suburban homes of the



mercantile classes. The loss of a rarefied artistic production had an unexpected consequence, however: other barometers of exclusivity had to be found. And this is how, paradoxically, the end of ornament's evolution as an expression of (classical) culture may have also signaled the emergence of an entirely new focus of attention for the arts and crafts. This focus revolved not around the ornamental object as a bearer of meaning but around a protagonist: the hero-artist, the solitary creator, a figure mythologized by the twentieth-century avant-garde and one that persists even in the architectural histories of the present.

The loss of the historicist project of reconstruction that drove much artistic and architectural production throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in this way compensated for by the invention of an entirely new narrative for architectural production, one in which the singular visionary artist designs a world as yet unimagined. A final workshop photograph in the collection of George Jackson and Sons might even show this man as he stands caught between two worlds, alone in his workshop, carving out an ornamental flourish by hand. fig. 14 This human touch, which distinguishes him from the workers in the other images who are shown operating by more industrially removed processes, reveals him in two possible modes: as the anonymous craftsman of a previous lost age, whose skill and knowledge could not be replicated by others nor by any machine; alternatively, as the protagonist-artist of the future, entirely liberated by automation, since he is driven by an urge to create that renders the precise nature of his tools irrelevant. As the nineteenth-century craftsman, he finds that automated labor and prefabrication have assumed control of the processes of which he was once master. But as the twentieth-century artist, he wants to find himself liberated by these same processes. He will no longer be a craftsman, then, but a designer, and his productions will be measured by different means. If the man in the photograph is as yet neither one nor the other, it is because he still occupies a delicate space between the two—a space opened up in that curiously overlooked mid-nineteenth-century moment in which the builders, the architects, and the makers, together with their books and their creations, hovered precariously between one imagined world and the next.



**fig. 14** The designer as artist  
Photographer: unknown  
Source: George Jackson Ltd., Company Archives