

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, case 33 (2023-24): <i>A history of the birds of Europe</i>, H. E. Dresser	
Statement from Expert Adviser	Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the volumes meet Waverley criteria one and two See below
Statement from the Applicant	Statement from the applicant referencing the three Waverley criteria. The Reviewing Committee will designate an object as a 'national treasure' if it considers that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune on one or more of the following three grounds: a) Is it closely connected with our history and national life? b) Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance? c) Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history? See below
Note of case hearing	See below
Press release	A press release was issued by the Secretary of State on 19 June 2024: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/19th-century-ornithological-volumes-at-risk-of-leaving-the-uk
Recommended price	£127,000
1st Deferral period	18 September 2024
2nd Deferral period	
Note of outcome	

RCEWA – A History of the Birds of Europe, H. E. Dresser

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the volumes meet Waverley criteria one and two.

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

1. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT AND SUMMARY

H.E. Dresser. *A History of the Birds of Europe, including all the species inhabiting the Western Palaearctic Region*. London, Published by the Author, 1871-96.

17 volumes comprising 9 volumes of text (including index and supplement) and 8 volumes of plates. Large quarto size (320 x 250 mm).

Author's own unique copy with signed bookplate.

Additional wood engraved titles, containing the 721 hand-coloured lithographic plates by J. G. Keulemans, Joseph Wolf, Archibald Thorburn, and Edward Neale. Most plates also in uncoloured states (with or without letters, sometimes in more than one version), some plates in additional coloured state to incorporate alterations, some with manuscript annotations (predominantly in Dresser's hand).

The volumes are in a good condition. They are bound in contemporary red Morocco, gilt top edges, marbled endpapers with some spotting and extremities on some of the volume slightly rubbed.

Executive Summary

Henry Eeles Dresser (1838-1915) was one of the most influential ornithologists of the late nineteenth century. Through his travels built up an extensive correspondence network with many of the world's leading ornithologists of the time in addition to building a highly significant collection of bird specimens and eggs. His work was cited by the likes of John Gould in his *The Birds of Great Britain*, and he published many major articles on the subject of ornithology which helped progress it as a science. At the time of his death in 1915, he was regarded as one of the best-known European ornithologists.

Dresser's interest in birds started from an early age, an interest that saw him systematically collect the eggs and skins of Palaearctic birds which he also prepared. His extensive collections, which numbered about 12,000 specimens, were deposited at the Manchester Museum in various stages from 1899 where they continue to be preserved today. Additionally, a large letter book (1871-73) which includes letters from 167 correspondents relating to the publication of the book which took 13 years to complete and involved a significant amount of administration.

Dresser's extensive collecting aim was to review and publish the bird species in Europe. His largest and best-known book, *A History of the Birds of Europe* would become one of the most ambitious bird books of the late nineteenth century and the first complete work on the avifauna of Europe since that of John Gould. Commencing initially in collaboration with fellow eminent English ornithologist Richard Bowdler Sharpe, it was intended to bring together the latest knowledge of the bird species found in Europe. Their partnership only lasted two years after which Dresser completed the project by himself.

Dresser did not wish to produce "*a pretty picture book*" (letter to Newton, 10 February 1870, CUL) but he did employ some of the leading bird illustrators of the day to create the hundreds of lithographic plates that would accompany his text in which he used his international network of contacts for both specimens and information to produce a globalised narrative of scientific and geographical knowledge. According to McGhie (2017, p.150) the publication involved the examination of 10,367 bird specimens with almost half of these coming from Dresser's own collection.

When Dresser died in 1915 aged 77, his obituary published in *Ibis* (Anon, 1916) summarised his life and his major role in scientific societies while also stating that his "*most important work is undoubtedly the well-known 'History of the Birds of Europe' ... the whole forms a monument of the industry and accuracy of the author*".

This set of volumes were Dresser's private set that he had printed for himself and used a special thick paper for the plate volumes. This information is provided by Dresser in the index volume (see Appendix 1 for a transcription of this text). The plate volumes contain additional inserted drawings alongside manuscript annotations pertaining to information about the colouring, composition and background of the plates and some additional plates that were never issued.

The text volumes are clean and contain no additional annotations apart from Dresser's signed bookplate. They are, however, unique in format as the final published work integrated the letterpress with the illustrations.

The plate volumes are of greater significance as these comprise the original plates that were used as the colour proofs (or colour masters) for the lithographs that were eventually published and sold by subscription. These therefore acting as the original drawings as the regular process of producing a watercolour first was not followed.

The usual process would have involved an artist's watercolour being transferred to stone and then printed as a line drawing to then be hand-coloured by the artist as a proof for a master colourist and colourists to copy for the final published plate. In Dresser's process, he writes that only 34 bird plates were produced using this process – the remaining 687 illustrations were painted directly onto the stone by his artist. This is qualified by Dresser who wrote "*the plates, which are bound separately are the pattern plates, coloured specially by the artist, as I had the*

illustrations drawn direct on stone, and a proof coloured which thus forms the original of each one”.

Dresser’s private set are therefore highly significant and unique. They represent the original ‘artwork’ for the publication as no other watercolours are known to survive. This in turn gives aesthetic importance and significance to all of the plates in this set.

In addition, the volumes also contain the black and white proofs that were first printed from the lithographic stone – these also being unique as the plates in the published volumes are all hand-coloured. Also present are two original graphite drawings of the claws of the willow ptarmigan which Dresser acquired from a Swedish Professor Malmgren (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/118933#page/265/mode/1up>). There are also manuscript annotations and notes present on the plates in all the volumes, predominantly by Dresser, with some by his artists which relate to the drawings process and thereby provide an exclusive insight into the production of the books.

The volumes not only represent the creative process behind Dresser’s publication but also that of an English ornithologist whose significant specimen collection the volume is based upon remains in the UK. Alongside other remnants of Dresser’s correspondence and original material held at other national institutions, they form part of a wider dispersed collection reflecting a period of national history and life pertaining to both the development and understanding of the avian world in addition to an historical printing process that is no longer used.

2. CONTEXT

- **Provenance**

Private collection of the author of the volumes, Henry Eeles Dresser (1838–1915) of which they were his own copy. They hold his bookplate and his signature, to index volume.

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[Information has been withheld here in line with the requirements of section 40(2) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 –Personal information. A public authority is entitled to withhold information under section 40 (2) where the information is personal data]

Key literary and exhibition references

This set of volumes are not known to have been exhibited as they remained in a private collection until their sale in 2006. Their existence and significance therefore having not previously being appreciated.

No. of comparable objects by the same artist already in the UK, in both public and private collections?

This set of Dresser's *Birds of Europe* is unique in its physical manifestation with its content bound and printed differently to the final published work that was financed by subscription. The self-published work comprised 84 quarto parts and the cost of a complete set was £52,10s (equivalent to c. £5,000 at 2018 values). A total of 339 copies were made with Dresser giving a further 20 sets, printed on thinner paper and without the plates of illustrations, to those who had contributed information (McGhie, 2017).

See Appendix 2 for a summary of related objects in public/private ownership in the UK and Internationally.

3. WAVERLEY CRITERIA

This collection meets Waverley Criteria **One** and **Two**.

Waverley 1 - Is it closely connected with our history and national life? If yes, please explain why?

Henry Eeles Dresser (1838-1915) was born at Thursk, Yorkshire on 9 May 1838. He came from a wealthy family and was schooled in Lewisham prior to being sent abroad to Germany to be taught as a school in Hamburg at the age of fourteen. He also spent a year in Sweden and became fluent in at least six languages including German, Finnish, Danish and French. He initially entered his father's timber merchant business which saw him travel extensively through, but also Mexico and Texas where he would continue to extensively collect outside of his business meetings.

After suffering from an autoimmune disorder in 1869, the following year he entered into a partnership in London in the metal trade in which he would remain for the next 40 years. Being based in London provided Dresser with markets and in particular Leadenhall market and auction rooms to purchase specimens and in due course gain an international reputation in scientific society. Unlike some of the other naturalists of the day, "*Dresser's ornithology was confined to his 'spare' time outside of business*" (McGhie, 2017, p.172) which is potentially why Dresser's name is not as widely appreciated outside of the science of ornithology as he was not a paid professional.

A prominent figure in the British Ornithologists' Union and the Zoological Society of London, Dresser was one of the prime movers in ornithology in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. His accomplishments included helping to form the backbone of ornithology in Britain during a time of much change and development of ornithological science, the development of journals devoted to birds, the bird conservation movement, and institutionalised museum collections in Britain (McGhie, p.2). Through his ability to set up exchange networks and relationships with curators in most of the major European museum's, by the late 1860s he had amassed one of the finest bird skin and egg collections in Britain as a direct result of his personal travel, business links, wealth, and determination (McGhie, p.95).

Dresser published many articles in the subject of ornithology and leading zoologists of the time in turn used Dresser's publications for their own articles and books. One of his most important papers was on the breeding of waxwings which was published in the *Ibis* in 1861.

A notable feature of Dresser's work was his independence from institutions and organisations. However, in his role as the Secretary to the British Association for the Advancement of Science 'Close-Time Committee', he helped lay the foundations of nature conservation in Britain and to wildfowl protection through the passing of Bills in Parliament.

As McGhie (2017, p.263) concludes "*Dresser's ornithological output – his writings and the collections that underpinned them – represents a tremendous legacy. His publications serve as a basis for the understanding of the world's birds, their lives and the threats they face. His collection is important as a historical document in its own right ... Dresser's books and collections help us formulate questions about people's long-standing fascination with birds, and how that fascination has been manifested in different ways by different groups of people*".

It could be argued therefore that Dresser's personal history alongside his many achievements are closely tied and connected with our history and national life.

Dresser's privately printed set of his publication, *A History of the Birds of Europe*, is inherently connected to his specimen collections and the original material that is preserved in other UK institutions. Although Dresser and some of his contemporaries may have fallen from sight due to the changing scientific study of birds, Dresser and his work remains closely connected with our history and the national development of ornithology of a science.

The volumes are representative of not only Dresser's collecting prowess, but also their content and information reflects both his efforts and ability. Despite there being little or no change to the letterpress volumes, this set being Dresser's own copy is manifested in a completely different format to the published works in addition to comprising the original proofs and drawings. The set is therefore directly significant to the production of the volumes and inherently connected to the specimen collections. Many of the illustrations were drawn by some of the leading bird illustrators of the day who were part of a significant period of British wildlife illustration.

To retain the volumes in the UK would ensure that this part of Dresser's collection would remain accessible for study and research and ensure that the further fragmentation of a collection of one of Britain's most regarded ornithologists is avoided. It would also assist and enable the collection to connect with other parts of his collection to bring people together through cross-disciplinary research and explore narratives beyond a nationalistic perspective.

As one of the most influential ornithologists of the late nineteenth century, were these volumes to leave the UK, this would represent a loss to the

comprehensiveness and totality of his works and the public accessibility and proximity to his significant collections.

Waverley 2 - Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance? If yes, please explain why?

As with the development of most branches of Natural History Science, ornithology has grown as a specimen-based discipline. Only through the direct study and comparison of specimens was it possible to closely observe and distinguish new species. Dresser lived during a time where photography was not available to use in publication and communicating scientific information and knowledge was achieved through published works that were illustrated with black and white engravings, or, when money permitted lavishly hand-coloured engraved works or lithographs until such a time when the production of such works got cheaper.

The previous significant publication in this subject was John Gould's *Birds of Europe* (1832-37) which comprised lavishly hand-coloured lithographs. A new authoritative ornithology on European birds was therefore long overdue.

The lithographs produced for Dresser's publication were undertaken by the leading bird illustrators of the day – namely the Dutch artist John Gerard Keulemans (1842-1912) who provided most of the illustrations with additional contributions by Joseph Wolf (1820-1899), Archibald Thorburn (1860-1935), and Edward Neale (1833-1904) – all of whom still remain regarded as some of the finest wildlife artists.

As described in the executive summary, Dresser used a slightly different technique to produce his illustrations, moving away from the watercolour/stone/re-colour method and having his artists draw and paint directly onto the lithographic stone.

That the illustrations were drawn directly onto stone means that no original watercolours were produced for this work and that the original is therefore is Dresser's personal copy. Apart from the volumes having the significance of being Dresser's personal copy and given that the artists also coloured these 'pattern proofs', it could be argued that the set comprises 687 original illustrations directly from the hands of Keulemans, Wolf, Neale and Thorburn themselves.

The outstanding importance of this set of plates lie not only aesthetically in their style and composition but that they represent a unique record of the illustration process for this set of books. Although many of the bird species were known at the time, McGhie (2017, p.25) notes that the plates in this work were used to identify rare vagrants to Britain until a surprisingly late date.

The plates also represent not only a process that is no longer used from a different time of production and printing but also with the process that Dresser used, he may have been among the first (if not the first) to have innovatively edged the illustrative process one step further forward (Sotheby's, 2023).

See Appendix 3 for examples of published plates compared to those in Dresser's private set.

REFERENCES

Anon (1916) XVII Obituary Henry Eeles Dresser. *Ibis*, 58 (2), pp.340-342

Dresser, H. E. (1871-1881) *A History of the Birds of Europe*. Published by the Author, London. Vols.1-9 <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/53765> [Smithsonian Libraries and Archives copy] Accessed 25/03/2024

McGhie, Henry A. (2017) *Henry Dresser and Victorian Ornithology: Birds, Books and Business*. Manchester University Press. 341 p.

Sotheby's (2023) Travel, Atlases, Maps, Photographs & Natural History sale <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2023/travel-atlas-maps-photographs/h-e-dresser-a-history-of-the-birds-of-europe-1871> Accessed 23/03/2024

Wikipedia. *A History of the Birds of Europe* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_History_of_the_Birds_of_Europe Accessed 15/04/2024

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RCEWA – A history of the birds of Europe, H. E. Dresser

Applicant's statement

Is the item closely connected with our history and national life?

No. It is a work of natural history, and the specimens described and illustrated are European rather than exclusively British.

Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?

No. While the lithographed plates are undeniably attractive, they have been made for scientific, not aesthetic purposes.

Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?

No. Dresser's *Birds of Europe*, published in quarto format between 1871 and 1896 comes towards the end of a golden period of Victorian ornithological publications. Arguably, more ambitious and significant were the works of John Gould, whose own ground-breaking folio format *Birds of Europe* (1832–1837) contained original lithographs by Edward Lear, perhaps the greatest of all bird artists.

Most of the illustrations in Dresser's work by are by the prolific J.G. Keulemans and Joseph Wolf, both artists of great merit (and also both used by Gould); their lithographed and original works appear regularly at auction and are to be found in many UK institutions and libraries including the Natural History Museum and the Zoological Society of London; see Christine Jackson, *Dictionary of Bird Artists of the World* (Woodbridge, 1999).

There is no doubt that the annotations and colouring in the author's own copy of his *chef d'oeuvre* are noteworthy, but he is already very much a known quantity: his archive, including 7,200 bird skins and 6,000 eggs, is held at Manchester Museum; his extensive album of photographs and letters from his correspondents is held at John Rylands Library (both under the auspices of the University of Manchester). In terms of scholarship, Henry A. McGhie's *Henry Dresser and Victorian Ornithology: Birds, Books and Business* (Manchester, 2017) is an exhaustive account of the author and his work.

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, note of case hearing	
Meeting date	Tuesday 7 May 2024
Object	<i>A history of the birds of Europe, H. E. Dresser</i>
Expert Adviser's objection	The Library Special Collections Manager, Natural History Museum, had objected to the export of the volumes under the first and second Waverley criteria on the grounds that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune because they were so closely connected with our history and national life, and they were of outstanding aesthetic importance.
Committee Members & Independent Assessors	Seven of the regular eight Committee members were present and able to inspect the volumes. They were joined in person by three independent assessors, acting as temporary members of the Committee.
Value on the licence	The value shown on the export licence application was £137,477.50, which represented the hammer price at auction (£100,000) plus the buyer's premium (£26,000) and the overhead premium (£1,000). The value also included a U.S. state tax of £10,477.50 which would not be payable in the event of a UK sale.
	<p>The applicant was informed that an interim process was currently in place for Committee hearings. The Committee was still holding hybrid meetings, but any Committee members, including the independent assessors, were required to inspect the object/s under consideration prior to discussing the case and voting. Any permanent Committee members or independent assessors who were not able to view the object were not able to vote.</p> <p>The applicant confirmed that the owner understood the circumstances under which an export licence might be refused.</p>
VAT	The applicant confirmed that the value did not include VAT and that VAT would not be payable in the event of a UK sale.

<p>Expert Adviser's comments</p>	<p>The expert adviser stated that she had nothing further to add to her submission.</p> <p>The expert was asked why she had not objected to the export of the volumes under the third Waverley criterion. She replied that the content of the books would be what was studied, and this aspect of the volumes was not under discussion. The content could be studied from the later published copies, but the unique process of drawing and colouring directly onto the lithographic stone was of outstanding aesthetic significance.</p>
<p>Applicant's comments</p>	<p>The applicant wished to add to their submission and asserted that H.E. Dresser was not in the same league as great English ornithologists such as John Gould and Edward Lear. They also argued that the images in the books were attractive but not of outstanding aesthetic importance.</p> <p>The applicant was questioned about whether the volumes would be of outstanding significance if they were studied alongside Dresser's collection of bird specimens currently in the UK. They replied that although these original volumes were the best copy of the work available, they did not provide further research potential and were not important enough to meet the Waverley criteria.</p>
<p>Committee's discussion</p>	<p>The expert adviser and applicant retired and the Committee discussed the case.</p> <p>They noted that H.E. Dresser was highly regarded within academic ornithology and that to compare him negatively to John Gould was downplaying his achievements. However, they were unsure that his prestige was significant enough to be of outstanding importance to our history and national life.</p> <p>They agreed that the volumes were unique because they were the original "master" lithographs and included annotations from Dresser. However, they didn't consider that the process of drawing and colouring directly onto lithographic stone gave the volumes an outstanding aesthetic importance. They highlighted that having Dresser's own, original, annotated volumes alongside his collection of bird specimens which are in public collections in the UK would provide valuable research</p>

	<p>opportunities. Although they were not of outstanding aesthetic importance, the Committee agreed that Dresser’s technique of having the artists draw directly onto the lithographic stone added to the scholarly significance of the original volumes.</p> <p>Although the expert adviser had not objected to the export of the volumes under the third Waverley criterion, the Committee found the discussion around and arguments for their scholarly importance compelling.</p>
Waverley Criteria	<p>The Committee voted on whether the volumes met the Waverley criteria. Of the ten members, four members voted that they met the first Waverley criterion. No members voted that they met the second Waverley criterion. Ten members voted that they met the third Waverley criterion. The volumes were, therefore, found to meet the third Waverley criterion for their outstanding significance to the study of book publishing and printing technique, as well as ornithological representation, illustration, and annotation. They were also of outstanding significance to the study of Dresser’s own collection.</p>
Matching Offer	<p>The Committee recommended the sum of £127,000 as a fair matching price.</p>
Deferral periods	<p>The Committee agreed to recommend to the Secretary of State that the decision on the export licence should be deferred for an initial period of three months. At the end of the first deferral period, if the Arts Council received notification of a serious intention to raise funds with a view to making an offer to purchase the volumes, the owner will have a consideration period of 15 Business Days to consider such offer(s). The Committee recommended that there should be a further deferral period of three months that would commence following the signing of an Option Agreement.</p>
Communication of findings	<p>The expert adviser and the applicant returned. The Chairman notified them of the Committee’s decision on its recommendations to the Secretary of State.</p> <p>The expert adviser agreed to act as champion if a decision on the licence was deferred by the Secretary of State.</p>