



THE CONSERVATION OF THE POLYCHROME DECORATION IN THE ENTRANCE HALL OF THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

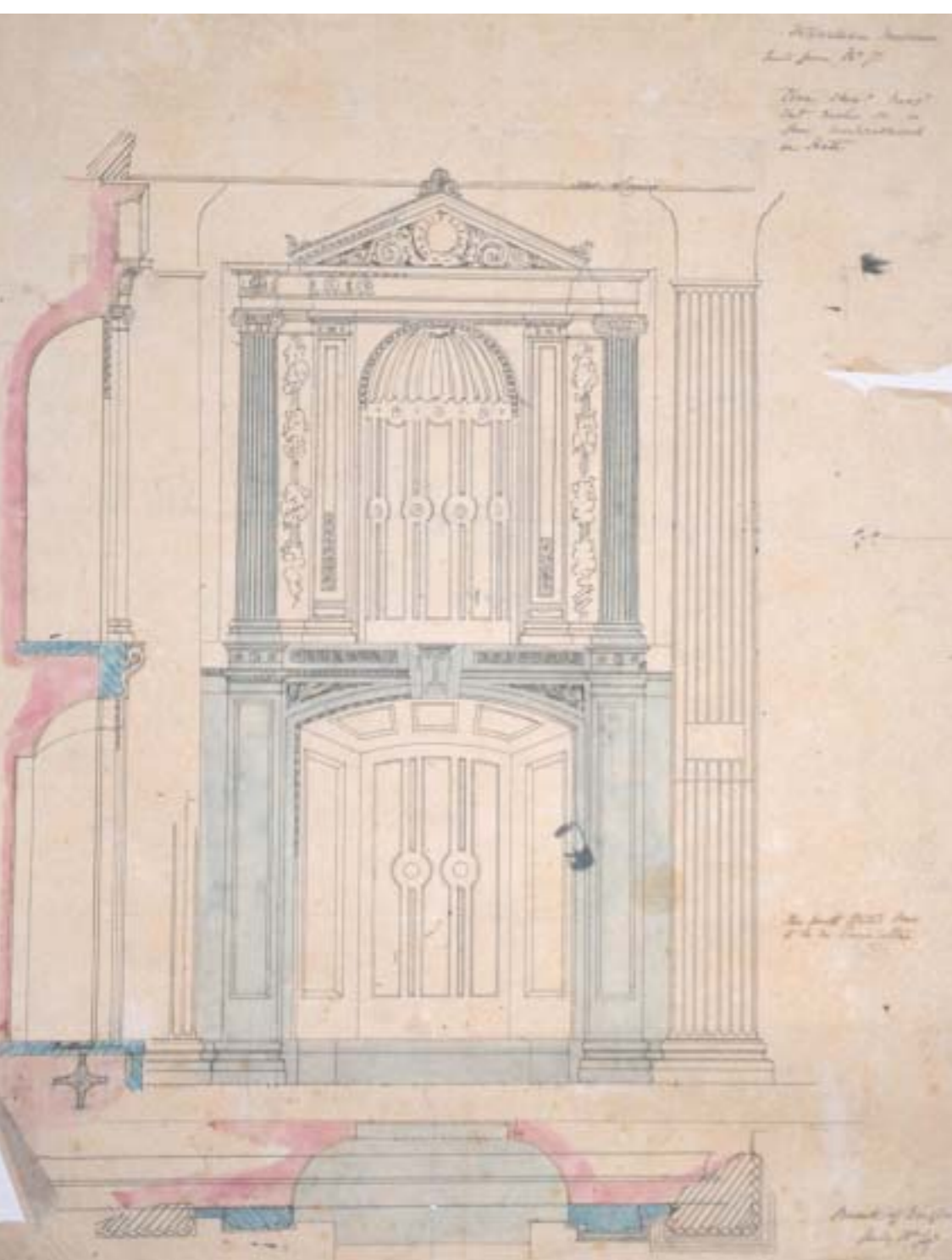
PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Entrance Hall of the Fitzwilliam Museum is decorated with an elaborate scheme of architectural stonework, sculpture and polychromy, designed by the architect Edward Barry. Unlike many similar schemes of the period, the decoration has remained largely untouched since it was executed in the later part of the 19th century.

Due principally to the fact that it is decorative rather than figurative in nature, Victorian architectural polychromy is often treated in a way which would be regarded as unacceptable for other forms of decorative art. As a result, it is often considered acceptable to repaint an approximation of the original rather than to conserve the real paint layers. Both the Fitzwilliam Museum and Tobit Curteis Associates felt very strongly that the decorative scheme was an important historic artifact in its own right and should be treated with the same basic conservation criteria as any other work of decorative art displayed in the museum.

THE CONSERVATION PROJECT

A detailed technical survey demonstrated that, although a significant layer of disfiguring dirt had accumulated on the surface, the paint layer, the gilding and the elaborate plaster and stone structure, were in relatively good condition. In addition, it was established that the principal causes of deterioration (of which moisture and pollution were the most significant) were historic. Tests indicated that the damaged paint layer could be successfully stabilised and the dirt layer could be easily reduced, resulting in a dramatic improvement in both the stability and the appearance of the decoration. Therefore, over a three year period, a carefully phased programme of conservation was undertaken.



Because of the multifarious nature of the decoration, a team of conservators was assembled, who specialized in the conservation of wall paintings, stone, plaster, easel paintings and gilding. From the beginning it was recognized that the project was an opportunity not simply to treat the decoration, but also to undertake an in-depth study of its original materials and techniques (including detailed materials analysis) and its art historical development (many of the original designs survive in the museum's archive). Detailed recording and documentation was regarded as a key element of the project. In addition, the project was seen by both Tobit Curteis Associates and the museum as an opportunity to establish a precedent for the treatment of similar 19th century decorative schemes.

