



Sir William Chambers first published this design of the Pagoda in 1763 in his book *Plans, elevations, sections, and perspective views of the gardens and buildings at Kew in Surrey*. Elevation of the Great Pagoda as first intended by William Chambers, Architect by T Miller. Engraving on paper. © RBG KEW

Painting the Past: Pedro da Costa Felgueiras.

— WORDS BY TOM MORRIS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMBER ROWLANDS

When you get a book like this, you need to decipher it. It's all in old English and very poetic, but you don't get clear ingredients," says historic paint and lacquer expert Pedro da Costa Felgueiras, who is sitting in his Hoxton studio flipping the pages of an antique book, riddled with paint recipes. "Is that an ingredient or is that an emotion?" he jokes, pointing at one of its dusty pages with a smile.

Pedro has made it his mission to translate the past in the modern day. In 1995, the Lisboner opened his London studio, specialising in the complicated art of restoring Oriental and European lacquer. He is an expert in japanning—the European version of Asian lacquer ware that was first developed in the 17th century—and in urushi, the original Japanese technique that used special sap derived from Rhus and Melanorrhoea trees. Pedro has undertaken everything from furniture conservation at the Wallace Collection and Geffrye Museum and restoring Huguenot houses in Spitalfields to recreating entire estates, such as the Strawberry Hill House, a Grade I listed villa, in Twickenham. His studio is an homage to history—bursting with shelves of old books, jars of pigments labelled with their Latin names, tins of paintbrushes—and is where he practices his special alchemy of bringing the past to life.

His deep interest in history began when he was growing up in Lisbon. "I used to play in the summer holidays on big 18th-century staircases in the building where my mum worked. My school was a big villa. Sunday church was one of those baroque numbers and my grandmothers lived in old houses," recalls Pedro. This was where his interest in paint began too. "My father was a painter and decorator when he was younger, so I remember seeing him straining his linseed oil paints, as that was what was available at the time."

When he finally moved to London, Pedro studied conservation and restoration of decorative surfaces at the Sir John Cass Faculty of Art and Design. He not only had an interest in the field but an aptitude for it too, especially to some of the toxic materials he uses. "Some people are allergic to it—I'm not. I can rub it on my skin and nothing happens. That's why there are clans of families who do it, because they are not allergic to it."

This work takes not only enthusiasm and immunity to certain materials, but time too. Linseed oil dries slowly, and lead paints have to be made with a pestle and mortar. This partly explains why it is such a dying art form. "We're at a crossroads where now everything is changing, the whole industry is moving towards water-based paints. Linseed oil is a historic paint, so it takes much longer to harden, but when it's hard, it's not like modern paint. Modern paint is hard because it's made of plastic."

Pedro's collaborative restoration of Strawberry Hill House—a project that took five years to recreate the three rooms in the house—shows what happens when you commit to past traditions. The Georgian Gothic house was built in 1749 by Sir Horace Walpole—described by Pedro as a "total fruitcake"—and today comes alive with bright colours and brilliant, camp detailing. "People forget that these houses were highly created pieces of art. They had a 'committee of taste' with people like Robert Adam and there were descriptions of them all having fights and stuff. They chose very well what to do there and which pigments to use," he explains.

But this does not come without its challenges. Besides having to translate wordy recipes, there were practical difficulties in getting pigments such as blue verditer too. "Most of the pigments I used at Strawberry Hill have to be bought in very specific numbers in specific places and, if you really beg, you get them in 10-millilitre bottles. I was using them by the gallon-full," Pedro says.

Pedro is just finishing work on possibly the biggest challenge of his career so far. Next year, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew will unveil a two-year restoration project by Historic Royal Palaces of the 80 decorative dragons on its famous pagoda built by Sir William Chambers in 1762. Many of the dragons disappeared in the 1780s and none survive today, although there is much folklore about what they looked like—such as having bells tinkle in their mouths—and what happened to them (in 2014, one was thought to have been found but, after considerable analysis, it was discovered that it was part of the sign for a public lavatory in Woking).

The curators and historians undertook a massive project of research to discover what the dragons were originally like. The pagoda itself underwent thorough analysis, which suggested that copper verdigris was used under the Victorian-era red surface. Pedro, when he set about faithfully replicating one of the two-metre-long dragons for a prototype, was confident in his conclusions. "Some people said, 'Impossible! They would never have used that material outside,' but the building was full of it. Subsequently I found out that copper verdigris was very much associated with Chinoiserie and exoticism. Lots of garden buildings had it, and there were some descriptions of garden sticks being dipped in the stuff," he says.

The process was complicated, but the results magnificent. A base of red lead paint was used to cover up knots and bleeding in the wood, and then an unusual grey sub-layer made of white lead and lamp black was added. Copper verdigris—a gloopy paint that was used in medieval times for illuminations before a decent green was invented with the advent of Prussian blue (which could be mixed with yellow) in 1705—was then added in layers. The copper verdigris had to be slightly heated in a bain-marie in order to become manageable, and took Pedro a week to complete. The final dragon is a glassy, vibrant kitsch jewel. Completing the work faithfully, however jarring it may seem to the contemporary eye, was a central concern for Pedro. "What I tend to do is put back what has gone missing completely," he says. "These buildings mean something; they are part of our history. You need to do them properly."

History is evident in Pedro's other love: the small garden at his home in Whitechapel. He takes the same historian's eye to this space as he does to his professional work. "In terms of aesthetics, I tend to like much earlier plants than the later Victorian ones. I like the natural style, rather than the Busy Lizzies of the 19th century," he says.

With his lacquer and paint occupation requiring exact processes and a forensic level of control, it is in his garden that he takes a looser approach, although, he says, there are parallels. "In gardening, you're creating something and you're making an object, but it's never finished and grows on its own, which is satisfying," he says. "I like collaborating on projects, and in a garden you are collaborating with nature." TM



Above and opposite: A sample of wings that were used to explore decorative schemes and possible finishes for the dragons in the Great Pagoda at the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew. A copper verdigris glaze was eventually used, as it matched the contemporary descriptions of the dragons as being coated in "an enamel like finish with an almost glass shine to it".



Above: The mantelpiece in Pedro da Costa Felgueiras' home contains an assortment of curios. Pride of place is a giant ceramic chestnut leaf, slip cast and hand-painted by a Portuguese-based company that has been operating for over 130 years. Opposite: Pedro collecting berries and his small walled garden in London's Whitechapel.