

# The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum

## Information Sheet



### The Beetle-wing Ballgown

This dress was worn by an English woman, Lady Russell, Jane Eliza Sherwood (1797-1888), to a ball when she lived in India. She was the daughter of an East India Army Officer.

She married Sir William Russell (1773-1839) in 1814. He trained as a doctor in Edinburgh then he emigrated to India where he eventually managed a large medical practice in Calcutta specialising in cholera. After the death of his first wife he married Jane Eliza Sherwood and their first of six children was born in 1822.

In 1831, the family moved back to England and Sir William Russell was appointed by the British Government to the Central Board of Health with the specific task of controlling cholera in this country which had spread from the East.

In 1839 Lady Russell inherited Charlton Park in Cheltenham and the family moved to Cheltenham. Sir William Russell, who was unwell died a year after their move.

Made from white muslin and hand-embroidered with iridescent green beetle-wing cases, silver strips and spangles; the dress exemplifies the merging of two cultures to create a unique style which became known as Anglo-Indian. The style of the dress is typical of British and European fashions, the puffed sleeves and high waist-band whilst the embroidered decoration and fine muslin fabric are Indian in tradition. These beetle-wings have been tested by experts at the British Museum and identified as those from Jewel beetles. These beetles have two sets of wings,



**The Beetle wing dress in use.**



**Detail of the beetle-wing design.**

the outer wings which are hard and used here, are the ones they use in flight. In the rainy season the beetles swarm in search of mates. Once they have mated and laid their eggs the adult beetles die and the wings are harvested.

The design of the decoration is derived from patterns which were popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Mughal court and

developed into a familiar cone floral repeat motif described as 'Buta'. The pattern was used on Kashmir shawls and through their export via the East India Company the design was imitated by shawl manufacturers in Paisley – hence the Paisley shawl. Fine muslins were popular dress fabrics because of the hot climate in India.

The dress is all handmade and with over 3000 beetle wings, would have taken a considerably long time to make. When this is taken into consideration it is easy to understand why dresses and other garments with this decoration were only worn by wealthy people.

The dress was given to the art gallery & museum in 1943 by Lady Russell's granddaughter.

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:  
Collections Team, The Wilson, Clarence Street, Cheltenham GL50 3JT

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