

DESIGN.

By MISS ALICE F. DOYLE.

The following was one of the Short Papers read at a Meeting of the Limerick Field Club, January 31st, 1905. It may direct the attention of some members to new qualities in flowers, plants, and animals. For their utility to the student is not exhausted when we have discovered and classified them, and it is interesting to rediscover in the flowers blooming in our fields, etc., the origin of much ornament now conventional, and so usual on walls and ceilings, that we have almost ceased to connect it with its source.

There is a great pleasure in the study of design; but the student in the beginning is a little puzzled at hearing that there are no rules for it. If he takes this literally and designs something, feeling free to let his pencil be unrestrained, his instructor may tell him that he has erred in many ways against the principles of ornament. He will, in a little while, begin to see then *that* his mind must become imbued with the beauty of other designs, and the principles of ornament; but that his own original work must be worked out from his own ideas.

The principles of ornament are:—Repetition, alternation, symmetry, radiation, balance, proportion, variety, eurythmy (or harmony), contrast, intersection, complication, and utility and fitness, which terms explain themselves.

The Elements of ornament, or the items used in the construction of ornament are:—The stripe, the wave, the circle, the meander, the scroll, the Greek scroll, the fret, the festoon, the catenary and the spiral.

There is another rule which is that a design should not be just a pretty picture, but should suit the shape it is intended to decorate, so that, if you saw the design merely, it should suggest the object it

embellishes. Ornament may be simply decorative, or it may be symbolical. It must suit the material of the object decorated; it should in fact, really seem to be a part of it, and, to be true ornament, it must be conventional. Conventional ornament is the taking of the ornamental construction, the colour or anything else we see to be beautiful in nature and adapting these qualities to the decoration of other things, making, naturally, such changes as render them suitable to the new purpose. In other things we do this without any difficulty—we take natural wool and weave it into warm and beautiful materials; we take the silk thread from the busy little insect and suit it to our requirements, by spinning it into soft, rich silks, and no one says it is unnatural that we should do so; yet, when we take from the flora and fauna, from the growth of a tree, or the arc of a rainbow, just the beautiful lines and curves or the colour that we require, we are only acting in a similar manner. A little friend of mine, whose style was being directed to convention, showed me a design, very stiff, very garish as to colour, and possessing not even the elemental characteristics of the flower. I tried to show her these faults and to show her that it was not a conventional design; but she most indignantly asserted that it was, adding “at any rate I have made it stiff enough.” Her teacher had evidently, not conveyed her ideas properly.

Nature is, of course, very beautiful; but, if we apply it unsuitably to decoration, we may lose the very grace and charm we strive to obtain.

The decorations of our own buildings are not of a very national character; Gothic ornament is generally to be found in our churches, and Greek, Roman, or Renaissance in our other beautiful buildings. The pretty little building where our Club assembles is a very perfect example of a Greek temple; but the ceiling is Roman, and we shall speak of it later. Much charming work is found in the houses of old Dublin, where a band of skilful Italians enriched friezes and mouldings with stucco work of very great beauty, somewhere in the beginning of the eighteenth century, and where memories of Angelica Kauffmann’s graceful passage through it can be recalled in many a stately mansion.

It would not be natural or desirable that designs produced now in any country, should be reproductions of the past art of that country:

the needs of every period and the changing character of the people, should influence all new art produced. Now-a-days, everyone travels even a little, and what we see in other countries—the natural forms of flowers growing round us, and the individuality of each designer—all combine to give us new ornament. The best method of producing good designs is to study the best in other countries and other times. It is interesting to notice how a nation's characteristics are exemplified in their decorations.

Celtic art is, of course, what comes first with us, though not the most ancient. The Celts were a mystic people, and their zoöomorphic ornament of the early Christian period was probably of northern origin, and may have been based on the Scandinavian legend of the Dragon. Hreimar had three sons, Otter, Fafni, and Regan. Otter was killed by Loki, one of the Scandinavian gods, and Loki was made to give a treasure of gold by Hreimar. Fafni changed himself into a dragon to guard it; Sigurd, his half-brother killed him to get the treasure, and killed Regan so as to keep it. He placed the treasure on the back of the noble horse Grani, but was killed by Gunnar who, in his turn, was punished by being cast into a pit of serpents. This explains the zoöomorphic character of Scandinavian design. Most of us have seen the beautiful tracery of Bishop O'Dea's crozier, of the Ardagh chalice, the Book of Kells, the Book of Durrow, and the other beautiful heir-looms which we possess and keep in our National Museums at Dublin. They all show how piety, refinement and learning flourished in Ireland, even in the most warlike times.

Everything that the Egyptians admired or worshipped is represented in their designs—fabulous animals, the winged globe, the scarabæus and the asp, and their deities. Then their plants—the lotus, papyrus and palm; a characteristic of their ornament is the introduction of their beautiful picture writing. Their sculpture is the oldest extant, and their monuments are dignified and noble.

The Assyrian ornament differs very much from the Egyptian. Stone was not found to any great extent in Chaldea, and clay was plentiful, so their designs are more suited to decorating bricks than harder materials. The lotus and bud are their principal ornaments, and the *Hom*, or Tree of Life; the anthemion and patera are their

principal elements; and it is to be noticed that shapes somewhat similar to these are to be found in every nation.

Persian art was, originally, similar to that of Assyria, but was subsequently influenced by the Mahometan conquest by Abu Bekir. Their textiles are of great beauty, the flowers they use being the lily, hyacinth, tulip, rose, iris, etc.

Under Pericles, Greek art is said to have reached its highest. Grace, charm and refinement; these are Grecian characteristics. We feel it even in the suggestion of anything Greek, in the very name. Graceful dancers, flower wreathers, all enter into their designs. There is a theory to the effect that the outlines of their pitchers, vases and amphora, are taken from the reverse profiles of beautiful faces and flowers. I do not know if this is generally accepted, but it is interesting and ingenious.

The vine, olive, fir tree, oak, and a reminiscence of the acanthus, are their more general flowers; and in Giotto's tower in Florence, there is, we believe, an example of a supported vine. It is a curious fact that, almost universally, designers represent the vine as though it could support itself; but Mr. Lewis F. Day has introduced props of apple boughs, which make the designs look more reasonable. A designer can, indeed, feel that he has achieved success if he can design something that approaches Greek work done about five hundred years before the Christian era.

The introduction of the arch in their buildings is the principal difference between the Greeks and Romans; but it is not my purpose to speak of architecture. In their ornament there is considerable strength, they use curves and scrolls, much as did the Greeks, sometimes, indeed, lacking their refined grace. Bold curves, with mythological figures, birds, reptiles and scrolls, very richly covered with leaves, are very general. The acanthus mollus was more generally used than the acanthus spinosa, which is Greek. The deep, square panels, like those of our club-room ceiling, are called lacunaria, and are decorated, as in this example, with an enrichment of egg and dart moulding, the familiar water-lily, and a centre rosette in high relief. This form of decoration was very general in the old Roman baths. In the very elaborate decoration of the ceilings of palaces, and sometimes

of tombs, allegorical and mythological figures replaced the simpler rosette. A group of acanthus leaves often forms a rosette in conjunction with a scroll; sometimes there is a little cluster of berries in the centre, again the scroll may emerge from, or conclude in, a rosette which resembles a wild rose, and often a kind of fushia-like form, whose origin I have been unable to trace, depends from the rosette. It may be a little ornamental arrangement of the acanthus leaves made rather with a view to suiting the curves of the scroll than with any accurate adherence to the structure of the plant; for, though we may not go against Nature, we may take liberties occasionally as a poet does.

Pompeian ornament is Roman, but it has often the peculiarity of a very dark background. There is more lightness about the ornament, but the plants and forms employed are almost the same. We are very familiar with the principal flowers used in Gothic art—the lily, the rose, the passion flower and the trefoil. A great favourite is the pomegranate, the split fruit showing the seeds being extremely decorative.

Chinese art is generally a representation of the beautiful flowers of the country, but they often introduce a very magnificent curling dragon, and geometric forms enriched with flowers, are often used.

Japanese art, often confused with Chinese, shows more delicacy of feeling and refinement; birds are an element more frequently employed—the crane, the duck, etc. The flowers we generally associate with Japan are the chrysanthemum, the lily and the iris.

There are so many charming books written on this subject that anyone becoming interested in it will find a delightful field of literature opening out before them; I have found Mr. Glazier's book, Mr. Lewis Day's and some others of great interest to me and of great service in the construction of this paper.
