

AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE THE PRINCIPLES WHICH SHOULD DETERMINE FORM IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS.\*

It would be difficult to imagine a more just and comprehensive view of the extent of direct imitation admissible in each department of the fine arts, than that which was presented in the Appendix to the Third Report of the Commissioners, by Sir Charles Lock Eastlake, and republished in his "Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts." In a note to one of those important essays the writer observes, that "the general style of the formative arts is the result of a principle of selection, as opposed to indiscriminate imitation. It consists, therefore, in qualities which may be said to distinguish those arts from nature. The specific style of any one of the arts consists in the effective use of those particular means of imitation which distinguish it from other arts. Style is complete when the spectator is not reminded of any want which another art, or which nature could supply."

Now, the specific style of architecture is especially worthy of study, since not only do similar conditions pervade all branches of design into which structural forms enter as principal elements, but of all the arts it is obviously the least imitative, and the most abstract. The effects of delight which can be produced by it, are dependent not upon a reproduction of any objects existing in creation, but upon a just display by the architect of his knowledge of those subtle general conditions, a few of which we have recognised as pervading every perfect work of nature. The beauty of Civil Architecture, we are told by the best writers upon the subject, depends upon—1st. Convenience; 2nd. Symmetry, or proportion; 3rdly. Eurythmia, or such a balance or disposition of parts as evidences design and order; and, 4thly. On Ornament. In too many modern buildings, alas! we find that either convenience has been attended to and all other qualities left to chance, or, what is still worse, ornament alone aimed at and all other considerations disregarded. Let us, for the sake of example, trace the operation of the principles to which we have alluded, all of which will be found to have their origin in the provisions of nature. The wise architect will begin by considering the purpose of his building, and will so contrive its plan and leading form, as to fulfil all the utilitarian objects for which it was proposed to be constructed; in other words, he will be governed by a sense of *convenience or fitness*.

He will then consider how all the requisites can be most agreeably provided, and harmonious proportion combined with an expression of purpose. He will find, on recurring to nature, that every substance suitable to be employed in construction, exhibits endless variety in strength, weight, and texture. He will study these various qualities, and by experiment ascertain that each material possesses a certain scale of proportions and a certain series of solids, by the employment of which, in fixed positions, its functions may be at once most economically and most fitly employed. Acting on such data, he will distribute his lines of substructure, his columns of support, his load supported, his wall to resist the driving of the elements, and he will assign to each its special proportion and form—never confounding those of one substance with another—never using iron as he would stone, or wood as glass should be. Thus aided by his sense of the functions of each portion of the structure, the material of which it may be constructed, and its condition of relative importance, the architect adjusts the appropriate dimension of every part. His work is as yet, however, only half done; his materials require bringing into graceful and regulated distribution. At this point, Eurythmia, the original of "the fairy order," steps in, bringing Geometry in her train. Doors, windows, columns, cornices, string-courses, roofs, and chimneys, are instantly disposed so as to contrast with, and balance one another, showing, by the symmetry of their arrangements, the artist's application of that method and evidence of de-

sign which indicate the restraining power of mind over matter throughout all nature—wild as her graces may occasionally appear. The crowning difficulty yet remains behind in the adjustment of appropriate ornament. For all other departments of his art, the architect employs only pure abstractions, harmonised with his general deductions of leading principles of beauty: in his application of ornament, however, his resources are somewhat more expanded. All decoration, the forms of which are borrowed from nature, to be pleasing, must undergo a process of conventionalising; direct imitation, such as that which would be produced by casting from a gelatine mould, would infallibly disappoint, since the perfect reproduction of the form would lead to demands for reality in colour, in texture, and in other qualities which it might be utterly beyond the power of any other material or processes to render, than those which nature has herself employed in the original. The duty of the architect is, therefore, to study first of all to employ such forms as harmonise and contrast with his leading lines of structure,—and then in those few instances where, for the sake of adding more immediately human interest to his work, or for explaining its purpose more directly, he may desire to suggest the idea of some object existent to nature—then and in such a case it is his duty to symbolise rather than to express, and to strive to convey an idea of particulars and qualities only, instead of to make a necessarily imperfect reproduction which conveys no idea at all.

The exact amount of resemblance which the hieroglyphic may be permitted to bear to that object, some ideal property of which it is intended to express, must depend upon so great a variety of circumstances that it obviously becomes one of the most delicate operations of the artist's skill to adjust the precise form in which he shall work out his ornament. The treatment of the honeysuckle by the Greeks, and the lotus by the Egyptians, are probably the happiest existing illustrations of refined appreciation of the mysteries of judicious conventionalising.

As a general rule, the less closely the artist attempts to embody nature, the more safe he will be; but as there are, we conceive, some few cases which justify a nearer approximation than is generally admissible, we shall proceed to enumerate the most important of them, premising that, paramount over every other consideration, must reign an exact regard to the conventionalities incident to the material employed, and the absolute necessity of arranging the forms of the ornament so as to contrast rightly with the adjacent geometrical lines.

1stly. That imitation may approximate to nature only in an inverse ratio to the resemblance of the material in which the work is to be executed to the object to be copied. Thus, the smoothness of flesh may be imitated with delicacy in white marble, and the idea of rock-work only conveyed in the same material by a completely formal and geometrical method of representation.

2ndly. That as imitation in all cases interests and attracts attention, it becomes necessary to restrict its use sparingly to particular situations; thus, we may, on the one hand, with propriety employ decorations suggestive of natural types, in those few important points on which we wish the eye to dwell, such as the centre of a façade, the principal doorway, or window, the starting of a staircase, or the end of a boudoir; but if, on the other hand, we employed in such situations mere conventional patterns, and in less important parts, ornaments in convention approaching imitation, then we should find attention concentrated on those meaner portions of the structure, and the really principal features of the design passed over and neglected. A striking illustration of the consequences of this want of discrimination was shown by the sculptor Lequesne, in his various groups in the Great Exhibition; the care he bestowed in working up his accessories, his weeds, foliage, rocks, earth, and everything else, almost entirely neutralised the interest which should have been excited by the finished treatment of the

flesh of his unhappy mother and her miserable infant. The admiration which might otherwise have been given to his two groups of dogs and boys was completely absorbed by admiration at the patience with which "each particular hair" was made to curl. To all the above-described faults the works of M. Etase offered a truly remarkable contrast, the labour in them being applied at exactly the right points.

3rdly. That where ornament is contrasted by evident connection with geometrical lines of structure, conventional imitation may be introduced. Thus, in many of the marble chimney-pieces in the Exhibition, and in much of the furniture, the structural forms of which made regular panels, or conventional framework, the introduction of nicely-carved flowers or fruit, of the size of nature, and in low relief, produced an agreeable effect. Where, in others (and more particularly in some of the Austrian), the foliage, scrolls, cupids, and all sorts of things, completely ate up the whole surface, and made up the whole structure, the effect was eminently objectionable.

4thly. That where the copy differs absolutely in bulk from the original, minutiae of surface detail may be introduced. Thus, when we reduce a subject, such as a bunch of grapes, from the round or full relief to the lowest rilievo, much of the conventionality which would otherwise be essential may be dispensed with.

5thly. That considerable differences of scale in things of unvarying dimension, justify an approach to natural form. Thus, when we materially diminish in our reproduction any object the smallest size of which is generally known never to equal that to which it is lowered in our copy, we may safely attempt as close a conventional transcript as the material in which we work admits of. On this account delicate flowers, such as those which decorate small Dresden china vases, and which are executed with such skill in biscuit by Mr. Alderman Copeland, Mr. Minton, Mr. Granger, of Worcester, and others, form not inappropriate ornaments, when confined to a scale considerably smaller than nature. In cases, however, such as that of the Dresden white Camellia-tree of the Exhibition, where an attempt is made to copy nature on her own scale, the effort altogether fails, and the labour, so far from giving pleasure, utterly fails, and becomes a trick not less inimical to good taste than the veiled figures.

6thly. That where in ornament the leading forms are geometrically disposed, so as in regularly recurring scrolls, or other curves, which could never take so formal a position in nature, a rendering of her spirit, though not of her substance, may be permitted in the leaves and accessories. Thus, in much of the elaborate wood-carving produced by Mr. Rogers and others, the artificial disposition alone of the beautifully-executed objects, redeemed many of the groups from the charge of too close a reproduction of nature.

We have dwelt at some length upon these special circumstances, which modify conventional treatment in ornament, partly because we felt that the data applied generally to most varieties of enrichment as well as especially to architecture, and partly because we felt it necessary to indicate some of the exceptions, the comparative rarity of which tends generally to a confirmation of the accepted dogma, which prescribes that architectural ornament shall be in a remote style of convention only.

Before proceeding to the subject of Sculpture, we would fain offer one or two remarks concerning what is called style in art: for fear lest our recommendations to systematic study of elementary principles should be misapprehended. In what are generally understood as styles in the history of art, such as the Grecian, the Roman, the Gothic, the *Renaissance*, &c. may be recognised deeply interesting accumulations of experience concerning the nature of man's instinctive affections for certain concatenations of form. Styles are usually complete in themselves; and, though not of uniform excellence, are still generally concordant among all the various members that compose them. Whatever may have been the dominant

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