THE ELEMENTS OF CELTIC ART

BY

E. K. CARMICHAEL, M.C.

PUBLISHED BY AN COMUNN GAIDHEALACH AT
114 WEST CAMPBELL STREET, GLASGOW
1922

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The first two chapters of the following were written at the request of the Arts and Industries Committee of An Comunn Gaidhealach for children of thirteen years of age and over. They are now being published as an introduction to the study and application of Celtic Art, and a third chapter has been added, more for the benefit of grown-ups.

The author hopes that this little book will stimulate some one to produce one more worthy of the vast subject which he has only been able to hint at in these pages.

Teanroit, Beauly,
18/8/22.

The illustration of the Thames Shield is reproduced by permission of the Director of the British Museum, and that of the Ardagh Chalice by permission of the Council of the Royal Irish Academy.

THE THAMES SHIELD
(British Museum)

THE ARDAGH CHALICE
(*Royal Irish Academy*)

CHAPTER I

Before you can understand about the Art of the Celts, you must first know what Art is, and what use it is, and how it began.

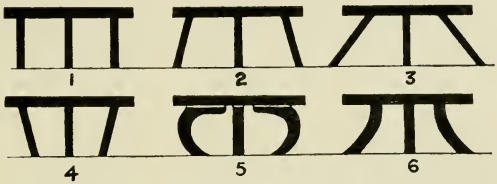
Art is the making of things beautiful, and the purpose of that beauty is to make us glad when we see it. The world seems a better place to us, and life more worth living, when we see something that pleases us; and if the beautiful thing is something that we can use, we feel we can do better work with it. This is even true about clothes—most of us like to wear nice clothes. Don't you feel happier if you are wearing pretty clothes? But even our clothes must be suitable for whatever we are doing.

Probably the first ideas of Art, even among primitive man and savages, were connected with religion; but this is a big subject and need not be entered upon here.

They first began by decorating the person, by cutting the hair in peculiar ways and painting the face and body, and later on by wearing beads and ornaments and then skins and clothes. When people began to make weapons, and have

houses and furniture, they gradually got the idea of making their weapons and furniture pretty by putting patterns on them. They saw, however, that merely putting a pretty pattern on a sword handle or a clay pot did not necessarily make a handsome sword or a handsome pot—they found that the shape of the article had really more to do with its beauty than the decoration that was put on to it. These ancient people did not often make things only for the sake of their being pretty; they made things because they required to use them, so that the usefulness of an article, and not its beauty, was the first purpose in making it. Thus if a man were making a sword, he would pay far more attention to making it a good sword than to making it beautiful, and he would not allow any shape to be given to it, or any ornamentation to be put on to it, that would spoil its balance or interfere with its usefulness. And if a man were making a stool, he would first try to make it as strong and steady and comfortable to sit upon as possible. Then, as far as he could without spoiling its strength, steadiness and comfort, he would design its shape or outline so as to make that as elegant as possible; to do this he might make these six pictures, and choose the one he liked best, as you can do.

Now in deciding which of these designs he would choose, he would see that No. 3 would not be a strong stool, and that No. 4 would not be very steady, and that No. 5 and No. 6, besides being rather affected and unnatural, would require curved legs. For these he would have to find bent branches that were the right shape, or to bend wood with steam so that it would stay bent. In this way the wood that



was at hand would suggest the most natural and therefore the most artistic shape for the legs. In No. 1 the legs come straight down, and you feel that the joint between the legs and the top is strong. In No. 2 the legs are splayed out only a little, and the joint is nearly as strong, and the stool looks firmer. In No. 3 the legs are splayed still more than in No. 2, and there is still less chance of the stool upsetting, but you feel that the legs may break away where they are joined to the top, and it

is just the feeling within you that this shape is weak and unsuitable for its purpose that will make you say that it is ugly. The same is the case with No. 4, but here it is not the weakness of the joint that you are afraid of, but that the stool is not steady and may upset. There is nothing in itself ugly in having the supports narrower below than above, for the two wheels of a cart, looked at from in front or behind, are like this, and so are many other things, but in the case of the cart it is to make the wheels stronger that they are closer together below the axle than above, and so it looks quite well and satisfying. So this is another very important thing about Art which can be learned from these pictures — that there is a great tendency for a thing to look well simply because it looks strong and suitable for its purpose; but there is also a tendency for a thing to look clumsy and ugly if it looks much stronger than is necessary. So the man in making the stool must take care that the legs are well proportioned to the weight they have to carry. Now having chosen his design, he would make his stool as well as he was able, but if he were anxious to make a really beautiful stool he might think of decorating it with some patterns. Here again the man has got to stop to think. If he

carves a pattern on the top of the stool he may make it uncomfortable to sit upon, the legs would be too thin to ornament except by turning, so he would probably decide to decorate the top, but not by carving it, but by marking it with a hot poker, or inlaying it with other wood or metal.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Then would come the question of what pattern to put on the top of the stool.

Now Art is a thing that is very like language. Every race has got Art of its own, just as every race has got a language of its own, and the man who decorates a stool with a pattern or

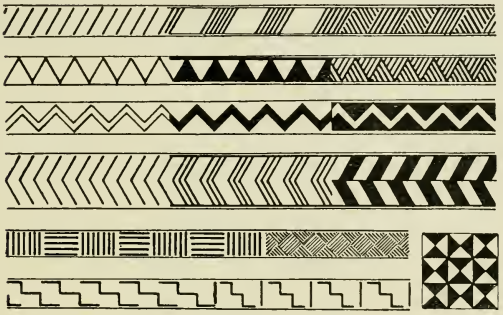
design would use the Art of his race in doing so, as it would be the only Art that would mean anything to him, just as, were he speaking, he would talk the language of his race, as it would probably be the only language that he knew.

On the preceding page are some drawings showing how this man might have decorated the top of his stool, or any other circular thing, if he were (7) an Egyptian, (8) a Chinaman, (9) a Greek, (10) an Indian, or (11) an Iberian,[1] and last of all (12) how an ancestor of our own might have decorated a circle.

[1] Iberian is the name given to the race which inhabited Western Europe, including this country, before the Celts came in.

CHAPTER II

The earliest patterns used by the Celts, among other races, were made up of short, straight lines. They require no description, as you can see 17 varieties of them in Fig. 13. These are



13

very easy for you to copy and make use of yourselves. The kind of pattern shown in this figure is called chequer work, with the exception of the two patterns in the last line, which are called step patterns, and are really quite different from the others. The best work in Celtic Art

was done by the people who lived from 500 B.C. to 1000 A.D. Its appearance was not always the same throughout that period, nor were the kinds of patterns most in favour always the same. But the Celts treated the elements of these patterns in ways peculiar to themselves and different from other people, which you can only learn by studying examples of old work.

Good Celtic work has the following general characteristics. It is always conventional — it never attempts to represent anything on earth in a natural way and exactly as that thing appears.

Each separate piece of design must be in a separate panel, and the panel should have a well-marked border round it. You will see that in Figs. 7-11, which are not Celtic, there are two or more different patterns in each circle, while in Fig. 12, which is Celtic, there is only one.

The pattern must be complete within the border, and not (as in Fig. 8) cut off by it. It should fill up the whole panel, as far as the kind of pattern used will allow.

Besides these general characteristics there are characteristic treatments of each different kind of pattern, whether spiral, key pattern, or interlacement, which also can only be learned by studying examples.

Spirals.—The oldest form of spiral is just like the letter S, or Fig. 19, and where a number of them

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are joined or locked together, they form a running spiral pattern. Fig. 14 shows some of the early Celtic running spirals that were used to decorate

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sword sheaths and the like, and Fig. 15 shows a circular pattern of the same period that may be

considered as a spiral pattern. It may, however, be an artistic treatment of a very old symbol, which was used largely in Celtic and other Art,

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called the Swastika. The simplest form of this symbol is seen in the curious little cross in the very centre of the figure.

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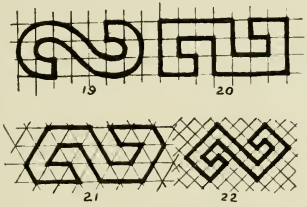
The Christian Celts brought spiral ornament to a higher perfection than any other race has ever reached, notwithstanding that it is the commonest

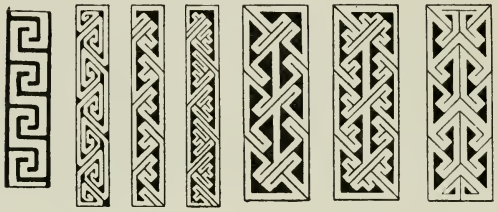
motive used in decoration up to the present day. Figs. 16 and 17 are two good examples of spiral ornament from the Book of Kells. Fig. 18, which is to be seen on the Cadbol Stone, is done with the same pattern as Fig. 16, but made into a square only part of which is shown.

Key Patterns.—When the Egyptians tried to weave a spiral, such as Fig. 19, which they were very fond of, into cloth, it turned out with square



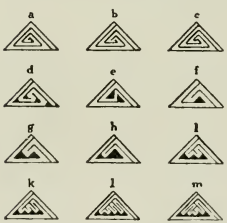
corners, like Fig. 20, and this was the origin of what are called key patterns. The Egyptians found they had invented a new pattern, and key patterns formed on squares, like Figs. 20 and 23, were used to decorate their temples and palaces. But when they wove the same spiral into a grass mat, it turned into a key pattern not formed on squares, but on diamonds and equilateral triangles, like Fig. 21. The Chinese borrowed this idea, and you will see a key pattern based on diamonds in the background of Fig. 8. The Celts borrowed

the one based on squares, but instead of keeping the squares horizontal, as in Figs. 20 and 23, as the



23 24 25 26 27 28 29

Greeks and other peoples did, they turned the squares diagonally, as in Fig. 22. But although they made many key patterns on squares placed diagonally, their most characteristic and best key patterns were made with these squares divided into two right-angled triangles, by drawing diagonals through them. Samples of the key pattern made in this way are shown in Figs. 24-29, and some of the ways in which they filled in the triangles are shown in Fig. 30. You will see that Fig. 24 is just the same as Fig. 23, except that it is made in right-angled triangles instead of in squares, and has



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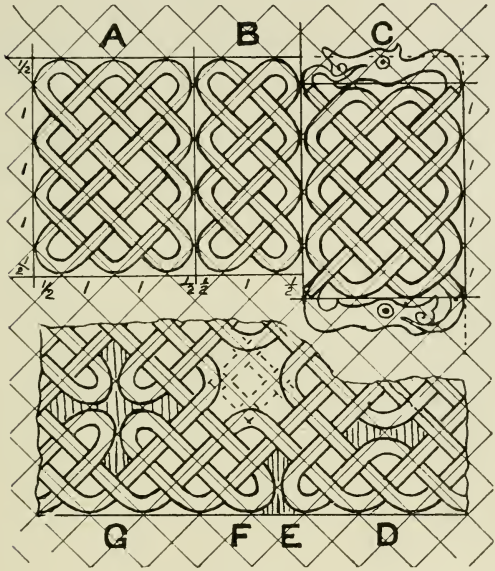
an extra turn in the spiral. You will be able to draw these key patterns if you get a cross-ruled sheet of paper and lay it cornerwise.

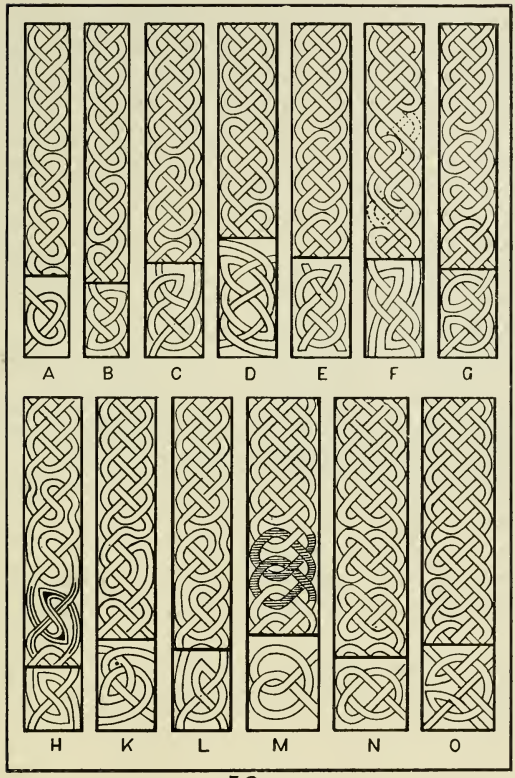


31

Interlaced Patterns.—Next to the spirals the most important Celtic patterns are made up of a band bent backwards and forwards, and interlaced with itself, so that as you follow its course it

goes over and under at each crossing alternately. Never must it go over or under twice in succession. Generally the band is endless, as in Fig. 31A, and sometimes there are two or more endless bands, as in Fig. 31B. These patterns are used for decorating panels, and sometimes for decorating borders, when they are like those in Fig. 32, and are called plaitwork.

The easiest way to design interlaced patterns is to use a cross-ruled sheet of paper placed cornerwise as for key patterns. Fig. 31 represents a piece cut out of a page of a cross-ruled exercise book, so that the squares are placed diagonally or cornerwise. The first thing to do is to draw two lines at right angles to each other, so that they will meet in the middle of a square. If your pattern is to consist of one continuous band, you will have to select a number of squares for the sides and ends of your panel that will have a greatest common measure of 1. Thus in A the sides are 4 squares long (two half squares and three whole squares) and the ends are 3 squares long (two half and two whole squares). In B, however, the sides have 4 squares each, and the ends two squares each, and the G.C.M. of these two numbers being 2, you have a pattern consisting of two bands. If instead of having the corners of your panel in the middle of squares, you have them at the corners



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of squares, as in Fig. C, then your band will not be continuous.[1] The Celts often did this when they wanted to put the heads and tails of beasts on the ends of the bands, but they also often put their tails in their mouths to make them continuous.

If you try to make one of these patterns yourself, you will find great changes can be made in the appearance of the pattern by making it with the band broader or narrower, or by making the band black or the background black, but that the greatest change is in just how you draw the lines and the curves.

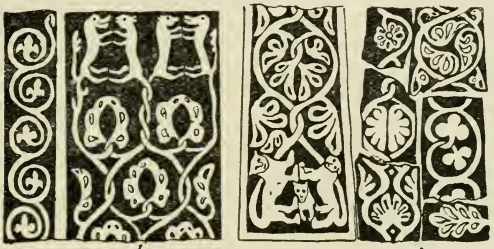
The drawings here are not intended to be pretty but only to show you the way they are done, for the effect cannot be pretty if you draw the lines with a ruler and compasses.

Figs. D, E, F, and G show what are called breaks in the interlacement, and you will understand them if you first study Fig. F and know that the dotted line shows how the bands would have gone if they had not been cut off, bent round and

[1] For purposes of calculation a discontinuous band counts as half a band. The unit of measurement for the sides and ends of a panel is from centre to centre of adjoining squares along the diagonal line. If a side commences at the corner of a square instead of at the centre, a half unit is introduced, which will yield a half or discontinuous band; and if it also ends at the corner of a square, another half band will be produced. Thus, in Fig. C the G.C.M. of the sides and ends is 1, but this unit being composed of two half units, two discontinuous bands are created instead of one continuous one.

joined up again. These breaks are often used to vary patterns, like A, B, and C. You will see that if you put a break like D or E into A it would change into a two band pattern, and if you made a break in B it would change into one continuous band.

From making breaks in plaitwork, as you will see in Fig. 32, arose what is called knotwork, and



33

the knots derived from the various positions of the breaks in plaits of different numbers of strands will be seen by looking carefully at the drawing.

Vine Spirals.—In the Highlands in the 16th century and after there grew up yet another kind of design, which is known as the vine spiral, the beginnings of which we borrowed from Eastern Europe. In Christian Art this idea was taken from the saying of Christ, 'I am the True Vine,'

but the pattern probably got mixed up with an old Babylonian pattern of the Tree of Life, with a beast guarding its foot, so although the original pattern was something like Fig. 33A, it will be found that quite often the stem of the plant is a continuation of the tail of the beast, as in Figs. 33B and C. Interlacement and twisting were also used in these patterns as well as the spiral. Many forms of leaf were used, some of which are shown in Fig. 33D. The leaves were not usually derived from the leaves of any actual tree, just as the beasts in Celtic Art are not real beasts but purely imaginary, for the Celts—though not with the bigotry of the Mohammedans—believed in obeying literally the second commandment. You can see examples of vine spiral patterns in most old graveyards in the Highlands.

CHAPTER III

In the foregoing I have dealt with only a small portion of the art-heritage of the Celtic race; —in fact only with those developments of the more important motives which have been sufficiently investigated and their systems so understood as to render them amenable to the designer.

It should here be stated that this investigation was primarily the work of the late J. Romilly Allen, to whose memory we owe a great debt. There still remain big masses of Celtic decorative art in such an incomplete state of investigation as to leave their systems of construction and the ideas underlying them so obscure that description, understanding, and utilization of them is at present very difficult. In this category may be mentioned the splendid flamboyant patterns of Pagan times and the highly complicated class of interlaced zoomorphic patterns of the Christian period.

Metal—bronze, silver, and gold—was the principal medium of the Celtic artist. Designs on metal were executed by engraving, piercing, embossing, and by casting in the solid. In pre-Roman and even in Roman and later times

metal-work was frequently ornamented with *champlevé* enamel in beautiful colours. In fact the early Britons were the discoverers of the art of enamelling direct on to the metal, and many beautiful examples of enamelled harness buckles and the like have been discovered.

Perhaps the two best examples of Celtic metal-work, unexcelled by any race at any period, are, of Pagan times, the Thames Shield[1]—full of joy but magnificently restrained; and of Christian times, the Ardagh Chalice[2]—an abandonment to joy and perfection, both of which are figured at the beginning of this book.

The coloured enamel work of the Pagan Celts had its counterpart in early Christian times in the illuminated MSS. of the Celtic Church. Of these the most famous is the Book of Kells—the greatest storehouse of Celtic art and the most wonderfully executed illuminated MS. in the world, unsurpassed in artistic beauty by any that has survived to the present day.

After having mastered the simpler forms of Celtic design as set forth in this primer, the

[1] British Museum — Bronze, flamboyant repoussé work with enamel. So called because it was found in that river.

[2] Royal Irish Academy—8th century. Silver, bronze, and gold. 334 different pieces excluding rivets. Silver wire, enamel, glass, amber and stones, and entirely covered with designs similar to those of the Book of Kells.

student should go direct to the old examples, and, having copied and studied these, should then fare forth on adventures of his own, inventing and creating, but keeping close to the tradition and the spirit of the art,—as the old saying has it, *lean gu dlùth ri cliù do shinnsir*, follow closely the glory of your forefathers.