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**Ideals in art**

**Crane, Walter**

**London, 1905**

**Zürcher Hochschule der Künste**

Shelf Mark: 9900- 364

Persistent Link: <https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-91751>

Of ornament and its meaning.

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## OF ORNAMENT AND ITS MEANING

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Meaning

THE decorative sense as expressed in the rich and varied field of surface ornament is now so much taken as a matter of course, and so associated with certain historic styles, racial types and climatic characteristics, that few care to look further into origins than such well-defined and comprehensive sources seem to contain, and doubtless did we know all about our historic styles (a knowledge of which every art student is expected to have at his fingers' ends) and could we thoroughly analyze the racial types and climatic influences of the world, we should know as much as could be known about ornament.

Ornament in its developed, or sophisticated and conscious, stage seems to me to have a close analogy to music of certain types, in which the sensuous delight in rhythm and melody, as well as the technical skill and invention of the musician, constitute the principal charm.

I imagine, however, that the pleasure a designer may feel in following out a germ of what I might call ornamental thought to its natural or logical development, and the pleasure

derived by the beholder from some harmonious or rhythmical arrangement of form and line are themselves developments from a primitive germ. It is the pleasure, or search for pleasure, of the æsthetic sense, which, from the first discovery of the fascination arising from a repeated form, or a recurring line, has been ever eager to extract from such simple elements fresh delight by greater complexity and new dispositions of the old elements, until the ornamentalist, or the student of pattern, finds himself in a vast forest of invention, complex and varied in its floral growth almost as Nature herself—an enchanted garden of decorative form, line, and colour—in which, nevertheless, the struggle for survival, or perhaps ascendancy, takes place, continually controlled by the stern schooling of necessity and utility—the gardeners with their pruning knives.

Yet I imagine, long before this conscious pleasure there was *wonder*—the wonder as of a child who gazes at the daily wonder of the sun, and covers paper with attempts at making circular forms.

Among the earliest scratchings of primitive man we get sun-symbols, we find meandering lines for water, acute points for fire, and zig-zags for lightning. These signs, too, seem at first used in a detached way, as if to convey to the mind the idea of the thing as words or signs and not with any ornamental intention.

The Egyptians, as we know, afterwards developed this kind of sign-language in their system of hieroglyphics, and in the necessity,

perhaps, of making the forms represented extremely abstract and suitable for incision, while conveying as much character as possible, they also made them ornamental. The necessity, too, of compression, ordered scale, and control of space or boundary would naturally help the decorative effect. (See illustration, p. 89.)

But apart from this consciously ordered and systematic language of hieroglyphic, we may see the sun symbols and the meanders and zig-zags forming in repetition simple borderings and types of ornament in the early art of most peoples on pottery, textiles, or carved in stone.

The sign known as the Fylfot also, originally supposed to indicate the rotation of the heavens, and having a certain mysterious significance, perhaps, to others not fully aware of its original meaning, was used as a mark or sign of good fortune, and this, too, (being capable of repetition and pleasing recurrence) in course of time became incorporated into systems of ornament. It is found widely scattered and associated with many different types, being found in the art of both eastern and western peoples, and constantly reappearing.

The Greek fret, a type of border ornament frequently associated with the foregoing, and apparently surviving by sheer logical persistence, as well, perhaps, as its perfect adaptability to simple textile conditions, may have originally had the significance attached to interlocked hands. We know that borders of joined hands or fingers are still found upon oriental copper

dishes, and in association with the margin of the dish have an obvious significance, either as the laving of hands before or after meat, or as in the sense of the text "he that dippeth with me in the dish."

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In regard to the fret, however, there is a

Greek Cylix



Peleus and Thetis

well-known centre of a Greek cylix painted with a design representing the wrestling of Peleus and Thetis, where the interlocked hands take precisely the form, seen in profile, of the fret border which encloses the (circular) design, the unit of which may be discovered by anyone who will interlock right and left hand and note the form expressed by the overlapped fingers.

Again, as I have elsewhere pointed out, the garland or swag so dear to the heart of the classical architect and designer, was originally the festive garland of leaves and flowers hung around the house or temple, as may be seen in the beautiful Romano-Greek relief of the visit of Bacchus to Icarius in the British Museum.

There appear to me to be two sources of derivation or meaning in ornament; *the Symbolic*, which I have touched upon, and *the Constructive*.

To the latter may be traced many of the forms in use as enrichments in the various orders of classical architecture, which owe their origin to primitive wooden structures, such as the dentil, the egg and tongue, the guilloche, etc. The volute and meandering borders so frequent in Greek pottery are traceable in their main lines to the primitive structural art of wattling. While the banded patterns upon weapons in the bronze age are, like enough, reminiscences of the tying and thonging, by means of which primitive man dispensed with nails.

That universal and indispensable pattern-motive and pattern-basis, the chequer, seems obviously to have been suggested by rush plating, or primitive weaving; and the knotted and spreading strands of the primitive mat, as it lay on the ground, may have been the germ from which a whole family of border patterns was developed which come to us from the ancient Asiatic civilizations of the East; but the type reached its richest and most graceful form in the hands of

the Greeks in their anthemion or honeysuckle borderings.

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The anthemion itself, taken singly, as sculptured ornament or finial upon a stele, I am inclined to think had a symbolic intention, and was intended to suggest the flames of the funeral pyre. In general form it is almost identical with the gilded metal flame haloes placed behind the images of Indian and Burmese deities, and recalls also the rayed flower so universal in Persian ornament, sometimes enclosing a fruit of the pomegranate type. Here again there is symbolic intention—life and the flame of life, with its flower and fruit.

Religious symbolism has, of course, played an important part in the history of ornament, and especially enriches the ornament of the middle ages, together with heraldic symbolism, which may be said to have been almost exclusively *the* ornament of the earlier middle ages—and very splendid ornament it was. What would have been those beautiful Sicilian silks, and the splendid thirteenth and fourteenth century textiles, without those “strange beasts and birds” which form such valuable ornamental units, and must have been reassuring and comforting upon the hanging or the robe, filling the owner or the wearer with the pride of ancestry, and the spirit of his fathers, as he recognized the family totem, or the badge and motto that had served well in so many a fight.

Apart, however, from both symbolic and structural origin and meaning, an important element in ornament is *line*, and line, owing to

certain inseparable association of ideas according to its quality, structure, or direction, must always carry definite meaning to the eye and the mind: the association of restfulness with horizontal lines, and ornament constructed upon such lines; the suggestion of fixity and solidity by the use of horizontals with verticals; the stern and logical character given to a design in which only angular forms are used; the expression of movement by the waved or meandering line—the line actually described by human action (even by simply walking, as we may note by marking the recurring position of the head of a figure so moving along); the lines of energy and resistance by the sharp irregular zig-zag; the lines of grace and rhythmic sweetness by gently flowing and recurring curves; or the lines of vigour, of structural force, of life itself in the radiating group, or the upward spiral of aspiration.

One cannot attempt to follow out all the suggestions, in a short paper, which the thought of the meaning of ornament arouses, but it appears to me, regarded as a whole, that we have in the world of ornament a language not only of extraordinary beauty, but of deep symbolical, historical, constructive, and racial meaning, and could we follow it fully to its sources, we should probably get as complete a history of the races which have used it as a means of expression, as we could do from any other kind of human record.

To the modern designer, accustomed as he is to play with what were once words and

syllables of perhaps vital import, *meaning*, in the ornament he may be called upon to fashion, apart from its own form or technical purpose, seems, perhaps, a vain or an inessential thing. But, while by no means confusing the purpose of art with that of poetry or literature, and fully allowing that to attain beauty and fitness is as much virtue as we ought to expect of any designer of ornament, or any other artist—if it grows, as it were, naturally out of the structure and necessities of the building, or of whatever it is the final expression and flowering—I still think that there are some thoughts, some suggestions, proper to design as a language of line and form, and that an ultimate symbolical meaning, however veiled, gives an interest and a dignity to any piece of ornament, as well as a certain vitality which it could not otherwise possess.

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