THE LIFE HISTORY OF A DESIGN

It is most usual to consider decorative art from the aesthetic point of view; but it may, with profit, be treated by the biologist; for all delineations used as ornament have an individuality and life-history which are interesting and valuable, independently from their artistic merit. The lotus-border, the Greek egg and dart moulding, the alligator derivatives of Oriental textiles may be studied as so many specimens in natural history. And rightly to understand and classify them they must be approached with scientific methods. In biology, it is recognized that in order to seize and to understand the phenomena of life, the student must form a series: comparing the complex and highly developed animal with a lower form, and this latter in turn with a still simpler and less specialized organism. The same means must be employed in the study of the arts of design, whenever their history and evolution become things of moment. A complex delineation adroitly conceals its source and origin, to determine which the investigator must follow its less and less specialized forms backward into barbaric art, and thence into savage ornament, which is the analogue of the lowest forms of organic life.

It is now recognized that biologists, ethnologists and art-critics may work side by side and with reciprocal profit; that science has broken or made thin the walls separating the various divisions of intellectual activity. Therefore, the term “life-history,” as applied to a given example of ornament, will be accepted without question. The life of a design, like that of an animal or a plant, consists of three stages, or periods: infancy, maturity and old age, or, more simply, birth, growth and decay. It is never stationary; but, like living things, undergoes a slow and constant change.

It is true that the greater part of artistic expression owes its origin to realism: the delinea-
tor yielding to that desire to imitate which is among the strongest impulses of human nature. The first representation of an object, employed as ornament, is intended to be true and suggestive; but especially among barbarous people, the delineation fails, because of lack of skill in the artist, or the unsuitability of the materials employed. This first representation corresponds to the birth of a new organism into the world of living things. As the animal or plant, immediately on birth, becomes subject to influences which determine to a degree the course of its life; so the design, which, although it can not lose the impress of the race and civilization which produced it, is yet acted upon by forces which give it individuality, and provide for, or arrest its development. Among these external influences may be mentioned the following:

Degeneration of the design through incompetent copying.
Conventional treatment for decorative purposes.
Simplification through repeated copying.
Debasement resulting from an imperfect or perverted artistic instinct.

For purposes of illustration, the lotus-design offers a most inviting study. First of all, a word must be said regarding the division of ornament to which it belongs. According to the terminology adopted by an eminent scholar, whose theories form the basis of the present article, it is a phyllomorph (plant-form), and, as such, belongs to a small class; inasmuch as plant-life is passive and does not force itself so aggressively upon the attention as do the forms of animals (zoomorphs). This explanation would account for the nature of objects imitated by savages in their ornament, which consists largely of animal forms easily traceable to their source, if the conventions used by the designer be once apprehended. According to the same authority, plant-forms in ornament are never adopted by those incapable of high civilization, and they are generally the sign of peoples already well
advanced; since to the inhabitants of cities, they are reminiscent, representing something lost and regretted: a cherished part of the free life of nature. Finally, those plants into which a spiritual meaning can be read are best able to establish themselves in decorative art. The lotus was introduced by religion, established by symbolism and propagated by the habit and frequency of sight. In ancient Egypt, this flower was a sun-symbol and was associated with the eagle and the hawk, which, among zoomorphs (animal forms), typified the same natural force. This first relationship gradually led to others in which the primitive symbol was absorbed and lost. So that the lotus became a well recognized emblem of life, resurrection, reproductive force and immortality. It was painted and carved for several thousand years in Egypt alone, and appeared as a decorative theme composed of isolated flowers, rising straight and high upon their stems, as if these latter were issuing from their native element: the slimy ooze of the bed of the Nile. This separation of the component elements of the design was a decorative fault, as a marked lack of unity resulted therefrom, marring the otherwise beautiful and graceful pattern. It remained for another people, skilled in the making of textiles, to remedy the defect by joining the stems of the flowers; so giving to the design suggestions of a fringe. In connection with the lotus derivative, the Assyrians used another floral pattern, also borrowed from the Egyptians. This was the rosette so frequently employed even to-day in ceiling decorations in stucco. It was originally drawn from the cross-section of the seed vessels of the lotus, and its union with the first design was a natural and happy one. There are indeed authorities—among whom Layard, the archaeologist and excavator—who claim originality for the Assyrian flower pattern; asserting it to have been conventionalized from the scarlet tulip which, at the beginning of spring, blooms luxuriantly over the plains of Mesopotamia. But even allowing the truth of
this statement, it remains that the lotus motive overran Assyrian art; whether it was accepted from the Nile country, or whether it found a pre-existing design upon which it could be engrafted. In comparing the flower design as employed by the two peoples, a critic has thus expressed himself:

"The Assyrians borrowed their motive from Egypt, but they gave it more than Egyptian perfection. They gave it the definite shapes that even Greece did not disdain to copy. In the Egyptian frieze the cones (buds) and flowers are disjointed; their isolation is unsatisfactory both to the eye and the reason. In the Assyrian pattern, they are attached to a continuous undulating stem, whose sinuous lines add greatly to the elegance of the composition."

The textile skill of the Assyrians already mentioned as a cause of their success in the flower motive, is plainly reflected in the examples discovered by Sir Henry Layard in the Ninevite palaces. In one of these there is a repeated and pendant disc or sphere, as a variation from the flower; all the pendants being connected by a single cord, which appears as if it were drawn into loops by their weight. The flower-motive thus, among the two earliest artistic peoples, took, with each, a distinct form resulting from natural causes. In the Egyptian temple—which represented the world—the lower portions of the walls were adorned with long stems of lotus, or papyrus—bouquets of water-plants emerging from the great river. The Assyrian design, on the contrary, influenced by the textile idea, and suggesting a tasseled fringe, is never without a looped base line and is pendant rather than upright. It no longer recalls the river country with its water-plants, but rather the wide plains of the Orient, against whose fierce heat the tent, canopy and curtain offered a grateful protection. To illustrate the rich, decorative effect of these early systems of ornament, no better example can be found than the picture of Sir
Edward Poynter, representing “The Queen of Sheba at the court of King Solomon,” in which the lotus derivative and the rosette cover wall and ceiling and balustrade to form a bewildering maze of graceful form and brilliant color.

From Assyrian ornament, the flower-pattern passed into Greece through the medium of the islands of the Archipelago, especially Cyprus, whose people were both artistic and commercial. The Greek decorators appropriated the design, as modified in Middle Asia; that is, with the flowers represented as partly faded and with curling sepals. Architects, painters and potters were content to reproduce this one design for many centuries, with but slight variations; thus showing, as a critic has remarked, a decorative conservatism in marked contrast to the mental unrest of the Greeks, which was always seeking new things. Under the false name of the honeysuckle pattern, the Greek form is familiar to every grammar-school pupil; and no eye, however artistically untrained, can fail to recognize the parent of the acroteria (roof-ornaments) of the Parthenon in the lotus pattern as treated under the Theban kings. No less than the “Greek honeysuckle,” is the French fleur de lis a descendant of the lotus-pattern, although it was complicated through Assyrian influence, with the date-tree head supported and flanked by horns—a familiar sight in Eastern countries, where this combination was used to avert the power of demons and of the Evil Eye. The decorative quality of these objects was observed by the Crusaders, who possibly, also, came to believe in their magic influence, and the fleur de lis was adopted into French heraldry by King Louis VII, on his return from the Holy Land, midway in the twelfth century. A lotus original has been acknowledged for the Ionic capital, whose volutes, if studied in the earliest and through the transitional examples, are plainly seen to be the withering sepals of the sacred water-plant. Finally, the “egg and dart”
moulding, which passed from the Greek into the Renaissance ornament, is probably a lotus derivative, as many of the first critics would have us to believe. Owen Jones and de Vesley, among the foreign archaeologists, and Professor Goodyear, the American, independently arrived at the conclusion that the moulding in question is nothing beside a "simplified" lotus design; that is, a form in which one member is developed and accentuated to the partial obliteration of the remaining elements. So considered, the egg and dart pattern becomes simply a semi-oval left between two lotus trefoils, the dart being the central sepal. The design first used upon flat surfaces, was further slightly modified, when the flat oval areas were carved as rounded projections.

It would therefore appear that the plant-forms used still to-day in the decoration which meets our glance from wall and rugs and hangings may largely be traced to a common parent: the lotus. And however ill-founded and fantastic this statement may at first seem, it has been deduced from patient investigations, like those pursued by Darwin in his work upon the "Origin of Species," which revolutionized the world of science.

The study of design pursued by the biological method, even gains in interest when it is applied to animal forms. The tapestries, rugs and pottery which compose so large a part of our material environment seem with these concealed zoomorphs. A wavy line, a scroll, a geometric pattern, which apparently has no relationship with any created thing, is most often the long-developed, "simplified" form of some bird, beast, or fish which, ages ago, seized the ready imagination of a semi-barbarous designer. To illustrate this point, we have but to avail ourselves of a series of drawings which are found in Holmes' "Ancient Art of the Province of Chiriqui, Colombia:" an admirable study contained in the sixth annual report of the Bureau of Ethnology, published at Washington, in 1888.
The series, copied from Mr. Holmes' study, and printed at the end of the present article, begins with a highly conventionalized representation of an alligator, which animal, it may be said in passing, invariably finds its way into the decorative art of its native districts. In the illustration, the salient features of the animal alone receive attention: the serpentine line of the back; the scales, here indicated by spotted triangles; the gaping mouth, with a row of dashes for the teeth; altogether, a strong suggestion of the feelings which the alligator is capable of exciting in the semi-barbarous mind.

These suggestive decorations having been scattered among the people, produce a new class of works, whose ruling feature is "simplification:" that is, types in which the leading features are retained, while the minor characteristics are always obscured, and, in some cases, almost wholly obliterated. So, in the second drawing of the series, the body of the alligator is without scales, the head devoid of eyes, the mouth barren of teeth, and the upward curve of the tip of the upper jaw greatly exaggerated—which last peculiarity would correspond in biology to a highly specialized organ.

Following the designers who "simplify," come others in whose hands the types become degenerate. In the third term of our series, we find the alligator reduced to a curved line and a spot; to a curved line without spots; or to a continuous chevron, with spots filling the triangles made by the indented line. A mere suggestion is all that remains of the conventionalized alligator of the first term of the series; the strength of the simplified form is a thing of the past; decay has invaded the design, and its indentity can not be determined save by the touchstone of science.

These illustrations might be prolonged indefinitely to show the curious mingling of animal with vegetable, or of animal with textile forms. But it is hoped that enough has been said to suggest
agreeable and useful employment for an idle hour, through the study of any given design which shall meet the eye in tapestries, floor-coverings, wall-hangings or cabinet work. Evolution is the pass-word of the hour, and studies in origin, development and degeneration, in whatever department found, are in chord with the spirit of the age.