"THE WAVY LINE"  BY IRENE SARGENT

AFTER the sharply defined forms of the thirteenth century had given character and accent to Gothic architecture in England, there arose a floriated ornament which slowly invaded the surface of the structure, until it finally obliterated beneath its vagaries the contours which it had at first softened and graced. The lack of definition, the confusion of structural lines resulting therefrom, in its turn, produced the sudden counter-revolution of William of Wykeham as displayed in his work at Winchester Cathedral; when the Perpendicular style was substituted for the Decorated, and geometric patterns replaced the design based upon plant-forms.

In our own day, art is threatened by a danger similar to that which was averted by the mediaeval churchman and architect. And if it is an art less sublime in its purpose and manifestation, it is of no less vital importance. For if we are no longer great church-builders in the sense of the men of the olden time, we are to the highest degree home-builders. And the home has gradually come to perform many of the functions of the church of the Middle Ages. Decorative or domestic art has assumed an importance which even a century ago it could not have been believed to possess. Through it the personality of the present age expresses itself as strongly as through more practical mediums, and our generation, like those which have preceded it, sees itself mirrored in works of the imagination: in the lines drawn by the designer; in the colors selected by the painter to compose his palette, no less than in the written word which is comprehended the most widely of all art-forms.

If then once we recognize the meaning and importance of artistic movements—since they are the parallels of social ideas—we shall question their tendencies more closely, as we shall feel them to hold a clue whereby we may gain much in knowledge of ourselves. No artist can divorce himself from the time
in which he lives, nor can he, however forceful his personality, do more than modify and translate, after his own manner, the influences by which he is surrounded. And any pronounced, lasting, and widely observed characteristic in an important art-form of any given age, if it be sincere and original, rather than an imitation more or less frank of some previous and admired period, is a sure index of the spirit of that given age. This fact, essential to note, should make us thoughtful and mentally alert as we examine the objects through which are externalized the aesthetic impulses of our time. For it cannot be ignored or denied that we are passing through a crisis in decorative art, which we have conceded to be the art-form peculiar and proper to a period of growing democracy, widening culture and large individual wealth.

The crisis indicated resides in a breaking with tradition and historical precedent; in a reversion toward Nature; in a powerful impulse to represent and interpret the line effects of plant-forms. Now in progress in the capitals and centers of culture in both Europe and America, it has been variously named; its best known designations being “the neo-floral style” and “l’art nouveau.”

At first thought, in the abstract, and especially in the absence of visible products of the system, this change, revolutionary and radical though it be, would appear as one full of hope and promise: for the great schools of ornament have always found their origin and inspiration in the examples of linear beauty, varied, exact and multiple, which exist in plant-forms. It would at first appear that this crisis were but a modern parallel of the movement which raised the lotus to the ruling place in the decorative art of ancient Egypt, and sent it upon its unending cycle of change and transformation through the ornament of all subsequent civilized peoples. The new impulse to represent the life, the characteristic action, “the very shudder and trembling of
the flower" by means of sinuous line would seem at first to be the legitimate, modern, subtle and significant appreciation of the forms which appealed to the ancients only through grosser, more material linear qualities. Superficially reasoning, we might count this new treatment of plant-forms as a high attainment of our age; as an advance upon what we might name the bare definition of species which is found in historic ornament: the easily recognized though conventional lotus of the Egyptians, the palm of the Assyrians, the fleur-de-lys of the Middle Ages, all of which from a certain modern point of view can be regarded as crude and primitive. But in judgment of the new movement we must not be overhasty either to praise or to condemn. Its present aspect is not so important as its tendencies and possibilities. Will "the wavy line" add value to the legacy of decorative art which has been accumulating for six thousand years, or will its influence be destructive and disintegrating?

The fact regarding it which is most worthy of mention is that it breaks the chain of artistic development. It is revolutionary, and therefore to be doubted, however alluring it may appear. It must be tested by steadfast laws and stand or fall, according as it obeys or defies them. Through obedience to such laws, which in decorative art are named harmony and unity, the lotus, its variants and descendants have persisted and survived down to our own time; receiving from each people into whose art they have entered some minor characteristic, so that they are distinguished one from another like different nations which together compose a single, dominant and long-lived race. Durable elements in art, like durable ideas in political or social schemes are those which come not to destroy, but to fulfil. To realize this fact one has but to turn the pages of any grammar of ornament and to note what is there to be observed, as one follows consecutively the history of the great floral pattern variously named the lotus, the anthemion, or the flower
and knosp design. In the art of the oldest civilized people, that is, the Egyptians, we find the lotus design rising from the base line of the temples, and the plant represented as if vitalized and growing. For this people the temple symbolized the world, and everything entering into its composition had reason for being, was constructive, or necessary in a decorative sense to heighten effect or to intensify meaning. Allowance being made for that conventionalism which is a requisite of decorative art, the design violated no principle of nature. Clusters of aquatic plants, the lotus or nymphæa, and the papyrus, appeared in their proper environment. But as the Egyptians, though highly expert in the use of the ideograph, failed to produce an alphabet, they also just missed the arrangement of a perfect design. The lotus motif, as originally employed, was a series of isolated units. The element of connection was wanting. It remained for a people subject to different geographical conditions to add the last essential. This was done by the Assyrians, out of knowledge gained through their work in spinning and weaving. The floral pattern, as left by the second artistic people of antiquity, is a strongly unified design, consisting of alternate blossoms and buds rising from unbroken basal lines which suggest the strands of textile fabrics, without removing any strength or beauty derived from the observance of Nature. The second people therefore not only accepted the legacy of their predecessors, but added to it a most valuable and original contribution. They did not destroy. They fulfilled. They attained a result which prevailed in the decorative art of centuries upon centuries as successive peoples rose to prominence by virtue of intellectual superiority or right of conquest. The principles of harmony, unity and proper conventionalism having been once understood and put into practice, were not set aside, and these being maintained, chaos could not enter into ornament nor disintegration begin its fatal work.

But as was indicated at the be-
ginning of the present paper, the art movement of the present day is a most dangerous and threatening one. For, under pretext of interpreting Nature by an advanced and subtle method, artists of great worth no longer observe the great mother of life. They attempt to subvert and destroy principles which are as permanent as the laws of mathematics. They would have chaos in place of order, and set up the personality, the individual fancy of the designer against the laws of the eternal republic of art. They are the nihilists of aesthetics. They no longer observe Nature. They are blind to all save "the wavy line." Their object of worship is the long, floating tress of a Lady Godiva or a Berenice, or yet again the knotted locks of a Medusa or the wind-tortured hair of a Maenad. Such are the leaders of the movement, but there are beneath them talents of less pronounced type whose ideals are far less subversive. These are not the tireless seekers of rhythm and "accent" and of well-defined planes. They are rather those who insist that the artist should control his sentiment and gently yet firmly direct the public taste. Disciples of the neo-floral school of design, they show their allegiance to the cause which they have adopted by dealing with nature after the manner of botanists; thus ignoring the natural and eternal separation existing between science and art. They observe, analyze and dissect, and in short attempt to create motifs in design from the entries of a student's note-book. They are not to be feared as enemies of art walking under friendly disguise, but rather as those who through obtuseness of feeling fail to perceive delicate distinctions, and who cannot understand that the function of art is not to imitate but to represent. A third division of the active advocates of the wavy line are much less frank in their purpose than the two classes which have already received mention. They are those who, too feeble or too fearful to invent, distort the historical styles and obscure plant-forms. Among them are the self-deceived who imagine themselves to be
seeking a line of great subtlety, but in this group largely predominate those experimentalists who desire to create that which has not before existed without regard to necessity or value.

The name of these innovators is legion, and they are found in every department of the fine arts, even in music where "the wavy line" can exist only in equivalent. It is interesting to note "the signs of the times" which reveal themselves in the objects of use and adornment by which we are daily surrounded.

First in importance must be noted the furniture of our own homes, wherein the plant-form has been brought into prominence. For the best examples of such objects we may turn to those which were displayed at the last Paris Exhibition under the name of "L'Art Nouveau Bing." The fascination exerted over the visitors by these household furnishings was in a measure due to their admirable fitting into their surroundings, and to the color schemes of the rooms containing them, in which wood, metals and delicate fabrics combined to produce a complex harmony of effect. But separated from their surroundings and studied as to their structural lines, these objects reveal facts and tendencies before unobserved. According to the statement of their makers, and as may be plainly seen, they are revivals of French eighteenth century traditions adapted to modern ideas of comfort. Further than this they contain the new elements of both design and ornament with which we are more directly concerned. Skillfully joined with the souvenirs of the transitional Louis XV-XVI period, there is a plain factor derived from the household art of the Japanese. In their adaptation of a national historic style, the producers of the "Art Nouveau Bing" declare that they are following the evolution of ideas and habits which should be reflected in the objects of daily use, causing in them an incessant transformation corresponding to the growth and progress of life. They seek to be interpreters
Door in Carved Wood
After a sketch by Henri Grousse
(Courtesy Art et Decoration)
Chandelier

Designed by Dampf

(Courtesy Art et Decoration)
Sofa
By G. de Feure
(Courtesy The International Studio)
Mirror-frame

By G. de Feure

(Courtesy The International Studio)
rather than copyists, and cast themselves on the side of
dangerous invention rather than remain producers of
objects of arrested development. As artists of far more
than ordinary merit, as historical students of attainments
and discernment, they are able to please, or at least to
allure both the connoisseur and the uninstructed. But
this result should not be their sole or highest aim. They
should ask themselves whither tends this movement to
whose progress and extension they are lending an im-
portant influence.

It must be remembered that the
French furniture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centu-
ries owed a large share of its beautiful effect to its sur-
roundings; that it was made to finish and perfect the
architecture of the building for which it was intended;
that it forms an integral part of the apartments in which
it was originally placed and that it cannot be removed
from them without detracting from their structural beauty
and losing much of its own meaning; above all that it
bears the impress of stateliness and most rarely that of
intimacy and domesticity.

In order to ensure the last
named characteristic in furniture adapted to modern uses,
a new element was necessary, and for this the so-called
Frenchmen of the East gave a suggestion. Lightness of
line, reflections of plant-life in both construction and orna-
ment were thus borrowed from the art of a people who,
as William Morris once indicated, are distinctively non-
architectural, owing to their geographical position and the
volcanic character of the islands which they inhabit. By
examination of the Bing models it will be seen that the
supports of these tables, chairs and seats are clearly plant-
stalks; that the cabinets and armoires have a portable air
which has characterized the furniture of all warm countries
from that of the ancient Greeks down to that of modern
artistic peoples living under similar climatic conditions;
furthermore, that the upholstered portions recall to the
least imaginative eye either the petals of flowers, or the wings of insects; and finally that "the wavy line" dominates the ornament, whether it be in the carving of woods, or in the floral designs of textile fabrics. Further, to note the last named point, a mirror frame produced in the Bing studios will serve as an illustration. "The wavy line" is here found in a design executed in carving and composed of birds, flowers and a female figure. The birds are swans, the flowers are convolvuli, and the woman is a dual being, half plant and half human creature, apparently seized in the very act of metamorphosis as Daphne, the laurel, is represented in the ancient marbles and wall-paintings. It is a design curious and chaotic, which only the technique of the trained artist raises above the abnormal and the trivial. It is a specimen of a decadent, rather than of a rising art, showing the same symptoms of dissolution which are apparent in the latest classic sculptures and ceramics: multiplicity, fineness and mannerism of line; the use of the distorted female figure as a decorative unit; a composition in which no idea is dominant, treatment is obtrusive and ornament excessive.

If such is the "wavy line" treated by the foremost among the advocates of the neo-floral school, what vagaries and extravagances may we not await from those who lack technical training and the traditions of historical art, but who are seized by a mad desire after the rhythm of the plant form or the undulations of the "curly tress motive;" or what gross sacrilege may not be perpetrated by designers actuated by commercial motives.

The new system lacks the first and great essential of permanence in that it is not structural. "The wavy line," like a trail of volcanic fire, lurks beneath the foundations of the domestic and decorative art of the opening century. To allow the chaotic and the negative in design to gain the ascendancy is to introduce a real danger into our environment. The eye is one of the
two broadest and most direct avenues of perception leading to the brain, and the images cast upon the retina have untold power in influencing thought, promoting action, and inducing mood. Let the structural lines of the furnishings of our homes, studios and offices be frank and emphatic, dignified and significant. And if it be true, as Morris has written, that these lines must be either a development or degradation of forms used hundreds of years ago, let them err rather on the side of adaptive imitation than on that of decadence. Let us provide that the record of our age which is surely expressed in domestic art, be not one of negation and degeneracy. And from these considerations we may arrive at the principle of the great craftsman whom we have so often quoted, that "a sincere art must be developed by the people, for the people, as a reciprocal joy for the maker and the user of the thing produced."

If now we return to the pursuit of "the wavy line," we can come upon its wanderings in any one of the minor arts which we may select. In the metals with their dominant characteristics of ductility, it seems to find its legitimate use. But even here with its obscuration of plant or flower forms, as seen in the elaborate fixtures for electric lighting, designed in accordance with "l'art nouveau," we find a lack of force and of unity in composition.

In some instances, however, the wires themselves became an integral part of the design,—thus serving at once purposes of necessity and beauty,—and the flower forms are also skilfully and reasonably employed. As a whole, compared with the wrought-iron work of the historic period, that of the neo-floral style has a lightness of effect which comports with modern conditions; since our houses are no longer fortresses, nor our toilette tables strong boxes that they should be heavily barred with the work of the smith. The effects of "the wavy line" in iron-work are perhaps the most
pleasing when they occur in open-work balustrades and grilles. In these pieces, the floral form seems often to have been adapted from the well-known Louis XV. scroll, and at other times it falls into a well-ordered and well-conventionalized leaf-design. On the contrary, the lamp designs of the new school are liable to show at their worst the exaggeration of "the wavy line," the distortion of the plant-form, and the peculiar use of the female figure before indicated. And here the results are even more trying and unhappy than in cabinet-making, for the reason that woods are less obtrusive and aggressive in their effects than the more stubborn mediums of iron and bronze.

Among workers in the precious metals, the neo-floral style has found great favor, owing to the adaptability and appropriateness of floral forms to the designs of gold and silversmiths. Into these "the wavy line" has so obtruded its presence that some of our most familiar table ornaments and utensils, twisted almost beyond recognition, appeal to us from shop-windows to guess their old uses beneath their new disguises. Furthermore, society women have welcomed the new art into their personal ornaments. Buckles and brooches, pendants, belts and bracelets often combine in miniature the figure-motif with the curling tress, the flower-petal and insect-wing design, and add beside some grotesque of fin or feather.

The non-structural design of which we have been treating has perhaps nowhere gained such firm footing as in the department of ceramics. The new art lends itself naturally to the brush of the china-painter and floral patterns have ever been favorites with potters. "The wavy line" not here content to represent the highly hybridized chrysanthemum, or other flowers of similar possibilities makes novel and advanced demands. It breaks the time-honored traditions of this class of design. For purposes of illustration one division of decoration will suffice, and that division will best
be the border, in which formerly continuous motifs were employed. Under the new conditions, the continuous motif has been discarded in favor of repeated and isolated units. A case in point exists in the border known as "the ship and wave motif," in which the sinuous line is broken at short intervals, the ends of the line curling upward, balancing each other and forming part of a curious figure, which if completed, would not be unlike the Louis XV. scroll. Then, within this enveloping line, a ship is pictured, conveying in a mysterious way the idea of the motion known in marine language as the "pitch." The vessel itself is of an indefinite classic shape—a galley perhaps—with a high prow, crescent-shaped keel and other details which within the concavity of the wave echo the first, stronger and larger figure.

This border like the specimens of cabinet-making earlier mentioned, is not one of the extreme examples of the new school, but beneath its attractive qualities lurks the non-structural, nay, the destructive element which is the *sine qua non* of the system, if system it may be called. The "ship and wave" border lacks the connecting strand which, as we have seen, was the last essential added by the Assyrians to perfect the otherwise excellent flower-design of the Egyptians. Therefore, borders like the new one used in illustration are retrogressive, since they impair the legacy of historic ornament. Their use in art would be paralleled in book-making, if the alphabet were to be discarded for the ideograph, or picture-writing. If space permitted, we might adduce other examples in recent ceramic design in which the isolated decorative units are themselves disintegrated, becoming in floral patterns a symmetrical arrangement of separate, scattered petals. In some instances, the very names of these motifs are suggestive of their artistic intention, as we find it to be in the case of "The Ragged Tulip" and others equally significant. But it is useless further to seek examples of the new system, for they
would without fail reveal the same essential qualities, and to repeat arguments is to waste words.

Enough has now been said to imply that the path of "the wavy line" throughout the art of our day breaks the continuity of development. It is a sign of the times and, like other strange phenomena, it deserves to be closely studied: not worshipped after the manner of the superstitious men of the olden time who saw in every comet the soul of some deified hero, or else dreaded in the brilliant visitant an agent which should destroy the world.

To threaten is not to overwhelm, and the arts appealing to the eye may in their resistance draw courage from the history of music as developed within the last few decades. There, Richard Wagner incarnates the spirit of "the wavy line" and he fought against the masters of structure. The good that he wrought in his art remains to commemorate the passage of a great genius, while the evil influence effected by his innovations was transitory. "The wavy line" in its very quality of disturber and destroyer is not without its uses and benefits. But it remains with artists and laymen to decide whether they will have Cosmos or Chaos.