The Use of Ornament in the House

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The attention that ornament receives from the public is partially due to the belief that it is one with beauty. This attention is so exaggerated as to cause grave trouble to the professional mind. Ornament is studied and sought for by architects seeking public favor, at the expense of mass, breadth, proportion and plan. Such action is but the response of supply to demand. The cry of the public is for ornament. The people want it, they pay for it, they purpose to have it. They ask: "Is not our daily life serious and sober in all its aspects? Give us ornament in the house, in the street, everywhere."

The cry is too insistent not to be heeded. But the want expressed by the cry should be carefully considered and wisely supplied. A building may be good and valuable as a habitation for man and a protection to his family, but in order that it satisfy that desire for ornament which is strong in every human being, some further quality must be brought to it: something that will make it attractive, beautiful and worthy to be cherished.

In current literature, writers query as to the function of ornament, where it is to be employed and what it means. Let us briefly consider these questions, first of all striving to define the word representing the basis of our theme.

Ornament is the wine of architecture. Through it runs the personality of the artist and into it is condensed his genius. But it unduly charms and allures. It is to be resisted by the weak, and to be used by him alone who can master it.

True ornament can not be applied. It arises from within the thing to be decorated. It is the effort of personality to express itself. It is joined with the constructive principle as the life of the being is joined with the bone and muscle of the body. Ornament is the surface manifestation of the vital energy of art, comparable with the human voice, the glance of the eye, the touch of the hand. It conveys sentiments and expresses facts. It is religious and symbolic. It epitomizes the history of entire races in a design the size of a man's hand. It demands existence, but
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it must not be allowed to live under a self-destroying anarchy. Government and proper development are its necessities, as they are those of all other strong individual forces. If we follow the history of our subject, we shall find that whenever ornament has been successful and satisfying, it has also been organic: so united with structural principles as to form an integral part of the edifice or object which it adorns. In order to make plain our meaning, we may draw an illustration from the Transition Period, which intervened between the Romanesque or Norman Style, and the first division of the English Gothic. From this excursion into history we learn a fact which should guide the architect and do much for the education of the layman. It is that ornament is developed, not invented; that it is a spontaneous, not a forced growth; that it must be vivified from within, and not galvanized from without into a mere semblance of life. The motifs of the Transition Period are an object lesson in evolution. They show the survivals of the geometric designs of Persian and other ancient Oriental types; they show also the classic influence modified by passage through the Romanesque style; finally they reach forward to indicate the plant-form of the Early English: a species of ornament which unites many of the qualities of the three types preceding it and which is, at the same time, strong, individual and original.

During the supremacy of Gothic architecture, the nations of northern Europe were constituted; democracy asserted itself in parliaments and charters; commercial leagues and merchant gilds grew strong. Everywhere, in religion, in state and social affairs, there was life, together with its outward manifestation, action. So we find Gothic ornament ambitious and distinctive, the work of master intellects, and offered to us glowing and red-hot from the fiery furnace of the imagination. There are no shallow incisions, no weak modeling, no thefts of inappropriate motifs. Instead, there is breadth, admirable massing of surfaces and where effect is necessary, the power of the chisel is exerted, so that it may be felt forever. The twelfth and thirteenth century sculptors modeled after the manner of Titans. Their ornament presents bar-
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baric proportions, unity of parts, perfect adaptability, striking inventiveness and rugged individuality. But they knew how to restrain their hand. They left whole acres of space severely plain, barren of molding. They trusted to texture, joints and the kindly touch of time to soften and harmonize the whole.

If we visit the great monuments of this organic period of history—the cathedrals of France and the abbey-churches of England, if we apply to them the foot-rule of hyper-criticism, if we reduce their gigantic features to inches, we gain a single conclusion: that we stand before the work of artists who wrought effectively, and who knew when to stop. In truth, the chief beauty of some of these interiors—as for instance the nave of Amiens—is the absence of decoration. The sermon in stone teaches by example. There is something almost supernatural in the work of these first Gothic architects and sculptors. It was conceived in the white heat of enthusiasm. The idea sprang full grown from the brain of the artist. Construction and ornament mingled in a single organism, each fulfilling its proper function. It is interesting to follow the subsequent development of this great phase of art, noting the ornament distinguishing each of its three periods, and the relations of the ornament first to construction and afterward to mass. The early artists were satisfied with shaft, pillar and groin. The Decorated Period added the canopy. The architect of the Perpendicular Style divided and subdivided the wall spaces, and added cusps to the panels thus formed. The Early English ornament has a vitality all its own. The jewels of its ornament lie sparkling in a broad texture of simplicity. Everywhere, there are contrast, complement and compensation. At first, the firm body of the constructive fibre was flecked with the piquancy and movement of flower and crocket. Then, as these features multiplied, they became themselves as foils to lines of shallow hollowings, straight and delicate. The Early English ornament, with its bold, deep moldings, fell when the architects, seized by the Nature-impulse, produced the floriated design. And this, in turn, was abandoned, when by its luxuriance it had covered cornice and capital, arch and casement; when it had obscured the struc-
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tural elements and threatened them as a parasitic growth threatens the life of the tree which gives it hospitality. The revolt against the floriated ornament instituted the Perpendicular Style with its sharply defined contours, as we see it in Winchester Cathedral. Then the disciples of William of Wykeham believed that they had restored order where there had been chaos, and that a final system of ornament had been founded; final because it expressed their own personal wants. But as the Lancet or Early English ornament led by evolution to the extravagances of the Decorated Period, so the Perpendicular Style led just as logically to the Geometric vagaries. And thus, it will be seen that no system of ornament can be definitive and final, since such system to be real and vital, must express the aesthetic impulse of those who create it, and since the direction of the aesthetic impulse changes with every era—one might even say with every generation of men.

In the first period of the Gothic, the spirit of the art was clothed in a robe magnificent because of its distinction and simplicity. Architecture stood before the world with its grand structural lines defined and accented beneath its vesture. Then, decoration came, little by little, to adorn the robe, which was at first exquisitely simple, then splendidly adorned, finally complicated and courting admiration at the expense of its majestic wearer. Were it needed, still another proof that ornament to be satisfying and functional, must always express some want or impulse of the times, can be drawn from the Norman period. Although massive and barbaric, the decorative elements then employed contain strong elements of beauty. The sturdy sculptors assimilated the Arabian and Sicilian influences gathered during the Crusades, in which the Franks played the principal part, and they lent their own strength to the rude volutes, frets and borders which appear in their capitals and moldings. This ornament arose, as it were, from necessity. It was part and parcel of the thing decorated, and was not applied to it as a cloak is wrapped about the body, or a glove is fitted to the hand. There was richness, even profusion, as in the diaper-work, crockets and finials, but no exaggeration.
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There were precision, variety and charm. The plain, broad impost, innocent of ornament, save an occasional concave or convex molding, offered a site for fancies of fruit, flower, or foliage. These expressions are so eloquent, terse, and vivid that we can imagine the temper of the individual carver, and see him hew out and carve the bold, overhanging forms on which the sunlight rests. These craftsmen loved ornament, not as many among us now do, for its own sake, but for the relations which it holds toward the structure and mass of the whole edifice. They did not manufacture ornament, with each little motif complete in itself. They felt the impulse to beautify the object on which their labor was expended. They touched it and it burst into the loveliness of life. The difference between the work done by these artists and craftsmen who wrought in obedience to impulse, and the work demanded oftentimes by the public of to-day, is wide and discouraging. In our own country, an architect of European training, and therefore of developed historic sense, is not seldom requested to apply Romanesque detail to a modern American edifice, or to impart something of Persian or Indian delicacy to a grave, dignified Greek or Roman frieze,—furthermore, to accomplish all this without discord or break of continuity. Those who demand such decoration wrongly consider ornament as a thing in itself. In reality, it is only a part of something, and that something is a vitalized organism, in which construction and ornament are joined together to form a complete whole, as are harmony and melody in a musical composition. In isolation no system of ornament can justly claim preference over all other styles. Ornament must be judged in position and in its relations to mass and structure. The monumental simplicity of the graven obelisk casts its spell upon us. The refinement of the Panathenaic frieze caresses our aesthetic sense. The rude grandeur of the Gothic portal appeals to our manhood. The delicate elaboration of an Italian arabesque recalls the times when for the rich life was a continuous and elegant feast. But all these charm us less by their intrinsic beauty, however great that may be, than by their association with the structures of which they form an integral part,
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and by their adaptability to the places and uses for which they were intended. Ornament should be felt rather than seen, and the moment that it becomes obtrusive, it is false and superfluous. It is no longer a growth; it is a superficial application. Ornament and construction must not war against each other, for in their conflict the structure perishes in the artistic sense. Many designers insist that construction is best left alone, and kept absolutely free from decoration. Others again regard space only as a field for the display of ornament. The life of one of the two elements is too frequently the death of the other, and the puzzle of the modern sphinx is not how to invent a new style, but how to employ the legacy and capital of knowledge which have accrued to us from the ages; how to adapt our building art to the new place which demands its fullest exercise: that is, the home, which has taken to itself many of the prerogatives of the temple and theatre of antiquity, and of the church of the Middle Ages; which has become the center of social life.

How to decorate the house in which we spend the most pleasurable hours of our existence has become an important problem. That it is also an interesting one to people of all ages and of widely differing conditions, we may learn by listening to the conversation of strangers whom we meet at the theatre, in shops, or in the street. Discussion of form, of color effects, of materials in household belongings mingles everywhere with discussion of politics, finance and social questions. And as in all other arguments, the true and the false are here found in close union. Still, it is evident from these discussions, and far more so from the results now generally attained in household decoration, that the public must be instructed in these subjects, so that the architect and the artist be left untrammeled: free to do their best work, to do justice to themselves and their patrons.

The knowledge necessary for the establishment of a true system of ornament lies in a few principles. We can not too often insist that ornament must be functional: that is, play a part in the thing which it adorns, and not be to it a superficial and applied decoration. Then, it should always express personality: that of the artist
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and the epoch creating it, that of the object of which it is an integral portion. It must be significant: not after the manner of the myths, the symbolism, the fantastic forms and the so-called “historic styles,” with which the people of our own and other countries have so long amused themselves, as children delight in a picturebook. It must be filled with the spirit of our times. It must be as expressive of our own enthusiasms, as were the Norman and the Gothic ornament of the thoughts, beliefs and aspirations of the Middle Ages.

These requirements are claimed by certain critics and artists to have been met by the newest school of French art. And it is certain that by their refreshment at the fountain of Nature, the architects, sculptors and decorators of France have been able to give a new impetus of growth to certain forms and branches of the Fine Arts. But the new graft has dangerous tendencies which must be cut off in their budding stage. Otherwise, degeneracy will ensue. The “art nouveau” ornament in the hands of a master who knows how to stay his touch, is beautiful and soothing to the eye. Through its gentle appeal to the sensuous perception it lightens the burden of the overworked and the overstrained. It leads back to “the simple life.” But the same system of ornament given over to the power of an insincere draughtsman is only to be avoided and censured. The obscured plant-form becomes in this case a non-structural wavy line, which is repeated and echoed in some dragon or reptile type, or in the tortured anatomy and drapery of a female figure. In the first instance we have progress and renewal; in the second, degeneration. In ornament we need, we must have, life. But we must purify it of that destructive, restless line which seems to set it in motion without measure or rhythm, and which produces the effect of a kaleidoscope wherein all combinations are accidental and totally without sequence.

To eliminate these dangerous elements from that material environment of our lives which we call our home, artists and laymen must join their efforts. At present, ornament is too often the handmaiden of commerce, and its production the concern of the marketplace, rather than of the studio. It is not begotten in love, and
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therefore it is in itself hateful. It does not come into existence out of response to that imperious need of beauty which is one of the primary appetites of human nature. To be real and functional in the scheme of art and life, it must be created after the manner of the olden times. It must come as spontaneously from the brains, the chisels and pencils of modern artists and craftsmen, as it long ago issued from the power of the Norman and Gothic builders. It must be at once impetuous and reserved, sturdy and delicate.