THE ADAPTATION OF ORNAMENT TO SPACE. BY M. P. VERNEUIL. TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY IRENE SARGENT

IMITATION of space and nature of material: these are the two principal factors of the many interesting problems which offer themselves to the designer of ornament. And if it is instructive to formulate and to study these problems, is it not still more useful to cause them to be solved by eminent decorative artists? From such explanations all our readers will derive pleasure, while certain among them will gain from the same source a fund of valuable knowledge.

In composing, the designer must strictly observe the two great laws which govern decorative art. These laws are simple, but absolute, and can be briefly stated.

First: the designer must adapt the ornamental forms which he employs to the spaces which he wishes to decorate.

Second: he must adapt the same ornamental forms to the qualities of the medium in which he works.

In the strict observation of these two laws resides, at least, in great measure, that which we name interpretation: that is, the resolvent power which, selecting a natural element, reduces it to the state of an element of decoration.

But what is meant when the designer is told to adapt an ornamental form to the space to be decorated?

There exist several methods by which to decorate a given space. At the very least, there are two usual modes of procedure. To
illustrate, let us choose an example: preferably a rectangular form,—the cover of a box.

Using the first of these methods, cutting by chance, it would seem, into what might be called a ready made system of ornament, the artist establishes a rectangle equal to the space to be decorated, and applies to the box cover a design which is absolutely without fitness to its acknowledged purpose. The result in this case is a fragment of ornamentation applied, so to speak, as an afterthought, upon a given surface. By the same method and with the same units of design, one might equally well have decorated a circle, a triangle, or any other wholly different space. This method, let us hasten to say, although it is of very frequent occurrence, is unworthy of an artist. In such instances, the logic of composition is ignored.

It is inadmissible for the designer, when confronted by a given space to be decorated, to ignore the fact that ornament should be logically composed, and strictly contained within the allotted limits; unless, indeed, that an effect foreseen and prearranged, influences him to construct his design otherwise. But even in such a case, he will always provide that his composition have an air of purpose and will, thus removing it from the class of motifs which are employed as expedients and commonplace.

But what ought we to say of those designs in which the units are cut and detached by caprice, it would seem, and the fragments remaining are, by such arrangement, rendered more or less incomprehensible? And ought it not to be established in art, as a first essential, that every ornament should be specially composed for the space to be occupied?

If this principle were disregarded, what would be the functions of the artist? It is evident that they would consist in composing commonplace for indiscriminate use, good for all purposes, it would appear, and in reality good for none. But the functions of the decorator are all
other than these.
They are high and dignified in the world of art.

According to his desire, in constructing his design, the artist can strongly emphasize the contours of the space to be decorated, or, on the contrary, he can, to a certain extent, disguise them. And we shall see from the examples here illustrated, that each manner of procedure has its partisans and defenders.

Therefore, we abandon as having no interest for us, all ornament not specially composed for a space to be decorated. It then remains for us to study the means which are at the command of the artist desirous of perfection in his work. Among these means, or rather these methods of procedure, two are prominent. Either the artist wishes to ornament the entire space, to cover it with homogeneous decoration; or he may localize the decoration, and confine it to a single portion of the space; leaving the remainder plain and bare.

From the latter method there may result a desired and effective contrast between ornament and plain surface: the one heightening the value of the other, and offering a parallel to the alternation of voids and solids in architecture. Confined to decoration, this principle is thoroughly understood by the Japanese, and has often been practised by them.

In beginning our examinations, let us determine what course may be followed by an artist who wishes to cover a given space with homogeneous ornament, and, for illustrations, let us accept the designs which are found upon the first pages of the present article.

A rapid review allows us to note that five principal systems of ornament can be employed. These five systems may be thus
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classified: perfect symmetry, partial symmetry, false symmetry, symmetry upon a non-symmetrical background, and, last of all, free composition.

But always, and above all, whatever may be the system of composition employed, it is well to state that every decorative composition may be limited to the following essentials: harmony of line; balance of masses and values. We have no need to speak at length of composition considered as to its principles. Harmony of the component lines is imperative in every decorative design; but it is further necessary that these lines harmonize with the contours of the space which they decorate; that they do not cut the space in a way unpleasant to the eye; that they do not appear to distort it, unless by premeditated effects, discounted in advance; since from such effects the decorator can produce excellent results. For example let us take a rectangle.

If for any reason the desire occurs to the decorator to change the apparent proportions of this figure, nothing is easier. He has only to decorate it in such a way that his lines are strongly emphasized in the direction in which the proportions must be increased. To make a more technical explanation, we may say that a rectangle covered with emphasized lines, which are parallel to one of its sides, will appear to be elongated in the direction of these lines. Further, a circle decorated in the same way with parallel lines will apparently change into an oval emphasized to the same degree that the lines themselves are accented.

As to the balance of lines and values, the principle governing these is self-explanatory. It is certain that in order to obtain a perfectly homogeneous composition, if such be his desire, the decorator must so regulate the arrangement of the constituent parts of his composition, that their masses balance.

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one another in the various parts, and, also, in the unified whole of the design. So, also, the values of the color-elements of these masses must be the objects of similar care and study. Balance can thus be established for the whole composition, upon one or several axes. But these considerations are somewhat confused with those which are to follow, and which concern the principles of composition previously explained.

The essentials of symmetrical composition are so well understood that it is not necessary to linger upon them. Given, for example, a circle divided by a diameter, if all the ornament occurring on the left of the diameter be thrust upon the right,—the diameter serving as an axis,—we obtain decorative symmetry: that is to say, all that is found on the left of the axial diameter, will be found again reversed on the right of the axis.

Naturally, decoration can be symmetrical with regard to one or several axes; as we shall find later by reference to our illustrations. In the head piece of the present

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article, the central composition is symmetrical with regard to a single vertical axis.

This is the most simple, as well as the surest and most rapid method of balancing a composition. The desire of giving variety and spontaneity to designs which are somewhat too regular and precise, quickly causes the artist to seek other combinations. Thus partial symmetry follows.

This latter condition is illustrated in the right hand motif of the headpiece. The two flowers are absolutely symmetrical with regard to the vertical axis. But, on the contrary, the stems and the leaves, no longer obeying the same law, break the monotony of the composition by introducing an unforeseen element. It is not necessary to say that the axis can cut the composition in various directions, and, pass, for instance, diagonally through the square.

Still there exists a certain stiffness, even in partial symmetry, while false symmetry necessarily gives a greater freedom to the composition; although often leaving it that air of fine balance which is so agreeable to the eye. But, in this case, the symmetry is only apparent, and if equal masses and like values balance themselves with regard to an axis, it is meanwhile easy to discover that the symmetry ceases here, and that the drawing and details are wholly dissimilar to one another. These conditions are illustrated in the left hand square of our headpiece, and, in this case, we deal with symmetry of mass, not with symmetry of form. Another method presents itself, which may be described as follows: Under a decorative motif of symmetrical construction, there passes a secondary motif which is non-symmetrical. A mixed effect results; giving to the design an appearance of fancifulness, which stops short of confusion, because of an existing basis of order and harmony. Examples of this method occur in our illustrations of certain designs by M. Mucha.

A final method resides in free composition; the designer being restricted to no other consideration than that of obtaining a good result, while following the dictates of his own imagination.

We shall now pass in review the different series, which have been variously treated by several artists, who have inscribed differing ornamental motifs in similar spaces. We shall again deal with the principles of composition which we have just enumerated.

M. Dufrené prefers a middle way between the direct interpretation of natural forms and the realistic treatment of forms which are purely conventional. He employs the flower; but the flora that he loves is peculiar to him, and can not usually be directly connected with Nature, even as interpreted by artists. His plants are works of the fancy, without having in their composition that element of unreality which the imaginative oftentimes do not know how to avoid, and which becomes the source of unpleasant surprise. The plants of M. Dufrené do not, but they might, exist. They are constructed.
rationally; they do not shock the spectator; they appear to be derived from Nature. From this flora the artist obtains excellent results, without, however, devoting himself to one system; since one of his designs which we illustrate is built upon pure linear forms.

The rectangular composition of M. Dufrène is the lid of a jewel-box decorated in lacquer. His structural system is simple, and admits an axis parallel to the longer side of the space. The decorative arrangement is symmetrical with regard to this axis. The masses are well balanced, and the solid composition quite homogeneous. The ornament, in graceful, sweeping lines, covers the given surface, showing, however, several interior open spaces.

On the contrary, in the circle representing a lace doily, M. Dufrène has reserved a vacant center. The use for which the design was intended, indicated this treatment as the most natural one to be followed, and the artist accepted it without hesitation. In this case, the ornament is limited by two concentric circles, but it is in no wise symmetrical.

In this piece the masses are finely balanced, and, in order to give the eye a certain confidence, a false symmetry has been established according to an axis passing through the two floral groups. The two curved stems between the principal and the secondary leaves assist in this effect. Let us further note that the circle is here ornamented with elements taken preferably from curves. It is a question whether this treatment results from intention, according to the principle maintained by certain decorators that a circle should exclusively receive decoration based upon curves; or whether the artist, caring little for systems, sought primarily effect and his own visual pleasure.

In his triangle, which is a portion of a mosaic of tiles, the artist derives his decorative elements from the unreal flora that is so dear to him. The composition is here solid, entirely filling the given space. Furthermore, it is symmetrical, and extremely well arranged, with careful adjustment of masses, values and tones. It offers an agreeable harmony of line and a general effect without dryness.

This fault might, perhaps, be attributed to the decorative motif for a tympanum,
designed by the same artist. But this defect, if such exist, is the result of the pure linear forms here employed. Moreover, the lines are successful, and the symmetrical composition perfectly assimilates the given space, ornamenting it in a pleasing manner.

M. Dufrêne, in these four compositions, has evidenced his usual skill, and we find in each one of them the qualities of an imaginative artist who is able to restrain himself from childish exaggerations, to which many artists have abandoned themselves, in the delusion that they were creating a style.

It is one thing to create a style, and quite another to give style to one’s works. And if M. Dufrêne can not claim the honors of an inventor, he is able, at least, to give to his decorative designs a character which belongs to them alone, and which, gradually growing stronger, will serve to make known the personality of their author.

M. Benedictus, it would appear, seeks also to impart to his compositions, a special distinction. His conventionalism is easily recognizable, and although he does not limit himself to the resources offered by Nature, for the most part, he derives thence the principles of his ornament. Flora and fauna attract him equally, and from the elements drawn from these two kingdoms he produces excellent results. In his rectangle, the arrangement of the ornament is double, so to speak, and a part of the area is left free from all decoration. A first motif consists of a double and symmetrical unit of two contorted lizards relieved against a second motif of foliage, localized into a definite form. Here the general design is symmetrical, according to an axis parallel to the shorter side of the rectangle. The whole is extremely decorative, and well balanced as to line, lights and darks, voids and solids.

For the ornamentation of his circle, M. Benedictus, like M. Dufrêne, has chosen curved figures. Dividing the given surface into three equal parts, he has employed a motif which appears to be three times repeated. But it is only an illusion, a false resemblance; for, if the foliage and the stems are identical in the three cases, the flowers differ, each time, and present variety, there where the eye, unfriended, perceives only a simple repetition. The result is not without character and effect.

In the triangle, the scheme is less frank, and, perhaps, less successful. Undoubtedly, the localization of the leafy masses in
the angles is a fine method of treatment, which leaves the center of the composition free and clear; but it is to be regretted that the stems which, although remaining inside the exterior triangle, appear to deform it by exceeding the limits of the interior triangle, to which figure the ornament is almost entirely restricted. Otherwise, the treatment of the foliage is full of interest, and the composition, wholly without symmetry, is very pleasing in its freedom. In the ornamentation of his tympanum, the artist—who seems to prefer liberty of design to the subordination of symmetrical units—has sought only to balance the masses of flowers and leaves of the mimosa plant which he has chosen as his decorative principle. The design is charming and cohesive; the lines of the leaves either harmonizing or contrasting well, one with the other.

M. Benedictus is an excellent decorator. He is able to impart to the natural elements which he employs a distinctive style; while his color, full of resource, adds still further to the interest awakened by the composition.

In Mr. Mucha we approach a less severe and studied talent, and if his compositions have less character than those of the preceding artists, they are, perhaps, more comprehensible to the public, for whom conventionalization is a defect rather than a quality.

M. Mucha uses a double system of composition, in the sense that in the same design he confronts purely conventional forms with natural elements scarcely translated from realism. A floral decoration, almost naturalistic, may occupy the first plane of the design; while a simple scheme, thoroughly conventional, sometimes very dry and hard, completes the whole. In his rectangle, the artist has treated, in an original and picturesque manner, a branch of mimosa; providing, however, that the general curved direction of the plant should be agreeable and graceful. Behind, upon the background, there winds one of the forms of which we have previously spoken, and which seem to be favored especially by this artist. It is open to question whether the two systems—the highly naturalistic and the purely conventional—harmonize perfectly with each other, but the result is not ineffective.

In his tympanum, M. Mucha has adopted a somewhat less free and characteristic scheme. He has yielded to the demands of symmetry, but yet without abandoning his usual ornamented backgrounds. He here employs effectively his decorative theme built upon full blown roses and buds of the same species. In his triangle, the scheme is similar; the elements only being changed, by the substitution of the carnation for the rose. In his ornamental treatment of the circle, M. Mucha is emphatic. He believes that a circle should be decorated not only
with curves, but also with other complete circles. It is thus that his decorative scheme of violets is bounded by two circumferences, which, however, are not concentric. The naturalistic elements are, in this case, still mingled with conventional and sinuous lines.

One can indeed give preference to other decorative schemes over those of M. Mucha. But it must be recognized that he plays like a virtuoso the themes which he elaborates into compositions.

We now pass to a designer, M. Auriol, whose schemes, constructed in a severer and more arbitrary style, are varied in appearance, but ornamental above all other characteristics. In his rectangle, this artist holds a free although firm hand, employing an indefinite, perhaps a conventional flora. His sole care, in this instance, outside of general effect, has been to produce balance of masses and cohesiveness of design. He has succeeded perfectly and, for a rectangular space, his decoration offers qualities well worthy of attention.

The three remaining compositions of the same artist are more strictly limited to the exterior lines of the surface. In the tympanum, a vertical axis regulates the symmetry of the ornament, which is built upon a theme of jonquils and crocuses. The principal effect to be noted in this example is the marked localization of the yellow notes of the blossoms, grouped in balanced masses.

In the decoration of his circle, M. Auriol, although still basing his theme upon natural forms, conventionalizes them to a greater degree, as is seen by his treatment of the flowers and leaves of the convolvulus. Here the design is symmetrical with regard to two axes perpendicular the one to the other. This is equivalent to repeating the symmet-

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rical motive four times in the composition. The design is solid and the extreme conventional treatment is highly decorative.

In the triangle the same system of ornament is again employed. It is also again symmetrical according to a vertical axis.

M. Auriol here shows the various treatments to which he subjects a single form in conventionalizing it, and, also, the great care of balance which he never fails to exercise. The same care is evidenced in the examples here illustrated from the work of M. Simas, although the artistic ideas of this decorator are derived from a wholly different source. He is more a product of the schools, and with him imagination holds a less important place. But this fact does not at all detract from the value of this excellent artist. His works awaken a different, although an equal interest.

In his rectangle, M. Simas presents an allegory of winter. First, we remark a well defined design in the border and the interior division, the latter of which is made by a round arch. This emphasis laid upon the design, is a characteristic to be noted in all our examples borrowed from the work of the same artist. From the summit of the arch a bouquet of mistletoe is suspended; while branches of holly decorate the sides, and meet at the top the knot of ribbon which holds the mistletoe in place. In the background, behind the arch, snow is falling. In the spandrels, dead leaves are whirling in the wind; while frost, flowers, or crystals, ornament the border enclosing the composition, which is symmetrical only in the general scheme.

It is the same with the composition decorating the tympanum. A border of ground ivy accentuates the form of the space, the center of which is occupied by a heavy wreath of eglantine roses. A scroll, arranged in folds, fills the tapering space below the wreath. The decorative work of M. Simas is, in general, very architectural, and the two examples which we illustrate will confirm this statement.

In his circle decorated with septifolium, a single curling motif is repeated eight times. The indented leaves of the plant, all pointed toward the center, there form a somewhat solid decoration, which grows lighter and lighter, as it approaches the circumference. Finally, in the triangle, the erodium serves as the basis of the ornament. A plain circular space is left at the center, from which three masses of foliage are thrown out to fill the angles. The spurred seed-vessels of the plant are carried round the whole extent of the background.
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Points deserving great praise in these designs are the elegance and the architectural quality of the composition, as well as the artistic restraint which is everywhere evident.

In the designs of M. Grasset contrary principles are noticeable. Independence is dominant. There is no structural composition, and a most successful imaginative quality enables the artist to master his problems of space and decorative effect. The balance of masses is here carefully assured, but the composition is free from all restraint: a fact which does not prevent it from having been well studied beneath an appearance of absolute ease. Another detail to be observed in these designs is the great simplicity prevailing throughout them; as, for instance, two flat colors produce excellent effects, without the aid of half-tones or gradations.

This simplicity is delightful in the drawing and the arrangement. The hydrangeas of the rectangle appear to be untrained plants, growing as if by chance. The water iris, with fully expanded blossom, and lanceolate leaves, is presented with careless grace. The hyacinths of the circle, with their upright, almost rectilinear foliage, harmonizing or contrasting exactly with one another, denote no perceptible labor of drawing. It is indeed one of the essentials of art to disguise effort, to offer the spectator only the pleasure of the finished effect, and to conceal from him the difficulties encountered by the artist during the course of his work. The labor must not be visible, nor the successive attempts be suspected. On the contrary, the work must appear spontaneous, produced by one throe of the imagination, and this quality is manifest in the designs of M. Grasset which are here reproduced. In his tympanum, the artist traces with masterly ease the fragile stems of his poppies, bending them at will with the utmost grace, and folding again and again their indented leaves in exquisite convolutions. At the same time he maintains a perfect balance of mass, and the harmony of the straight and the curved principles.

In the two compositions of M. Lalique, the structure of the design is more apparent. Imagination of another kind prevails.

It is legitimate in this place and connection to speak of M. Lalique; although, for many persons, he is only the distinguished restorer of the jeweler’s art. And this would seem to be a title sufficient to satisfy the most ambitious. But yet it is not enough for this artist, who is at heart a decorator, anxious to develop to the highest point his gifts of grace and distinction. Our readers have already examined the decorations of his house, which may be characterized as artistic treasure-trove. Such, for instance, are the bas-reliefs in molten glass so beautifully luminous, which ornament the great street-door of his gem-like marble palace.

In our illustrations, he appears in the part of a decorator of plane surfaces, and
our only regret is that he is not sufficiently represented in our present article.

In the triangle decorated by the artist, two cock’s heads are shown confronting each other. The conventionalized crests and feathers serve admirably to fill the angles; while beneath the heads, which are full of character, a plain space is reserved. The cock, it would seem, is a favorite motif with the artist, who often derives from it admirable results. His use of the same theme will be remembered in a diadem-like comb, exhibited at the Exposition of 1900, where a cock’s head, exquisitely treated, held in its wide-open beak a large, clear, precious stone, a topaz, if we mistake not. In this piece, the open spaces made by the contour of the comb outlined with extreme delicacy, as well as the decorative quality of the general scheme, gave an artistic quality rarely to be expected or attained. But the same artist has produced a similar decorative effect with the two heads so simply treated in our illustration. And this effect proves that the value and interest of a work do not proceed from extreme complication. They result rather from the style with which the true artist is able to permeate his creations. M. Lalique excels in modifying, in simplifying, natural forms. Every day we see him transforming into jewels the wayside flower and the most commonplace insect, which assume style and dignity by passing through the medium of his powerful personality.

A T the end of this rapid examination of decorative compositions a single conclusion is reached.

First of all, one must recognize that, in order to obtain one and the same result, the seven artists here represented have employed various means. Symmetry is seen side by side with free design, and even in the different drawings of a single artist. This fact would seem to indicate that all theories of composition are useless, and that the artistic perceptions of the decorator, together with the result obtained, are the only essentials of value.

Every designer obeys his temperament, and in this he does well. M. Simas prefers freedom, while M. Grasset composes more severely and coldly, using more regular and tra-
ditional methods. He has recourse to symmetry and repetition.

Method is nothing. Result is all essential. This answer should be made to the champions of system, who confine individuality within a field too small to allow sufficient freedom for its development. It is, indeed, easy to learn to compose with accuracy: to balance line, mass and color. But how much more difficult it is to find an artist really worthy of the name, who is able, not merely to fill a given space, but, also, to impart to his design a distinction, a style, which is the peculiar property of his genius. The occurrence is rare, but it is not impossible, as it is proven by our illustrations. For an amateur even, however ingenuous he may be, can never mistake a Grasset design for an Auriol, or a Dufrène for a Mucha. And the reason for such clearness resides in the fact that these artists have been able to acquire that rare possession, distinction.

An interesting subject for study would be the respect for personality in artistic education, and the means adapted to develop, to excite this individual character, without which every artist is stricken with mediocrity. Undoubtedly, it is well to compose faultlessly. But often one sees teachers of art shudder with indignation at the sight of a design which is outside the ordinary type, which ignores formulas and creates a blot upon a uniform area of work. It is natural for a strongly original master to attempt to infuse his own personality into his students. But would not his task be a higher one, if, eliminating his own preferences, he sought to develop in each of the young talents confided to his charge, the sense of individuality and character, to heighten qualities which later, after long and painful struggles, might manifest themselves brilliantly, before their possessor was himself aware of their existence?

It might, perhaps, be even desirable that an art teacher should lack strong personality, provided that, thoroughly acquainted with the technicalities of his subject, he should seek, not only to transmit his knowledge to his students, but also to develop their special aspirations; as in this case, his own too strongly pronounced qualities would no longer oppose and obstruct the progress of those whom he would lead.

But we are far afield from our ornamented triangles and circles. Yet this very digression is an object-lesson in decorative art: one which could be extended with profit. By thus enlarging our area of observation, we hope to present, not only designs by French artists, but also those of decorators of other nationalities. By this means, our readers will be enabled to study different methods of solving an artistic problem, as, also, to examine from the same point of view the resemblances and the differences presented by the various schools of decorative art. It is advantageous to see the same form or space treated successively by French, German, English and American designers, all of them excellent in their profession.

But our ambition is higher still. Not
content with this project, we hope, not indeed to reveal, but, at least, to indicate and emphasize those resources of the decorator which are as yet too little known. We allude to the infinite treasures of Nature. Only too often the artist, pressed for time, and oppressed by routine, keeps jealously to the beaten paths. The floral kingdom alone claims his attention, and even then it is to a chosen aristocracy that he addresses himself; since there are a thousand little blossoms, delicate and various in form, which are neglected by those who do not wish to see them, or who can not appreciate their charm. Mosses, the white nettle, and other humble growths invite study and wait to be conventionalized. And, outside the floral kingdom there lies the realm of insects! What forms are there! What sumptuous color-schemes in which all boldness and all harmony are successfully attained! From Brazil and from the Congo Free State we obtain the richest, strangest, most diverse forms of life, capable of satisfying the most exacting dreamer. In these species the most precious substances: gold, silver, enamels, deep-toned velvets, seem to be used in profusion in order to charm and dazzle the artist.

It would be imprudent and useless to attempt to reveal the wealth of these riches, which are inexhaustible. But it is hoped that through the study of certain types, some enthusiasts, extending these researches, will be enabled to increase the already known resources.

Beside the world of insects, there lies the world of birds, of fishes, and the world of microscopy. Our project is to touch lightly and consecutively upon each of these subjects.

If the animal in its entirety does not invite the artist, a thorough examination will yet reveal in the details, forms either exquisite or strange, sometimes unique, and often charming, which decorative caprice can utilize and raise to an artistic rank until the present time monopolized by plants and by the animals regarded as of noble type.

The days are past when the lily, the iris, the poppy and the eglantine rose seemed alone worthy to enter into decorative design. Also, beside humming birds and butterflies, there exist other insects, and we promise ourselves the pleasure of examining many such within the limits of these pages.

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