ORNAMENT: ITS USE AND ITS ABUSE. BY GUSTAV STICKLEY

Not long ago, two women who were visiting my workshops, stopped to examine a table which, made of fumed oak and simply constructed, depended for its attractions upon its carefully adjusted proportions and its color properties—the latter based upon the work of Nature and developed by judicious treatment.

Casting over the object a glance which I saw to be trained and critical, one of the visitors exclaimed: “Isn’t that beautiful?” The other, plainly a more conventional person, replied rather unwillingly: “Yes, if you admire that sort of furniture.” Then, she added, after a quick survey of the room inclusive of all its contents—cabinet, metal, and needle-work—“I see that everything is alike: the same principle everywhere. In fact, I hear that the director of these workshops has pronounced against all ornament.”

This fragment of conversation appeared to me an excellent basis for explanations which, if sufficiently well made, might be conducive to the education, the happiness—I might almost say the morality—of a large class of persons. I therefore determined to offer a few words in THE CRAFTSMAN regarding ornament: to define its nature as I understand it to be; to discuss in a simple way its functions; to plead against its misapprehension and abuse.

My plan, I own, as I reconsider the words just fallen from my pen, might appear formidable to persons seeking information in a popular form. But let not “the gentle reader” take fright! To borrow a
phrase which once pleased me as a description of length and prosiness, I am not about “to bring down the history of the world from Genesis to the Day of Judgment.” Nor do I intend to seek illustrations from arts and crafts other than those with which I am familiar practically; since I believe that as “the shoemaker should stick to his last,” so will the cabinet-maker best express himself, if he confine his criticism to those objects which are wont to take shape in his workshop, growing beneath his eye and developed by his judgment from the plan to the thing accomplished.

But thus restricting myself, I shall still possess over-abundant material for reference; while time and space will fail, before I shall have been able to formulate the closely pressing thoughts with which this material inspires me.

I therefore hasten to my definition of ornament, which I apprehend to be a factor in the thing created, used by the craftsman solely for the gratification of the eye, separated and distinct from all qualities of usefulness, but yet concurring with them in an indivisible unity. As my first illustration I will cite structural devices, such as the mortise and tenon, which, while strengthening the framework and so heightening the serviceability of the object, also emphasize, at the proper points, the outlines presented to the eye. From the instance quoted, elementary in its simplicity, it is possible to follow the same system through an infinitude of far more complicated examples, each of which invariably proves that the most subtile curves, the most delicate balance of parts, not only embellish the composition, but are constructive factors, concealing their function of labor beneath the mask of beauty. Rendered enthusiastic by a long and patient study of the
forms of the lesser building art, I venture to affirm that what may be called the decorative treatment of structure was as well understood by the old masters of cabinet-making—the French under Louis XIV., and the English of Georgian times—as by the Gothic masters of the architectural principles of pier and flying buttress, thrust and counter-thrust.

But Boule and Chippendale, Adams, Heppelwhite and Sheraton, with their nameless associates, did not live in an age of machinery. Their works were individuals, distinguished from all other objects of their class, just as every human being has a personality and a countenance all his own. It is quite impossible to reproduce them: copies being to the originals what automata are to living, breathing men and women.

But beauty in cabinet-making need not be a thing of the past. As I have elsewhere expressed myself, a democratic art must be produced, which shall adapt itself in both material and structure to the needs and the means of the people. The wood carvings of the old days ornamenting the chair, chest, or settle, were the result of much time, as well as of great skill. They were slowly produced for the wealthy few who had fitted them to some scheme of decoration, and knew the very space which they were to occupy, before they came into existence. It is absurd therefore to attempt to reproduce by machinery this system of decoration, legitimate as originally used, and to apply it at haphazard to structure, at points where the contact of the two elements has no meaning, and the union resembles nothing so much as a nonsense jingle rhyme, in which coined words are massed together, with no connecting thread of sense. If only the manufacturers, the designers and the public of to-day could be brought to this point of view,
which is based upon pure fact, the interests of economy, of household art, and of sound education would be greatly advanced by this acceptance of truth; since all these means to happiness are, I hold, interdependent, and progress, or fail together. Apart from all necessities of buying what one finds, and what one must, by reason of purse limitations, every one expresses himself in his dress, his room, his dwelling. Therefore, it is nothing short of immoral so to commercialize production in the things of daily service—furniture, textiles and pottery—as to vitiate the public taste by making it accept more and more freely that which is swept together with no sense of order and fitness, and made, not to wear and to last, but simply to sell. I feel that I can not too strongly inveigh against carving executed by machinery, and I will further amplify the reasons for my aggressive position. First, the carving so executed is false in itself; since it is not an original process, but rather one counterfeiting a slow, patient, intelligent operation, whose beautiful results can be obtained through the sole medium of the human hand. Secondly, I will again refer to the incompatible union which is so easily formed by construction and decoration, furthered by both manufacturers and designers: by the former because they are eager for great profits; by the latter because by saving themselves the slow, exhaustive labor of original composition, they increase their product of drawings and so gain a reputation for facility.

At this point, I might be asked why the designers of the present time do not unite structure and ornament in the same logical way as the famous old cabinet-makers whose examples stand ready for study before them. To this question I can reply by saying that each period has its own structural forms—more or less pronounced—of the things
of daily service; that these forms undergo a continuous imperceptible change by reason of the changes in social customs to which they respond; that it is not the same with ornament, which, under no necessity to fit itself to that which is living and progressive, remains what I may call historic: that is, recognizable as belonging to a special century, reign, or movement. So, an American reclining-chair, whose only essential, valuable characteristics are structural soundness and the ability to afford comfort, is, more often than otherwise, built to display itself as supported by a dragon, gryphon, sphinx, or other winged being, stolen from the real function which it originally exercised on some old cabinet or chest, and set in worse than idleness in its new position, impotently to snarl or grin, as if in derision of its own fate.

This one example will serve to show to what extent the designers of furniture to-day depend upon chance for construction and upon the past for ornament. It will also serve to prove that certain structural forms in cabinet-making refuse ornamentation and are spoiled by it, just as certain faces and figures are injured in their effect by elaborate dress; or better, as certain strong types of character are made ridiculous in the attempt to soften their austerities by means of social refinement and culture. The force of this last comparison, will, I think, be readily perceived, since we are all familiar with the rustics of the stage who, seen against the background of their own village, are fascinating as sons of the soil; but who, when transported
to the metropolis through the demands of the dramatic action, become grotesque, repulsive and hateful. I would, therefore, if it were possible, establish and maintain, with limitations and tolerance, a kind of Monroe Doctrine in cabinet-making; that is, I would reject all foreign and historic styles from the workshops and warehouses of America, except such as prove their right of entrance by rising above questions of imitation to meet the severe tests of utility, durability and firm artistic principles. But for the present regrettable conditions, I do not sharply reproach either the designer or the manufacturer. The blame lies with our age which both uses and abuses machinery: using it legitimately to lighten and quicken heavy labor; abusing it to falsify and degrade art, by attempting to produce what a human brain, eye or hand must direct, measure, or fashion. A few classes of individuals must not be held responsible for the trend of the age, and to fix the fault in the present case is to follow the story of "the house that Jack built." The manufacturer of furniture, in order to keep pace with his competitors, buys the carving machine; the machine, once purchased, must be kept in activity; the designer, to save his employer from loss, must produce at a rapid rate, hardening his artistic conscience as he sees the machine destroying the individuality of his work by producing four similar pieces at once, and trying his best to supply the lost attraction of individuality by pure novelty, which may induce the public to purchase, and thus promote the ends of commercialism.
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But I will turn from my prolonged censure of machine carving to suggest what in my judgment is a rational and practical means of beautifying the cabinet work of the present time: that is, the exhaustive study of proportions, the careful adjustment of part to part, and the development of the beauties of color, grain and markings existing in our native woods. I am persuaded that those who shall devote trained intelligence to such study will not regret the use made of their time and powers. To prove that I do not stand isolated in my opin-

ion, I will again, as I have already done at greater length, express my admiration for the exhibit of domestic architecture and decoration made at St. Louis, under the auspices of the German Empire. And in concluding this part of my subject I am almost led to say that every designer of furniture should be an architect, or failing this, a practical cabinet-maker and joiner.

It now remains for me very briefly to indicate the reasons governing my selection of illustrations. The first of these is a typical example of machine made carving. The ornament is here aggressive and boastful. It lies as plainly as words could do. Its originals, found
in the style of the Renascence, were always supports and adjuncts—
integral parts of the composition. There, the upright figures sup-
ported real weights: the bed of tables, the caps of pedestals, the friezes
of cabinets and the like; while the trunks and heads of the mermaids
were used as modulating curves required to join two parts. But here,
the cherub appears to be enjoying vacation from a porter’s service be-
neth the plumy acanthus, and the mermaid hides her tail in the up-
holstery. Their occupations are gone and they resent it by creating
discord after the manner of all idle persons.

The ugliness of this piece is intensified by contrasting it with the
dignified model which follows it. The plain chair puts forth strong,
tense arms and presents a well-defined seat. Its firm yet flowing out-
line sweeps along with a wave-like grace, emphasized by the contrast
of the concave with the convex. Accents are placed at the proper
points: at the upper and lower terminations of the legs, and at the
top of the arms. The whole is unified and harmonious.

The third design, equally with the first, is an attempt to create a
model which shall make quick sales and large profits. It is a development from a comfortable stuffed chair, whose back has been fitted with a wood spine for no better reason than to break a plain surface with ornament, and so to attract buyers (and they are many) whose object is display. The composition is thoroughly bad: senseless with its alternation of wood and upholstery; aggravating with its ill-adjusted arms and legs.

An agreeable contrast to this ostentatious model exists in the fourth chair whose good points are apparent. The wall of its back describes a broad and pleasing curve, rising slowly from the front uprights, and the frame is well defined, as it should be in this bold, masculine type of design.

A table follows next, showing a familiar and attractive pattern. The bulbous treatment of the acanthus pedestal is effective, and the animal legs, stretching out from beneath the foliage, offer a good example of structure treated decoratively.

Its successor in my sequence is a degenerate sprung from the same race. Its pedestal, composed of low, clumsy, clustered columns, suggests the most barbarous type of Romanesque architecture. The bed of the table would be over-supported by these alone, but the animal’s legs and claws, so legitimate in the last instance, here serve as floor brackets, absurd in their suggestion.

My final contrast is presented by two desks, the first built by a craftsman who reveals his mastership. The assertive outline, the strong drawing of the lower chest, the sharp pitch of the drop, the well-modeled cabriole leg unite in forming a composition to which the gratified eye returns repeatedly.

It is all otherwise with its companion. The latter possesses no distinction. Its proportions are faulty, its curves abortive, its ornament is vulgar—even the molding of the top is reversed from its correct profile. While its companion, intrinsically good, will continue to increase in value, like a fortune having a solid foundation, the degenerate model will scarcely be received in the auction-room; since its first value was the computation of a single manufacturer, and it can pass no test of worth or beauty. To look for a moment at its mis-applied ornament is to confirm myself a thousandfold in the judgments which I have just expressed.