MODERN APPLICATION OF THE ART OF DAMASKEENING IN JAPAN: BY FLORA OAKLEY JANES

The swords of Damascus and the minute decoration of their hilts in gold and silver tracery have given a name to a distinct and most interesting form of art work in metal. But as we call porcelain “china” though it may have been made in New Jersey, and never once think of Calcutta when buying or wearing calico, so for the finest damaskeen work in the world at the present time we go not to Syria but to Japan.

Kyoto, the old capital, which for eleven hundred years was the heart and center of every art impulse in the empire, was the seat of the industry in the riper days of the feudal regime. For three hundred years the art has flourished there in the patronage of court and warring clans; and today the most elaborate gold inlaying in Japan is done by a dozen or so of workmen in three little shops in out-of-the-way corners of Kyoto.

In a time when a boy of samurai rank was invested with a sword at the tender age of five; when every gentleman carried two swords as a badge of his position as gentleman and warrior; when war was a genteel trade and the sword the universal weapon; when fashion gruesomely included a dagger among the wedding presents of a bride, and dictated a special dirk for the correct performance of harakiri, it is readily seen why it was that the new craze for art decoration which came into Japan on the wave of Buddhist innovation should have turned to the ornamentation of every part of the sword suitable for ornamentation—the hilt, the guard and the scabbard.

If there is any one thing, however, which more than another stands for action without any foolery, it is the modern gun-barrel. And so, with the passing of the feudal age, the artist or artisan in sword-hilts was left without a definite occupation. But in late years, especially since a distinct branch of trade has been established in the West, the leading staple of which is Japanese “curios,” a steadily growing demand has sprung up in the track of the professional buyer as well as of the foreign tourist. The articles called for are varied enough; but from the Japanese point of view they are singularly alike in that they are all utterly inexplicable and unaccountable, ranging as they do in size and expense from a box for
a millionaire to keep his postage stamps in up to an eighteen inch plate—emphatically not for him to put his food on but to hang on
the wall!

Damaskeening, as done in Kyoto, takes one step beyond the possibilities of bronze work, inasmuch as it adds the hair line to the bronzist’s methods. All metals and all alloys are laid under contribution, though gold and silver upon iron are given the preference for the fine contrast they afford; while the stress is put upon inlaying and carving processes rather than upon the fusing and mixing of metals in delicate proportions as in bronze work. One peculiarity is highly noticeable in all metal work in Japan. A Japanese has no prejudice which leads him to place one metal before another for its mere costliness, any more than a western artist in oils would think of using his most expensive colors all the time instead of the most effective ones. This may be depended upon as a main distinction between East and West in metal work. Copper, for instance, may very readily take precedence over gold, or iron over either one. The place in the color scale would determine the selection of any particular metal, not its intrinsic value.

All processes possible in combination are at the disposal of the worker in damaskeen. He may inlay, carve, engrave, and even fuse, though he places less reliance upon fusing than the bronzist does. The favorite style of decoration is a medallion inlaid boldly with a scene and set in a ground of workmanship so minute and so evenly distributed that a second look is necessary to resolve what appears to be a sheen into an almost microscopic labyrinth of scrolly and fret.

As is the case with all fine Oriental work, it is impossible to appreciate the beauty of damaskeen without at least so much of knowledge of the exquisite skill and almost superhuman patience spent upon it as may be gained from an hour’s visit at a workshop.

First the plate of metal,—iron or soft steel,—to be ornamented is firmly embedded in a block of rosin to give facility for handling. But iron or soft steel in its crude state is intractable for inlaying. Just as the artist in pastels has to prepare his paper carefully to insure the ready blending of the tints of his picture, the worker in damaskeen must thoroughly and uniformly break up the stubborn
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texture of his metal plate to obtain a surface which will both receive and hold the inlaid decoration. This work, however important, is but preliminary and is intrusted to the apprentice. So with a toy chisel and a make-believe hammer he sets at work. Moving the chisel slowly over a bit of space as long as the width of the tool, say a quarter of an inch, he beats a continuous tattoo upon its flattened top, the result being a tiny square of vertical hair lines like the shade in an engraving. Then he turns his block at right angles and makes a second square adjoining the first, turns again and makes a third until the plate has become a checker-board, the squares of which are of alternate vertical and horizontal parallels. This, of course, has taken time, but the work is only just laid out. Again the surface is patiently gone over in the opposite direction—that is, the vertical hair lines are crossed by horizontal ones and vice versa. A third time the process is repeated with diagonals, and a fourth with other diagonals crossing the previous ones in checks. The master of the shop now runs his finger over the plate and pronounces it ready for the design.

Meantime, the gold has been preparing. This comes from the gold-beater in thin ribbon plates. The master himself cuts them into convenient lengths of about three inches, and then with a pair of scissors which he stops every other minute to whet, he pares one hair’s breadth after another so fine that a dozen have to be cut before the ribbon is perceptibly narrowed. A glance over the rim of his goggles now brings a boy to the hibachi, who quickly starts a glow among the three or four bits of charcoal by blowing the flame through a bamboo stick with the bellows given him by nature.

It is this extreme simplicity of method and paucity of means to do with that makes a piece of fine Japanese work of any kind seem little short of a miracle to a “foreign barbarian.” It compels an intimacy with raw materials and a sharpening of the faculties that amount in practice to an added sense. A few minutes of blowing and the strips are all cut, the coals bright red and all in readiness. Taking the bamboo tube from the boy and with the other hand deftly picking up a little platinum dish of the gold shavings with a pair of chop-stick tongs, the operator balances the dish nicely on the coals. Before a degree of heat has been reached sufficient to melt the gold, he carefully picks out one of the hot wires, and
laying it on a steel plate he rolls it with a spatula until the angles and kinks have disappeared and the wire itself is as fine and even as a hair from a baby's head and almost as pliable. All are treated in turn, and the materials are now ready for manipulation.

A FAVORITE Japanese treatment of damaskeen, as has been said, is a medallion outlined boldly with a coarse wire, within which a design is delicately wrought in gold, it may be in the space of a square inch, to represent, say, a temple garden or a palace park—both subjects commending themselves for minuteness of detail in foliage, water, boats, lanterns, temple roofs, distant mountains, and clouds with an inevitable flight of birds disappearing into them. The ground is then completely filled with some all-over pattern of chrysanthemums or Paulownia, for instance, executed with almost microscopical delicacy and precision.

The article to be decorated may be a fan-shaped jewel box. A medallion of the same shape will be outlined on the lid in coarse silver wire and filled in to represent a vista of hills with water and pine-tree foliage in the foreground, while the body of the box may be covered with a running pattern of tufts of pine needles. A Greek key may finish the edge of the lid, and the bottom may be covered with an all-over adaptation of the Greek key—a pattern which the Japanese, however, claim as an independent invention of their own, suggested by the lightning. The inside of any box is always finished with a hammered gold plate.

The two steps already described are quite mechanical, but to produce a pattern or design requires not only a delicate touch and a knowledge of metals amounting almost to an instinct but the ability at least to copy with the utmost accuracy, if not to work a design out and out in free hand. The cross-hatched surface of iron is such as to make a preliminary outline drawing impracticable. The artisan is an artist to the extent that his eye alone must guide and determine his work. When he has mastered his means of expression, his task is the artist's task to make a sketch. He makes it on an iron plate in lieu of paper with gold wire tracery in place of ink.

Picking up a wire, he touches it to the iron, guides it along with the chisel to form the line he has in mind—a mountain slope, the sag of a cottage thatch, or the pinion of a bird—cuts it off at the
proper length by a slight pressure of the chisel edge and gives the line a few taps with a spidery hammer, repeating the process till the main features of the design are indicated.

The entire plate is then given a thin coat of lacquer, through which, when dried, the gold work is easily made to appear on being rubbed with a steel polisher. The plate is thus made ready for the next less important details. These are then added and lacquer is again applied. The process may be repeated until a design has been worked over twenty times. By such a mode of procedure, the workman is not only enabled to keep the proper proportions of space which the infinitude of details might otherwise encroach upon, but lacquer has been so forced into the pores of the iron as to make it proof against rust, though lacquer does not at all appear on the finished surface.

When the last trace of gold has been inlaid, the piece of work, if a receptacle, as a box, vase, or shrine, rather than a flat surface, as a panel or plaque, is lined with gold by hammering a sheet of the pure metal directly upon the interior surface. The whole is then carefully burnished and the work is complete.

Considered as workmanship, damaskeen has great durability. When one end of a wire has been touched to the iron and given a smart tap or two with the hammer, it is possible to draw a heavy plate freely about on the table by the wire or even to lift it in the air. The wire will break before the end will be detached.

To the general field of decorative art, damaskeen holds a relation somewhat similar to that of the sonnet to poetry. The problem is unlimited embellishment of the "scanty plot of ground" enclosed within the rigid limitations of material and space; and to the solution of this problem anything at all in the works of nature or the arts and imaginations of man may be called upon to contribute a design. As may be expected, the national fancy for a grotesque effect finds expression in damaskeen as in everything else the Japanese artist touches; but the naturally fine taste of this truly aesthetic people always prevents the perpetration of an offense of any kind.

To illustrate the range of ingenuity shown in the selection of a design, I recall a little tray with a cottage and overhanging plum
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tree in full bloom in the medallion—a theme as common as it is pretty. The medallion was set in the usual net of filagree work, but in the cramped space of each of the interstices was displayed some implement or utensil of the kitchen or general household economy, as if the cottage had been ransacked to provide the scheme for its own setting. A delicately outlined teapot, a gridiron, a dustpan, a shovel and tongs, and forty other homely things all came to light on a close inspection of the work.

The most ambitious piece of damaskeen I have ever examined was a large iron plaque, representing a theme in which religion, mythology and drollery were combined in about equal proportions. The tracery in this case poetically stood for the unsubstantial veil that is felt to be between this material world and the realm of spirits. Behind it and striving to break through its meshes were horrid monsters of the darkness, which the iron was cleverly used to typify,—dragons or hobgoblins with claws, horns, scales, fins and snouts—madly careering about a temple window, from which a couple of tonsured Buddhist priests were driving them with bell and rosary back to their own proper domain.

Damaskeen may not be an art, and the patience, skill, and taste required to damaskeen may not amount to genius; but in that case the old definition is at fault which makes genius an “infinite capacity for taking pains.”

THE REVELATION OF WORK

“W ORK is a confession of weakness as well as a revelation of strength; it becomes an index to the purposes and the methods of the worker. In the work of each individual may be read the outward expression of his inner moral being. The order of the world is essentially moral; but this order is sadly disturbed by the shirker and the trifler. The progress of civilization is impeded by the carelessness and shiftlessness, the ignorance and incompetence of many who profess to do work assigned to them.”

—John Herbert Phillips.