

“ORNAMENT” AND THE
SOURCES OF DESIGN IN THE
DECORATIVE ARTS

TODAY in many of the high schools, and particularly in those institutions devoted to the teaching of industrial design, the study of the development and evolution of styles is receiving a constantly increasing amount of attention, while the various architectural schools have of necessity always devoted much time to the study of certain specialized types of ornament and form. The teaching in all such schools has to some extent been based upon the study and analysis of the various objects in which the several styles are exhibited, and to a far greater extent upon photographic or other reproductions of them, as there seems to be a commonly accepted theory that such objects, whatever they may be, are not only the original things, but the only things in which the art of decorative ornament and form may be studied to the best advantage.

So far as the teaching of craftsmanship, as distinct from design, is concerned, this theory is undoubtedly true, but history shows conclusively that it is only partially true of design. For although design is based upon craftsmanship, it is quite another thing, and the study of the two must not be confounded. The situation is exactly analogous to that in music, where although composition presupposes the possibility of execution, the training of the executant and of the composer are widely different, and few musicians are able to play their own tunes for the simple reason that they cannot write them.

Whatever the case may have been in the

earliest times, the fact remains that since the middle of the fifteenth century, when printing was invented and paper first became an ordinary article of commerce, the craftsmen have turned for their designs not so much to the actual pieces of furniture, metalwork, or what not, that have come from other days, or other hands, as to drawings and engravings which have been made and sold in large quantities



PATTERN FOR LACE FROM PAGANI, OPERA
NOVA COMPOSTA, VENICE, 1546

for their use. Were it otherwise, the rapid and simultaneous development of furniture-making along the lines of a new style in many widely separated localities could not have taken place, because the objects made in these new styles were immediately absorbed into residences and were not available for study by the craftsmen. Even were this simple historic fact not true, they could not have been produced in sufficient quantities or rapidly enough disseminated to serve as models for the trade, and in any event the elementary problem of expense would have made such a dissemination impossible, as few great metropolitan dealers or manufacturers,

even of today, can afford to have their private museums of decorative art. Contemporary dressmakers in the provinces of the *monde couturière* do purchase models from the great initiators of fashion, but their custom has not spread to the other trades, nor even very far among their own craft, as is proved by the notoriously great sale of printed or cut pattern designs. Comparison of the slowness of alteration in fashion prior to the middle of the fifteenth century and its subsequent increasingly kaleidoscopic speed with the development and spread of printing and engraving, compels the conclusion that the printing press has been mainly responsible for the change in tempo since that time.

Again, the situation may perhaps best be explained by a reference to music. The sounds produced by the performer at the piano correspond to the articles produced by the craftsman, while the musical score, the creation of which demands truest invention and greatest constructive imagination, passes from hand to hand in printed or written form just as the engraved and drawn designs for craftsmen did in former years prior to the invention of photographic process reproduction. In fact, a photograph of an objet d'art is roughly analogous to our modern "canned" music, and the solar print of a Hepplewhite chair in a museum bears somewhat the same relation to the original engraved designs from which that chair was constructed, that the mechanical player's music bears to the lithographed score of a Beethoven sonata. The original basis in either case being a printed score or design, the chair or the music produced by the executant at the bench or at the piano is but a reading or an elaboration of another man's creation, to be considered and recognized as such, in most cases without further or more exalted claim.

Of the designs from which our forefathers immediately produced by far the greater part of the various things today loosely classed as examples of decorative art, many were drawings, but most were prints, and from a cultural point of view many of these are of the very greatest

importance. Much of this "ornament," as the drawn and engraved designs for laces, furniture, metalwork, etc., are called in the technical language of the print room, is from the hands of men who have won their greatest popular fame as engravers and etchers of pictorial prints, their ornament being either "original," or variations upon themes found by them in actual objects, or often mere "copies." In any event, in pure ornament there is little

learned in the several crafts for which they were working, and their designs have been made definitely for the purpose of being engraved by other hands, just as the musical composer intends that the notes in his manuscript shall be stamped into zinc by the music engravers.

As engraving had its origin in the workshops of the gold and silversmiths, so did few of the great print makers of the Renaissance fail to produce their engraved



LACE IN THE MUSEUM MADE FROM THE PATTERN ON PAGE 36

difference between the first two classes; for no one in all probability has ever invented a wholly new and original design, while as for the "copies" they are like two editions of the same musical score, their value not differing materially if the transcriptions be accurate. Moreover, even in the case of a direct copy of the decoration and form of a piece of metalwork, it must be remembered that the craftsman, who works from a piece of paper pinned on the wall over his bench bases his work upon the eyesight, draftsmanship, and taste of its draftsman rather than upon that of the supposititious "original" creator. Large, however, as is the amount of ornament designed by engravers or etchers, most of it has been made by men

ornament. Thus, to mention but a few of the more popularly known personalities, Schongauer engraved a series of armorial bearings, a crozier, a censer, and several leaf patterns; Dürer not only made his magnificent coats of arms with the cock and with the skull, but produced bookplates and six woodcut copies of the celebrated engravings of "Knots" by an anonymous Italian engraver of the school of Leonardo da Vinci; while the German Little Masters devoted a large part of their efforts to exercises in design for use by metal workers and carvers of wood and stone. To Altdorfer, the Hopfer family, and such later men as Matthias Zundt and Virgil Solis we are indebted for long series of arabesques and designs for beakers,

cups, and other vessels, while Peter Flötner and Paul Flindt specialized in woodcut and etched designs for marquetry, furniture, and metalwork. The situation was much the same in Italy that it was in Germany, possibly the most famous and beautiful of all the Italian primitive engravings being the nielli and what in

ized designers for the several crafts, who worked habitually with pen or engraving tool rather than with brush, hammer, or chisel, thus taking over for their respective trades the function previously performed by men primarily known as painters or pictorial engravers. This specialization is noteworthy because, except for the decor-



TITLE-PAGE OF THE BOOK FROM WHICH THE CUP BELOW WAS MADE

English are known as the "Otto Prints" after the name of a former owner, but which in German are descriptively known as Florentinische Zierstücke.

Quite probably the large proportion of ornament to be found in the work of the early engravers is due to the fact that many of them were originally trained as gold and silversmiths—the earliest engravings having quite curious technical analogies with the plates by such American primitives as Maverick and Paul Jones, who were both silversmiths and engravers upon copper. The most influential early ornament, however, was that designed by painters—the case of Raphael's loggia being a prime instance—as their designs for the decoration of flat surfaces were copied by the engravers and draftsmen and spread broadcast through the community. After the first quarter of the sixteenth century there rapidly grew up a class of special-



ation of flat surfaces, the designs produced for the various purposes seem early to have formed the ruts in which future development was to take place—the immediate transference of non-pictorial designs from the medium for which they were intended to another being comparatively infrequent. From time to time as new decorative elements made their appearance they were utilized and adapted by the designers for the several crafts, important instances being the pervasion of the "Moresque" in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and the immediate influence of the discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum in the eighteenth century; but their subsequent development seems largely to have been independent.

This condition has lasted well on to the present day, the great succeeding styles in any class of "work of art" being in almost every instance either initiated or dis-

BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

seminated by the specialized designers. Thus the several great styles of the English eighteenth century are known not after the actual cabinet makers who made the furniture but by the names or the manners of the creators of the pattern books. Chambers, who, with Chippendale, was responsible for the "Chinese" furniture,

Berain; the styles of the Regency and Louis XV are attributed in large part to the group of designers of pattern books at the head of which stood Oppenort and Meissonier, while Louis XVI is summed up in many respects by the plates of Salembier. Piranesi, who on his coppers always described himself as architect, was prob-



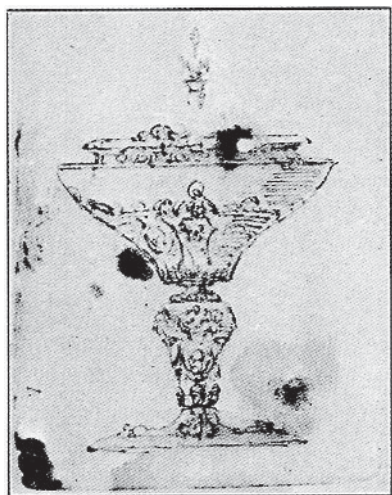
ENGRAVING FOR A CUP AND A FREE COPY IN SILVER IN THE MUSEUM

was an architect, as was also Adam—neither of them being a cabinet maker. Of the three most famous English designers, Hepplewhite, Chippendale, and Sheraton, all were trained as cabinet makers, but pieces made or actually designed by them are practically unknown—the greater part of their fame and influence having been due to their published pattern books. The Louis XIV style seems to have been due mainly to the popularity of the engraved work of such draftsmen as Charmeton, Jean le Pautre, and Jean

ably more than any other man responsible for the initial impulse which brought about the so-called Empire style. Space forbids mention of the great designers for jewelry, except perhaps Benvenuto Cellini, one of whose masterpieces has now found its final resting place in the Metropolitan Museum, or of the many men who have invented the designs in the countless pattern books for laces, embroideries, metalwork, and generally for schemes of interior decoration—but the same thing is true of them that is true of the furniture

designers, they were primarily ornamentists and only secondarily craftsmen.

The decoration of flat surfaces had rather a different history than that of ornament intended for specific materials, as here there were not the same controlling physical limitations. Despite the great beauty and celebrity of such work, for instance, as that of Raphael and Watteau, designs of this type are perhaps to be found in greatest abundance in the decoration of printed pages—from the Florentine



FROM A SKETCH BOOK OF
BENVENUTO CELLINI
IN THE POSSESSION OF J. P. MORGAN

arithmetic of 1490, which so obviously inspired the ornament of Hans Sebald Beham and Aldegrever, and the *Hypnerotomachia* printed by Aldus in 1499, through the various editions of the classics and other popular books produced at Venice and Lyons during the sixteenth century, and winding up with the head and tail pieces by such very great masters as Eisen and Choffard in the eighteenth-century editions of the French classics. The reason that the most charming and graceful designs of these non-specialized types so frequently occur as book decoration is that it was possible, as a general rule, to secure the services of much greater and more delicate artists for that purpose than for any other—and it therefore hap-

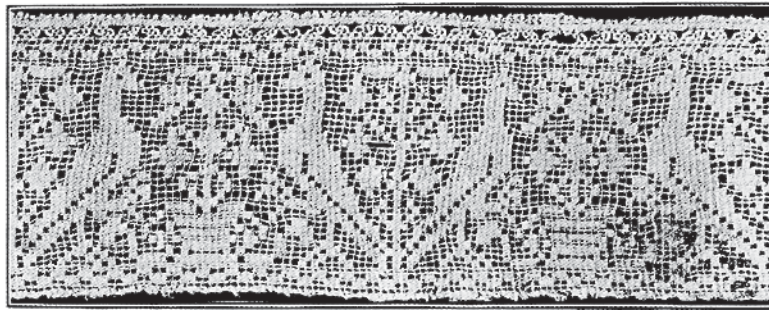
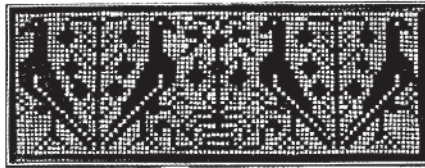
pens that if one would see the greatest abundance of dainty and perfect examples one must turn to the fine editions of the favorite authors to find them.

The importance of the collection and study of drawings, prints, and book decoration, not only for a proper understanding of the functional growth and development of ornament but as the source for inspiration of new design, therefore, can hardly be overrated. The most intelligent students of design and the most artistically enterprising master craftsmen of Europe have been keenly alive to the actuality of the situation for at least a generation, and such very intelligently conducted institutions as the Kunstgewerbe Museum at Berlin, the National Art Library, which is one of the departments of the South Kensington Museum at London, and the Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie at Paris, have been assiduously forming collections of printed and drawn "ornament" of all times and periods; the impulse in Berlin coming from a group of great merchants under the leadership of Dr. Lippmann, for many years the head of the Royal Print Cabinet, and at Paris being carried on through the generosity and public spirit of one of the greatest living couturiers. In this country there seems as yet to have been no concerted movement for the formation of such a collection in any place, save in so far as books of specialized interest have been gathered at the several architectural schools. The museums here for a generation have been aware that the whole of art is not to be found in sculpture and painting, and most important and valuable collections of furniture, woodwork, pottery, plate, and textiles have been formed at many places, notably at the Metropolitan Museum, the collections of which have been made extraordinarily rich through the generosity of the late J. Pierpont Morgan and his son. These collections are having a most gratifying effect upon the prevailing standards of craftsmanship in this country, such an exhibition of contemporary American work as was held at the Metropolitan Museum in March of last year showing clearly the inspiration they have af-

BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

forded. But as yet the current production of the craftsmen throughout the country, however good from the point of view of craftsmanship alone, is disappointing so far as it still has a decided tendency to fail in design. Much as the collections of decorative art have done and are doing, therefore, it would seem as though the development of design in this country must of necessity fall behind the

have learned the art of its use from the study of the juxtaposed examples. Unfortunately the fine ornament of past times has to a large extent been worn out in the workshops, just as the other tools were, and today it is becoming so rare and expensive that it is quite impossible for any but the wealthiest worker or manufacturer to form a good collection of it. The making and utilization of such collec-



PATTERN FOR LACE FROM PAGANI, OPERA NOVA COMPOSTA, VENICE, 1546
AND LACE IN THE MUSEUM MADE THEREFROM

development of craftsmanship until such time as those collections are supplemented in our public institutions by collections of the drawings, prints, and book decorations made by the great masters of ornament, and the public is taught their use and value. Not only should the "objets d'art" and the "ornament" upon which they are based be placed in juxtaposition and their relationship explained and interpreted so that the craftsmen of the country may realize the manner in which their forerunners worked, where and how they obtained and compiled their designs, and how most successfully they may do the same thing for themselves; but the museums should be active to establish great collections of ornament to which the craftsmen may turn for inspiration and aid when they

tions therefore have become matters for collective effort, and like all other collective effort in the field of the fine arts it should find its leaders and its focus in the museums, because from a broad point of view it is perhaps doubtful whether any other extension of present institutional activities could be so valuable to the cause of art in the communities they serve. At the present time the collections of decorative art educate more connoisseurs and collectors than they do craftsmen, and until and unless they are supplemented by "collections of ornament," the education they afford will largely continue to be that which is useful in the acquisition rather than in the creation of works of art.

W. M. I., JR.