

NEEDLEWORK AS A MODE OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION.

SECOND PART.

BY WALTER CRANE.

WHERE the whole gist and beauty of needlework lie in the qualities of surface and texture over and above that of form and abstract or symbolic

at a peacock in his fresh plumage, as he may be studied any day in Kensington Gardens by the Serpentine, with the promise of a fine London spring morning. See him on the grassy slope, the tender green of the new springing grass leading up to, as the highest note of the harmony, the flashing gold and emerald of the tail coverts.

There are, perhaps, no other decorative methods which could reach the pitch of brilliancy in the rendering of such qualities of colour as is attainable in silk embroidery, and none can rival it in beauty of texture and surface, and therefore in fidelity to the character of plumage.

The atmosphere, which makes a difference to our vision, only painting can express, but that is its prerogative, and the attempt to imitate the special



"THE FIVE SENSES," COVERLET OF LIGHT RED LINEN, WORKED IN COLOURED THREADS. (SIXTEENTH CENTURY GERMAN.)

(In the South Kensington Museum.)

expression, material becomes of great consequence, as, for instance, when we desire to work a design of birds and flowers, for the purely decorative beauty of their natural tints, and when the work is intended for comparatively small panels, screens, or hangings near the eye.

If a peacock were our subject, and we desired to present the bird in all its glory, we should naturally choose the lustrous surface and sheeny quality of silk to work in, and in that material might approach as near to nature as perhaps it is possible to do in any art, since the natural beauty of the silk, by means of cunning stitches, is enhanced by the way in which the light falls upon its surface when worked; and in meeting that contingency—regarding it as an essential condition of the work, and making the most of it—all the skill and resource of the worker, all the art and craft of the needle, may be exercised. Look



HANGING OF WHITE COTTON. (PERSIAN, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.)

(In the South Kensington Museum.)

qualities of painting in any other art is a mistake and quite beside the mark.

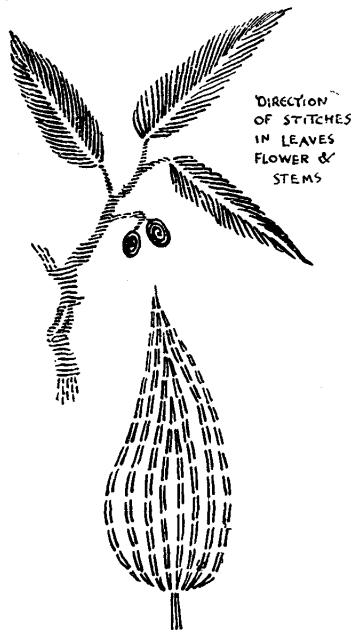
Perhaps the best examples of beautiful silk work in the rendering of birds and flowers are those of

China and Japan, which for fineness, firmness, and precision of workmanship, brilliancy of colour, and characterisation of natural form are wonderful. Both birds and flowers lend themselves peculiarly well to representation in needlework, not only because of their obvious decorative value, but also owing to the fact that both the structure of feathers and the structure of flowers and leaves can be rendered with close fidelity by means of the needle. A feather, for instance, very obviously adapts itself to representation by stitches, and in fact it might almost be said that in this case representation and imitation are synonymous—by no means *always* the case. The feather, by the way, gives its name to a particular stitch familiar to needlewomen.



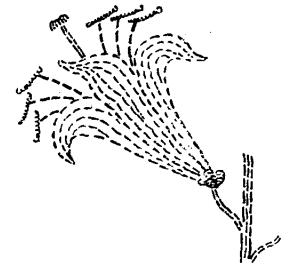
The structure, colours, and surfaces of flowers and leaves can be expressed with extraordinary fidelity in needlework, and too much attention can hardly be given to the study of the direction of line which characterises in nature the different types of leaves and flowers, for not only will the design be stronger and more full of character, but have more beauty of line where these things are observed. It is tolerably evident that the nature of a leaf (of, say, a bay or laurel) and the law of its growth are conveyed with a

better sense of design if it is represented by stitches springing from the central stem and sloping upwards towards the point, than they would be if placed the reverse way and nature contradicted. A leaf of the plantain or arun character and the palm tribe, on the other hand, would be represented by vertical stitches diminishing towards the point. It would be possible to work leaves, say, like lime and hazel, by long horizontal stitches at right angles to the centre stem, and afterwards cross them by single lines of stitching to express the veining, after the method known as "laid" work (p. 199) we may find in Persian and Portuguese and old Italian silk work. The stems of trees are very suggestively expressed by a series of vertical stitches crossed by closely



laid horizontal ones, which pleasantly recall the texture and surface of the bark.

The lines of structure in flower petals, again, demand different treatment, though there is no doubt more range for varied treatment. A rose, perhaps, might be treated effectively by stitches laid either horizontally or vertically (or by satin or feather stitch) according to the degree of convention, realism, or relief desired, though the best means of obtaining the proper colour value would be of more importance here, perhaps, than the direction of line. The lily, however, would naturally be worked on the same principle as the palm leaf, the stitches tapering longitudinally towards the points of the petals or worked in the laid method before mentioned.



Gold thread has always been a fine decorative resource in embroidery, and when judiciously used gives a very rich and splendid effect. It may be



"THE TREE OF LIFE," LINEN COVER EMBROIDERED IN COLOURED SILKS. (PERSIAN.)

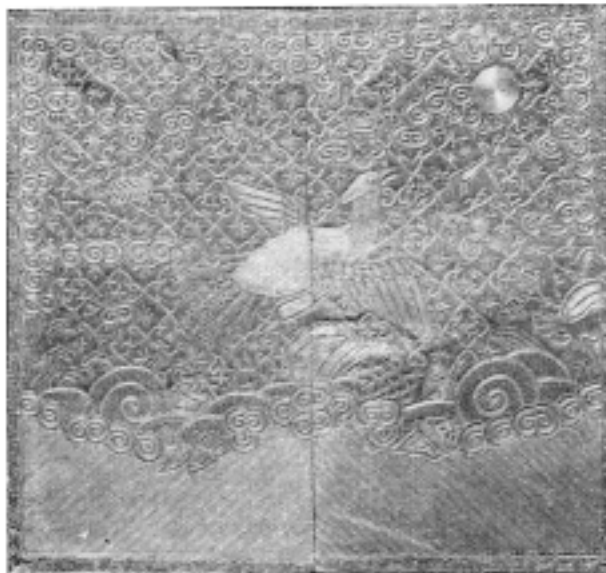
(In the South Kensington Museum.)

used throughout a design as an outline to emphasise the silhouette of, or clear the colours of,



CARPET OF WHITE COTTON, EMBROIDERED IN COLOURED SILK. (PERSIAN, SEVENTEENTH OR EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.)
(In the South Kensington Museum.)

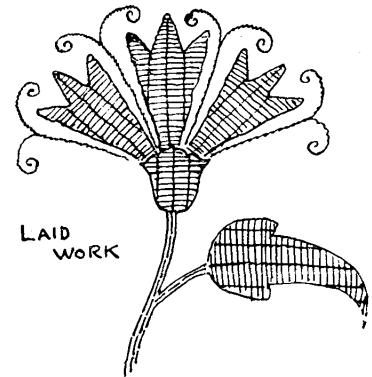
an arabesque of flowers and leaves (somewhat after the method of cloisonné enamel); or it may be used to heighten the effect of parts only and used in masses, as in the case of an aureole around the head of



SQUARE FOR MANDARIN'S ROBE, GOLD THREAD LAID. CHINESE.
(In the South Kensington Museum.)

saint or angel, or to distinguish precious things, as gold ornaments, armour caskets and vessels, much on the same principle as such things were introduced in mural paintings by the early Italian painters, raised in gesso and gilded.

The Japanese kimmo use gold effectively in embroidering parts of a printed design, while other parts are enriched by coloured silks, and others left in the printed



PILLOW MAT EMBROIDERED WITH STORKS. (CHINESE.)
(In the South Kensington Museum.)

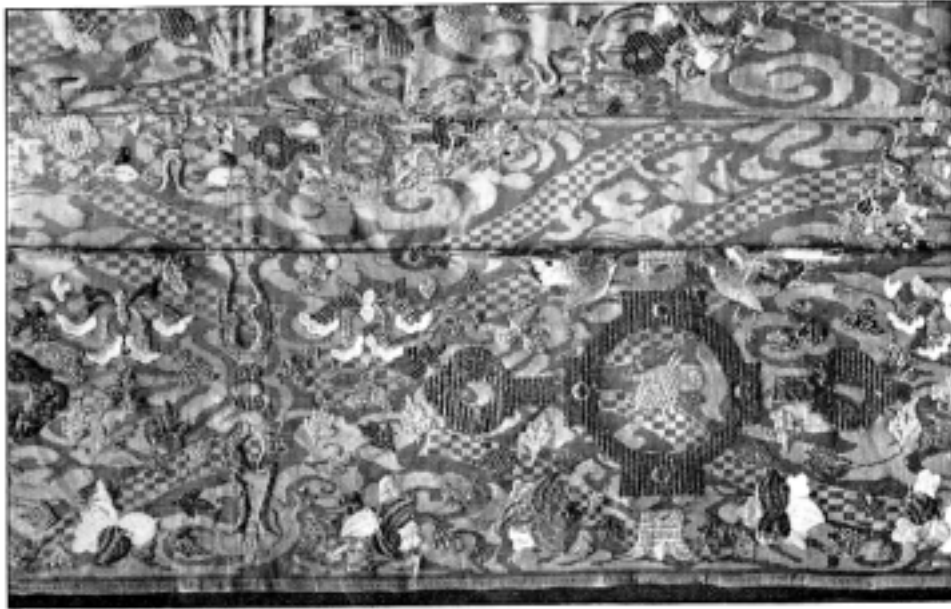
pattern. Persian and Indian printed cotton and linen hangings and colours are often found embroidered upon wholly or in part. This suggests that the print was originally intended as a guide to the embroiderer. The Japanese, in their large chain-stitch worsted embroideries of figures, generally rather dark and sombre in colour, frequently introduce large disks of gold thread with wonderful effect and apparently



SPIRAL METHOD OF LAYING GOLD THREAD

solely with ornamental purpose, the thread in these disks being spirally twisted round and round from the centre and stitched down or laid on to the

fanciful pomegranate-like fruits and flowers which form the pattern. The metal has no doubt blackened a good deal with time, but a certain charm



PORTION OF BORDER OF A COVER IN YELLOW SILK, DAMASK GROUND, EMBROIDERED WITH BIRDS AND FLOWERS. (CHINESE.)

(In the South Kensington Museum.)

fabric by fine thread. Upon the masses of gold thus formed the light falls into broad radiations of shade and shine, planes of luminous gold with all sorts of variations of surface, so that the effect is extraordinarily bold and rich. We have besides from the Japanese embroideries entirely of gold thread, which are very wonderful. The use of gold in Cretan, Syrian, and Persian embroideries is very effective. Silver thread, owing to its liability to tarnish, is difficult to use, though this does not appear to have been an obstacle in old work. In a sixteenth-century cope in my possession silver thread is very beautifully wrought into the colours of the



COVER OF DARK BLUE SATIN, EMBROIDERED WITH STORKS IN SILK IN GOLD AND SILVER COLOUR SILK THREADS. (JAPANESE.)

(In the South Kensington Museum.)

attaches to its present condition as of a kind of subdued crystallised splendour. The method in which the flowers and leaves are worked, the direction and use of the stitches, etc., are well worth study.

To revert again to such forms, as their natural characteristics are capable of being expressed by needlework, animals may be included, with flowers and birds, as being extremely adaptable, their forms being decoratively valuable as patterns, while the colours and textures of their coats, the direction of the hair and characteristics of its textures, distinctive markings, all belong to the methods of expression by the needle,

much in the same way that was observed in the case of feathers and leaves. The flowing mane of the lion, the black stripes of the fiery tiger, the spots of the yellow leopard, the rough coat of the wild boar, the dappled sides of the fallow deer, the woolly fleece of the sheep, all seem to fall into the range of what might be called the natural expression of the needle, which by the very necessity of its fibrous method can characterise the rough and the smooth, the wavy, or the straight.

In the adoption and adaptation of the forms of nature by any art or form of handicraft we should expect some distinct and characteristic treatment, separating them in the particular design and material from any other; and so far from trying to imitate in one material or method effects or treatments only adapted to another, we should rather seek to obtain more distinct character by *emphasising the technical differences* between one method of design and expression in handicraft and another.

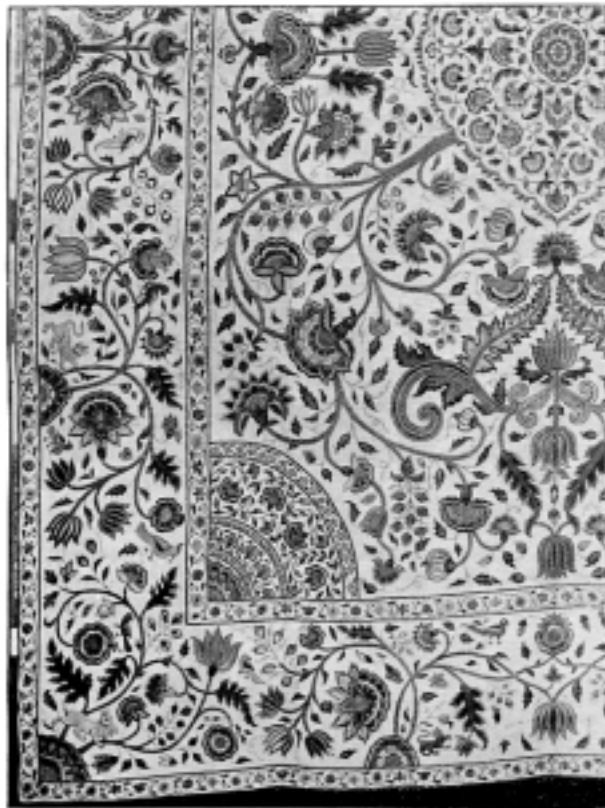
Nature in all art is the great storehouse of

important in design of any kind than the use made of natural form and fact. They may only reappear in highly abstract shape after passing through the crux of ornamental and technical demands, or they



SAMPLER IN COLOURED SILKS. (SPANISH, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.)

(In the South Kensington Museum.)



PORTION OF PIECE OF EMBROIDERY FORMERLY BELONGING TO TIPPOO SULTAN. (INDIAN.)

(In the South Kensington Museum.)

suggestion and revivifying influence, but it is often through art—historic or traditional art—that we get the key to its fitting expression, and this is perhaps especially so in needlework. Nothing is more

may be almost a direct transcript. Much depends upon method and material, and more upon decorative use and purpose; and within this range both abstract ornament and close naturalism must have due place. Everything finally depending upon judicious individual choice, or what is called *taste*—perhaps more important in these distracting days than any other factor in art.

We shall find no better models for treatment of floral design in textiles than in Persian art, of which our South Kensington Museum contains a wealth of beautiful specimens. Persian floral design appears to me to be so dominated by decorative instinct and invention, that the blend of naturalism and formalism is perfect. The unity is so complete that we feel here is a world of ornamental beauty with laws and harmonies as well as forms of its own, just as natural, on its own plane, as Nature herself, because just as much the result of adaptation to conditions. We can identify the rose and the pink and the iris, the palm and the pomegranate in Persian embroidery, but they are each of a specialised decorative genus perfectly adapted to their purpose, and governed by the principle of controlling boundary before alluded to.

Now I feel that the ideal to aim at in needlework

design is something distinctive and inseparable from the characteristics and conditions of the craft. We should not be content with merely *imitating* either nature, or Persian work, or Indian, or Chinese, or Japanese, or Cretan, or Italian, or Spanish. If embroidery is to be a living art it must, like the other arts, find its own distinctive forms of expression, gathered from many sources, perhaps, and having roots in the traditions of the past, but belonging to the present.

A general survey of needlework as part of the great historic record of design, after its rude and primitive efforts, shows us, in the course of its artistic development, exquisite workmanship perfectly united to decorative beauty both of form and colour; we may see, perhaps, the results of patient years of labour lavished upon a few square inches of fine silk or gold work; we may find the sacred symbols of religious faith, the badges of family and race, the frank colour and artless traditions of the peasant, the proud ensigns of nations and peoples, the little child's sampler, the *tour de force* of the expert, the quaint shadows of human follies, fancies, and fashions, and the romance of faded lives—all these the needle has recorded for us in unmistakable characters, so that there can be no question of its place in art and history, its human interest, its range of suggestion and expression, apart from its undoubted decorative and domestic value.

Yet all this decorative richness and historic significance has sprung out of the common ground of necessity and utility—the necessity of the needle and thread applied to the fundamental utility of clothing. So it is with any handicraft: pursued under natural, human, and free conditions it is certain, sooner or later, to blossom into design. So it comes about, I suppose, that Cinderella, stitching towels or marking linen by the kitchen fireside, is transformed in the course of time into a dream of decorative beauty in a fairy palace.

It is well that the technical methods and mysteries of needlework should be studied, just as we should study the grammar and literature of a

language while endeavouring to write or to speak in it; the traditional stitches adapted to the different kinds of work, the expression of surface and decorative effect, and so forth.

What beautiful works samplers can be made may be seen in the fine Spanish specimens of the seventeenth century in the South Kensington Museum, one of which exhibits forty different patterns of stitches. Yet I presume there is no finality in the art of the needle, and it may be possible to invent or adapt new ones and new forms of design.

The more thoroughly the resources and limitations of a craft are understood the better for the work, since in meeting conditions we really conquer them, and working freely under them, are more able to make them the medium of new motives in design.

A few years ago, I remember, in New York the head of a school of industrial design there wrote to me, and he said, "We have a primitive art *which knows nothing of technique*, and we have an up-to-date art *which knows nothing but technique*."

That, perhaps, is a condition of things characteristic of the age. Let us take care that between the two stools art does not fall to the ground. Let us see that while we strive to perfect ourselves in methods of expression—to master the technical difficulties and necessities of any art or handicraft—we do not lose sight of the *end* in endeavouring to realise the *means*. Let us not forget that every art is a method of expression, and that the highest expression of any art is, after all, the expression of beauty. And how can that expression be full or perfected unless it springs out of the joy of life and pleasure in handicraft, and answers to the spontaneous demand of the human spirit for harmonious conditions?

NOTE.—In the first instalment of this article, which appeared in the January number of THE MAGAZINE OF ART, the reference to the herald's coat of Philip II illustrated on p. 148 was inserted by mistake. The example intended to be referred to (on p. 144) is one of the time of our James II, and is in the South Kensington Museum, but not illustrated in the article. The herald's coat was, of course, given as an example of appliqué and its effectiveness in rendering heraldic devices.

