

CHAPTER I

THE SOURCES OF DECORATION

IN dealing with the subject of decorative art in Egypt, it is needful to begin by setting some bounds to a study which might be made to embrace almost every example of ancient work known to us in that land. The Egyptian treatment of everything great and small was so strongly decorative that it is hard to exclude an overwhelming variety of considerations. But here it is proposed to limit our view to the historical development of the various motives or elements of decoration. The larger questions of the æsthetic scheme of design, of the meaning of orna-

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ment—symbolic or religious, of the value and effect of colour, of the relations of parts, we can but glance at occasionally in passing ; in another branch, the historical connection of Egyptian design with that of other countries, the prospect is so tempting and so valuable, that we may linger a little at each of these bye-ways to note where the turning occurs and to what it leads. As I have said, all Egyptian design was strongly decorative. The love of form and of drawing was perhaps a greater force with the Egyptians than with any other people. The early Babylonians and the Chinese had, like the Egyptians, a pictorial writing ; but step by step they soon dropped the picture altogether in favour of the easier abbreviation of it. The Egyptian, on the contrary, never lost sight of his original picture ; and however much his current hand altered, yet for four or five thousand years he still maintained his

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true hieroglyphic pictures. They were modified by taste and fashion, even in some cases their origin was forgotten, yet the artistic form was there to the very end.

But the hieroglyphs were not only a writing, they were a decoration in themselves. Their position was ruled by their effect as a frieze, like the beautiful tile borders of Cufic inscription on Arab architecture; and we never see in Egypt the barbarous cutting of an inscription across figure sculptures as is so common in Assyria. The arrangement of the groups of hieroglyphs was also ruled by their decorative effect. Signs were often transposed in order to group them more harmoniously together in a graceful scheme; and many sounds had two different signs, one tall, another wide, which could be used indifferently (at least in later times) so as to combine better with the forms which adjoined them. In short, the

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Egyptian with true decorative instinct clung to his pictorial writing, modified it to adapt it to his designs, and was rewarded by having the most beautiful writing that ever existed, and one which excited and gave scope to his artistic tastes on every monument. This is but one illustration of the inherent power for design and decoration which made the Egyptian the father of the world's ornament.

In other directions we see the same ability. In the adaptation of the scenes of peace or of war to the gigantic wall surfaces of the pylons and temples; in the grand situations chosen for the buildings, from the platform of cliffs for the pyramids at Gizeh, to the graceful island of Philæ; in the profusion of ornament on the small objects of daily life, which yet never appear inappropriate until a debased period;—in all these different manners the Egyptian showed a

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variety of capacity in design and decoration which has not been exceeded by any other people.

The question of the origination of patterns at one or more centres has been as disputed as the origination of man himself from one or more stocks. Probably some patterns may have been re-invented in different ages and countries ; but, as yet, we have far less evidence of re-invention than we have of copying. It is easy to pre-suppose a repeated invention of designs, but we are concerned with what has been, and not with what might have been. Practically it is very difficult, or almost impossible, to point out decoration which is proved to have originated independently, and not to have been copied from the Egyptian stock. The influences of the

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modes of work in weaving and basket-work have had much to do with the uniformity of patterns in different countries ; apparently starting from different motives, the patterns when subject to the same structural influences have resulted in very similar ornaments. This complicates the question undoubtedly ; and until we have much more research on the history of design, and an abundance of dated examples, it will be unsafe to dogmatise one way or the other. So far, however, as evidence at present goes, it may be said that—in the Old World at least—there is a presumption that all the ornament of the types of Egyptian designs is lineally descended from those designs. Mr. Goodyear has brought so much evidence for this, that—whether we agree with all his views or not—his facts are reasonably convincing on the general descent of classic ornament from Egyptian, and of Indian and

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Mohammedan from the classical, and even of Eastern Asian design from the Mohammedan sources. A good illustration of the penetrating effect of design is seen in a most interesting work on the prehistoric bronzes of Minusinsk in Central Asia, near the sources of the Yenesei river, and equidistant from Russia and from China, from the Arctic Ocean and from the Bay of Bengal. Here in the very heart of Asia we might look for some original design. But yet it is easy to see the mingled influences of the surrounding lands, and to lay one's finger on one thing that might be Norse, on another that might be Chinese, or another Persian. If, then, the tastes of countries distant one or two thousand miles in different directions can be seen moulding an art across half a continent, how much more readily can we credit the descent of design along the well-known historical lines of intercourse. The same thing on a

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lesser scale is seen in the recent publication of the prehistoric bronzes of Upper Bavaria ; in these the designs are partly Italic, partly Mykenaeen. If forms were readily re-invented again and again independently, why should we not find in Bavaria some of the Persian or Chinese types? Nothing of the kind is seen, but the forms and decoration are distinctly those of the two countries from which the ancient makers presumably obtained their arts and civilisation. Yet again, to come to historical times, the elegant use of the angle of a third of a right angle so generally in Arab art, is very distinct and characteristic. Yet if patterns were continually re-invented, how is it that no one else hit on this simple element for thousands of years? The very fact that the locality and date of an object of unknown origin can be so closely predicted by its style and feeling in design, is the best proof how continuous is the history and evo-

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lution of ornament, and how little new invention has to do with it—in short, how difficult it is to man to be really original.

Now we can see a source for most of our familiar elements of design in the decoration which was used in Egypt long before any example that is known to us outside of that land. And it is to Egypt then that we are logically bound to look as the origin of these motives. If, then, we seek the source of most of the various elements of the decoration which covers our walls, our floors, our dishes, our book-covers, and even our railway stations, we must begin by studying Egypt.

As our object is the history and evolution of the various elements of decoration, we may classify these elements under four divisions. There is the simplest geometrical ornament of lines and spirals and curves, and

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of surfaces divided by these into squares and circles. There is the natural ornament of copying feathers, flowers, plants, and animals, There is structural ornament which results from the structural necessities of building and of manufacture : these often result in the perpetuation of defects or copies of defects, like the circle stamped in the plain end of meat tins which is made to imitate the circular patch soldered on to the other end, so trying to establish a balance of appearance. Many architectural devices and difficulties are perpetuated for us in this way long after the original purpose has passed away ; such as the cylindrical bosses projecting from the walls in Moslem architecture, which imitate the projecting ends of pillars torn from ruins and built into the wall, though rather too long for the position. The origin and the imitation can be seen side by side at Jerusalem. Structural ornament is therefore