

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06711-9 - Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New

Walter Crane

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I. OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE ILLUSTRATIVE AND DECORATIVE IMPULSE FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES; AND OF THE FIRST PERIOD OF DECORATIVELY ILLUSTRATED BOOKS IN THE ILLUMINATED MSS. OF THE MIDDLE AGES.



Y subject is a large one, and touches more intimately, perhaps, than other forms of art, both human thought and history, so that it would be extremely difficult to treat it exhaustively upon all its sides. I shall not attempt to deal with it from the historical or antiquarian points of view more than may be necessary to elucidate the artistic side, on which I propose chiefly to approach the question of design as applied to books—or, more strictly, the book page—which I shall hope to illustrate by reproductions of characteristic examples from different ages and countries.

I may, at least, claim to have been occupied, in a practical sense, with the subject more or less, as part of my work, both as a decorator and illustrator of books, for the greater part of my life, and such conclusions as I have arrived at are based upon the results of personal thought and experience, if they are also naturally coloured and influenced from the same sources.

All forms of art are so closely connected with life and thought, so bound up with human conditions, habits, and customs; so intimately and vividly do they reflect every phase and change of

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that unceasing movement—the ebb and flow of human progress amid the forces of nature we call history—that it is hardly possible even for the most careless stroller, taking any of the by-paths, not to be led insensibly to speculate on their hidden sources, and an origin perhaps common to them all.

The story of man is fossilized for us, as it were, or rather preserved, with all its semblance of life and colour, in art and books. The procession of history reaching far back into the obscurity of the forgotten or inarticulate past, is reflected, with all its movement, gold and colour, in the limpid stream of design, that mirror-like, paints each passing phase for us, and illustrates each act in the drama. In the language of line and of letters, of symbol and picture, each age writes its own story and character, as page after page is turned in the book of time. Here and there the continuity of the chapters is broken, a page is missing, a passage is obscure; there are breaks and fragments—heroic torsos and limbs instead of whole figures. But more and more, by patient research, labour, and comparison, the voids are being filled up, until some day perhaps there will be no chasm of conjecture in which to plunge, but the volume of art and human history will be as clear as pen and pencil can make it, and only left for a present to continue, and a future to carry to a completion which is yet never complete.

If painting is the looking-glass of nations and periods, pictured-books may be called the hand-glass which still more intimately reflects the life of different centuries and peoples, in all their

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GERMAN SCHOOL.

XVTH CENTURY.



LEIDEN CHRISTI.

(BAMBERG, ALBRECHT PFISTER, 1470.)

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ILLUMINATED MSS.

minute and homely detail and quaint domesticity, as well as their playful fancies, their dreams, and aspirations. While the temples and the tombs of ancient times tell us of the pomp and splendour and ambition of kings, and the stories of their conquests and tyrannies, the illuminated MSS. of the Middle Ages show us, as well as these, the more intimate life of the people, their sports and their jests, their whim and fancy, their work and their play, no less than the mystic and religious and ceremonial side of that life, which was, indeed, an inseparable part of it; the whole worked in as with a kind of embroidery of the pen and brush, with the most exquisite sense of decorative beauty.

Mr. Herbert Spencer, in the course of his enunciation of the philosophy of evolution, speaks of the book and the newspaper lying on the table of the modern citizen as connected through a long descent with the hieroglyphic inscriptions of the ancient Egyptians, and the picture-writing of still earlier times. We might go (who knows how much further?) back into prehistoric obscurity to find the first illustrator, pure and simple, in the hunter of the cave, who recorded the incidents of his sporting life on the bones of his victims.

We know that the letters of our alphabet were once pictures, symbols, or abstract signs of entities and actions, and grew more and more abstract until they became arbitrary marks—the familiar characters that we know. Letters formed into words; words increased and multiplied with ideas and their interchange; ideas and words growing more and more abstract until the point is reached when the jaded intellect would fain return again to picture-writing,

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and welcomes the decorator and the illustrator to relieve the desert wastes of words marshalled in interminable columns on the printed page.

In a journey through a book it is pleasant to reach the oasis of a picture or an ornament, to sit awhile under the palms, to let our thoughts unburdened stray, to drink of other intellectual waters, and to see the ideas we have been pursuing, perchance, reflected in them. Thus we end as we begin, with images.

Temples and tombs have been man's biggest books, but with the development of individual life (as well as religious ritual, and the necessity of records,) he felt the need of something more familiar, companionable, and portable, and having, in the course of time, invented the stylus, and the pen, and tried his hand upon papyrus, palm leaf, and parchment, he wrote his records or his thoughts, and pictured or symbolized them, at first upon scrolls and rolls and tablets, or, later, enshrined them in bound books, with all the beauty that the art of writing could command, enriched and emphasized with the pictorial and ornamental commentary in colours and gold.

As already indicated, it is my purpose to deal with the artistic aspects of the book page, and therefore we are not now concerned with the various forms of the book itself, as such, or with the treatment of its exterior case, cover, or binding. It is the open book I wish to dwell on—the page itself as a field for the designer and illustrator—a space to be made beautiful in design.

Both decorated and illustrated books may be divided broadly into two great periods :

XVTH CENTURY.

GERMAN SCHOOL.



(ULM, JOHANN ZAINER, 1473.)

FROM BOCCACCIO, DE CLARIS MULIERIBUS.

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THE TWO GREAT DIVISIONS.

I. The MS., or period before printing.

II. The period of printed books.

Both illustrate, however, a long course of evolution, and contain in themselves, it might be said, a compendium—or condensation—of the history of contemporary art in its various forms of development. The first impulse in art seems to answer to the primitive imitative impulse in children—the desire to embody the familiar forms about them—to characterize them in line and colour. The salient points of an animal, for instance, being first emphasized—as in the bone scratchings of the cave men—so that children's drawings and drawings of primitive peoples present a certain family likeness, allowing for difference of environment. They are abstract, and often almost symbolic in their characterization of form, and it is not difficult to imagine how letters and written language became naturally evolved through a system of hieroglyphics, starting from the unsystemized but irrepresible tendency of the human to record his linear ideas of rhythm on the one hand, or his impressions of nature on the other. It would seem that the illustrator or picture writer came first in the order of things, and the book afterwards—like the system we have heard of under modern editors of magazines, of the picture being done first and then written up to, or down to, by the author.

Side by side with the evolution of letters and calligraphic art went on the evolution of the graphic power and the artistic sense, developing on the one hand towards close imitation of nature and dramatic incident, and on the other towards imaginative beauty, and systematic, organic ornament,

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more or less built upon a geometric basis, but ultimately bursting into a free foliation and flamboyant blossom, akin in inventive richness and variety to a growth of nature herself. The development of these two main directions of artistic energy may be followed throughout the whole world of art, constantly struggling, as it were, for the ascendancy, now one and now the other being paramount; but the history of their course, and the effect of their varying influences is particularly marked in the decoration and illustration of books.

Although as a rule the decorative sense was dominant throughout the illuminated books of the Middle Ages, the illustrator, in the form of the miniaturist, is in evidence, and in some, especially in the later MSS., finally conquers, or rather absorbs, the decorator.

There is a MS. in the Egerton collection in the British Museum (No. 943), "The Divina Commedia" of Dante, with miniatures by Italian artists of the fourteenth century, which may be taken as an early instance of the ascendancy of the illustrator, the miniatures being placed somewhat abruptly on the page, and with unusually little framework or associated ornament; and although more or less decorative in the effect of their simple design, and frank and full colour, the main object of their artists was to illustrate rather than to decorate the text.

The Celtic genius, under the influence of Christianity, and as representing the art of the early Christian Western civilization—exemplified in the remarkable designs in the Book of Kells—was, on the other hand, strictly ornamental in its manifes-