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INTRODUCTION



The subtitle of this book announces its theme: “Foundations for a History of Ornament.” How many of you are now shrugging your shoulders in disbelief merely in response to the title? What, you ask, does ornament also have a history? Even in an era such as ours, marked by a passion for historical research, this question still awaits a positive, unqualified answer. Nor is this purely the reaction of radicals who consider all decoration original and the direct result of the specific material and purpose involved. Alongside these radical extremists, there are also those of a more moderate bent, who would accord to the decorative arts some degree of historical development from teacher to pupil, from generation to generation, and from culture to culture, at least insofar as they have to do with so-called high art, devoted to the representation of man, his achievements, and struggles.

Certainly, from the very inception of art historical research, there have always been some scholars in the field who also conceived of pure decoration in terms of a progressive development, i.e., according to the principles of historical methodology. But these were, of course, mainly learned academicians who adapted the rigorous training in philology and history acquired at gymnasia and universities to the study of ornamental phenomena as well. However, the drastic impact of this more extremist position upon the general attitude toward the decorative arts is revealed by the way in which historical methodology has been applied to the study of ornament up to now. For example, scholars have been extremely reticent to propose any sort of historical interrelationships, and even then, only in the case of limited time periods and closely neighboring regions. Their courage seems to fail them completely the moment an ornament ceases to have any direct relationship with objective realities—to organic, living creatures or to works fashioned by the human hand. As soon as they deal with the so-called Geometric Style, which is characterized by the mathematical expression of symmetry and rhythm in abstract lines, all consideration of artistic, mimetic impulses or of variation in the creative abilities of various cultures immediately ceases. The degree to which the terrorism of extremists has successfully intimidated even the “historians” involved in the study of ornament emerges clearly in the haste of scholars to assure us that they would never be so foolish and naive as to believe, for example, that one culture could have ever copied a “simple” meander band from

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another, or by their repeated apologies whenever they do venture to assert even a loose connection between, shall we say, the stylized two-dimensional vegetal motifs current in two geographic areas.

What led to this situation, which has had such a decisive and, in many respects, paralyzing effect upon all art historical research in the last twenty-five years? The blame can be placed squarely on the materialist interpretation of the origin of art that developed in the 1860s, and which succeeded in winning over, virtually overnight, everyone concerned with art, including artists, art lovers, and scholars. The theory of the technical, materialist origin of the earliest ornaments and art forms is usually attributed to Gottfried Semper. This association is, however, no more justified than the one made between contemporary Darwinism and Darwin. I find the analogy between Darwinism and artistic materialism especially appropriate, since there is unquestionably a close and causal relationship between the two: the materialist interpretation of the origin of art is nothing other than Darwinism imposed upon an intellectual discipline. However, one must distinguish just as much and just as sharply between Semper and his followers as between Darwin and his adherents. Whereas Semper did suggest that material and technique play a role in the genesis of art forms, the Semperians jumped to the conclusion that all art forms were always the direct product of materials and techniques. "Technique" quickly emerged as a popular buzzword; in common usage, it soon became interchangeable with "art" itself and eventually began to replace it. Only the naive talked about "art"; experts spoke in terms of "technique."

It may seem paradoxical that so many practicing artists also joined the extreme faction of art materialism. They were, of course, not acting in the spirit of Gottfried Semper, who would never have agreed to exchanging free and creative artistic impulse [*Kunstwollen*] for an essentially mechanical and materialist drive to imitate. Nevertheless, their misinterpretation was taken to reflect the genuine thinking of the great artist and scholar. Furthermore, the natural authority that practicing artists exert in matters of technique resulted in an environment where scholars, archaeologists, and art historians swallowed their pride and beat a hasty retreat whenever the question of technique arose. For they—mere scholars that they were—could have little or no competence in this regard. Only recently have scholars become bolder. The word "technique" proved to be extremely flexible: first came the discovery that most ornamental motifs could be (and had actually been) rendered in a variety of techniques; then came the pleasant realization that techniques were an excellent source of controversy. In time, archaeological publications, as well as journals de-

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voted to arts and crafts, joined in the wild chase for techniques, a pastime that will probably continue until all the technical possibilities for each and every humble motif have been exhausted, only to return—one may be sure—precisely to the point where it all began.

In the midst of such a spirited intellectual atmosphere, this book ventures to come forward with foundations for a history of ornament. The wisdom of beginning with foundations that pretend to be nothing more than that is obvious. In a situation where not only the field of action is hotly contested at every step along the way but even the groundwork itself is constantly in dispute, our first concern is to secure a few positions, a connected series of strongholds from which a comprehensive, systematic, and complete offensive can later be launched. The nature of the situation militates further that “negative arguments” take up a far greater portion of this book than is customary in a positive, pragmatic description of history. Here our most immediate and urgent objective is to address the most fundamental and harmful of the misconceptions and preconceptions that still hinder research today. This is another reason why, for the present, the concepts of this study are presented in the form of “foundations.”

Having said this, I still feel compelled to justify the existence of this book. However, anything one might say in this regard will sound unconvincing as long as the technical-materialist theory of the origin of the earliest primeval art forms and ornamental motifs remains unchallenged, even though it has failed to define the precise moment when the spontaneous generation of art ends, and the historical development effected by laws of transmission and acquisition begins. The first chapter, therefore, is devoted to challenging the validity of the technical-materialist theory of the origin of art. As its title indicates, it deals with the nature and origin of the Geometric Style. Here, I hope to demonstrate that not only is there no cogent reason for assuming *a priori* that the oldest geometric decorations were executed in any particular technique, least of all weaving, but that the earliest, genuinely historical artistic monuments we possess in fact contradict this assumption. Similar conclusions will also emerge from deliberations of a more general nature. It will become evident, namely, that the human desire to adorn the body is far more elementary than the desire to cover it with woven garments, and that the decorative motifs that satisfy the simple desire for adornment, such as linear, geometric configurations, surely existed long before textiles were used for physical protection. As a result, this eliminates one principle that has ruled the entire field of art theory for the past quarter century: the absolute equation of textile patterns with surface decoration or ornament. The

moment it becomes untenable to assume that the earliest surface decoration first appeared in textile material and technique, then the two can no longer be considered identical. Surface decoration becomes the larger unit within which woven ornament is but a subset, equivalent to any other category of surface decoration.

In general then, one of the main objectives of this book is to reduce the importance of textile decoration to the level it deserves. At the same time, I must admit that this medium has been the point of departure for all the research that I have gathered from eight years of service in the textile collection of the k. k. Österreichisches Museum für art und Industrie [Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst]. At the risk of ridiculous sentimentality, I cannot help feeling some regret at robbing textile art of its nimbus, in view of the personal relationship which I acquired with textiles in the course of curating the museum's collection for so many years.

Once the momentous proposition about the original identity of surface decoration and textile ornament had become accepted, there were almost no limits placed on its application. Beginning with rectilinear geometric shapes, it quickly expanded to include artistic representations of even the most complex natural forms, namely, human beings and animals. For example, the origin of motifs consisting of two figures symmetrically arranged to either side of a central axis was attributed to tapestry weaving. The Heraldic Style, as this type of decorative arrangement has come to be known, is so common that it warrants its own separate discussion. In the second chapter, therefore, I explain why there is neither proof nor even a possibility that heraldic motifs resulted from tapestry weaving, since the advanced technical knowledge necessary to produce such complicated forms simply did not exist during the period when the earliest heraldic motifs originated. And, at any rate, we shall see that there are other, albeit less tangibly materialist explanations for the Heraldic Style.

As a result, the basic tone of the two first chapters is somewhat negative, even though I have made every effort to replace the things that were discredited with something new and positive. In the case of the Geometric Style, it is especially necessary to dispel once and for all the misconceptions surrounding its purely technical, material origin and the allegedly ahistorical nature of its development. Yet one fact enormously complicates any historical approach to the Geometric Style: whereas organic nature and the handicrafts inspired by it allow the artist manifold alternatives, the mathematical laws of symmetry and rhythm that govern the simple motifs of the Geometric Style are more or less the same the

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world over. Spontaneous generation of the same geometric decorative motifs in different parts of the world is, therefore, not out of the question; but even so, one can take specific historical factors into account with complete objectivity. Certainly, some cultures were always leading the way for others, just as more talented individuals have always distinguished themselves from their peers. And surely it was just as true in the remote past as it is today that the vast majority of people find it easier to imitate than to invent.

Once plants are used as decorative motifs, the study of ornament finds itself on more solid ground. There are infinitely more species of plants that can be used as the basis for patterns than there are abstract, symmetrical shapes, limited as these are to the triangle, the rectangle, the rhombus, and only a few others. This is the point where classical archaeology begins to take an interest in vegetal ornament; in particular, the connection between Greek plant motifs and their ancient Near Eastern prototypes, which mark the beginning of art history proper, has already provided the subject of intense study and extensive debate. Nevertheless, German archaeology has not yet attempted a systematic description of the history of the vegetal ornament that was so crucial to antique art from ancient Egyptian to Roman times; this is a consequence of the enormous resistance to making "mere ornament" the basic theme of a more ambitious historical study. However, an American, has recently taken the step that German-trained scholars timidly avoided. W. G. Goodyear, in his book, *The Grammar of the Lotus*, was the first to argue that all antique vegetal ornament, and a good deal more, was a continuation of ancient Egyptian lotus ornament. The driving force behind the ubiquitous diffusion of this ornament was, in his opinion, the sun cult. This American scholar is apparently no more concerned with the technical-materialist theory of the origin of art than he is with Europe's crumbling castles and basalt deposits—unless I am mistaken, Gottfried Semper's name is not mentioned once in the entire book.

Strictly speaking, Goodyear's main thesis is not completely new; what is indisputably unique, however, is his radical determination to accord his ideas a universal significance, as well as the motivation that he cites for the entire development.

As far as the latter is concerned, however, the idea that the sun cult had such an overwhelming influence on decoration is surely erroneous. It is not even certain whether sun-cult symbolism played such a preponderant role in ancient Egyptian ornament, much less outside of Egypt, where there is absolutely no proof and, moreover, no likelihood that it did. Sym-

bolism was unquestionably one of the factors that contributed to the gradual creation of a wealth of traditional ornament. However, by proclaiming symbolism the sole and decisive factor, Goodyear makes the same mistake as the materialists who single out technique in this way. Moreover, both interpretations share an obvious desire to avoid at all costs the purely psychological, artistic motivation behind decoration. In cases where the artist is obviously responding to an immanent, artistic, creative drive, Goodyear sees symbolism at work, just as the artistic-materialists in the same instance utilize technique as their incidental, lifeless objective.

Moreover, Goodyear places almost no limitations on the influence that the lotus motif exerted as a model for all sorts of ancient ornament, including even the prehistoric zigzag, and this amounts to the same kind of overstatement indulged in by artistic-materialists and Darwinists. As a result, Goodyear often makes historical connections that a more dispassionate observer would flatly reject. Since he seizes only upon those things which serve his purpose, he has become willfully blind to finer distinctions. Therefore, it is not surprising that he overlooked, among other things, the genuinely Greek core of Mycenaean ornament, thereby missing what may well have been the most important point of the entire development of classical ornament.

As many a scholar before him, Goodyear clearly recognized the vital importance of vegetal decoration in ancient ornament, not only for its own sake but also for the proper assessment and appreciation of ancient ornament within the overall history of the decorative arts. My lectures on the history of ornament, delivered during the winter term of 1890–91 at the University of Vienna, gave special emphasis to the development of the vegetal ornament that began in the earliest period of antiquity. A part of the content of these lectures appears in the third chapter along with a few minor additions; it consists mainly of responses to Goodyear's work, which had since appeared. I would agree with him that the Greeks borrowed motifs extensively from the ancient Near East; moreover, the way that they infused such forms with formal beauty has long been acknowledged as a Greek accomplishment. However, Goodyear, along with other scholars interested in determining the essentially Western elements and impulses in early Greek art, ignored the Greeks' most characteristic, autonomous, and influential invention, namely the tendril. One seeks in vain for dynamic, rhythmic vegetal tendrils among the various ancient Near Eastern styles, though they already appear fully developed in Mycenaean art on what would later become Greek soil. While Greek blossom motifs have a Near Eastern origin, the lovely undulating lines connecting

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them are specifically Greek. From this point on, the development of the tendril is a major aspect of the subsequent history of ornament. The tendril begins as an undulating band emitting spirals within a narrow border; by the late Hellenistic period, it has turned into an elaborately branching, leafy vine capable of spreading out over large areas. In this form it continues in Roman art and beyond to the Middle Ages, in the West as well as in the East, in Islamic no less than in Renaissance art. The curling foliage of the Little Masters of the sixteenth century is as much a direct descendant of antique classical tendril ornament as late Gothic crocket-work. By tracing vegetal decoration throughout the centuries from its first appearance up to the present day, it becomes evident that ornament experiences the same continuous, coherent development that prevails in the art of all periods, as in the historical relationship between antique mythological imagery and Christian iconographic types. But this is too vast a theme to take up in depth within the framework of this book. Therefore, I will concentrate solely on describing in detail the development of tendril ornament from its origins down through the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Chapter 3, because it deals with a topic of such obvious importance, represents a truly significant "foundation" for the history of ornament.

It is very easy to trace the historical development of traditional stylized vegetal motifs. The same is not true, however, the moment that man attempts to produce ornament related to the natural appearance of an actual vegetal prototype. For example, the projection of the palmette found in Egypt and Greece cannot have been invented independently in both places, since the motif bears no resemblance to the actual plant. One can only conclude, therefore, that it originated in one place and was subsequently transmitted to the other. It is quite another matter, however, in the case of two ornamental works of differing origin that depict a rose, for instance, as it appears in nature; since the natural appearance of the rose is generally the same even in the most diverse countries, it is conceivable that similar depictions could arise independently. It becomes readily apparent from the study of vegetal ornament as a whole, however, that realistic renderings of flowers for decorative purposes, as is nowadays the vogue, is a recent phenomenon. The naive approach to art characteristic of earlier cultures insisted adamantly on symmetry, even in the case of reproductions of nature. Representations of humans and animals soon departed from symmetry by way of the Heraldic Style and other similar arrangements. Yet plants—subordinate and seemingly lifeless as they are—remained symmetrical and stylized throughout the centuries even in

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the most sophisticated styles, particularly as long as they functioned as pure decoration and had no representational value. The transition from ancient stylization to modern realism, of course, did not come about in a day. Naturalism, the tendency to make ornamental forms resemble actual plants seen in perspective, crops up repeatedly in the history of vegetal ornament. Indeed, there was even a period in antiquity when naturalism was quite advanced; however, it represents only a brief interlude in the otherwise constant use of traditional, stylized forms. Generally speaking, the naturalistic vegetal motifs of antiquity and of almost the entire medieval period were never copied directly from nature.

The acanthus motif provides us with the best, and probably most crucial, insight into how naturalized vegetal motifs were understood and executed in antiquity. Nevertheless, Vitruvius's story that decorative acanthus motifs were originally based directly upon the actual plant is still accepted without question today. No one seems disturbed by the improbable suggestion that a common ordinary weed could suddenly and miraculously be transformed into an artistic motif. Seen within the context of the history of ornament as a whole, the situation is unprecedented, without parallel, and downright absurd. Furthermore, it is the earliest acanthus motifs that least resemble the actual plant. Only in the course of time did the stylized motifs begin to acquire the characteristics of the acanthus plant itself; obviously, no one referred to them as acanthus motifs until much later in their development, when they actually began to resemble the plant. Chapter 3 will prove that the earliest acanthus ornaments are nothing more than palmettes that were either executed in sculpture or else conceived sculpturally. As a result, the acanthus motif, by far the most important vegetal ornament of all time, makes its debut in art history not as a *deus ex machina* but with a role that is fully integrated into the coherent course of development of antique ornament.

From the time it first fell under the influence of the more refined culture and art of Greece, the Orient resisted the naturalizing tendencies of Western art epitomized in the development of acanthus motifs and the like. Nevertheless, it fully accepted Hellenistic forms; surely no one doubts this anymore except those stubbornly committed to upholding a cherished theory. That there should be any question at all today in this regard, in view of the convincing evidence offered by the monuments themselves, is due primarily to the deeply-rooted antihistorical attitudes in evaluating decorative forms. In actual fact, however, the stylized blossom forms of Late Hellenistic and Alexandrian art occur frequently on Oriental works from the Roman Imperial period side by side with the

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naturalistic forms of the Roman West. Byzantine decoration is in part directly related to the Hellenistic forms that were clearly still in use in Greece and Asia Minor even during the Roman Empire. The same is true of Islamic art, though less obviously, since there were so many intervening stages.

A strong Byzantine element has long been recognized as a factor in the origin of Islamic ornament, in fact, even more so in the 1840s and 50s than today, a circumstance once again attributable to the ill-advised technical-materialist theory that doggedly insists upon the spontaneous, autochthonous origin of the art of different cultures. In contrast, the Arabesque remains uncontested as a special creation of the Orient, and particularly of the Arabs. And yet the history of antique ornament demonstrates clearly that the tendrils basic to Arabesque decoration were unknown in the ancient Near East and therefore could only have been adopted from the Hellenistic West. In addition, a closer look at the dense entanglements of Arabesque decoration discloses a number of more conspicuous motifs whose volute-shaped calyces and leaf-fans clearly betray their connection to ancient palmette ornament. What does appear as an entirely new feature of the Arabesque, and completely unattested in the decorative approach to plants in classical antiquity, however, is the peculiar placement of Islamic blossoms. These occur not only at the ends of tendrils, as they are in nature and in Western decoration in general, but they often appear integrated within the tendril. This arrangement suppresses the character of the blossom and obscures the concept of the tendril as a stem, so much that it is sometimes difficult to recognize the Arabesque as a form of vegetal tendril ornament at all.

However, even these fundamental and characteristic idiosyncracies of the Arabesque, in which the antinaturalistic and abstract quality of all early Islamic art emerges so perfectly, have their antecedents in ancient tendril ornament, as the conclusion of the third and the fourth chapters will demonstrate. Here I am able to address a number of additional issues that could not be accommodated in my *Altorientalische Teppiche*, mostly because of the limitations on space. I am happy for the opportunity to expand upon the subject since I realize that many are still unconvinced that antique art was also the evident point of departure for the early medieval art of the Near East. This shows how profoundly modern thinking has been biased by the ahistorical attitude that maintains that art must have originated here and there spontaneously and autochthonously, yet even so the Occident must be a passive recipient, with the Orient always on the giving end. The Orient, of course, represents a land of fable and enchant-

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ment, not only for poets but also for art historians, who blithely attribute to it the invention of every imaginable "technique," particularly those that have anything to do with surface decoration. And once a particular "technique" is declared indigenous to the East, one can be certain, according to this viewpoint, that its corresponding artistic progeny is following close behind it.

Conditions are more favorable for an historical approach to vegetal tendril ornament in Western medieval art. This is not to say that the effects of artistic materialism have not taken their toll; on the contrary, they are apparent everywhere. Their pernicious influence is undoubtedly responsible for our vague, contradictory, and fragmented understanding of what transpired during the early stages of medieval art, the so-called Migration Period, and even later in the Carolingian and Ottonian periods, despite the relatively abundant material that has survived. Nevertheless, I am convinced that there are still fewer deep-seated preconceptions and less blind resistance to impede an attempt at treating the historical development of Western medieval vegetal decoration from the twilight of classical antiquity up through the beginning of the Renaissance. Since the present context does not permit me to touch upon everything related to the historical development of vegetal tendril ornament, I have concentrated on the aspects that seemed to require clarification most urgently, and that could, once clarified, provide a firm foundation upon which a history of ornament could continue to build. This involves, as stated above, antique tendril ornament, along with its most faithful follower in the conservative Orient, the Arabesque. Even in the scholarly literature dealing with the history of medieval art, one often encounters certain decorative motifs referred to vaguely as an "ornament," which then have to be described at greater length. This procedure would be totally superfluous if the motif involved had already been assigned its proper place within the overall historical development. Since the creation of this historical order is not without its difficulties, at least in the case of antique and Islamic tendril ornament, the main purpose of the third and fourth chapters will be to establish the historical foundations that will make this possible.

Even though the principle task of historical and art historical research is usually to make critical distinctions, this book tends decidedly in the opposite direction. Things once considered to have nothing in common will be connected and related from a unified perspective. In fact, the most pressing problem that confronts historians of the decorative arts today is to reintegrate the historical thread that has been severed into a thousand pieces.

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Since this book threatens to undermine so many deeply-ingrained and fondly-cherished opinions, it is bound to create a storm of protest. I am acutely aware of this. However, I also know that there are many who already share my views, and still others who may be in tacit agreement but who are not yet ready to speak out. And as for those who remain unpersuaded by my arguments, I shall have accomplished something even if I succeed only in compelling them to realize that they must go back and reexamine their premises and seek better and stronger evidence to support their cherished theories. For even limited success is worth the effort, if it sheds some light on the fundamental issues that concern us in this book. Only through trial and error can one approach the truth.



The Introduction of Vegetal Ornament and the Development of the Ornamental Tendril

Today it is difficult to say which natural domain, animals or plants, posed the greater difficulties to those who first attempted to reproduce their outline upon a flat surface. Since the components of plants are absolutely static, it might seem easier, at least to the casual observer, to arrive at a characteristic image of a plant than of an animal that is always changing its position. The various parts of plants, however, are no more planimetric than those of the quadrupeds which first attracted human attention. Therefore, in order for plants to be drawn or engraved on stone, bone, or clay, they first had to be stylized. This is apparent in the earliest known representations of plants. Leaves, which in nature radiate around the stem, are depicted on a flat surface either symmetrically branching off to the right and left of an upright stalk as if seen from above, even though they are normally seen in profile. This two-dimensional *stylization* remained in force until the discovery of perspective, modeling, and proportion gradually made it possible to create the illusion of space and volume on a flat plane.

As the prehistoric finds discovered thus far indicate, however, and contrary to what we might expect, human beings attempted to draw animals before they drew plants. The carved reindeer bones found in the caves of Dordogne have yielded only one single instance of motifs (fig. 6) that can be construed as flowers because of their rosettelike shapes, in contrast to the striking number of animal images.¹ Ethnologists have made similar observations about the art of modern primitive cultures. Geometric

¹ Were it not for the high quality craftsmanship of cave art, astonishing as it is in view of the early date and the primitive cultural circumstances, one could point to the inherent difficulty involved in carving the complicated parts of plants as opposed to the relatively simple shapes of animals. The discussion in chapter 1 has shown that sculpture was the oldest technique. Its almost exclusive use of animal imagery may have created a tradition which then led to the initial exclusion of vegetal motifs in subsequent two-dimensional media.



Fig. 6. Reindeer bone with engraved flowers from La Madeleine.

ornament and animal imagery always precede the depiction of plants. Some relatively highly-developed systems of ornament like that of the Incas seem to have had no plant imagery at all. This phenomenon may well be explained by the fact that animals, active and moving about at will, engaged the attention of human beings to a far greater degree than plants did. Furthermore, animals play a greater role in fetishism than plants. The remnants of an animal cult are still clearly evident in the myths surrounding ancient Egyptian gods. Similarly, the priority that animals have over plants is apparent even in later phases of art: human figures and animals were rendered in accurate perspective earlier than plants.

Moreover, flowers remain in the category of surface decoration much longer than other motifs, while landscape comes into being far later than other types of painting, not only

religious and history painting but even portrait and genre painting. The later introduction of plants into the visual arts, therefore, should be explained mainly by the lesser interest of people in the apparently static plant kingdom.

Another pressing question immediately arises at the beginning of this chapter: were the earliest depictions of plants thought of as ornaments, or were they understood to have inherent representational (hieratic, symbolic) meaning? The latter assumption presupposes a more advanced stage of culture for the people who first developed vegetal imagery—a stage of culture where art had already developed considerably beyond the simple, elementary need for adornment mentioned earlier. And, as a matter of fact, wherever we have come to know an ancient but nevertheless fully developed and self-contained culture, we find that religion and fine art enjoy a most intimate, reciprocal relationship. Consequently, after a certain point, which would now be impossible to determine, we can no longer ascribe the impetus for developing a truly “visual” art (meaning one that consciously aims to capture the physical appearances of nature) merely to an immanent drive to adorn or imitate three-dimensional forms in sculpture (as is the case with the cave dwellers of Aquitaine) but to

religious, that is to say, representational incentives. The earliest depictions of vegetal motifs known today date from the Old Kingdom in Egypt. Because of the conspicuously representational character of all ancient Egyptian art, especially that found in Old Kingdom tombs, its vegetal motifs must be seen as religious symbols, and not as simple ornaments. Strictly speaking then, they do not belong in a chapter on vegetal ornament. Nevertheless, since the vegetal motifs of ancient Egypt are clearly linked to the subsequent purely ornamental development, they will provide the point of departure for this entire examination of ornament.

Any religious symbol can become a predominantly or purely decorative motif in the course of time if it has artistic potential. When a motif is frequently and continuously executed in a variety of materials because of its religious associations, a stereotype is created, which can then become so familiar as to seem to a certain extent ingrained. The simple customs of the ancients encouraged this process considerably: symbols are found on clothing, implements, and generally on the kinds of things that were seen daily. There was hardly a household item in the homes of the ancient Egyptians that was not decorated with a lotus. The cultures that adopted Egyptian symbols no longer understood their hieratic meaning, to judge from the arbitrary way in which they usually applied them. The symbolic significance of the lotus diminished among the Assyrians, Phoenicians, and Greeks. The whole development culminates in Greco-Roman art, which ultimately owes most of its decorative vocabulary to Near Eastern symbolism. The Greeks, however, with their consummate sense of the beautiful, chose only those motifs with a potential for artistic elaboration.²

The ancient Egyptians had already taken care to insure that most of their vegetal motifs had inherent artistic potential. The art that first created vegetal motifs also brought about the stylization required by their translation onto a two-dimensional surface in relief and painting. Symmetry was again a guiding principle. Although the motif might have been rendered initially for its objective meaning, there was still the same strict observation of basic design principles involved in its formation as for the purely decorative ones satisfying the urge for adornment. The ancient Egyptians themselves must have appreciated the decorative qualities of their fully-developed symbols and this is even more likely for the less sophisticated cultures that gradually came to use them. If these cultures lacked their own decorative vegetal motifs before their contact with Egypt, as appears likely, they were henceforth able to acquire them com-

² Motifs such as palmettes, sphinxes, and centaurs, as opposed to animal-headed gods or scarabs and the like.

mercially or copy them themselves. Once a fully developed vegetal motif was available from somewhere else, no one thought of taking the trouble to create new stylizations from their own local flora.³ For the same reason, our decorative vocabulary still predominantly consists of traditional antique motifs, although there are more inventors and designers of ornament today than there had been in antiquity.⁴

As far as we know at present, the ancient Egyptians were the first to create an historically important art. And, as far as the remaining cultures of antiquity contemporary with Pharaonic Egypt are concerned, the history of their art begins the moment they come into closer contact with Egypt. Although this moment cannot be fixed precisely in any particular case, it is also no longer a matter of dispute, considering how extensively the characteristic decorative forms of Egyptian art spread throughout the oldest cultures of antiquity. Surely, the fundamental importance of ancient Egyptian vegetal motifs for all subsequent vegetal ornament has now been sufficiently demonstrated.

This does not mean, however, that we are now compelled to examine all the traditional vegetal motifs found on ancient Egyptian monuments. In representational Egyptian art, there are many cases of vegetal motifs, particularly trees (Tell-el-Armarna), that apparently had no symbolic significance attached to them and were therefore never exploited as ornaments. Actually, it is not so much the plant as a whole, as tree, bush, or even decorative shrub, that has been used as a symbol but the individual parts of plants, the blossoms or leaves. As we shall see, even on the earliest examples of Egyptian art, these parts were often already stylized beyond recognition. And even though they were being used in an objective sense, they already possessed an obvious potential for further decorative elaboration.

The *blossom*, with its colorful corolla usually growing radially from the calyx, is artistically the most important and perfect portion of a plant. Next is the *bud*, usually pointed and therefore well suited as a crowning element. The third important part is the *leaf*. The *fruit*, on the other hand, is not prominent in early symbolism and is therefore also less noteworthy for early ornament. The simplest explanation for this remarkable fact is

³ Consequently, there is no need to point to the religious symbolism of the sun cult, as Goodyear does, or to any other cult for that matter, to explain the spread of ancient Egyptian art motifs throughout the early ancient world, when the overwhelming human drive to imitate, duplicate, and copy suffices by itself.

⁴ The conscious copying of plants from nature for decorative purposes is a distinctly modern tendency that is especially characteristic of contemporary art. Notwithstanding, the acanthus and the classical blossom profile still dominate all vegetal ornament today.

probably that the uncomplicated and often asymmetrical forms of fruits did not particularly lend themselves to artistic elaboration.

Finally, a very important element in vegetal imagery, especially in regard to the later development of ornament, is the *stem*, for it is this part that actually connects the various blossoms, buds, and leaves. The stem makes it possible for vegetal motifs to fill a surface coherently, whether they are arranged as friezes within a register or spread out over a field. In ancient Egyptian art, the stem is seldom shown naturalistically but mostly as a linear, geometric element. As a result, it could, from the very outset, assume the variety of undulating and curling forms that provide the basis of all curved, purely geometric shapes. Consequently, the stem played a particularly important role in the progressive ornamentalization of originally representational, symbolic vegetal motifs. Early in ancient Egyptian art, we will be able to observe arrangements of blossoms, leaves, and stems that are not at all characteristic of the same plants in nature and can only be understood as an enlivening of geometric art forms with representational vegetal motifs.

Our objective, therefore, will be to examine how the blossoms, buds, and leaves of each style in question are connected as they fill up the decorative field. A continuous historical thread can be followed throughout, from the earliest Egyptian period up to Hellenistic times, when the Greeks brought the development to a climax, both by perfecting the formal beauty of the individual parts of each motif and by creating the most aesthetically pleasing way of unifying the motifs by means of the "line of beauty," or rhythmic dynamic *tendril*, the decorative conception that is their special achievement. Our investigation is chronologically divided into two parts: (1) a demonstration of how the vegetal motifs spread by Greco-Roman (Mediterranean) art originated from and gradually developed within Near Eastern art; (2) a discussion of how the Greeks further developed these motifs into the Hellenistic Period, paying special attention to the evolution of the specifically Greek motif, the ornamental tendril. The first section is only a brief introduction to the second part, which constitutes the major undertaking.

We shall become familiar with a continuous development that follows its own definite path. The first vegetal forms were probably created for their symbolic, representational significance. Further developments were built upon these basic types, and in essence only upon these few types. At the time, and for a thousand years thereafter, no one thought again of exploiting the natural appearance of specific plants artistically. And even when a naturalizing tendency clearly did arise, it did not begin by copying

actual plants from nature but by gradually and subtly naturalizing and enlivening the traditional, geometricized vegetal ornaments. The conclusions about the history of ornament in general that can be drawn from this observation are obvious; they are the reason we feel justified in ascribing such importance to the problems dealt with in this chapter.

A. NEAR EASTERN

1. Egyptian. *The Development of Vegetal Ornament*

There are two plants that are inseparable from Egyptian culture and that appear to be the most common symbols found on ancient Egyptian monuments—the *lotus* and the *papyrus*. Herodotus has left us a valuable account of the cultural importance of these two plants in the daily lives of the ancient Egyptians. Furthermore, there are two stylized floral shapes in Egyptian art that date back to the earliest periods: the one identified with the lotus has clearly articulated, triangular petals (fig. 7), while the other is identified with the papyrus because of its bell shape and lack of leaves (fig. 8). The opened flower of the species of plant associated with the lotus of ancient Egypt does, in fact, have a ring of triangular petals. The head of the papyrus plant, on the other hand, consists of individual, hairlike filaments that fall separately in all directions from the stem. Since the realistic rendering of such an elusive shape would have been virtually impossible in Egyptian art, given the nonperspectival approach that restricted forms to contour lines on a flat plane, one assumed that Egyptian artists had abstracted the filaments of the papyrus into a compact bell shape that could easily be expressed in terms of a definite outline. Another factor that

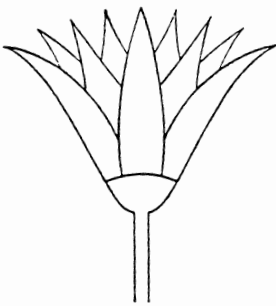


Fig. 7. Lotus blossom in profile view.

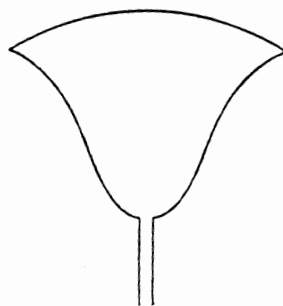


Fig. 8. Lotus blossom in profile view (so-called papyrus).