

## DECORATION IN NATURE

### WOOD CARVING.\*

By T. O. FRAENKEL.

TO begin, a carver must have, on an average, we will say, about fifty tools or chisels, and in order to have somewhere near a complete set, one can have two or three hundred, and still there would be no two alike, as all carving tools are ground at random or hap-hazard, but I have known of carvers executing creditable work with six, and in some cases doing better work than his neighbour with sixty. To do good, clean work it is of the utmost importance to have very sharp tools; without them the work would have the appearance of work done with a nail or hatchet. I had the pleasure of seeing, if you please, work of that kind in this city some years ago. It was at a carving school for ladies. They would toil probably two or three weeks, and in that time execute a masterpiece, with the help of the professor, and then take it home and spring it on their friends as their own handiwork. I am informed that there is a school in Cincinnati where they have more ornament than design. In spreading the tools on the bench, it is customary to lay the tools down with the points toward the operator. This is done (in laying the tools down) to prevent the point from striking the bench where there is more or less sand, which would dull the tools. In beginning a piece of carving the carver should know what position the work is to take, and to know whether it is going below or above the level of the eye. If placed above the eye it should be cut vigorously with rough and effective lines. If the work is placed low or level with the eye, it should be cut smooth and effective. We will take, for example, natural foliage conventionalized. That is to say, we spread the foliage, flowers and stems, departing somewhat from nature in order to get the panel evenly filled up. For instance, we lay out the panel, starting the main stem from the lower left-hand corner, and lay it out the best we know how; in laying out the stems they should be drawn with graceful lines, or, in other words, they should not be drawn in the panel like a string of noodle. In showing the branch from the main stem or intersection of branches, they should be drawn or cut in this manner, and in cutting the foliage it should be cut with quick and sharp curves; it can be cut so and still retain a soft appearance. For an illustration, we will take a leaf laying over a stem in this manner; it is not right to have a leaf clinging to the stem and background. I have seen that mistake made quite frequently, both in drawing and carving. A panel of that description should be laid out without the thought of a background. The shadows will take care of themselves. An experienced workman would turn that leaf up in the opposite direction, in order to avoid that effect and give the stem freedom and the leaf a light and airy appearance. If the panel is below the level of the eye, the leaves and flowers should be face up, and very little of the edge of the leaf shown, and should be undercut to give it a light appearance, the reverse if looked up to. After the design is laid out, the work is set in [a carver's term] roughly, and then grounded out, and then beginning on the surfaces roughed out to the general form striven for. Then the work is set in to the form of the leaves and the surface cut smooth; the ground is leveled as much as possible, and then stamped; it is then gone over with a stiff brush, and the panel is finished. The brush is used to produce a polish on the work, and to take off the newly cut and raw appearance of the wood and to give it the same tone as the newly surfaced margin. Sandpaper should never be used in good work, as it takes out all the life and expression in it. Carving should remain as the tools leave it. Not long ago I saw a finely designed Renaissance panel intended for a parlour mantel. The surface of the ornament was cut as good as any one could expect from a person that would cut the ground in the manner I saw it. The ground was cut rough and jabbed in every way. It looked like a scene in the Rockies, leaving out the poetry, and not a ghost

of a show for the delicate lines or shadows. I think it is wrong to cut the ground in this way; it may possibly do for some Byzantine work where there is little or no ground shown, but I would prefer to see the ground cut on a general level. In the outline-form of the leaf, it should be cut bold and clear with little line or vein work on the surface, which jumble the form and outline. Very often you find, where the form of the foliage is entirely neglected and the surface of the leaves so cut up with innumerable lines and stems, that to the eye the form of the leaf is completely destroyed. This, I think, is the fault with some of our Byzantine work. I maintain it should be cut with a soft effect, and it can be cut so and not look limp and lifeless. The number of lines produce a dark tint. Thus you have a mass of shade with innumerable small shadows, but no parts broad enough to receive the necessary amount of light. In our city of smoke, and fog now and then, and very little sunlight, where materials are blackened with smoke and dust, carving should be cut clear, bold and distinct. In carving, the position of ornament should be treated according to the position it is to take, and one should be careful in its use. If out of place it would not look well in a piece of furniture, no matter how well it may be cut. On the other hand, ornament in its proper place should be cut well. Better leave it off entirely if you cannot have it good. When you have a sunk panel with a small margin, always cut the ornament out of the solid, and call for it on the details. In modern cabinet work it is often glued on to save expense. Work of that kind is not exactly objectionable, for good glued work will hold on as well as the solid, but there is always a doubt whether it is glued well. In some cases it is not practical to cut it out of the solid, owing to the difficulty in getting the ground level with the outer surface or margin.

In studying ornament I would advise working from photograph plates. Printed ornament does not fill the bill, as it does not show the delicate effects on the surface of the foliage. I would suggest Hauptman's Italian Renaissance, as these plates are taken from casts of original models. If one can draw Renaissance it is not difficult to work in any style that presents itself. Keep on with your pen and ink and pencil and water colour, study and observe nature and everything pertaining to art; do not imagine you are not built that way, but go right in with a will and in time you will surprise yourself.

### TREATMENT OF CEILINGS.

THE ceiling is perhaps the part of an apartment that calls most loudly for decoration, says the London *Architect*, and no architectural feature is more susceptible to it, where it might be introduced with more effect, or give more pleasure to the inmate; yet this feature we invariably neglect. We naturally look up for beauty; however lovely the earth, the sky, both night and day, presents us with greater charms; we are cheered in our outdoor hours by its everchanging picture, for which a flax white plane is a miserable substitute in our indoor life. To houses of the very highest class these remarks will apply, for it is a feature which has not had its due proportion of attention; in point of decoration, in any class of buildings, from the cottage to the palace. There certainly can be no more fitting place for decoration in the habitation of a being created upright. Can inconsistency be more extreme than that presented by thousands of apartments, where a rich elaborately-decorated carpet is under the feet, and a plain, dead, flat ceiling above? In the interior of Arabian buildings the ornaments almost invariably become richer, more delicate and minute, as their height from the floor increases, and the most exquisite productions of the artist are lavished on the ceiling. With respect to the form, the curve is at all times preferable to the flat, though the latter by various means is capable of great beauty also. No very great additional height is required in order to have a curved ceiling, as, whether coved or segmental, the rise need not be very great. For rooms of great pretension there is no form more noble and natural than the vault and dome, particularly the latter, whether hemispherical or segmental, as far as it suits the plan or can be adopted by pendentives or otherwise. It is the best substitute

\* Abstract of paper read before the Chicago Architectural Sketch Club.