

Painters' Work.

THE DECORATION OF THE STAIRCASE AND CEILING.

BY ROBERT W. EDIS, F.S.A

A London staircase is generally a cold and dreary approach to the real withdrawing or living rooms of the house,—the rooms where we receive our guests and spend our pleasantest hours—often a long vault, walled in with blocks of imitation marble, a cold stone staircase, with cast-iron balustrading of the worst possible design—generally imitative of wrought-iron construction—thin, poor, and often unsafe, with a thin moulded handrail, with what are technically called ramps, wreaths, and curtails of the usual speculative builder's character. Of course all these must remain. We cannot exchange them for the wide oak staircase, with its boldly carved newels, handrails that look like support, and handsomely turned balusters of Elizabethan date; such, indeed, as are still left in numerous old English mansions, and in some few of the older London houses; but we can make them more cheerful, and less cold and dull. A painted and varnished dado, with a wooden moulding raking with the handrail, or plain deal painted panelling, will be at once a help and improvement. The wretched ironwork painted in a plain bright color—not picked out in gold, to show its peculiar eccentricities and faults of design—and the thin moulding which serves as a handrail ebonised as a contrast, will all help the peculiarly unfortunate lines on which you have to work. Above the dado, either distemper or paper in some warm and cheerful color. If you paper, let the paper be one of general tone,—otherwise the great space to be covered will be spotty and disagreeable.

A deep frieze of boldly designed painted or stencil ornament, will assist much in breaking the usual bad proportion of the staircase wall, while panels may be framed in bold lines of paint or distemper, wherein may be framed pictures or other art work. A good neutral tint or warm grey ground, with ornament in green and vermillion, has a good effect, if the colors be carefully treated; or a wide diaper, with patterns interchanged, and charged with shields and legends here and there. Any good photographs, sketches or studies, are useful to hang on the rake of the staircase, on the eye line, to take off the general coldness. Many varieties of tints will suggest themselves, which will help give a bright and cheerful character to the passage way of the whole house, in place of the cold and dreary, rightly called, wall to which we are so accustomed. As a rule, the lower flights of a London staircase are fairly well lighted, and the walls can therefore be hung with drawings. If possible, put here and there a piece of china, or a good figure on brackets, in the angles, to break the ugly appearance of the narrow half landing. A carefully designed lantern light, filled with leaded and jewelled glass, hung from the ceiling, will cost no more than the miserable pointed iron or bronze brackets which are generally affected, and will light the stairs more evenly. A bright drugget, nearly covering the whole of the treadway, is surely better than the narrow three-quarter width carpet, with its edges of cold painted stone; while here and there, on the landings and half spaces, a small Persian or Indian rug or prayer carpet,—which can be bought for almost the price of the carpet usually used—will give color and brightness, and add to the feeling of warmth and comfort; and these, always remember, can be taken up easily, and shaken if requisite every day, and are certainly more cleanly than the closely fastened down carpet, under which the dust accumulates and stays for many months.

If the landing or half space be large, put a comfortable or low couch, with some bright covering, and a stand for flowers or china; for any bit of color, either of nature or art, will add much to the cheerfulness of this part of the house. Nowadays, the art of China and Japan is well known to all of us, and, although I do not for a moment advocate any imitation of Japanese work in the decoration of English houses, yet there are many things we may do well to study Japanese work for. In painting on china and faience, in every form of decorative art, the Japanese show a keen love and an intimate knowledge of all that is best and beautiful in Nature, and are always at their best in depicting her ever-varied form, whether in flowers, tree or animal life. With a few exquisite touches the loveliest forms are placed before us, with great truth and freedom of drawing; and in all their art there is a desire to set forth beautiful form, and to express lovely combination of color in ever-varying fancy. They always seem to remember that all true decoration is based on construction, that the life and flower, so to speak, of decorative work must spring from the root and framework of construc-

tion; just as a good painter will draw his figure first, before clothing it, and the trunk and branches of a tree before covering it with foliage. What can be more exquisite than some of the drawing and coloring of the innumerable paper and silk blinds and fans that have been imported to such a large extent in the last few years? Many of these can be bought for a few shillings, and are admirable pieces of color decoration to hang on the walls of hall or staircase, or framed in small panels round the frieze.

The coloring is generally quiet and refined in treatment, and eminently decorative, and at the same time perfectly true to nature. Where an ordinary workman would conventionalize a flower or bird, and produce whole rows of them, without variation of any kind, in a stiff and unnatural manner, these Japanese artists give us endless variety and coloring, always graceful and effective, and never crude or coarse in color. By a few touches they produce nature in life and movement—a tree bent and shaken by the wind, a blade of grass bent or broken by some passing footstep, a spray of flowers waving with the summer breeze; birds in endless movement, flying or asleep, and all true to the characteristics of their life and form. In the lily, the carnation, convolvulus, fruit, or May blossoms we see numerous examples of our own English flowers, depicted in a way which few artists in England can equal or excel. All such bits of decorative art can be made much of in the dull monotony of a London house, and nowadays can be purchased at a very trifling cost.

If you will only trace, or get traced, some of the outline sketches of wild fowl, cocks and hens, pheasants, or storks, you will find they can be used with good effect as stencil decoration for the upper portion of the staircase walls, or in smaller scale for panels of doors, shutters, and other woodwork, which, as a rule, are left plain and untouched. For instance, suppose you have the usual four-panel doors common to most of our houses, with moldings run around of no particular design, I would suggest that you should paint them in two shades of color, to harmonise or contrast with the paper on the walls, the panels being the lighter shade, and on these stencil some of the designs I have alluded to in the darker shade; and then varnish the whole. By these means you will obtain, at the cost of a few shillings, a real good piece of decoration, which will always be pleasant to look at, instead of the dull monotony of imitation graining of oak, maple, or satin wood, to which we are so accustomed. In decorative art we have much to learn from the artists of Japan, who for many hundreds of years seem in their humblest articles of daily use to have carried out some impression of their love and knowledge of Nature in her most beautiful forms.

It is a somewhat difficult matter in most London houses, where the ceilings are generally plain, and bordered by cornices of inferior design, to treat them with any amount of color. In houses of the date of Adam the ceilings have generally some very delicate enrichments all over them, either flowing or arranged in patterns very slightly raised. Whenever these occur, it is well to treat them almost like Wedgwood ware, with, say, light tones of pink, green, grey, or buff, in very delicate tinting; but where the ceiling is quite flat it is desirable to tint it a light tone of grey or cream color, to get rid of the extreme glare of pure white. Next the cornice a simple distemper pattern, of a darker shade of the same color, will often be found effective and useful, or one or two simple lines with stencilled corners. The tinting of the cornices must materially depend upon their design and contour; if plain molded cornices, they may be tinted in one or two shades, the lighter tones being always at the top or next the ceiling, and gradually darkening off to the wall decoration. As a general rule, one or two of the tints of the general groundwork of the paper may be used with effect; if, however, the cornices contain the usual ill designed and modelled plaster enrichments, care should be taken to keep them in the background, and to pick them out as little as possible, so as to avoid making their general badness of form and execution too prominent.

It is well to remember a few general rules in decoration of ceilings and cornices, on which to rely when choosing colors or tints. For instance, in using what are called primary colors on molded surfaces, it is well to remember that yellow increases, while blue diminishes in strength; the former should therefore be used on convex, and the latter on concave moldings. All strong colors should be definitely separated from each other by light lines, fillets or small moldings; colors on light grounds appear darker by contrast, while those on dark grounds appear, as a rule, lighter. If the cornice presents any broad flat surfaces,