

HOUSE DECORATION.

A SIGN of the times is the number of journals either devoted to, or giving space regularly to, household decoration. It is a sign that in this country and in the United States the habit of mind is moving on from absorption in the mere necessities of life to a desire for some of its amenities. This desire has arisen first with women, who in America are the nearest approach to a leisure class, and the journals which give attention to household adornment are, for the most part, ladies' journals, or depend chiefly upon women for their subscription list. The ideals aimed at are defined usually by the feminine attributes "cosy," "dainty," etc., and the kind of work that is described is such as can be done at home and may be generally described as imitation architecture. All this may be welcomed as an indication that there is creeping in some relief to the squalor of a life devoted entirely to business; but the squalor of a false pretentiousness in art is not so respectable and is more repellent. If, as seems to be the case, it is an early stage of a people whose intelligence is more fully developed than their culture, it must pass soon from this superficial imitation of architectural effects to an appreciation of their essence, and it is best worth while to consider in what the essence of domestic architectural decoration consists.

At the bottom of all architectural effect is plan. The decoration of a room for the attainment of character is best begun with the footing courses of the building. The character to be attained will come under two heads—dignity or "cosiness." The latter, which we may call the domestic manner, seems to be the special development of modern planning, and the recipe is briefly a compact complexity of arrangement; complexity, that is to say, not for its own sake nor for the sake of variety, but to match the complexity of modern domestic life by arranging the area of rooms with such artistic precision that there are no waste spaces. For this reason the floor plan is irregular and there is often much irregularity in the rooms themselves; for windows which are placed only with a view to catch the light or the sun are often bowed; fireplaces which are designed only for the greatest snugness are likely to be nooked; furniture which, like the sideboard, is of such dimensions as to be immovable is provided with a home of its own, recessed so as to be in the room without claiming unnecessary side space; while the hall, which is at once an entry, a waiting room, a place for storing outer garments out of the way, an approach which should invite to the principal rooms with encouragement of good things beyond, and which should indicate the stairs with equal promise but without encouragement, is a field for the ingenuity of the architect about which, if there is to be much comfort in little space, one can predicate little but that variety is assured. The wall treatment of such a plan is devoted in the first place to further emphasis of its complexity by furring down the ceiling in recesses from the main area so that they are subordinate in height as well as in area. It is obvious that when this is done the scheme is all there. Details aim rather at fitting into and emphasizing the arrangement than at attracting special attention to themselves; moreover, economy through force of taste is the idea at the bottom of this manner of work; elaboration is therefore not the note for detail so much as simplicity. Such details as are used have also preferably some function to perform. The picture moulding, the dado capped with a shelf, the built seat and cabinet recess are much in use. The picture moulding will run at the level of the lowered ceilings over recesses, forming an angle finish under these ceilings and the bottom member of a frieze for the loftier central area. The central area will thus be the only part that will have wall decoration proper, for the space between the dado and the picture moulding is properly, in a simple dwelling, devoted to pictures, and the only effort expended upon the wall is

to obtain such texture of material as will keep the surface from being dull, though, as a background for pictures, it should be plain. Sand finish plaster, burlap or decorators' canvas and other stuffs are in use; but here is a field for invention and discovery. There is no limit to the variety of material that would be suitable, with the proviso that it must be sanitary. This proviso, unfortunately, excludes such depth of texture as would collect dust. The frieze of the central area, being the crowning member of the principal part of the room, and being above the line of pictures or other movable decoration, may be the field for any degree of elaboration in any form of work. It is perhaps an evidence of the excellent quality of this domestic manner of housework that the conventionally accepted architectural forms, which are made according to regular patterns and by multiplying processes, do not look at home in such a room as this—not because they are too good, but because they have not enough life in themselves, but, when they are acceptable, are acceptable as factors in a scheme which is a scheme of proportion only. Here interest in all parts is best, and, though simple work will do, the best work is not out of place in the frieze of a living room. It is a field for wall painting—decorative figure or decorative landscape—for carving or for modelling in plaster. It is time that the practice of modelling in plaster directly on the wall was revived, and a running scroll founded on some flowering plant could be quickly and suitably rendered upon a frieze of this kind, for here if anywhere the slight irregularities of hand modelling would be in place.

For dignity the essential difference is lavishness of space—not large space so much, that lavishness which pays no heed to the exact space required for each function, but squares out to an all-comprising area which does not fit the necessities so much as include them, having in view an aim beyond mere necessity—the attainment of regular form for its own sake. The ornament, or decoration proper, is therefore in this key. Its furnishings or features have more to do than to fill a function; they have to maintain a character. A mantel piece is not merely a convenient shelf on which things which please the eye may rest to adorn the local centre of comfort or on which books and tobacco may be found to minister to it; in a dignified room a mantel piece is in itself a dignified composition, which may have, and often has, no other function than beauty. Walls are not merely walls, but a tripartite composition. Doors and windows have a function to perform, but this makes not the limit of their form, but only its motive. Each is a door or a window, but it is also a composition. Finally, everything—mantel, doors, windows, sideboard, or whatever else is necessary—though in itself a composition, is but part of a whole, which is the room; and, if the greatest dignity is sought, all rise together to the cornice, which unites them all in one. It follows then that, in this manner, the abstract architectural forms which jar with cosiness find their proper use, which is to minister to a unity, self-existent and admirable for itself, in which the comforts of a home can be spread rather than fitted and not be the less comfortable for the more stately housing. The ultimate home of details to suit this manner will generally be found to be Italy; but there is not much hope for the designer who borrows from Italy, either directly or through France, instead of making the principles which are at the bottom of Italian or French work his own. These principles would repay research, but the present space barely suffices to make this attempt to classify the two domestic manners.

It should be said in conclusion that cheap effects, which form so much the object of study in the decorative articles before alluded to, are proper to neither manner. The only form of economy possible in good work here (as in good work of any kind) is the economy of abstinence. Decoration which is founded on plan may be slight or copious, plain or rich, and good in all cases if the material is good, but only if the material is good; and neither the householder or his architect is wise who attempts too much for his money by aiming at the greatest quantity rather than the best material.