

Painter's Work.

ON THE USE OF ORNAMENT IN HOUSE DECORATION.

There are certain principles which should govern the application of painted ornament to the decoration of buildings which are either not properly understood or are in many cases lost sight of altogether. These principles may be called fitness, adaptation of form and color to position and circumstances, harmony, correctness of drawing, and execution. No work can be successful without these qualifications.

Mr. John Ruskin makes some observations on modern room decorations which we cannot allow to pass without question. He says (*vide* "The Two Palaces," Lect. 3) "You will every day hear it absurdly said that room decoration should be by flat patterns, by dead colors, by conventional ornament and I know not what. Nobody ever yet used conventional art to decorate with who could do better. A great painter will always give you the natural art, safe or not. Correggio gets a commission to paint a room of a palace at Parma. Any of our people bred on our fine modern principles would have covered it with diaper; not so Correggio. He paints a thick trellis work of vine leaves with oval openings, and lovely children leaping through them into the room." Fancy our decorators decorating our English homes in this fashion! Could anything be more absurd? Vine leaves and trellis work, with even the loveliest of lovely children continually suspended in mid-air may be in good taste at Parma, but terribly out of place in English dwellings. We prefer to see our lovely English cherubs jumping about the room instead of through its walls. In these matters we are but too apt to forget that the style of decoration suitable to the sunny climes of the South and East, and most in harmony with the habits and customs of its peoples, are in a great measure, if not altogether, unsuited to our insular situation and domestic habits. We may adapt them (or rather what is good in them) to our purpose, and we may derive many valuable lessons in form and color from them; but to transplant them in their original form is a grave error. The black dado, red pilasters, and frieze with yellow, blue or white panels above, as seen in a Pompeian house, would look *outré*—out of place and tawdry—utterly foreign to our habits and to the style of our architecture. Again, we have the Moresque or Moorish style of decoration—a combination of some of the best features of the Egyptian, the Greek, the Roman, the Byzantine, and Arab styles, admirably adapted to the land of cloudless skies, where shade and coolness were a necessity, and only to be got by a particular style of architecture with open courts for light and ventilation; but in our "muggy" climate, where we have but too little sun and plenty of wind, such a style of decoration is, to say the least of it, unsuitable. Many of its beautiful geometrical diapers and ornaments we may use with advantage, and the lessons in color which it teaches cannot be over-estimated. But to make our rooms exact counterparts of the beautiful halls of the Alhambra (even if we could) would be simply ridiculous. We are aware that some of our principal decorators have got somewhat of a Pompeian fever, and have been painting black drawing-rooms, etc., *à la Pompeii*. Notwithstanding such authority, we must consider them as

Mistaken souls who dreamt of heaven.

As to Mr. Ruskin's assertion that nobody ever used conventional ornament if he could do better, we consider the assertion, to say the least of it, to be unwarranted by facts and without meaning. If Mr. Ruskin means that no artist would use flat ornament if he could paint vine leaves and trellis-work, there is no truth in the assertion; as there are many artists who can paint better things than vine leaves and trellis work who both design and paint conventional ornament. If he means that an artist who can paint vine leaves, etc., would paint them as room decorations as being more appropriate than flat ornament for that purpose, then the artist's taste and knowledge are both at fault, and his time and talents wasted.

It is a commonly received opinion that a man who can paint a picture is the right man to decorate a room. As a rule there can be no greater mistake. There are, of course, exceptions, but it will be found that the two are distinct, and require a special education or rather experience. The man who spends weeks and months in the elaboration of a picture will be too apt to treat his wall decoration in the same manner, and will show a want of breadth, a meagerness or poverty of coloring, and a finicking littleness in his ornamentation totally unsuited to the situation. This arises not so much from any want of knowledge of form or color as from a want of experience in the handling of large masses

of color. It is something like engaging a miniature painter to paint the drop scene for Old Drury. His ideas do not expand—they are bound down to a yard of canvas, consequently he cramps everything he touches. The naturalistic style of treatment as applied to house decoration is, as a rule for general application, a mistake. It is not long ago since our paper-hangings and wall decorations were treated in this manner, and we had our walls covered with large flowery patterns in natural colors—many in Mr. Ruskin's favorite trellis patterns, with bunches of grapes and vine leaves in most admired confusion. Our very floors were covered with carpets on which were represented wreaths and garlands of flowers as large as life and twice as natural, and we trampled them under foot without the slightest compunction. Our interiors were bowers of roses and posies—pretty baby-houses all.

At length better and more sober tastes prevailed, and we began to see that a room, to be beautiful and comfortable, and pleasant to sit in and to feel at home in, should be treated in a different manner; that bouquets of flowers and large masses of green leaves spotted over the walls were distracting objects; that our eyes were at once fixed upon them the moment we entered the room, and so long as we stayed in it, turn where we would, they were ever present, producing a sense of oppression and weariness. At last a master mind arose and took the matter in hand. A series of patterns for wall papers were designed by Mr. Owen Jones, which completely revolutionized our ideas and practice. These papers, both in form and color, were founded on the truest and best principles of decorative art as applied to domestic architecture, and although it is now many years since they were introduced, they have never been surpassed for beauty of form and harmony of coloring, and for adaptation to the purposes for which they were designed. They taught a lesson which our architects and decorators were not slow to avail themselves of, and as a means of purifying and elevating public taste their influence has been great, and is still and increasingly felt. Yet most of these patterns were designed upon the principle which Ruskin condemns, namely, natural leaves and flowers conventionalized. It appears to have been forgotten, or else never to have been dreamt of in the philosophy of many of our art critics and their followers, that there is such a word in our vocabulary as the word adaptation—adaptation of form to the particular purpose required, and adaptation of color to the special circumstances of position and locality; certain laws and rules are laid down, which are carried out under all circumstances and in all places. The folly and absurdity of this practice will be at once evident if we take a simple illustration as an instance.

Say a room whose walls shall be painted with a tint of color, made from emerald or other bright green and white—a color refreshing to the eye and pleasant to look upon, if our room is placed in the midst of a crowded city, where a green tree or a blade of grass is a *rara avis*. We shall feel refreshed every time we enter it. If we look out of a window our eyes will rest most likely upon a dusty red brick wall, not very clear or cleanly perhaps, but looking much pleasanter and better from the force of harmonious contrast. On the other hand, if we place our room in the country, where the look out will be upon green fields or garden and lawn, and if we treat it in exactly the same manner, we shall soon begin to find that we have no pleasure in it, and there is no feeling of relief felt on the grass plot or lawn. The natural greens of the grass and trees will have a dull faded look. This effect is produced by the large mass of bright green on the walls of the room, which completely destroys the capability of appreciating and distinguishing the beautiful varieties of tints of green which nature has so bountifully spread before us. Thus we see that the same style of treatment as regards color may be truly beautiful and harmonious in one situation, and utterly unsuitable, discordant, and out of place in another. Here also we may see the value and the necessity of the decorator being able to adapt his coloring to the particular circumstances in which the object he has to decorate is placed. Again it does not follow that because our room is placed in the country we shall discard green altogether, for if we add sufficient red and black to the same tint of bright green, to neutralize its brightness and reduce its tone, we shall have one of the pleasantest and most harmonious wall colors we are acquainted with—a color which not only produces a feeling of repose and quietness, but contrasts favorably with furniture of almost every description of wood, oak, walnut, mahogany, maple, etc., and almost any warm color or drapery or hangings will harmonize well with it. The grass, and trees, and flowers, and all pure greens look fresher and brighter by contrast with it. It is a color that interferes with nothing, but improves the color of everything in its vicinity.