PLANT ORNAMENT IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The luxuriant foliage of Corinthian capitals, the more severe fronds of the palmettes on Fifth Century grave stelae, or the twisting palmette tendrils around Greek vase handles are among the most prominent and characteristic themes of classical decorative art, and among those most influential for later art. Already in the First Century A. D., attempts were made to explain the origins of some of these forms; for Vitruvius[1] the Corinthian capital was an imitation of a vase accidentally overgrown with acanthus foliage. But this explanation was an isolated attempt; many centuries were to elapse before the development of art history as a historical discipline made possible a more coherent elucidation of the problem. The first major synthesis appeared in 1898; in his *Stilfragen*,[2] Riegl provided a survey of the materials as known to him at the time, and fitted both classical and oriental plant ornaments into a coherent story of development. For him, the original motives arose in Egypt, were handed on to the arts of Western Asia, and thence eventually reached Greece, where they were completely transmuted. Riegl's tracing of this story had many gaps, as was inevitable in view of the scarcity of materials known at the time. Since his work, as more and more material has been discovered, a number of studies have dealt with or touched upon various facets of plant ornament.[3] In view of the prominence of plant motives in the arts of Syria and Phoenicia, it has becomes common to speak of the Phoenician palmette and to consider that formal plant motives arose in Syria and spread to Egypt from there. However, there has not been any comprehensive review of the problem. The vast amount of new evidence for ancient Near Eastern art accumulated since Riegl's *Stilfragen* make it fruitful to trace in detail the early story of plant ornament; that is one of

[1] Vitruvius, 4, 1, 9.
[2] Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen* (Berlin, 1893), pp. 44-150.

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the principal tasks of this book. The beginnings of the story can be found in the early Third Millennium and the development will be followed down into the Greek orientalizing period (7th-6th centuries B. C.). But before turning to details, various general aspects must be clarified.

NATURALISTIC VERSUS ABSTRACT MOTIVES

Announcement that a story will be traced presupposes the existence of a continuous development. That this is so in the case of plant ornaments has been demonstrable since the time of Riegl and before. However, one point must be emphatically emphasized. The continuity is carried almost exclusively by certain quite formal vegetal designs, which despite their immense variety and the proliferation of subsidiary features, have when carefully analyzed two main elements only. It is the spread of these which provides the continuity. Thus the most significant growth of plant design springs from a very narrow basis. Though one naturalistic motive, the water lily, follows much the same path of migration as the formal ones, on the whole naturalistic plant designs do not form a coherent continuous development; they are not linked historically with one another. Groups of naturalistic motives can appear from time to time, according to the propitiousness of the setting, for example the veined and dentate, and usually readily identifiable foliage of Gothic ornament, the tulips, crocuses, and garden flowers of medieval Persian and Turkish ornament, or the lotus of India and related cultures. Between such groups there is no thread of common genetic relationship as there is between groups of formal motives equally diverse in time and space.

The new evidence from the ancient Near East justifies Riegl's sketch of the main thread of the development of plant design, albeit many details of its convolutions must be altered or are entirely new. But the beginnings of formal plant ornament are Egyptian, and

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[3] H. Goodyear, *The Grammar of the Lotus* (London, 1891). Carl Watzinger, "Die Griechische Grabstele und der Orient," *Genethliakon Wilhelm Schmid* (Sturrgart, 1929), pp. 141-167. W. Vollgraff, "Influences

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such motives did spread thence to Western Asia. After long and intricate development there, they were eventually adopted and transformed in Greece. The new Greek synthesis of the formal plant motives was then the inspiration for post-classical traditions of plant ornament in both the European arts and those of Asia which had a heritage derived from the Graeco-Roman art of the ancient Near East.

ORNAMENT VERSUS SYMBOL

The main tool in tracing the continuous genetic line of plant ornament is the formal analysis of the motives in question, and accordingly this task will demand much of our attention. In collecting and analyzing our plant motives, it becomes evident that they have an independent existence and development as artistic forms. That is to say they evolve as patterns, change their shape to a great extent as ornaments only, in many cases not being primarily conditioned by any factors other than decorative and aesthetic ones. In other words, much of the story can be traced without regard to the roles which the plant motives may be playing as emblems or symbols. Changes in form may be completely unrelated to any symbolic role of the motives. In fact this very uncommittedness of the designs accounts for much of their vitality. They were not tied down to the specific details of the beliefs of any one area, and were hence particularly able to migrate and be adopted into many different cultures. Changes in form may be completely unrelated to any symbolic role of the motives. When the use or character of any of our motives as an emblem or symbol does seem to be pertinent for its origin or for its changes in form, this has been taken into consideration when attempting to work out the exact nature of such situations. But it should be clear from the outset that interest in this book is focused on the elucidation of our material as art motives and not upon its symbolic aspects. Although we hope to consider such aspects when they are demonstrably present and pertinent, we are fully aware that we may have neglected some possible symbolic facets. We consciously prefer

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orientales dans la civilization hellène et moderne," *Mélanges Bidez* (Brussels, 1934), p. 996.

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to run the risk of slighting symbolism rather than of overemphasizing it. This approach seems justified in part because a great deal of attention has already been devoted to plant motives as symbols (in some cases absurdly overstressing this aspect[4]), and in part because of our conviction that the formal plant motives forming our thread of continuity are primarily decorative motives, not symbols. Albeit adopted at different times and places to carry some symbolic meaning, they remain in essence designs. The burden of proof for this claim will be borne in the body of the book.

AIMS

Demonstration of the continuous development of formal plant ornament from its origin down to the end of the ancient Near Eastern period, interesting though this subject is for its own sake, is not our sole objective. Rather we wish to use the process of reconstructing this sequence as a means of establishing various important conclusions. Plant ornament is a thread by whose aid we can find our way through the cultural labyrinth of the ancient Near East.

Accordingly, one important goal of our work is the demonstration of cultural relations and exchange by the migrations of plant motives and other pertinent cultural features. Some of the points which will be discussed here are the mutual exchanges between Egyptian and Asiatic arts, the nature of the links between individual schools of Western Asia, and above all, the confrontation of the ancient Near East with the Aegean world. What share may Minoan art have had in the development of Egyptian plant design? What interaction was there between Mycenaean and ancient Near Eastern crafts? What does our material contribute to such crucial problems of the Greek orientalizing period as the localization of the most influential ancient Near Eastern traditions and of the avenues of penetration into the Greek tradition? What is the difference between East Greek and West Greek, for example?

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[4] Cf. Goodyear, *op. cit.*

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A second aim of this book is to contribute to the understanding of both the national styles and eclectic traditions of the ancient Near East by providing specific examples of the borrowing of motives and the consequent changes made in them.[5] Here, although formal plant ornament remains the guiding thread, the discussion must be expanded to include other materials as well, in order to handle such special pertinent problems such as, for example, the development of Canaanite art.

Our third aim is the most difficult one, the one which can be least adequately attained. What can the formal plant motives show us concerning the processes of artistic creation in the various areas of the ancient Near East and the development of style? How did the motives arise and take their form? Why did they change? Why were particular forms chosen? Here we face fundamental problems, some of which Riegl considered when dealing with some of the same materials years ago. He proposed to explain changes in style by changes in *Kunstwollen*, a term whose introduction was one of his most influential contributions to art history, perhaps in part because he did not closely define it so that its interpretation has remained a fertile field.

[5] Cf. Riegl's demonstration of the value of ornamental art for such purposes in *Spät-römische Kunstindustrie* (Vienna, 1901, reprint).

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