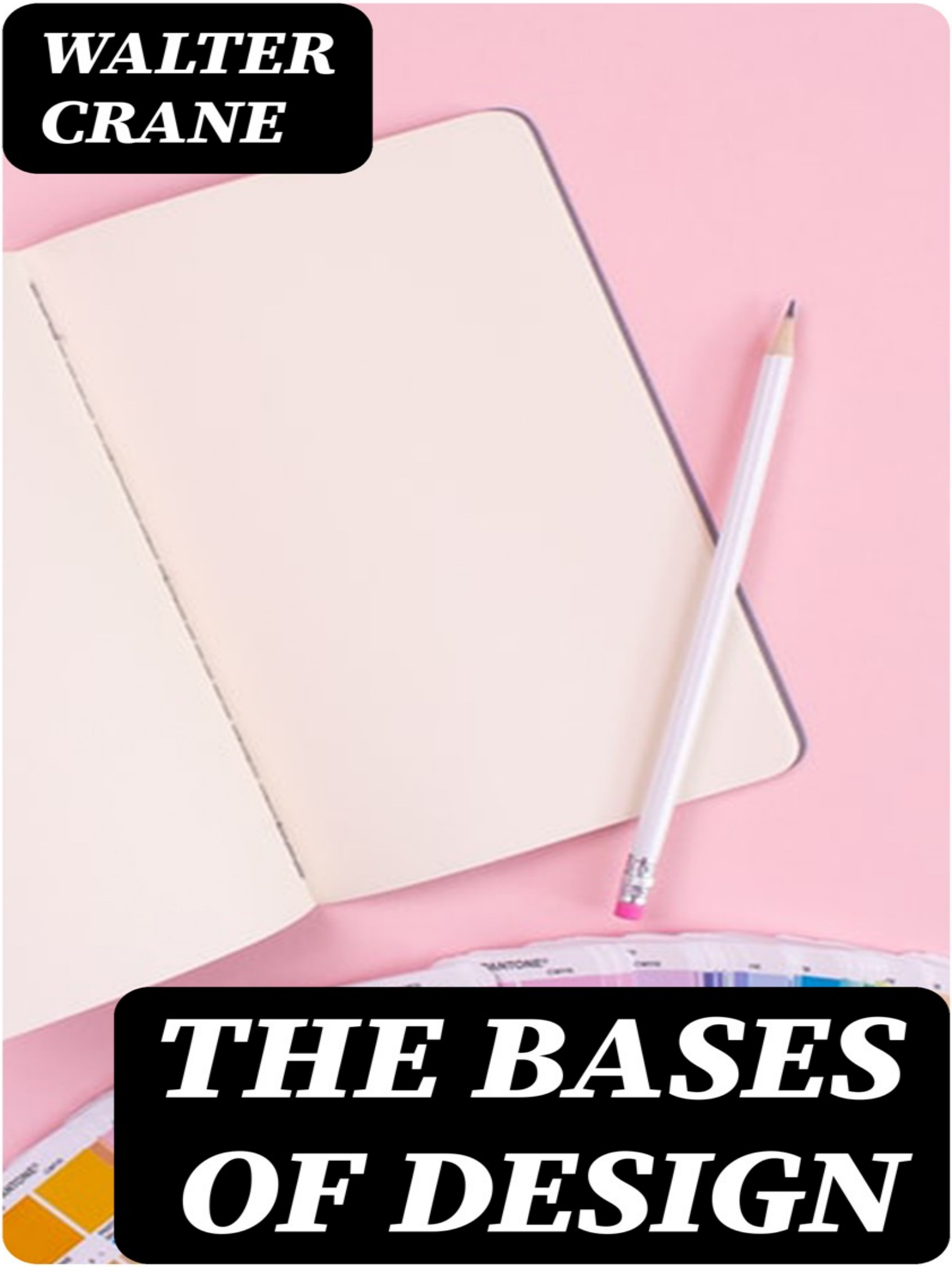
WALTER CRANE



THE BASES OF DESIGN

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Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

THE substance of the following chapters originally formed a series of lectures addressed to the students of the Manchester Municipal School of Art during my tenure of the directorship of Design at that institution.

The field covered is an extensive one, and I am conscious that many branches of my subject are only touched, whilst others are treated in a very elementary manner. Every chapter, indeed, might be expanded into a volume, under such far-reaching headings, to give to each section anything like adequate treatment.

My main object, however, has been to trace the vital veins and nerves of relationship in the arts of design, which, like the sap from the central stem, springing from connected and collective roots, out of a common ground, sustain and unite in one organic whole the living tree.

In an age when, owing to the action of certain economic causes—the chiefest being commercial competition—the tendency is to specialize each branch of design, which thus becomes isolated from the rest, I feel it is most important to keep in mind the real fundamental connection and essential unity of art: and though we may, as students and artists, in practice be intent upon gathering the fruit from the particular branch we desire to make our own, we should never be insensible to its relation to other branches, its dependence upon the main stem and the source of its life at the root.

Otherwise we are, I think, in danger of becoming mechanical in our work, or too narrowly technical, while, as a collective result of such narrowness of view, the art of the age, to which each individual contributes, shows a want of both imaginative harmony and technical relation with itself, when unity of effect and purpose is particularly essential, as in the design and decoration of both public and private buildings, not to speak of the larger significance of art as the most permanent record of the life and ideals of a people.

My illustrations are drawn from many sources, and consist of a large proportion of those originally used for the lectures, only that instead of the rough charcoal sketches done at the time, careful pen drawings have been made of many of the subjects in addition to the photographs and other authorities.

It may be noted that I have freely used both line and tone blocks in the text and throughout the book, although I advocate the use of line drawings only with type in books wherein completeness of organic ornamental character is the object. Such a book as this, however, being rather in the nature of a tool or auxiliary to a designer's workshop, can hardly be regarded from that point of view. The scheme of the work, which necessitates the gathering together of so many and varied illustrations as diverse in scale, subject, and treatment as the historic periods which they represent, would itself preclude a consistent decorative treatment, and it has been found necessary to reproduce many of the illustrations from their original form in large scale drawings

on brown paper touched with white, as well as from photographs which necessarily print as tone-blocks.

I have to thank Mr. Gleeson White for his valuable help in many ways, as well as in obtaining permission from various owners of copyright to use photographs and other illustrations, and also the publishers, who have allowed me the use of blocks in some instances—Mr. George Allen for a page from "The Faerie Queene"; Messrs. Bradbury, Agnew and Co. for the use of the "Punch" drawings; and Messrs. J. S. Virtue and Co. for the use of photographs of carpet weaving and glass blowing, which were specially taken for "The Art Journal." My thanks are also due to Mr. Metford Warner (Messrs. Jeffrey and Co.) for the use of his photo-lithographs of my wall-paper designs issued by his firm; to Mr. R. Phené Spiers for the use of his sketch of the iron balustrade from Rothenburg; to Mr. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson for photographs of two of his recent bookbindings; to the executors of the late Rev. W. H. Creeny for permission to reproduce two of the illustrations from his "Monumental Brasses on the Continent of Europe" (now published by Mr. B. T. Batsford); also to Mr. Harold Rathbone, who kindly allows me to reproduce the cartoons by Ford Madox Brown in his possession; to Mr. J. Sylvester Sparrow for the practical notes on painting glass; and to Mr. Emery Walker for help in several ways in the preparation of the book.

WALTER CRANE.

KENSINGTON,

November, 1897.

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE PRESENT EDITION

Table of Contents

THIS reprint of "The Bases of Design" gives me an opportunity to correct a few errors which had inadvertently crept in on its first appearance, and also to add a word here and there.

I venture to hope that the book may prove more useful and accessible to students in its present form.

WALTER CRANE.

KENSINGTON,

November, 1901.

CHAPTER I.—OF THE ARCHITECTURAL BASIS

Table of Contents

WHEN we approach the study of Design, from whatever point of view, and whatsoever our ultimate aim and purpose, we can hardly fail to be impressed with the vast variety and endless complexity of the forms which the term (Design) covers, understanding it in its widest and fullest sense.

From the simplest linear pattern, or bone scratchings of primitive man, to the most splendid achievements in mural decoration of the Italian Renascence—or, shall we say, from the grass mat of the first plaiter to the finest Persian carpet: or from Stonehenge to Salisbury Cathedral—the range is enormous, and were we to attempt to trace, step by step, the true relation between the diverse and multitudinous characteristics which such contrasts suggest, we should be tracing the course of the development of human thought and history themselves.

When we stand amazed in this labyrinth—this enchanted and beautiful wood of human invention which the history of art displays, we might be content to gaze at the loveliness of particular forms there, and simply enjoy, like children, the beauty of the trees and flowers; gathering here and there at random, and casting them aside again when we were tired, without a thought as to their true significance.

If, however, we desire to find some clue to the labyrinth—something which will explain it in part, at least, something which will give us a key to the relation of these manifold

forms, and enable us to place them in harmonious order and coherence, we shall presently ask:

(1) How and whence they derived their leading characteristics?

(2) Upon what basis have they been built up? and

(3) What have been the chief influences which have determined, and still determine, their varieties?

Let us try to address ourselves to these questions, since, I believe, even if we only end as we begin, by inquiry, that, in the course of that inquiry, by study, by comparison, and careful observation, we shall be able greatly to clear our path, and find much to help us as individual students and practical workers in art.

(1) The first arts are, of course, those of pure utility, which spring from the primal physical necessities of man: which are concerned in the maintenance of life itself—the art or craft of the hunter and the fisherman, the tiller of the soil, the hewer of wood and the drawer of water: but seeing that next to securing sufficiency of food, the efforts of man are directed towards providing himself with shelter, both of roof and raiment, and since most of the arts of the creative sort must be practised under shelter of some kind, and that all of them contribute in some way towards the building or adornment of such shelter, I think we shall find the true basis and controlling influences, which have been paramount in the development of decorative design, *in the form and character of the dwellings of man* and their accessories; from the temples he has raised to enshrine his highest ideals—these temples themselves being but larger and more monumental dwellings—to the tomb, his last

dwelling-place. We shall find, in short, the original and controlling bases of design in architecture, the queen and mother of all the arts.

In asserting this one does not lose sight of the view that *all art is, primarily, the projection or precipitation in material form of man's emotional and intellectual nature*; but, being projected and taking definite shape, it becomes subject to certain controlling forces of nature, of material, of condition, which re-act upon the mind; and it is with these controlling forces and conditions, and the distinctions which arise out of them, that we are now concerned.

Such distinctions as exist, for instance, in the feeling, the plan and construction of those patterns intended to be laid upon the floors (as in carpets or tiles), and such as are intended to cover ceilings and walls (as in plaster-work, textile hangings or wall papers), obviously arise from the relative positions of floor, walls, and ceilings, and the differences between horizontal and vertical positions; and these conditions are necessarily part and parcel of the constructional conditions of the dwelling itself.

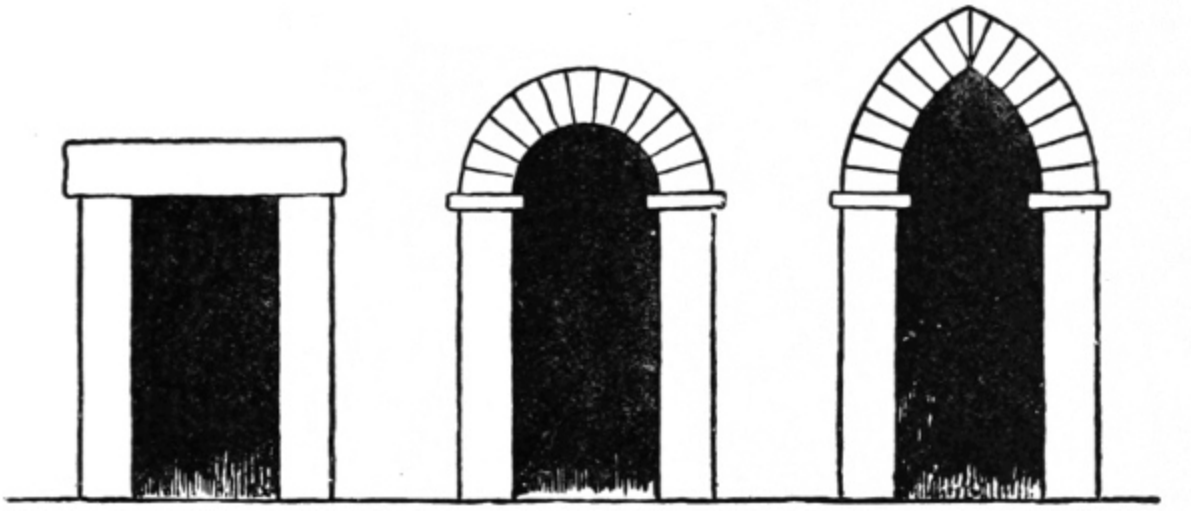
The first shelter may be said to have been the shelter of nature without art—the TREE and the CAVE, the first homes of man; although he was probably not by any means the first animal to hide among the woods and the rocks, since he had many and formidable foes to dispute with or disturb him in possession. It is noticeable that such art as is associated with this strange and remote chapter of man's existence on the earth—the art-instinct which impelled the primitive hunter to incise the bone and stone implements he used with the images of the animals he hunted—is purely

graphic, and does not show any feeling of that adaptive ornamental quality characteristic of what we call decorative design, which would seem to belong to a more highly organized condition of society. "Among the primitive Greeks," remarks Messrs. Guhl and Köner in their Life of the Greeks and Romans, "fountains and trees, caves and mountains, were considered as seats of the gods, and revered accordingly, even without being changed into divine habitations by the art of man." But, as proving literally that art springs out of nature, the cave itself led to a development of architecture, as in some early Greek tombs where the cave, or cleft in the rocks, is utilized and added to by masonry; or where the rock itself was carved and hollowed, as in the rock-cut temples of Egypt and India. To which some trace the origin of columnar architecture.

The TENT of the Asiatic wandering tribes, and the wattled and wooden HUT of the western and northern, come next in the order of human dwellings, and not only may we trace certain types of pattern design to both sources, but it would seem as if both the tent and the hut, and perhaps the wagon of the Aryans, had had their influence upon the more substantial stone structures which succeeded them. When tribes became communities, townships were founded, and more fixed and settled habits of life prevailed.

DIAGRAM TO SHOW THE THREE TYPICAL FORMS OF ARCHITECTURE:

I
LINTEL. II
ROUND ARCH. III
POINTED ARCH.



Now we may broadly group the principal types of architectural form and construction in three principal divisions, following Professor Ruskin, namely:

1. The architecture of the Lintel (or column and pediment).

2. The architecture of the Round Arch (or vault and dome).

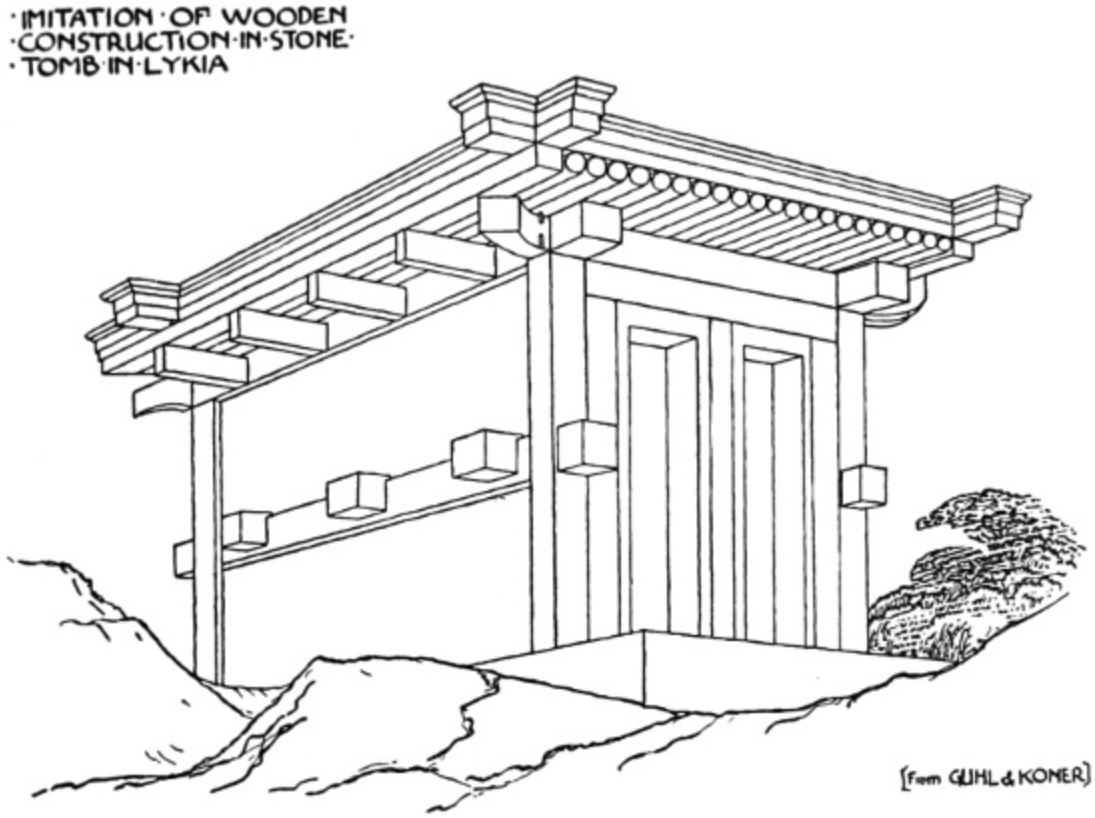
3. The architecture of the Pointed Arch1 (or vault, gable, and buttress).

Of the first we may find the simplest type in Stonehenge; we may find it in equally massive, and almost as primitive form at Mycenæ, in the famous Gate of the Lions, remarkable as being the earliest known example of Greek sculpture: we may find it more developed in the Greek temples of ancient Egypt, at Karnac, Thebes and Philæ, and we may see it in its purest form in the Parthenon at Athens.

GATE OF MYCENÆ.

The derivation and development of the Greek Doric temple from its prototype of wooden construction has frequently been demonstrated, and the tombs in Lycia furnish striking illustrations of this close imitation and perpetuation in stone of a system and details belonging to wood; and it is instructive to compare its features with corresponding parts in the Parthenon, and to observe how

closely they agree. It is a curious instance of that love for and clinging to ancient and traditional forms, that with the art and all the resources of Athenian civilization, the form and construction of its temples remained much the same, and may be considered as only glorified enlargements in marble of their wooden predecessors, retaining all the characteristic details of those primitive structures.

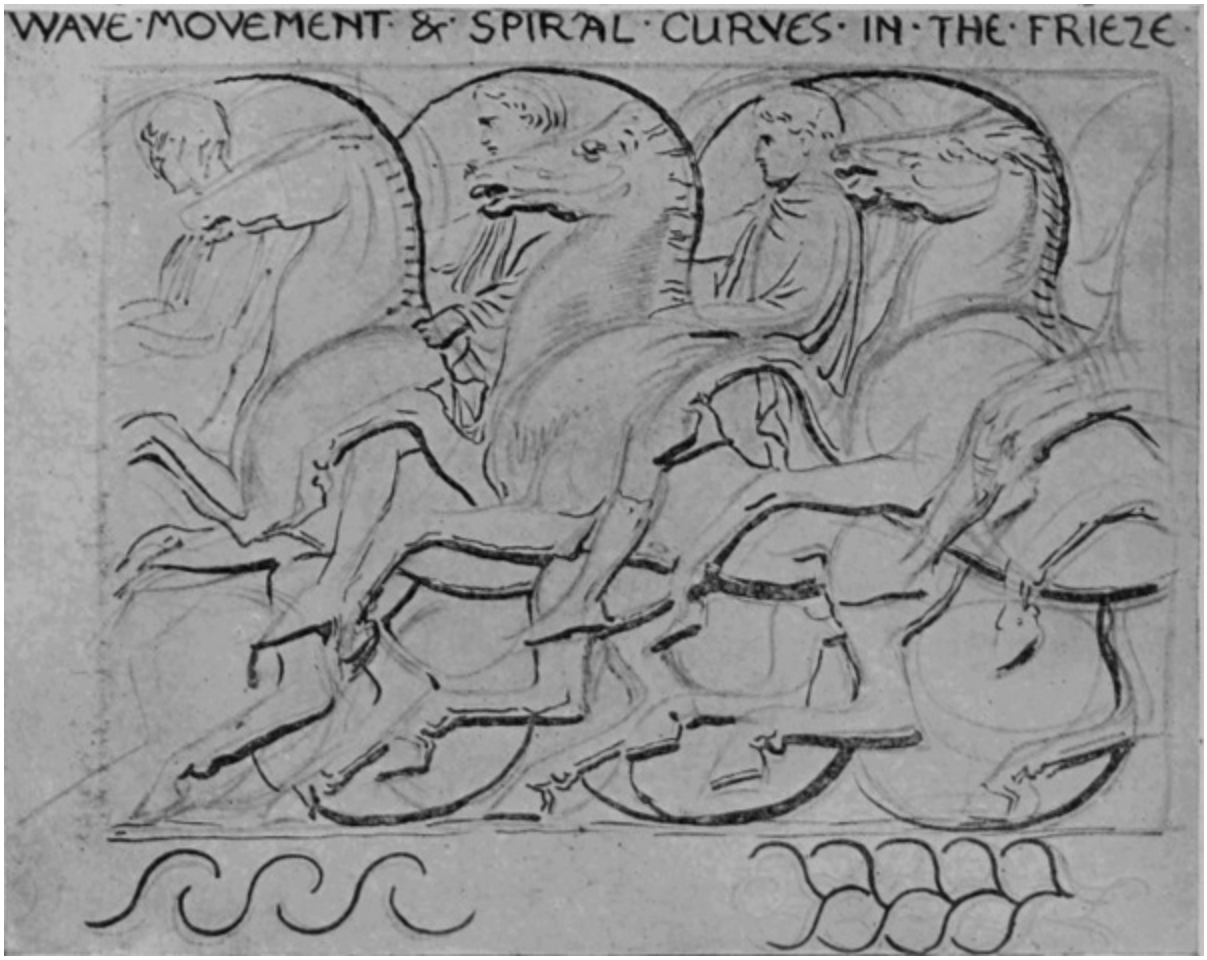


IMITATION OF WOODEN CONSTRUCTION IN STONE TOMB IN LYKIA,
[From GUHL & KONER].

By these means, however, qualities of grandeur, joined with extreme simplicity, subtle proportions, and sparing, severe, but delicately chiselled ornament were gained; which, when heightened with colour in the broad and strong sunshine of Greece, seemed all sufficient, especially so when they formed the framework, or setting, of the most

beautiful and noble sculpture the world has ever seen, as in the Parthenon.

To this sculpture, indeed, all the lines and proportions of the building seem to lead the eye, while it remains, whether in pediment, metope, or frieze, an essential part of the architectural effect, and is strictly slab sculpture, or what may be considered as architectural ornament, for, as I have elsewhere said, we may fairly consider figure-sculpture to have been the ornament of the Greeks: just as one might say that picture writing and hieroglyphic were the mural decorations of the Egyptians.



ORNAMENTAL LINES IN THE FRIEZE OF THE PARTHENON.

WAVE MOVEMENT & SPIRAL CURVES IN THE FRIEZE.

These sculptures were evidently designed under the influence of the strongest architectural and decorative feeling, and were constructed upon a basis of ornamental lines. There is a certain rhythm and recurrence of mass, and line, and form in them throughout, and they have all been carefully considered in relation to the places they occupy.

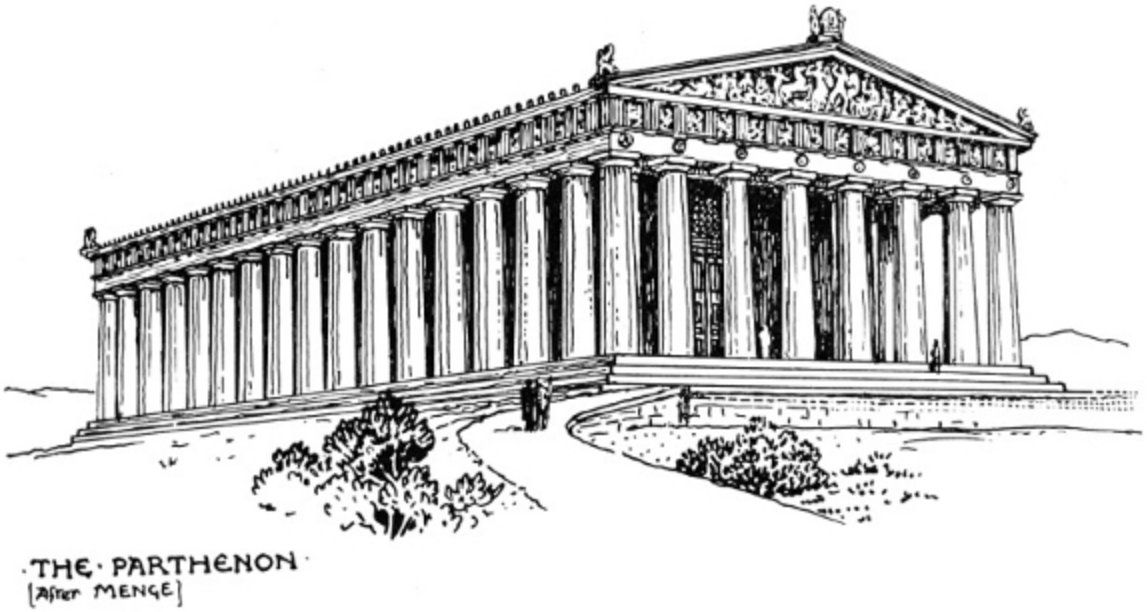
METOPE OF THE PARTHENON,
SHOWING RELATION & PROPORTIONS OF THE MASSES IN RELIEF TO THE GROUND.

It is to be noted, too, that the sculptures are placed in the *interstices of the construction*; that is to say, not on the actual bearing parts. On this point it is interesting to compare with the earlier forms of pure stone construction at Mycenæ. The lions over the Mycenæ Gate are carved upon a slab of stone placed in the triangular hollow left above the lintel to prevent it breaking under the great pressure of the heavy stones used. The triangular hollow may be seen *without* the slab in the doorway of Clytemnestra's house at Mycenæ. Here we have an early instance of the interstice left by the necessities of the construction being utilized as a decorative feature, significant in its design, showing the protecting image of the Castle of Mycenæ, much in the same way as we see the family arms sculptured over the gateways of our English mediæval castles.

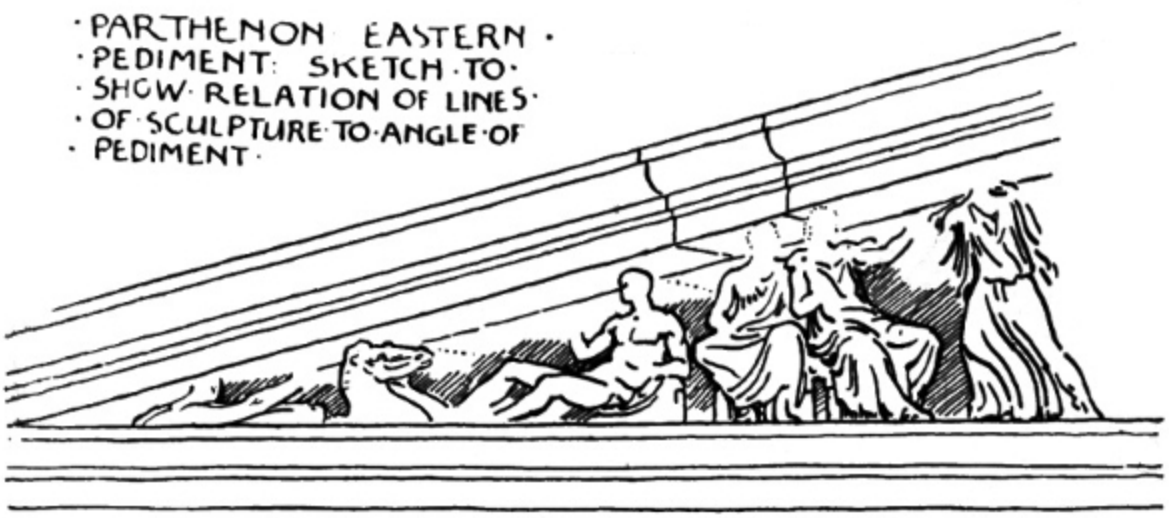
Returning to the Parthenon, we see that the same principle is observable in the pediment and metope sculptures, the frieze of the cella being really a mural decoration consisting of facing slabs of marble. The building would doubtless stand without any of them, as a timber-framed house would stand without its boarding, or filling of brick or plaster; but it would be like a skeleton, or a head without its eyes—much, indeed, as time, bombardment, ravage, and the British Museum have left it now.

Before we leave the Parthenon, let me call attention to one prevailing principle, characteristic of its design in every part; for though following throughout the principles or traditions of wooden construction, no doubt its proportions and lines were consciously and carefully considered by the architect with a view to æsthetic effect. It is *the principle of*

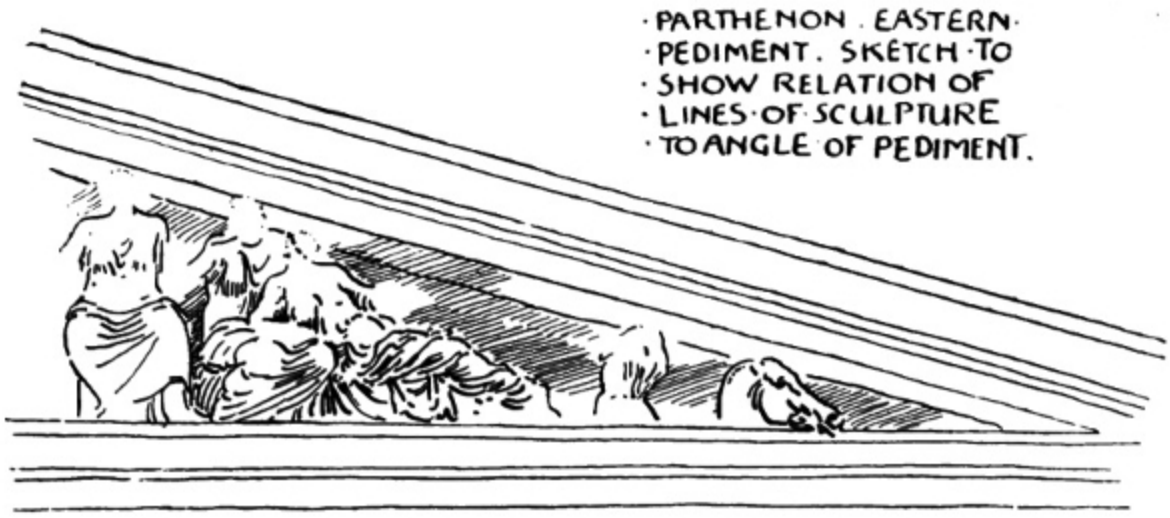
recurring or re-echoing lines, a leading principle, indeed, throughout the whole province of Design, and one on the importance and value of which it is impossible to lay too much stress.



THE PARTHENON
[After MENGE].

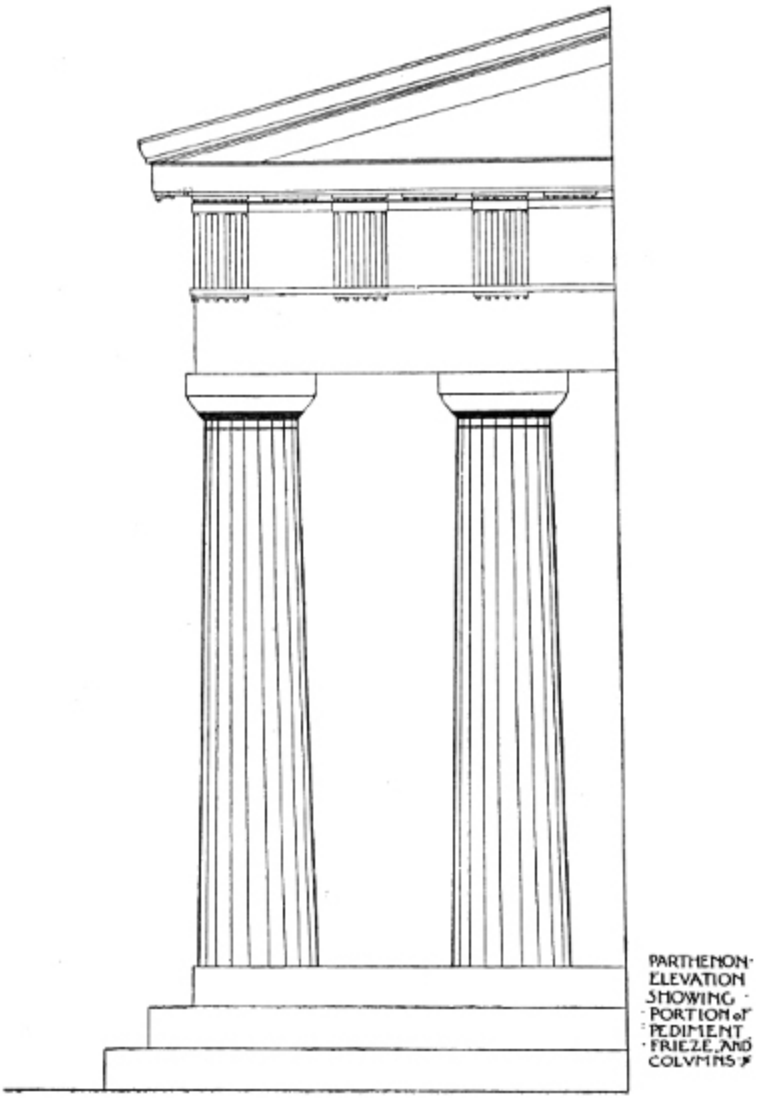


PARTHENON EASTERN PEDIMENT—SKETCH TO SHOW RELATION OF LINES OF SCULPTURE TO ANGLE OF PEDIMENT.



PARTHENON EASTERN PEDIMENT—SKETCH TO SHOW RELATION OF LINES OF SCULPTURE TO ANGLE OF PEDIMENT.

To begin with the pediment. The main outline is delicately emphasized by the mouldings of the edge, which also serve as a dripstone—the practical origin, probably, of all mouldings. The groups of sculptured figures within the recess (which further serve to express the pitch of the roof) re-echo, informally, in the lines controlling their composition, as well as in the lines of limbs and draperies, variations of the angle of the pediment. Thus, the groups of figures, full of action and variety as they are, are united and harmonized with the whole building; while, to avoid undue appearance of heaviness on the crest of the pediment and on the angles were placed anthemion bronze ornaments.

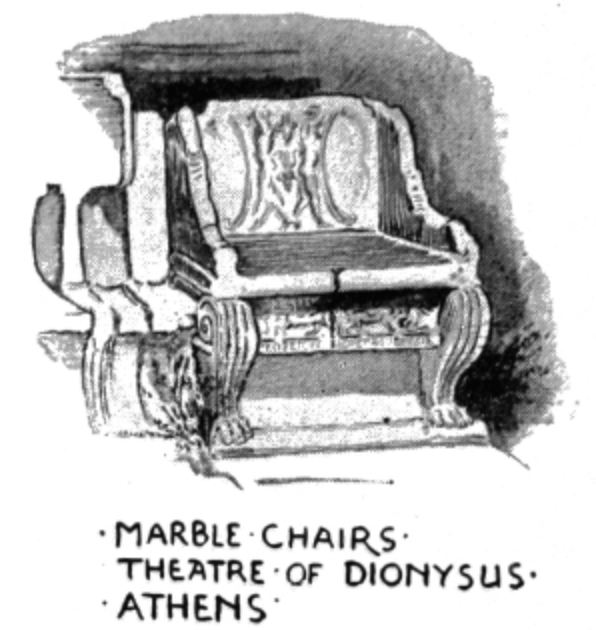


PARTHENON ELEVATION SHOWING PORTION OF PEDIMENT FRIEZE AND COLUMNS.

The cornice, again, is emphasized by mouldings marking the important horizontal lines of the building, re-echoed by the lines of the frieze, and counteracted and braced by the emphatic vertical lines of the triglyphs, and enriched by the little dentils below.

Then we come to the cap of the Doric column. It is simplicity itself. A thin square block of marble forms the

abacus. The capital is a flattened circular cushion of marble, rounded at the sides in a diminishing curve to the head of the column, which terminates in a horizontal reeding. The column itself is delicately channelled with a series of lines which follow its outline, and give vertical expression to the idea of the support of the horizontal mass above, the column gradually diminishing from base to cap, entasized or slightly swelled in the middle to avoid the visual effect of running out of the perpendicular. The Doric columns spring boldly from the steps without base mouldings, the steps repeating the horizontal lines of the building again, and giving it height and dignity. The other variants of the Greek style will illustrate much the same principles in different degrees, and we may trace the value of proportions, and recurring lines, and different degrees of enrichment through the other four orders.



MARBLE CHAIRS, THEATRE OF DIONYSUS, ATHENS.

As designers, then, we can at least learn some very important lessons from lintel architecture generally, and from the Parthenon in particular, and chiefest amongst these are:

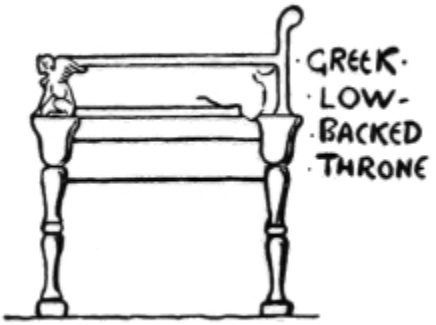
1. The value of simplicity of line.

2. The value of recurring and re-echoing lines.

3. The value of ornamental design and treatment of figures in low or high relief as parts of architectural expression

GREEK CHAIR.

GREEK TABLE WITH VOTIVE OFFERINGS.



END OF GREEK COUCH.

GREEK LOW-BACKED THRONE.

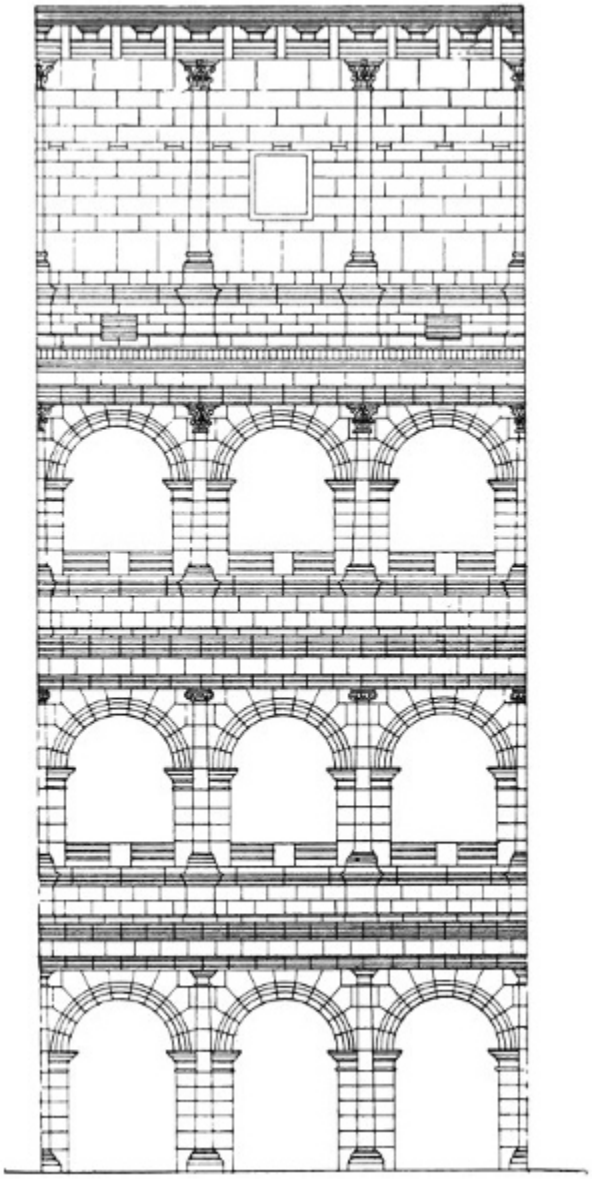
4. The value of largeness of style in the design and treatment of the groups and figures themselves, both as sculpture pure and simple and as architectural ornament.

When we come to examine the accessories of Greek life, furniture, pottery, dress, we find them all characterized by the same qualities in design as we have just been noting in the architecture; the fundamental architectural feeling seems to pervade them. A simplicity of line, balance, and reserve of ornament distinguishes alike their seats and chairs and tables, caskets, vases and vessels, and the expressive lines of their dresses and draperies falling into the lines of the figure give life and variety, while they contrast with the severity of the architectural lines and planes.

Now, so far we have been considering the architecture of the lintel, and its bearing upon design, and the qualities and principles we may learn from it generally.

With the use of the round arch—invented, it is said, by the Greeks, but always associated with the Romans, who used it—quite different effects come in, with different motives and ideas in design. The Roman architecture, the round arch, fulfils the functions of both construction and ornament, on the same principle of recurrence, or repetition, we have noticed before; as, for instance, in the Colosseum, where the tiers of round arches which support the outer wall of the building serve both the constructive and decorative functions. With the use of the arch the arcade becomes a constructive feature of great decorative value, and takes the

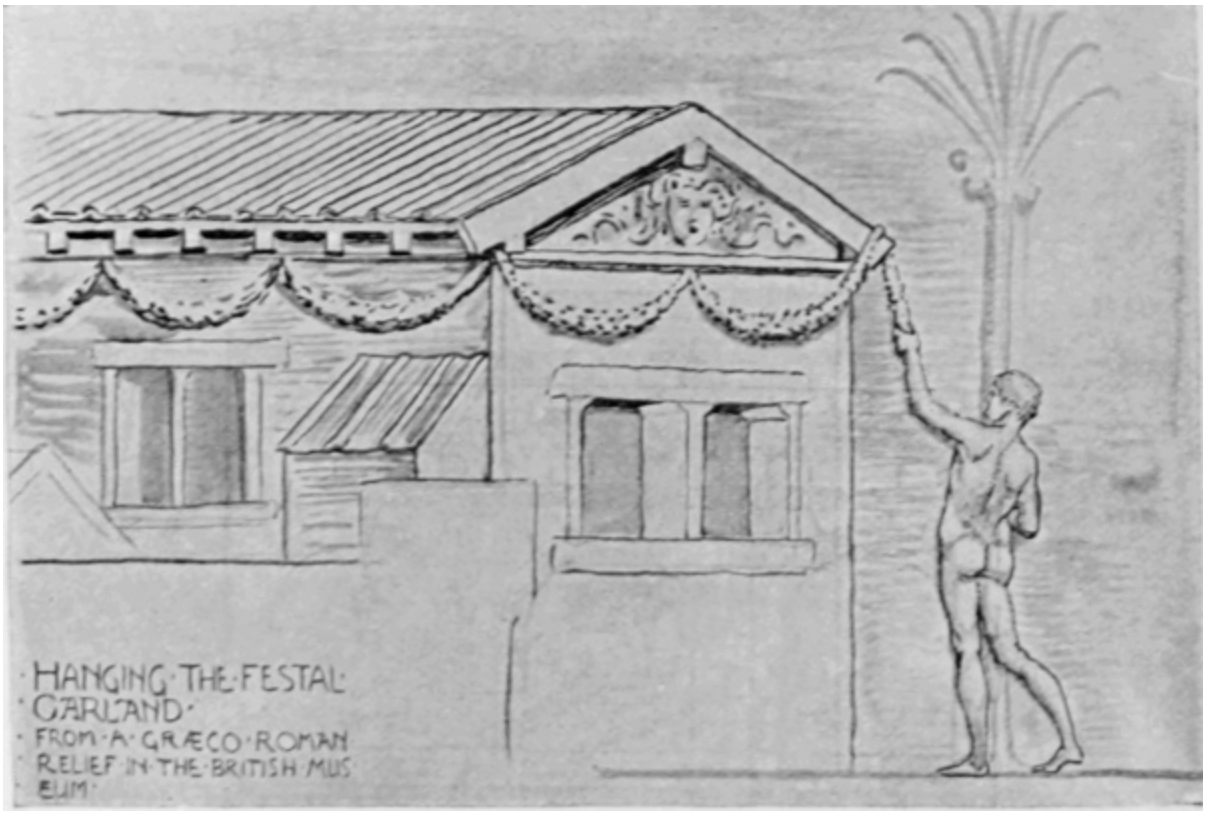
place in Roman and Romanesque buildings, with a lighter and more varied effect, of the columned Greek cella. Sunshine, no doubt, had much to do with its use, since a covered arcaded loggia, or porch in front of a building, so frequent in Italy, gave both shelter and coolness. The use of the arch led to vaulting, and to the use of arch mouldings, enrichments, and to the covering the vaults with mosaic and painting, and the vaulting led to the dome, which, again, offered a splendid field for the mosaicist and the painter.



CONSTRUCTIVE & DECORATIVE USE OF ROUND ARCH & PILASTER FLAVIAN AMPHITHEATRE (COLOSSEUM) ROME.

(FERGUSON).

The Romans borrowed all their architectural details from the Greeks, and varied and enriched them, adding many more members to the cornice mouldings, and carving stone garlands upon their friezes, to take the place of the primitive festal ones of leaves which were hung there, as in the relief of the visit of Bacchus to Icarius, a Romano-Greek sculpture in the British Museum.



HANGING OF THE FESTAL GARLAND,
FROM A GRÆCO ROMAN RELIEF IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

They (the Romans) fully realized the ornamental value of colonnades and porticoes, and they used the column, varying the orders, and translating them into pilasters freely as decorations on the façades and walls of their buildings,

slicing up the peristyles of temples, as it were, for the sake of their ornamental effect, cutting down the columns into pilasters, and placing them, with intervening friezes, one on the top of the other, masking the construction of the real building, a favourite device with the Renascence architects.

USE OF DECORATIVE SCULPTURE IN ROMAN ARCHITECTURE: THE ARCH OF CONSTANTINE.

Roman architecture may be considered really as a transitional style. While its true constructive characteristic is the round arch, every detail of the Greek or Lintel architecture is used both without and with the arch, and in the latter case the column frequently becomes a wall decoration in the shape of a pilaster, as well as the cornice, and is no longer made use of, as in true lintel construction,

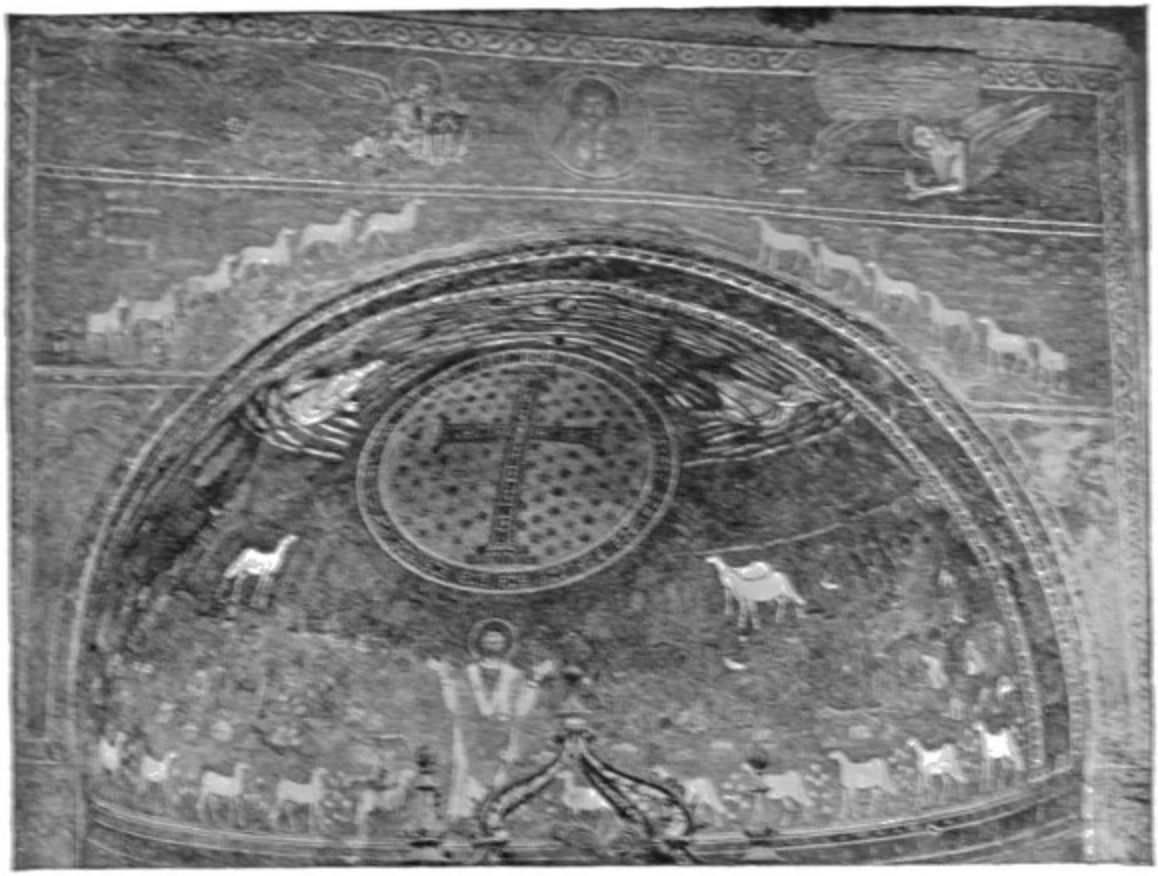
to support the weight of the roof. In their viaducts and bridges and baths they were great builders with the arch, but, like some modern engineers, when they wanted to beautify they borrowed architectural ornament from the Greeks.

Nothing very fresh was gained for design in these adaptations except a certain heavy richness of detail in the sculptured cornices and friezes, and coffered ceilings. The use of the flat pilaster, however, led to the panelled pilaster with its elegant arabesque, which was afterwards revived and developed with such extraordinary grace and variety by the artists of the Renascence and carried from Italy westward.

With the round arch, too, several important decorative spaces were given to the designer, the spandrel, the panel, the medallion, all of which, with the frieze, may be seen utilized for the decorative sculpture on the arch of Constantine. The decorative use of inscriptions is also a feature in Roman architecture, and the dignity of the form of their capital letters was well adapted to ornamental effect in square masses upon their triumphal arches and along the entablature of their temples.

The Romans, too, brought the domed roof and the mosaic floor into use, and were great in the use of coloured marbles; also stucco and plaster work in interiors, the free and beautiful plaster work found in the tombs on the Latin Way being well known; so that on the whole we owe to them the illustration of the effective use of many beautiful arts, which the Italians have inherited to this day, though it must be said often with more skill than taste.

One might say, generally and ultimately, Roman art exemplified that love of show, and the external signs of power, pomp, splendour, and luxury which became dear as well as fatal to them, as they appear to do to every conquering people, until they are finally enervated and overcome as if by the Nemesis of their own supremacy.



MOSAIC, ST. APOLLINARE IN CLASSE, RAVENNA.

The art of Greece, one may say, on the other hand, at her zenith represented that love of beauty as distinct from ornament, and clearness and severity of thought which will always cling to the country from whence the modern world derives the germ of nearly all its ideas.

But when the seat of the empire was transferred to Constantinople, and Roman art, influenced by Asiatic

feeling, and stimulated and elevated by the new faith of Christianity, became transfigured into the solemn splendour of Byzantine art, the architecture of the round arch and the dome and cupola rose to its fullest beauty, and such buildings as St. Sophia at Constantinople, and St. Mark's at Venice, with the churches of Ravenna, mark another great and noble epoch in the arts of design.

Byzantine design, whether in building, in carving, in mosaic, or goldsmiths' work, impresses one with a certain restraint in the midst of its splendour; a certain controlling dignity and reserve appears to be exercised even in the use of the most beautiful materials, as well as in design and the treatment of form.

The mosaics of the Ravenna churches alone are sufficient to exemplify this. The artists seemed fully to realize that the curved surfaces of the dome, the half dome of the apse, or the long flat frieze above the arch columns of the nave of the basilicas, like St. Apollinare in Classe, afforded splendid fields for a splendid material, the cross light from the deep-set windows enriching the effect, and that everything might well be secondary to it. The same principle or feeling is seen in St. Mark's where the architecture is quite simple, the arches and vaulting without mouldings, nothing to interfere with the quiet splendour of the gold or blue fields of mosaic varied with simple typical figures, bold in silhouette, placed frankly upon them, emblems, boldly curving scroll-work, and inscriptions. The execution, too, is as direct and simple as the design. Such design and decoration as this becomes an essential and integral part of the architectural structure and effect.