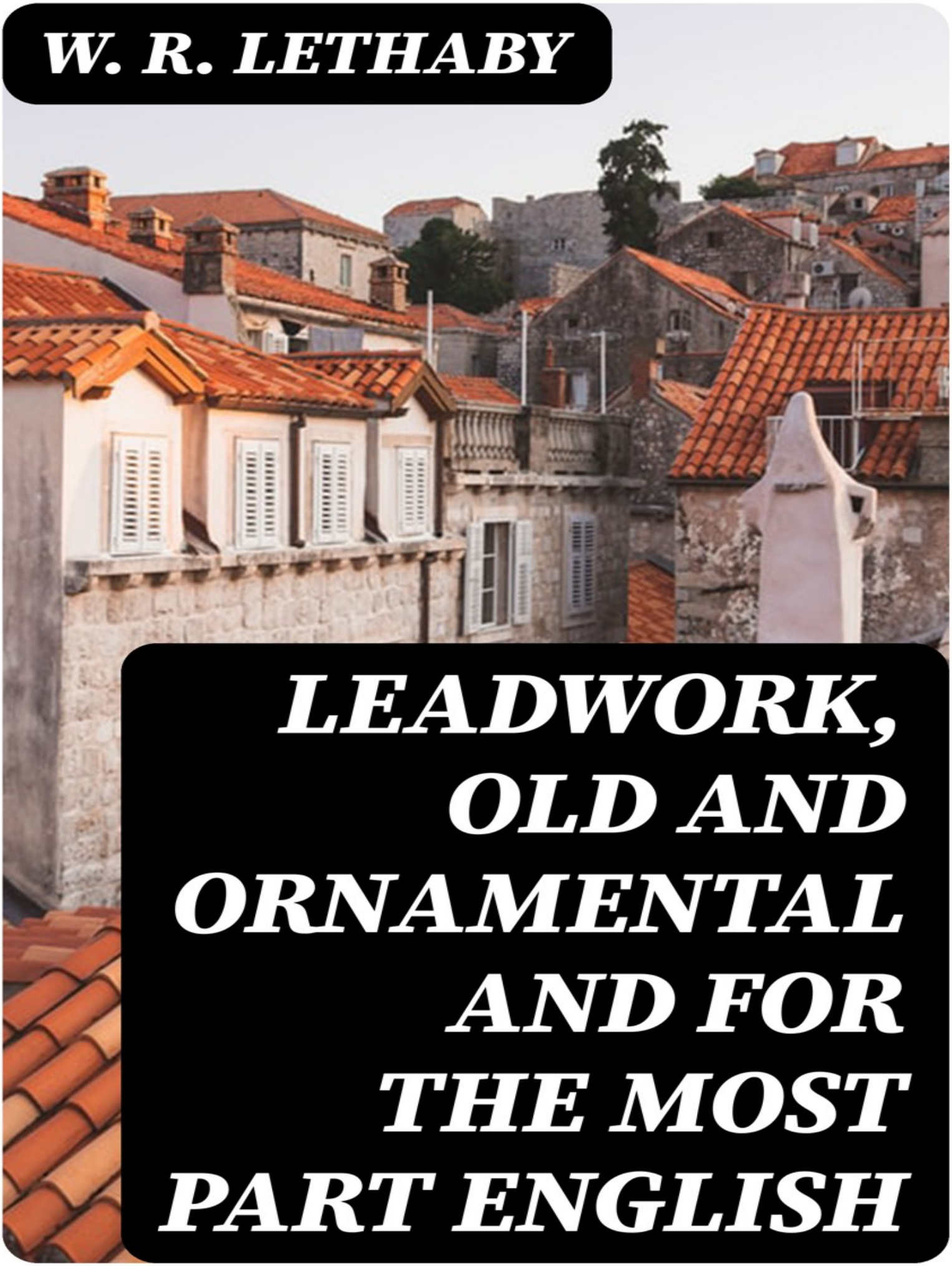
W. R. LETHABY



LEADWORK, OLD AND ORNAMENTAL AND FOR THE MOST PART ENGLISH

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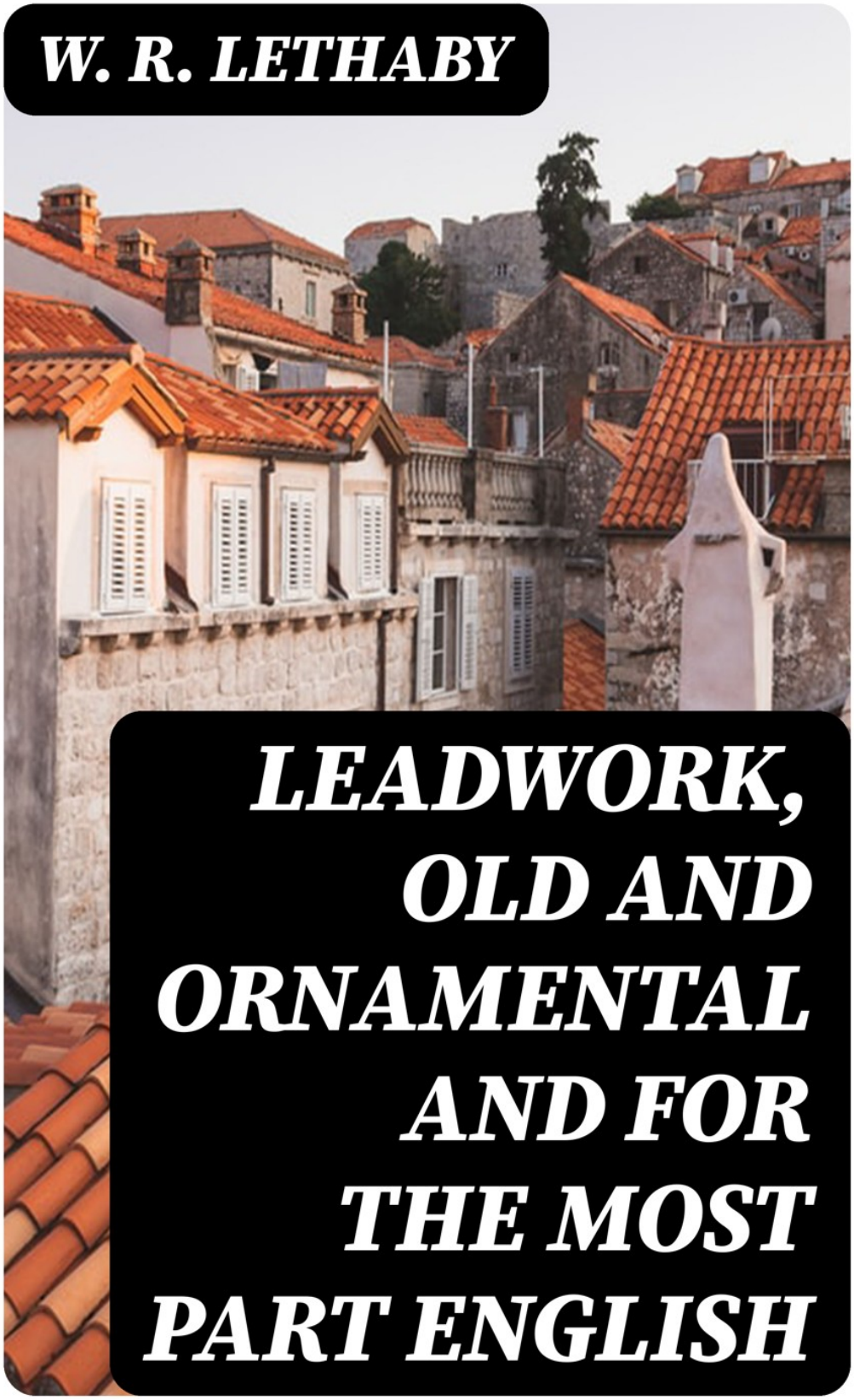

LEADWORK, OLD AND ORNAMENTAL AND FOR THE MOST PART ENGLISH

W. R. Lethaby

Leadwork, Old and Ornamental and for the most part English

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LEADWORK

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§ I. OF MATERIAL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP.

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To none of the processes of modern mechanism do more vulgar associations cling than to “Plumbing.” It is the very serviceableness and ductility of lead as a material that have brought about the easy and familiar contempt with which it is treated. While few are more worthy of artistic care no metal is more perfectly adaptable to noble use through a range of treatments that cannot be matched by any other metal whatsoever. It combines extreme ease of manipulation with practically endless durability, and a suitability to any scale, from a tiny inkwell, or a medal, to the statue of horse and rider, a Versailles fountain, or the greatest cathedral spire.

The range of method in handling follows from the equal ease with which it can be hammered out, cast, or cut, and all three, employed concurrently on the same piece.

The main purpose of the pages which follow is not to set out a history of the use of this material in various forms, although this is involved. It is intended by pointing out the characteristics and methods of the art of lead working in the past to show its possibilities for us, and for the future. A picture of what has been done is the best means of coming to a view of what may again be done. But it cannot be too

strongly asserted that the *forms* of past art cannot be *copied*; that certain things have been done is evidence enough to show that we cannot do them over again. Reproduction is impossible; to attempt it is but to make a poor diagram at the best.

Commercially produced imitations of ornamental works are infinitely beneath the merely utilitarian object which serves its purpose and attempts nothing more. Behind all design there must be a personality expressing himself; but certain principles of treatment and methods of working may be understood in some degree by a study of past work without going all through it again. History thus makes the experience of the past available to us, but it does not relieve us of the necessity of ourselves having experiences. There is a great stimulus in feeling one of a chain, and entering into the traditions of a body of art. The workman Bezin said to Mr. Stevenson of museums, “One sees in them little miracles of workmanship—it fires a spark.”

New design must ever be founded on a strict consideration of the exact purpose to be fulfilled by the proposed object, of how it will serve its purpose best, and show perfect suitability to the end in view when made in this or that material by easy means. This, not the torturing of a material into forms which have not before been used, is the true ground of beauty, and this to a certain extent is enough without any ornamentation. Ornament is quite another matter, it has no justification in service, it can only justify itself by being beautiful.

In so far as history is involved here it has been necessary to refer to and to figure many works, not bearing the

impress of a fine living style, but only passable exercises in the respectabilities of a sort of conventional design learnt by rote. As a general rule it will be found that the workers of the middle ages penetrated at once to the reason of a thing in structure and then decorated it with an evidence of fresh thought—a delight in growth, form, humanity, in one word Nature, the source of all beauty and subject of all art. Each thing made is evidently by an *artist*; it expresses reasonable workmanship and happy thought in pleasant solution of some necessity of actual service. Many of the later things are not thus natural and spontaneous but pedantic and pompous, fulfilling their chief intention if they were expensive; while to-day the chief care of design is often to *appear* expensive without being so in fact.

Only in our century in England would it be possible for the metals which are so especially hers, iron, tin, and lead, to have been so degraded that it is hardly possible to think of them as vehicles of art. It should not be so, for each of the metals can give us characteristics that others cannot, and the capabilities of lead have been sufficiently proved by more than two thousand years of artistic manipulation.

The only way in which the crafts can again be made harmonious by beauty is for men with a sense of architectural fitness and a feeling for design to take up the actual workmanship and practise it themselves as they would painting or sculpture, seeking the delight of being good artists not the reputation of being successful merchants or clever professional men. To any such, lead-working may be recommended.

§ II. AN HISTORICAL SKETCH.

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The ease with which lead ores may be gained from the earth and then worked, is sufficient to show that the application of lead to the service of the arts must have been made very early.

Nowhere does it seem to have been so easily found as “in England herself which is the classic land of lead and tin” (Abbé Cochet). These two metals made the early fame of Britain; they brought here the Phœnician trader and had doubtless much to do with the Roman occupation of this distant island.

“Tin and lead,” says Harrison in his *Description of England*, “metals which Strabo noteth in his time to be carried into Marseilles from hence, as Diodorus also confirmeth, are very plentiful with us, the one in Cornwall, Devonshire, and elsewhere in the north, the other in Derbyshire, Weredale, and sundry places of this island.... There were mines of lead sometimes also in Wales which endured so long till the people had consumed all their wood by melting of the same.”

Tin, which was of such sovereign necessity for the composition of bronze, was, with lead, an object of wide commerce, as we may learn from the prophecy of Ezekiel against Tyre, whose long black ships did the carrying trade of the world. As the Tarshish of Scripture is the Tartessus of classic authors—an entrepôt of Phœnician trade in Spain—it may well be of English mined metal that the prophet speaks:—“Tarshish was thy merchant by reason of the

multitude of all kinds of riches; with silver, iron, tin, and lead they traded in thy fairs."

The Assyrian slabs which contain the accounts of the expedition into Syria in the ninth century B.C. include among the tribute exacted of Tyre and of Jerusalem itself "bars of gold, silver, copper, and lead." Solomon used lead in the structure of the great wall of Jerusalem.

Sir H. Layard says the mountains three or four days' journey from Nineveh furnished iron, copper, lead, and silver in abundance, and he found instances of its actual use at Nineveh. Place also, in his excavations at Khorsabad, discovered a foundation inscription of Sargon II., the great builder of the eighth century B.C. engraved on a plate of lead. A leaden jar and a piece of pipe were found by Loftus at Mugheir.

In Egypt it was sparingly used. Sir G. Wilkinson says:—"Lead was comparatively useless, but was sometimes used for inlaying temple doors, coffers and furniture, small statuettes of the gods were occasionally made in this metal, especially those of Osiris and Anubis."

In Egypt as well as in Babylonia it was the custom to make a deposit of several objects in the foundations, a tradition which we still follow to-day. At Daphnae Mr. Flinders Petrie found a set of little slabs of different stones and small plates of metal, gold, silver, copper, and lead, all engraved with the name of Psamtik. The lead tablet is here figured.

FIG. 1.

The ornamental objects of lead to which the earliest date can be assigned are those found by Dr. Schliemann in his excavations at Mycenæ and Tiryns.[1]

The Greeks very largely used lead for many purposes. It is twice mentioned in the Iliad, and its familiar use as a building material is shown by Herodotus, who says that Queen Nitocris built a bridge over the river at Babylon, of stone bound together with lead and iron; and the story the Greek historian gives of the celebrated hanging gardens describes how they were raised on high terraces of arches covered with bitumen and sheets of lead.

Sufficient actual examples of Greek lead work are stored up in museums, masonry with dowels of lead, inscribed tablets, small toys and tokens, little vases for eye salve about as large as a thimble, boxes for unguents, and sling bullets. These last are often inscribed so that the warrior might know his work, often with flouts and jibes and jeers. One in the Lewes Museum has ΕΥΓΕΙ,—“Well done”; others have “Hit Hard,” &c.

In the museums of Athens are some small figures, a Dionysiac wreath of gilt lead leaves to be worn as a garland, a lead quiver for arrows about fifteen inches long, also plummets and market weights, with other objects. Mr. Cockerell found that parts of the early pediment sculptures at Ægina were of lead, and lead is inlaid in the volute of the early Ionic capital from the archaic temple of Ephesus now in the British Museum.

FIG. 2.

The plummets are interesting to us as builders' implements; there are two or three dozen in the British Museum, about three inches high and one inch at the base tapering upwards: some are marked with the letter A on one side and on the obverse a little relief, a throne-seat with an owl. The owl was Athene's own symbol, and appears on the coinage of Athens in a form from which this seems copied. The Acropolis was her throne. We will stretch our imaginations far enough to believe that the A stands for Athens and that these are the very implements used in

setting the masonry of one of the corner stones of the world’s art—the Parthenon.

FIG. 3.

The market weights are remarkable in bearing devices like the types of coins. For the most part they are square cakes and the devices simple almost to rudeness, yet they have that impress of style and grace in the design, with the large free handling in which is the exquisiteness of Greek art. A sketchiness so simple and easy can be the only right treatment for a metal so likely to receive injury in the use; to these as in all art so considered the inevitable injuries of wear are little loss. We can hardly suppose that such a simple industry as making lead weights for the markets would have had artists capable of designing, and suggesting in relief types like these, rather we may suppose that some of the great coiners furnished the models, especially as they would be issued by the authorities of the several towns.

We may take this first opportunity of remarking that the patterns for all ornament *intended for casting* should be *modelled* like these, never *carved*, as is now so universally