

Owen Jones and the Threefold Nature of Ornament

In London in 1851 there was an event of unprecedented scale: the Great Exhibition, the first World's Fair. The very dimensions of the exhibition building exceeded anything seen before it. At 560 meters long and 137 meters wide, Sir Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace greatly surpassed the size of Saint Peter's in Rome. It was the largest building in the world, and a monumental show of cultural products from the whole of humanity was presented in it. The products exhibited, both the British ones and those of other Western countries, were sobering in comparison to the monumentality of the building and the technical progress on show. They were sobering as soon as the standard of judgment was taken to be a marginal quality that seen on its own is not an autonomous object at all yet was a component of all the objects exhibited: ornament.

Looking at the products exhibited and their ornamentation made it clear that all of the Western products copied ornaments from past eras that haphazardly overrun the objects, while the material and function of the objects were not taken into account in the design. The very critique of ornament becoming autonomous increased its value in a categorical way: not the object itself was the authority of judgment but its ornamentation. It became the

standard for judging the object. As a result, into the twentieth century ornament became a key problem in all fields of art and the point of departure for various concepts for reforming the arts.

The Crystal Palace, even more so the Great Exhibition itself, illustrated the problem in an especially forceful way: for as a building of iron and glass, whose new technology and transparent hull tended to dissolve in substance, automatically focused the viewer's gaze on what was added to it: ornament. A new architecture could only emerge from ornament, as Owen Jones, the architect responsible for the interior decoration of the Crystal Palace, emphasized. Ornament was, he said, the «soul»¹ of the building. As an industrially produced building, the Crystal Palace accentuated the central problem that ornament had just made the center of attention and that had provided impetus to organize the Great Exhibition: How should one produce ornamentation for industrially manufactured products?

In order to establish the groundwork for a new ornamentation, the Government School of Design had been founded in 1837; it became the so-called South Kensington School, with which Jones was associated. In the tradition of the Enlightenment, the goal of the school was to use new ornamentation to elevate common taste and thus strengthen society's moral cohesion. The teaching of ornamentation was supposed to be expanded to include even elementary school. This concentration on ornament gave it the status of an autonomous work, even though it was always emphasized that the supreme objective was to integrate ornament into the overarching context of the work.

The autonomy of ornament was made possible by objects that were made to disappear in their function as a bearer of ornament precisely by the ornament itself. They were objects that in turn decorated other objects, dressing or undressing

1 Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, (London: Day and Son, 1856), 155.

them—for example, carpets, wallpapers, curtains, tablecloths, and clothing. In this class of objects, which was the leading one for the theory of ornament at the time, ornaments had a material, flat character that heightened the pictorial quality, and hence autonomy, of the ornament.²

2 Joseph Masheck, «The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness,» in *Art Magazine* 51 (1976): 82–109.

I. Cultural Nature of Ornament

Owen Jones undertook in his historical overview to explore the inner laws of ornamentation as a way of exploiting its potential to constitute culture. For only by finding principles of design based on laws would it be possible, in his view, to break through the arbitrary ornament that followed in the tracks of historical styles in favor of a new, up-to-date style. In the handbook he wrote for the South Kensington School, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), Jones showed the «general laws» on which all ornamental forms are based. Summarized in thirty-seven «propositions,» he began his book with them as directions for seeing.

Jones remarked that all ornamental forms that have been regarded as beautiful across cultural and linguistic borders are based on these laws. Jones thus understood ornament as a universal language of beauty, which developed into historical styles in the manner of dialects. During his investigations Jones discovered the richness of ornamental language in comparison to spoken language. Thus it was almost impossible to express in words the formal differences between Persian, Arabic, and Turkish ornaments, yet they stand out quite clearly to our eyes.³ Thus ornament represents a universally intelligible form of communication that predated the spoken language. Jones tried to reveal its grammatical structure, which is why his analyses of ornament feature a rather philological ambition.

3 Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, op. cit., 63.

According to Jones, the intelligibility across eras and cultures of successful ornaments derives from the fact that the grammatical structure of ornament is based on the fundamental structural principles that determine the form of creation, according to which plants grow.⁴ From this it does not follow that the creation of successful ornaments should be based on copying as accurately as possible the outward appearance of foliage or vines. Such ornament is the immediate sign of cultural decline.⁵ The extent to which real plants can serve as adequate models for ornamentation is demonstrated by Jones with examples from Egyptian ornament, which he regarded as the origins of the history of ornament. In order to provide an anthropological foundation for ornament, Jones opened *The Grammar of Ornament* with a chapter on «savage tribes.» But Jones noticed that on this level of culture the «ornamental instinct» began to stir only gradually; only Egyptian culture, which he understood to be the dawn of civilization, produced the first genuine ornamental style. In contrast to the «savage tribes,» their ornament was oriented around specific plants: lotus and papyrus.⁶

In order to illustrate how ornament was grounded in naturalism, Jones shows, at the beginning of the chapter on Egyptian ornament, which includes eight plates, a compilation of ornamental forms of those two plants. Depicted along the central axis of the first plate in the chapter (fig. 1 ▶) is a lotus flower «drawn from Nature»; to the left and right are ornamental forms based on the lotus, which Jones calls «representations.»⁷ This arrangement makes it clear that nature represents the absolute standard from which the ornamental forms were derived. Yet his veristic depiction of the lotus is already so stylized that it has the effect of an ornamental pattern. It is achieved above all by the negation of the sense of autonomous space in the depiction of the flower.

4 Ibid., 24.

5 Ibid., 70.

6 Ibid., 13.

7 Ibid., 19.



Figure 1

Only the cut-off stalk reveals the planar form to be three-dimensional.

With that knowledge, a moderate space resulting from color perspective results within the flower, evoked by the yellow dabs of color representing the receptacle of the flower and the progression of colors within the petals. The ornamental—or, in Jones's terminology, representational—depiction of the lotus fixes the ordering pattern of this veristic image by negating the sense of having its own space. The lotus stalk has become a line without a cross section that, in order to preserve its character as a stalk depicted in a plane, is demarcated by a brown contour line. This contour line also vaults over the individual petals. This produces a form that stands out as a figure against the ground of the plate, with which it simultaneously establishes, owing to its planar character, a relationship of correspondence that is not found in the representation of its model in nature. Only this space-reducing dematerialization of the model from nature produces the «flatness» that makes it possible to insert the ornament into the surface as a «surface decoration.» This process can be demonstrated with the example of the second series of veristic depiction and ornamental representation.

Figures 7, 8, and 9 show the stalks and flowers of the papyrus plant, while Figure 10 shows its representation, whose tripartite form of base, stalk, and capital also provided the model for the Egyptian column. Starting from this ornamental column schema, which once again was produced by a space-reducing dematerialization of the model from nature, the materiality of the column is reestablished. This visual argument is illustrated on plate VI (fig. 27). Figure 1 shows a capital from Luxor. Its fluting is run through with filigree papyrus stalks, so that the volume of the capital seems to grow out radially from the stylized leaves of the capital's cornice.

This effect arises precisely because the ornamental plants are not articulated freely as autonomous forms *in front of* the volume of the capital but are rather inserted into its surface and thus form a homogenous composite with it. In order to make the resulting surface integrity visible, the capitals, which are depicted from below, are exhibited as three-dimensional building parts. Like the «veristic» lotus on the plate discussed above, they have clear cross sections, while the patch of light shows that the ornament does not cast a shadow on the volume of the capital but is rather an integral component of the planar surface structure.

The situation with the Roman capital is different (fig. 3 ▲). Here the ornamental acanthus has a striking sense of space resulting from its material appearance, and it goes far beyond that of the veristic depiction of the plant on which it is modeled. Plate XXVI shows how the Roman ornament is articulated by this materialization against a ground (fig. 4 ▶). In Figure 5 in particular, the vigorous vines cast a shadow that darkens the volume of the building proper. Here the sense of the ornament's own volume replaces the volume of the building part that was so succinctly emphasized on the Egyptian capital, with the result that the surface structure of the volume of the building is destroyed. As was lamented of the objects at the Great Exhibition, the ornament overruns the object. It is an addendum, not an ingredient. According to Jones, even in architecture, ornament must be depicted in the mode of «flatness» for it to succeed in fundamentally characterizing the surface structure as an integral part of the building volume.

Hence a surface ornament that negates its own materiality is by no means superficial; rather, it is of fundamental semantic importance to the building volume. Moreover, as the capital from Luxor demonstrates, it can also have a plastic effect, in

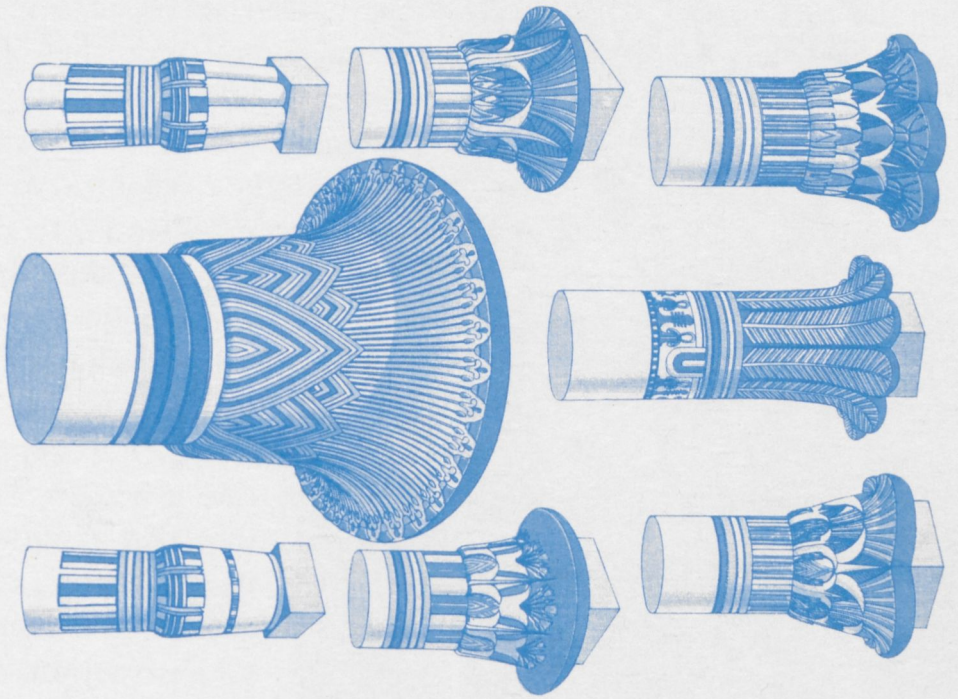


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

8 Christopher Dresser, *The Art of Decorative Design* (London: Day and Son, 1862), 38: «for the most perfect examples of what is usually termed 'conventionalized nature' [...] are manifestations of natural objects as undisturbed by surrounding influences and unmarred by casualties.»

that the lotus blossoms integrated into the surface establish the sharp defining contours of the volume of the capital. By contrast, the material and haptic vines of the Roman capital reduce ornament to a mere surface phenomenon, so that nature is denaturalized precisely by the naturalistic form of the ornament.

By contrast, a successful ornamental representation is based not on the imitation of outward appearance but rather on the space-reducing act of abstraction. In the process, the structure of the model from nature is purified of superficial contingencies and that which is common to all examples is thus manifested.⁸ In the process, ornament acquires the potential to be a form of scientific knowledge: flatness reveals the structure of

natural plants with a clarity not evident in the natural object itself. Because ornamental forms depict the natural proportionality in their beauty, they illustrate the *idea* of the plant, and with it that of plant growth in general. In that sense, *The Grammar of Ornament* is also a grammar of nature.

In the long history of ornament, however, this objective side of ornament was practiced without reflecting on it, and instead its subjective side was favored. The structure discovered always went hand in hand with an ornamental reconfiguration that, according to Jones, was controlled by a will to expression that sought to give ornament symbolic

9 Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, op. cit., 5: «Architecture is the material expression of the wants, the faculties, and the sentiments, of the age in which it is created.»

content.⁹ This resulted in the conventional forms of ornament that represent the ornamental canon in a given culture. Despite these culturally relative components, however, ornament as «conventional form» is not an arbitrary structure comparable to written characters, because its grammar is based on natural laws that find a specific application in the generation of ornaments. Polarity gives historical ornament a twofold relevance as a form of knowledge: on the one hand, by depicting plant structures with visual precision it provides knowledge about nature; on the other hand, the *how* of a given example of this precision opens up knowledge about the cultural formation of its own emergence. Hence *The Grammar of Ornament* is not just a grammar of nature but also a grammar of culture.

II.

Grammatical Nature of Ornament

The ornamental style that, according to Jones, has the greatest relevance through the ages is the Moorish style (fig. 5 >). That is why Jones uses examples of such ornament to illustrate his most important principles of ornamental design. Moorish ornament is distinguished by a perfect figure-ground relationship: «In Moresque ornament the relation of the areas of the ornament to the ground is always perfect; there are never any gaps or holes.»¹⁰ This finely meshed structure results from the internal organization of the ornaments: «Every ornament contains a grammar in itself.»¹¹ This means that the constructive unfolding of ornament does not follow an arbitrary act but rather, analogously to nature, carries out principles inherent in the ornament that mediate between the three primary figures that compose the grammar of ornament: the straight line, the diagonal, and the curve. As Jones demonstrates with examples, the

10 Ibid., 58.

11 Ibid., 66.

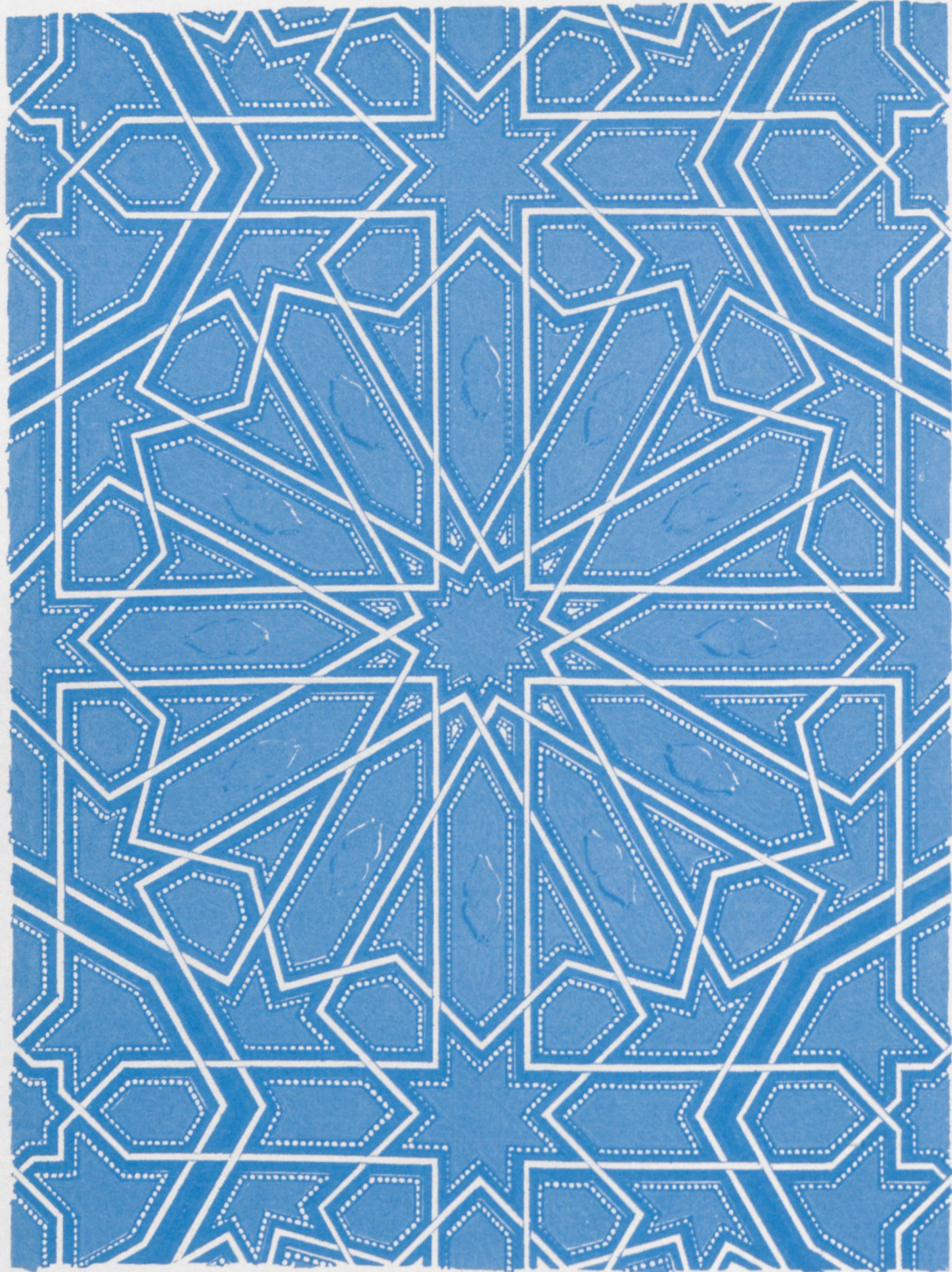


Figure 5A

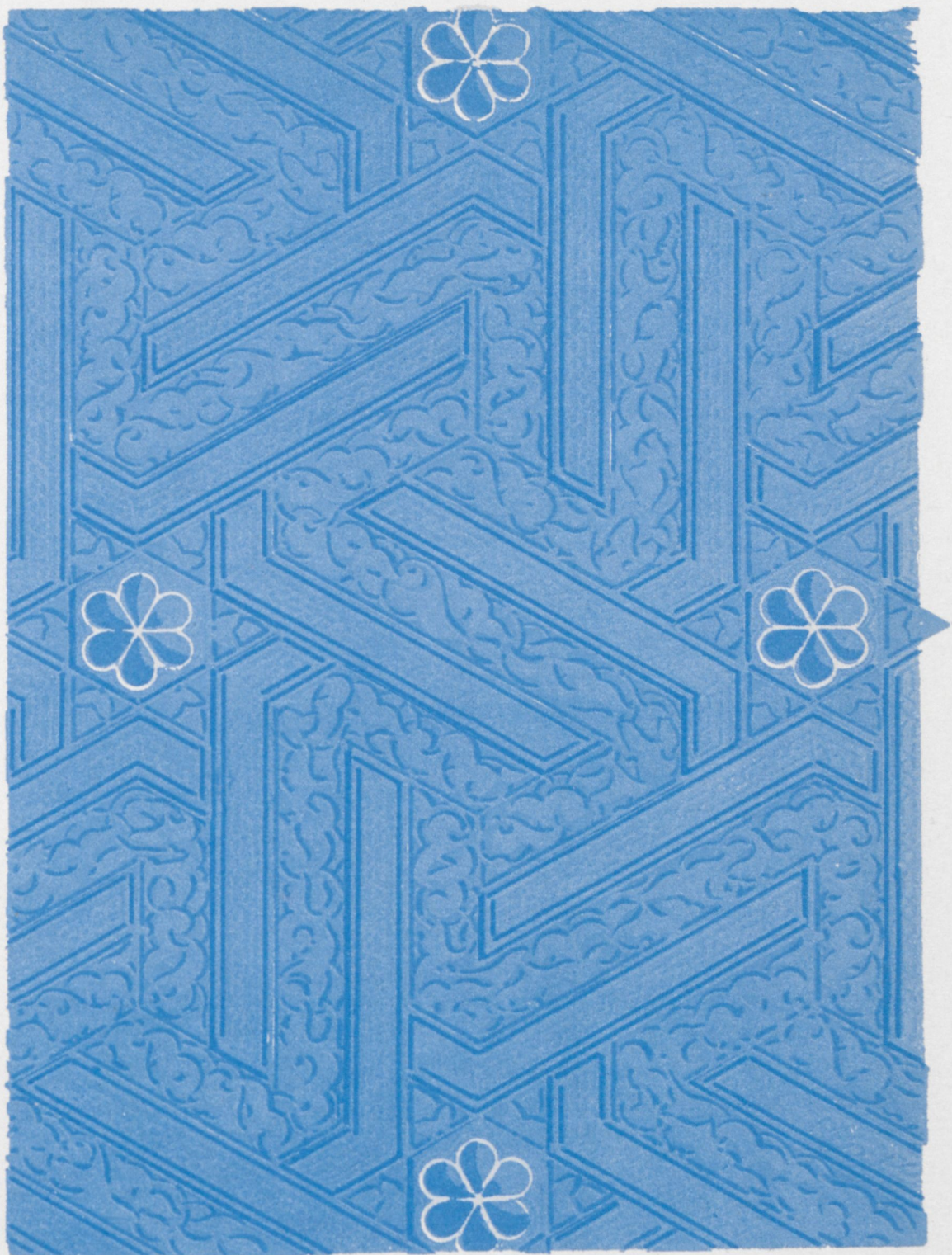


Figure 5B

grammatical connection of these elements occurs in gradual transitions (fig. 6 ▶). Whereas Line A is graduated with balanced proportions, the vertical that joins the two curves in Figure B produces a rupture in the linear structure. The eye cannot move past the caesura and perceive the figure as a flowing movement.

A similar imbalance that bothers the eye is found in Figure D. If the eye completes Figure A with an imaginary line depicted in Figure C, in Figure D it leads to contrary paths in different directions. Thus the figure loses the power to absorb the eye. On the other hand, the lines cannot flow continuously either, since that would give the impression of a random movement. It calls for mediation between different types of lines whose regular combination leads the lines into a planar formation and thus establishes a structure fixed by solid relationships. Jones explains how the three types of lines work together using the example of another schema reminiscent of Gestalt psychology (fig. 7 ▶). The basis of the ornamental structure is a grid composed of straight lines, which, though it is balanced symmetrically, looks monotonous. However, if diagonal lines are added at the points of intersection, the eye is attracted to these points of tension. The visual sense experiences this as pleasing. Finally, adding circles composed of curved lines produces a relationship that can be viewed with pleasure. The schematic diagrams (fig. 8 ▶) show the structures on which the Moorish ornaments in Plate xxxix are based. For the diagrams to become ornaments, the figure-ground relations have to be substantialized. This produces a sense of space inside that distinguished the ornament from the schema and establishes the internal interaction of figure and ground that connects the ornament to the living structures of nature, which in the schematic rendering have no room to be articulated.

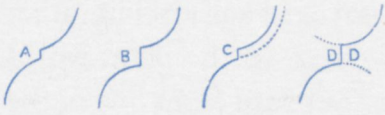


Figure 6

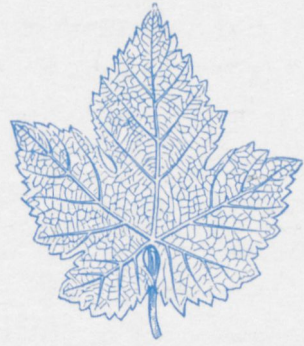


Figure 9A

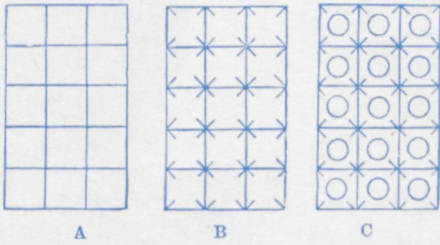


Figure 7

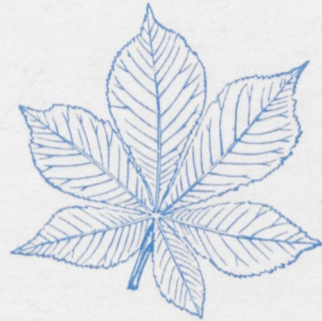


Figure 9B

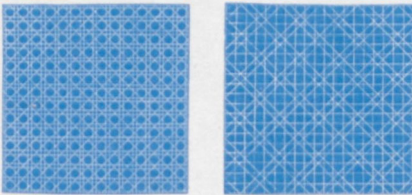


Figure 8



Figure 9C

The grammatical principles for mediating between the three types of lines are derived logically from nature by Jones (← fig. 9). Like the veristic depiction of the acanthus (fig. 10 ▲), the vine leaf also illustrates that the grid does not exist a priori but rather evolves in a dynamic process. In the plant world, this dynamic always goes outward from one of the main branching lines of the trunk. The ornamental grid is thus a living structure whose self-reproductive duplication is demonstrated by the chestnut leaf, where one life grows from another in proportional variation. Finally, the rolled-up leaf demonstrates the gradual transitions between types of lines.

III. Botanical Nature of Ornament

While the lotus blossom and the papyrus were the point of departure for Egyptian ornament, nature provides the foundation for even the most abstract ornaments. Jones demonstrates this with examples from Moorish ornament. Moreover, *The Grammar of Ornament* concludes with a chapter, «Leaves and Flowers from Nature,» whose plates were prepared by Christopher Dresser, a member of the first generation of students from the South Kensington School. Plate I (fig. 11 ►) shows chestnut leaves once again, depicted as if they were pressed up from below against a pane of glass. This produces a space-reducing flatness, which causes the shadowless green-and-white leaves to resemble a structural composite against the ocher ground. But the overlapping of



12 Ibid., 157.

13 Ibid., 2.



Figure 10

14 Ibid., 156.

15 Dresser, *Art of Decorative Design*, op. cit., 168.

the leaves and the shading on the stems make it clear this is not ornamentation but rather a veristic depiction. It is a depiction that reflects the full knowledge of ornamental laws: «The single example of the chestnut leaf contains the whole of the laws which are to be found in Nature.»¹² That is why Jones calls for a «return to Nature for fresh inspiration» already in his preface.¹³

But the call for a «return to Nature» should not be misunderstood as being in the spirit of Rousseau: regaining a lost naïveté with which the savage times created their ornaments. After all, Jones states, the ornamental drive evolved only after the Egyptians contributed civilizing impetus of knowledge, since their ornament was not based on an unconsidered naïveté but rather on knowledge they had derived from nature. The crucial difference from Jones's day, however, was that Egyptian ornament—like every autonomous ornamental style—symbolically expressed its culture and had a sympathetic power that created a social bond. The confusion of ornamental languages reflected by the European products at the Great Exhibition made it obvious that this cultural cohesion had been lost. Jones spoke of an «uncertain state,» even of a «present chaos.»¹⁴ As past ornamental idioms, the copied styles have no power to unite society. But what content could a new ornament express? If the ornament that adequately expressed each culture was once created by instinct, how are the rules Jones formulated as propositions to be applied?

Christopher Dresser offered an answer that pointed the way forward: His era was characterized by an epistemic head start, which is why he made his appeal: «Manifest the knowledge of our age! Proclaim to generation yet unborn the nature and extent of our discoveries.»¹⁵ Hence knowledge itself, including the methodology for obtaining it, represents the content that any future ornament should express:



Figure 11

16 Ibid., 15.

17 Ibid., 23.

«we have knowledge which is waiting to be embodied in form.»¹⁶ With this we have arrived at a crucial point, not just in the history of ornament but in the evolution of human intellectual history. Whereas in the past the creators of ornament relied unconsciously on structural principles from nature and then applied them productively in accordance with a will to self-expression, now the content to be expressed lies in the structural laws of nature itself. The absolute standard to judge the quality of ornament should itself be expressed in ornament. Then the culturally relative aspect of ornament will coincide with its naturalistic association: the subjective

side should be absorbed by the objective one. Two correlative resources for knowledge are available to achieve this goal: Jones's history of ornament and the natural sciences, botany in particular, from whose insights Dresser benefited in his writings on a theory of ornamental design.

In a series of twelve lectures held in South Kensington in 1858, «Botany as Adapted to the Arts and Art-Manufacture,» Dresser urgently called for the study of botany. With reference to Goethe's *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanze zu erklären* (1790; translated as *The Metamorphosis of Plants*), he explained that meticulous observation of a single plant would open up more knowledge than a hasty look at the floral wealth of many countries.¹⁷ In

his view, botany, with its analytical, experimental penetration into the inner structural laws of plants was a necessary training in vision for the artist of ornament. For their part, the outstanding products of the history of ornament would teach the eye how to observe nature. The laws Jones related to the outward visible structures of plants would now be found inside them. This would make it possible to produce ornamental structures that are largely decoupled from the phenotype of plants and yet follow the same organic structural principles. One example of such principles would be the cell theory formulated for plants by Matthias Jacob Schleiden in 1838.¹⁸ In this view, the processes of growth are not homogeneous but rather discretely structured by the self-reproduction of a basic element. Thus, like ornament, they form living grid forms. Against the backdrop of the correspondence between scientific research and ornament, ornament itself was granted the status of a science. It was a science that could make the structures of nature visible and sought nothing less than «to discover the *ultima thule* of life.»¹⁹

18 Matthias Jacob Schleiden, «Beiträge zur Phytogenesis,» in *Archiv für Anatomie, Physiologie und wissenschaftliche Medicin*, ed. Johannes Müller (1838): 137–76.

19 Dresser, *Art of Decorative Design*, op. cit., 49.