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FORM AND ORNAMENT IN CERAMIC ART HOLMES

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ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

OF

FORM AND ORNAMENT IN CERAMIC ART

BY

WILLIAM H. HOLMES

[EXTRACT FROM THE FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT OF THE BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY]

WASHINGTON
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1886

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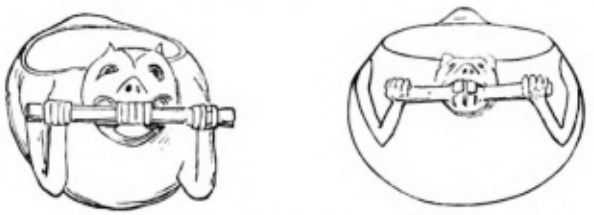
The acquisition of a new vessel-making material by a nation of potters and the association of the forms developed through its inherent qualities or structure would often lead ceramic shapes into new channels.

The contact of a nation of potters with a nation of carvers in wood would tend very decidedly to modify the utensils of the former. One example may be given which will illustrate the possibilities of such exotic influences upon form. In Fig. 473, *a*, we have an Alaskan vessel



a, wood. *b*, clay.

FIG. 473.—Coincident forms.

carved in wood. It represents a beaver grasping a stick in its hands and teeth. The conception is so unusual and the style of vessel so characteristic of the people that we should not expect to find it repeated in other regions; but the ancient graves of the Middle Mississippi Valley have furnished a number of very similar vessels in clay, one of which is outlined in *b*. While this remarkable coincidence is suggestive of ethnic relationships which do not call for attention here, it serves to illustrate the possibilities of modification by simple contact.

A curious example illustrative of possible transformation by adventitious circumstances is found in the collection from the province of ancient Tusayan. A small vessel of sphynx-like appearance, possibly derived more or less remotely from a skin vessel, has a noticeable resemblance to some life form, Fig. 474, *a*. The fore-legs are represented

a *b*

FIG. 474.—Form resulting from accident.

by two large bosses, the wide-open mouth takes the place of the severed neck, and a handle connects the top of the rim with the back of the vessel. The handle being broken off and the vessel inverted,

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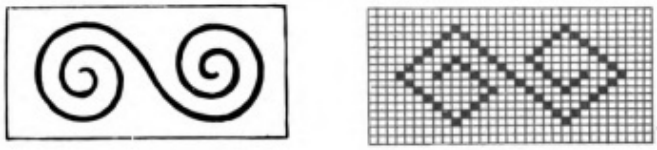
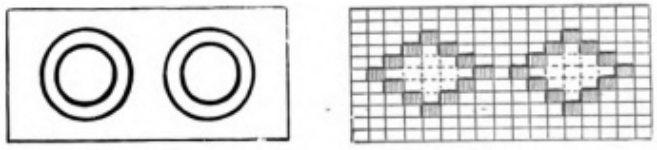
other direction. If an ornament originating in the constructional character of a woven fabric, or remodeled by it, and hence rectilinear, should be desired for a smooth structureless or featureless surface, the difficul-



a, free-hand form. *b*, form imposed by fabric.

FIG. 482.—Forms of the same motive expressed in different arts.

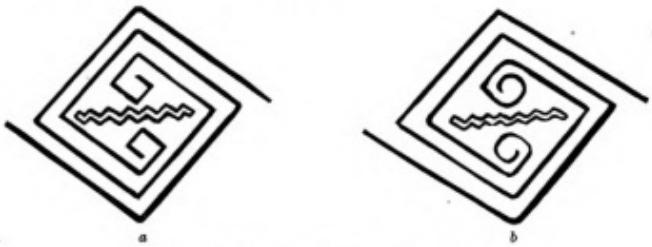
ties of drawing the angular forms would lead to the delineation of curved forms, and we would have exactly the reverse of the order shown in Figs. 482 and 483. The two forms given in Fig. 484 actually



a, free-hand form. *b*, form imposed by masonry.

FIG. 483.—Forms of the same motive expressed in different arts.

occur in one and the same design painted upon an ancient Pueblo vase. The curved form is apparently the result of careless or hurried work, the original angular form having come from a textile source.



a *b*

FIG. 484.—Variations resulting from change of method.

Many excellent examples illustrative of this tendency to modification are found in Pueblo art. Much of the ornament applied to pottery is derived from the sister art, basketry. In the latter art the forms of decorative figures are geometric and symmetrical to the highest degree, as I have frequently pointed out. The rays of a radiating ornament, worked with the texture of a shallow basket, spring from the center and take uniform directions toward the margin, as shown in Fig. 485. But

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when a similar idea derived from basketry (as it could have no other origin) is executed in color upon an earthen vessel, we observe a tendency to depart from symmetry as well as from consistency. I call atten-

FIG. 485.—Geometric form of textile ornament.

tion here to the *arrangement* of the *parts* merely, not to the motives employed, as I happen to have no examples of identical figures from the two arts.

FIG. 486.—Loss of geometric accuracy in painting.

It will be seen by reference to the design given in Fig. 486, taken from the upper surface of an ancient vase, that although the spirit of the decoration is wonderfully well preserved the idea of the origin of all the rays in the center of the vessel is not kept in view, and that by

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carelessness in the drawing two of the rays are crowded out and terminate against the side of a neighboring ray. In copying and recopying by free-hand methods, many curious modifications take place in these designs, as, for example, the unconformity which occurs in one place in the example given may occur at a number of places, and there will be a series of independent sections, a small number only of the bands of devices remaining true rays.

A characteristic painted design from the interior of an ancient bowl is shown in Fig. 487, in which merely a suggestion of the radiation is preserved, although the figure is still decorative and tasteful. This process of modification goes on without end, and as the true geometric

FIG. 487.—Design painted upon pottery.

textile forms recede from view innovation robs the design of all traces of its original character, producing much that is incongruous and unsatisfactory.

The growth of decorative devices from the elementary to the highly constituted and elegant is owing to a tendency of the human mind to elaborate because it is pleasant to do so or because pleasure is taken in the result, but there is still a directing and shaping agency to be accounted for.

I have already shown that such figures as the scroll and the guilloche are not *necessarily* developed by processes of selection and combination of simple elements, as many have thought, since they may have come into art at a very early stage almost full-fledged; but there is nothing in these facts to throw light upon the processes by which ornament followed particular lines of development throughout endless elaboration. In treating of this point, Prof. C. F. Hartt[2] maintained that the development of ornamental designs took particular and uniform directions owing to the structure of the eye, certain forms being chosen and perpetuated because of the pleasure afforded by movements of the eye in following them. In connection with this hypothesis, for it is nothing more, Mr. Hartt advanced the additional idea, that in unison with

[2] Hartt: Popular Science Monthly, Vol. VI, p. 266.

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