

HEE SOOK LEE-NIINIOJA

THE DEATH OF ACANTHUS



NOVEL & NOBLE COMMUNICATIONS  
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*To God who endowed the meaning of life; Parent who inspired it; Family who supported it.*

## F O R E W O R D

Personally, a hypothesis of the acanthus leaf as a possible symbolic ornament in Christianity arose to my mind when I was on the process of conversion from a Buddhist to a Christian. It questioned whether the acanthus could strengthen my understanding of the existence of God, the same as the symbolic lotus deepened my faith in the Buddha. Strangely enough, during my research on Islamic art, I have found that Islam has adopted the acanthus to their mosques, the same as Christian churches. Buddhist and Egyptian temples took it from pagan antiquity in Greece and Rome.

The research discusses the acanthus - its origin, definition, and function. This paper investigates the leaf as an ornamental means for religious architecture from antiquity to the Early Gothic, in parallel with its use in ancient Egypt, India, and China. It also tests how Muslims adapted this motif into Islamic architecture.

As a better understanding between different faiths and religions needed in current conflicted societies, this book is hoped to open up a dialogue, underlining their common culture through the acanthus.

This book is mainly for education and research.

Hee Sook Lee-Niinioja, PhD

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## ACANTHUS - IS IT A SYMBOL OR AN ORNAMENT?

The “Concise Oxford Dictionary” says that acanthus is (1) any herbaceous plant or shrub of the genus *Acanthus* with spiny leaves, and (2) its conventionalised representation decorated on Corinthian column capitals. The name derived from Greek *akantha* (thorn), probably due to *akē* (sharp point). According to Cooper (1987) in his “*An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*”, acanthus means life, immortality, horns of the lunar crescent, veneration of the arts in Mediterranean countries. Its thorns can signify pain, sin, and punishment in Christianity.



Mediterranean acanthus

Many decorative plants of the ancient world had associations with a god or beliefs in their magical powers. As acanthus appeared first in the Greek monumental art, often on burial urns, a definite relationship between the plant and the tomb seems to exist. Phrases in Greek mythology indicate that the plant had a specific sepulchral significance. Thorny and barbed bushes and herbs were frequently considered to be plants of bad omen under the power of the underworld and used as a common means for prohibiting dead people from returning to haunt the earth. The thorny acanthus is likely to possess magic powers in sepulchral art.

For Adam (1990), the plant is unlikely to have introduced for a decorative purpose. Its vigour and use in funeral rites and on gravestones (stele) during the Greek antiquity could link with protection against evil spirits. Based on Vitruvius’ story of the origin of the Corinthian capital, the acanthus was related to the female and funerary. The first internal use of the Corinthian capital was caused by the suitability for the rich interior with columns of the female, as her passive domestic role contrasted to that of the active male outdoors. The order of a young woman is represented at the Temple of Zeus Olympius (174 BC) in Athens alongside a statue of Venus.

Contrary to this, Hauglid (1960) argues acanthus to be a decorative motif: ‘What perhaps was once the symbol of death became later on the life of life in European ornamentation’. Rawson (1984) has the same view. The acanthus capital at the Temple of Apollo at Bassae suggests a particular role in cult images. The plant often decorated small juglets in burials, called “*lekythoi*”, and several later writers claim that such use of acanthus should explain in associations with the death and mourning.

Despite its symbolic meaning, the ornamental acanthus has kept popularity longer, because its earliest examples added to the palmette or lotus for a visual effect. During the Hellenistic period, acanthus had a firm position. As decoration, it exploited affluent imagination, first on a funerary stele, and later on capitals. The column topped by a group of three dancing girls from Delphi in early third century BC testifies it. At the Bel Sanctuary of Palmyra, acanthus rises from a conical stem to an elaborated spiral. Its beam soffits contain many examples of purely Greek derivation, to form full figures and to decorate capitals.

As an architectural enrichment, acanthus spread further to the Roman Empire. It also became part of Buddhist art in India and China, developing to an intricate arabesque without religious connotations in the Islamic world. Acanthus played its best ornamental role on Romanesque. Cluny hemicycle capitals, as an allegory of the monastery for a spiritual gymnasium (Palestra), had the decorative Corinthian ones.

The plasticity of conception and the depth of carving found in Romanesque capitals, beginning with the earliest examples, seem at first to be qualities which resulted from the substitution of non-religious decorative motifs for the foliate motifs on the Corinthian capital structure. Indeed, the most salient characteristic of the Corinthian capital is the sculptural quality of its structure. (Hearn 1981)

In the Early Gothic 12<sup>th</sup> century, acanthus was dominant as a supporting motif in all fields of ornamentation, especially on carving and manuscript illumination. It had no symbolic associations, while vine scroll incorporated in Christian iconography.

# O R N A M E N T      C H A P T E R I

To identify the function of acanthus as either symbolic or aesthetic or both, chapter I deals with general issues on ornament: its definitions, theoreticians from antiquity to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and conventionalisation.

## DEFINITION

As to the definition of art in general, and of decoration in particular, Collingwood (1883) argues that, if a man takes an interest instinctively in nature and imitates her work to reveal his pleasure, it is art. If his interest and pleasure in nature encourage him to work further, by lingering affectionately over the necessary form and colour and heightening the effect of strength or tenderness, it is decoration. Man adores nature and loves his work by adorning it. He treats nature by imitating her. Decorative art is the expression of man's interest or pleasure in nature and his work.

The English word "ornament", originated from the Latin "*ornamentum*", interprets to confer grace on the ceremonial object. It refers to decoration or embellishment. However, today, as an addition to their surroundings, objects of no particular use which give pleasure are called "ornament"<sup>(1)</sup>. In the broadest and highest sense of the landscape, a city itself can be an ornament<sup>(2)</sup>. It has argued that ornament is the means by which aesthetic beauty or symbolic significance imparts to the utility. Symbolic ornaments are composed of elements chosen for significance, while aesthetic ones for beauty alone<sup>(3)</sup>. Despite the correctness in general application, this definition does not fully satisfy the basic qualities of ornament. It is a complicated subject and is essential to understand its origin in later artistic forms.

According to March's "*Evolution and Psychology in Art*", ornament rises from structural handicraft at first and then becomes fixed in mind by contiguity; thus its transformation is occasionally but increasingly expected. It means that hand and eye together grow familiar with certain geometric lines and forms. They are not an ornament, due to the basic structure. When the mind is accustomed to certain appearance of repetitions and searches for other things in them with a sense of absence, the ornament creates.

The origin of ornament can also trace to a Greek term "*Kosmos*" which includes "universe", "order" and "ornament". Classical motifs, either realistic or stylised, were not originated from architecture but were from nature. Nature produces acanthus; the Ionic volute copies the helix of a snail or seashell. And symbolic motifs are related to social life and mythology, creating egg and dart ornaments to represent life and death. Various subjects of mythological motifs reflect the

social relationship that people have taken towards nature and their gods. All ritual processions, mythological figures, attributes, and images contribute to the iconographic heritage of ornaments. For example, the tattoo is a visible way to signalise their ranks and merits, to demonstrate their skills, and to protect against devils. For Kant, the German philosopher, ornament is ornament 'only when it suits the wearer'. It is part of the overall presentation of the wearer that carries it. Porphyrios (1991) argues,

Ornament, like language, is originally bound up entirely with myth. It is only much later that it achieves its purely representational, purely 'aesthetic' role, only as the magic circle with which mythical consciousness surrounds it is broken.

In opposition to the role of ornaments as significance, Trilling (2001) attempts it for beauty. As the basic art with its history, ornament contains all the shapes and patterns which humans have employed to their buildings. It connects content and form. It is elaboration in which the visual appeal of form takes precedence over the emotional or intellectual one of content. It is the primary appeal to stylised or non-representational form to be focused. Ornament is the only visual art for pleasure or beauty, imparting to the objects.

Whatever it is, ornament serves architecture in the same way it helps other types of crafts. It links parts of an object to be the natural conclusion of the process-making, brings life to the empty spaces, and signifies the relationship of one part to another in a building. The church altar of the main focus for worship is mostly decorated<sup>(4)</sup>. A border between architecture and ornament is that anything above the strictly functional and necessary one classifies as an ornament. The most beautiful monumental ornament of columns in a Greek temple is a property of architecture, while ornamental cornices indicate the secondary role. Therefore, ornament should judge in conjunction with the whole building. Ornamentation had to base on the close relation to all elements - the function of the construction, material, elements of design and its principles<sup>(5)</sup>.

The meaning of ornament alters along with the development and conditions of Western culture. Ornament incorporates with an inherent utilitarian form and acts as a visual system of configuration able to grasping and uniting multiple meanings. Focillon in his "*The Life of Forms in Art*" identifies ornament as 'the chosen home of metamorphoses'. Ornament lives a habitat that allows metamorphosis. Within the space of any practical objects, facts and expressions of utility had to be transformed at first<sup>(6)</sup>.

Ornament evolves, sometimes slowly and incrementally, more really by quantum leaps, but even the slow evolution leads, in time, to something genuinely new. (Trilling 2001)

# THEORETICIANS

## Vitruvius, the Imperial Rome

According to Vitruvius' "*Ten Books on Architecture*" in the Augustan first century BC, the term "ornament" associates with the figurative equipment, representational thing, and proportions of the Greek temples which adorned orders, such as triglyphs, metopes, and Ionic capital. The medieval concepts of ornament brought back the ancient Greek thoughts of Pythagoras and Plato. The Pythagoreans concentrated on the role of numbers on the manifestation of natural energy and order, while Plato abstracted love that became ideal and immaterial. Of the most luxurious Corinthian order, Vitruvius introduced an inventing story from a young girl, and the female beauty became involved in ornament<sup>(7)</sup>.

Although Vitruvius understood the technical advances of concrete vaulting and new building types in his own time, he had more interest in recording the way of Hellenistic (and probably early Greek) architects' designing temples as a guide for buildings. The elements of columns, called "orders", were codified by him<sup>(8)</sup>. One of the essential themes in his books is that a proper practice depends on the mastery of an extensive range of theoretical and practical knowledge.

Architecture as a 'liberal art' is the most characteristic of the Vitruvian idea. An architect should possess not only personal talent and specialised practical knowledge, but also have a broad education in liberal art because its increasing awareness can provide architecture with flexible, stable, and precious creation. The architect should have six qualities: Order, Arrangement, Eurhythmy, Symmetry, Fitness, and Economy<sup>(9)</sup>. "*Ten Books on Architecture*" can expose a view of Hellenistic knowledge, a personal critic of the Augustan architecture, and creativity through his ambitious but imperfectly informed vision.

Vitruvius, like much of the late Republican culture, exudes a confident synthesizing eclecticism, respectful of inherited tradition, selectively admiring of foreign accomplishments, and confident of personal ability creatively to synthesize these influences. (Rowland 1999)

## Leon Battista Alberti, the Renaissance

It was during the Renaissance that a traditional notion of the separation of function and ornament was set down for the first time by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72). In his ten books on the theoretical guide in architecture "*De re aedificatoria (On matters concerning architecture)*" of 1452, Alberti demarcated between structure and ornament which became part of the standard discussion of the principles of architecture for the following centuries.



Leon Battista (1304) *Della pittura e della statua*, Societa Tipografica de' Classi

Alberti assumed that each building needed to conform to a set of rules for its function. He followed the precedent Vitruvius' book which was crucial in the Renaissance as the only surviving ancient source that both dealt with the practical aspects of architecture and instruction of the application of ornament<sup>(10)</sup>. The difference between Alberti and Vitruvius was that Alberti started consciously afresh, while Vitruvius was occupied theorizing with architecture in the city of Rome and colonies of the Empire which could be easily visited by him and his readers. Alberti appealed buildings which were either depicted in ancient literary sources, or had access to the most fearless travellers, or were apparent as ruins. He believed that a new architecture is to originate from the ruins and texts, as solemn and impressive as that of the ancients. The decisive criterion is neither the written nor the ruined examples, but nature herself<sup>(11)</sup>.

*"De re aedificatoria"* was written when the urbane Italians started to challenge to the provincial Gothic. Therefore, for Alberti, the term "beauty" implies a reflection of the remarkable works of nature. Beauty is inherent to the architect's ordering of utility, and beneath the beauty, there was a mere utility which he considered as something recognisable. In addition to these basics, Alberti claimed ornament to be a form of divine light and perfection to beauty. Ornament possesses the character of something attached or added to the practical and inherent beauty of architecture. However, this act of attachment does not separate ornament from architecture. Instead, it contributes to the beautiful architectural order more visible.

For example, the Renaissance Italian architecture was a type of decorated wall construction in which the column was both an optional and often unnecessary means of structural support. Alberti's classical order of the column was an added bearer of the beauty that came from ancient architecture. It lifted the status of the building by making visible the spirit of the lost golden city of Rome. The impressive architectural elements on the ordinary Renaissance building took from a distant and sacred past<sup>(12)</sup>.

### John Ruskin, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

In a survey of historical theories on the ornament, it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the term "ornament" represents more often something applied to architecture. The century was a rebellion

of ornament and was one of the most creative periods. It was also the period, which a theoretical understanding of the link between ornament and architecture was confused by many significant developments, such as the Enlightenment and the triumph of the rational over the irrational. As a particular property of human thought and expression, ornament could philosophically or psychologically explain. To some extent, its rules and functions could formulate, and its limits prescribed. Ornament would be a category of design and architecture with its characteristic history<sup>(13)</sup>.



Gothic Doge's Palace in Venice; An arcade capital in the palace by Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*

Moreover, the idea that ornament has a purpose occupied the minds of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars, because they lived in a society where unqualified, cheap, mass-produced objects had radically increased, consumed by a new urban middle and working class for their homes. Besides, the series of international exhibitions starting with the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 endowed people opportunities to grasp handbooks of historical ornament<sup>(14)</sup>.

Regarded medieval buildings as antiquity, people began to document and measure them, discovered the affluence and creativity of the ornament, and restored them after centuries of neglect. Augustus Welby Pugin (1812-52) wrote about the current state of the building, arguing that 'styles are now *adapted* instead of *generated*, and ornament and design *adapted to*, instead of *originated by the edifices themselves*'. However, it was John Ruskin (1819-1900), a Victorian critic and moralist, who spoke most clearly the necessity for a break between ornament and its structure. He sought to define ornament by assuming principles of design. Since Alberti, the ornament which dressed the building gave it lies on meaning. In Ruskin's view<sup>1</sup>, ornament needs

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<sup>1</sup>Ruskin's sixth propositions on the theory of ornament (Cook 1904)

Proposition 1: *Gothic and Roman construction is nobler than Greek one.* Building an arch, vault, or dome is a nobler and more ingenious work than laying a flat stone or beam over the space to be covered. Proposition 2: *Ornamentation is the principal part of architecture.* The highest nobility of a building does not consist in its being well built, but in its being nobly sculpted or painted. 'Ornamentation is therefore the principal part of architecture, considered as a subject of fine art'. Proposition 3: *Ornamentation should be visible.* Ornamentation, with all its qualities clearly and entirely visible in its appointed place on the

not to serve the construction and function of a building merely; rather it could speak itself as the creative application of the rich detail in nature.

Connect the delight which you take in ornament with that which you take in construction or in usefulness. They have no connection, and every effort that you make to reason from one to the other will blunt your sense of beauty... Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance. (Ruskin 1857, 1961)

If construction was sincere, then ornament should not compromise the notion of use. Ruskin found his ideal guidance in the medieval work of the craftsmen responsible for the styles, such as the Venetian Gothic. The moral condition of a society could understand by the character of its ornament and how it was carried out. Gothic ornament owns the true morality of integrity, due to the expression of the Christian religion, executed by craftsmen who were inspired by nature<sup>(15)</sup>. Moreover, medieval craftsmen might have been primitive, ignorant, clumsy and crude in their character and work, but were free to express themselves within the building. In his “*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*” (1849), Ruskin asks whether the carver was happy while he was doing the stonework since Gothic carving made by thoughtful and happy craftsmen of true and noble artists<sup>(16)</sup>.

He praised the carver’s pleasure in creating beautiful foliage in a Gothic cathedral, while criticised Greek ornament as servile, because of the execution of the craftsman who had to obey his master<sup>(17)</sup>. He also opposed the Renaissance ornament for the intellect rather than the viewers’ emotion, calling ‘the wearisome exhibition of well-educated imbecility’<sup>(18)</sup>. Probably Ruskin’s criticism was an educational and moral theme to warn to contemporary maritime England<sup>(19)</sup>.

### Adolf Loos, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

“*Ornament and Verbrechen (Ornament and Crime)*” is the most crucial text to Loos’ philosophy on the ornament in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Against the extravagant Art Nouveau, it was published in Berlin in 1902 by the review “*Der Sturm*”, related with avant-garde expressionists. One of his main criticisms concerns an economic question, arguing the absurdity of ornament through the problems of aim, costs, and production in the modern industrial civilisation.

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building, requires knowledge of effect and power of design. Proposition 4: *Ornamentation should be natural*. It should in some degree express or adopt the beauty of natural objects. ‘All noble ornament is the expressions of man’s delight in God’s work’. Bad decorators were imitating and forgetting nature. Proposition 5: *Ornamentation should be thoughtful*. The expression of thought will be the noblest quality in what he produces in his brush, inasmuch as the power of thinking and of feeling is the noblest thing in a man. Proposition 6: *Gothic ornamentation is nobler than Greek one*. So, Gothic architecture is the only one which should now be built.

Since ornament is no longer a natural output of our culture, and therefore represents a phenomenon of backwardness or a manifestation of degeneration, the result is that the worker who produces it is no longer paid a fair price for his work. (Loos 1902)

Ornamentation is a waste of effort and health. The quality of an object cannot be judged in abstract terms but should evaluate based on the time, costs, and techniques in its manufacture. The removal of ornament simplifies the mass-production of utilitarian objects, helping to the social economy<sup>(20)</sup>. As no organic connection exists between ornament and culture, the ornament is a wasted material and capital<sup>(21)</sup>.



Loos house, Vienna

Loos eliminated all the Neo-classical mouldings from the façade at the Goldmann and Salatsch shop in Vienna and regarded any excessive ornament as vulgarity. For him, Ruskin and the design reformers in England had placed on the superiority of primitive and exotic craft traditions, but the inferiority of ornament in the industrial period is a phenomenon of its higher civilisation. His article of 1898 testifies: ‘The less civilised a people is, the more prodigal it will be with ornament and decoration’<sup>(22)</sup>. Another argument accorded to the latest thinking of understanding ornament in psychological terms. Ornament betrays a regressive nostalgia sublimated in the desire to mask from the deepest needs of human beings for erotic expression. Loos was controversial against all styles of decoration, as ornament deceives and denies the basic quality of the materials it decorates<sup>(23)</sup>.

A child is amoral. A Papuan too, for us... The Papuan covers his skin with tattoos, his boat, his oars, in short everything he can lay his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern person who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate... The urge to decorate one’s face and anything else within reach is the origin of the fine arts. It is the childish babble of painting. But all art is erotic. (Loos 1902)

Three factors distinguished the view on ornament from the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s view: (1) awareness of the threat that modernisation lets craftsmen out of work, replacing machine-made imitations. Low costs allowed quantitative copies, and the poor workmanship distressed the quality of life, (2) ornament was not just for visual pleasure but was for everything that made the pleasure possible.

For the first time, people talked about the importance of ornament; thus right ornament could help the Western civilisation survive, and (3) the West did not possess its ornamental style. The revival of the Classical and Gothic satisfied the needs of this century. Loos realized that alternation of traditional ornament would not reply to the new demands of the time, while others maintained ornament as protection against modernisation. Despite his deserved position in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his belief in the importance of applied art for a better life in a modernising world came from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century social aesthetics<sup>(24)</sup>.

## CONVENTIONALISATION

Owen Jones' Proposition 13 discusses on conventionality that natural forms should not use as ornaments. Instead, their conventional representations should convey the intended image to the mind without destroying the unity of the object which they will decorate. Historically, the majority of designers tried to imitate natural foliage as closely as possible, caused by lack of knowledge on conventionalisation. They rendered foliage in their way to show the ability. The Assyrian sculpture introduced many types of foliage (vine, fig fruits, palm stems, fern tree with fir, lily) on a flat plane, all in profile. Consequently, the natural lily flower from the earth exactly depicted as the same way in the architectural decoration of walls<sup>(25)</sup>.

One of the three canons of ornamentation, set up by Collingswood (1883) is called "abstraction" or "simplification" or "conventionalisation". On a lecture of the Egyptian ornament, he argues that the sacred lotus and papyrus were modified severely and formally, not for the sake of conventionalisation. Instead, decorators rendered them merely, as their hands suited to the hard material in which they carved. To this, a few scholars propose the ancient Egyptian ornaments to conventionalise, and the lotus as the best case<sup>(26)</sup>.

Whatsoever, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the term "conventionalised" indicates that an original figure abstracted from its natural shape to bring together with the materiality, form, and inherent expressions of an object. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a conventionalised figure of architectural ornament was thought to have been there by belonging to the original and classical forms of building. And basic motifs had been repeated over the centuries to become customary and perfected, evidently seen in the acanthus and other floral motifs.

The broad recognition and acceptance of conventionalised classical ornament in the Western world matched the long-standing belief in the authority of classical architecture as seminal, singularly generic, and the origin of all architecture worthy of the name. (Bloomer 2002)

The manufacturing of the revived acanthus killed the artists' creativity. What did before was also left for others to do again. To invent a new style of ornament, a new style of architecture

must first find. The desire for ornament coexisted with the earliest attempts of the human civilisation. Architecture does not create ornament but adopts it.

The Corinthian order in architecture was said to have been suggested by an acanthus leaf found growing around an earthen port; but the acanthus leaf existed as an ornament long before, or, at all events, the principle of its growth was observed in the conventional ornaments. It was the peculiar application of this leaf to the formation of the capital of a column which was the sudden invention that created the Corinthian order. (Jones 1856)

From the Renaissance to the present, theoreticians have endeavoured to advise the correct shapes, proportions, and locations of conventionalised ornaments to capitals. Moreover, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century<sup>2</sup> theoreticians, such as Pugin, Ruskin, and Jones, proposed a kind of general principles controlling the design and distribution of ornament. Jones made his theory of ornament with 37 propositions dealing with colour and shape as the basis for conventionalisation. As a result of becoming regular and simple figures from natural forms by Victorians, the artificial figures belong to properties of architecture than nature. The conventionalisation might have meant eliminating the minor features of a particular leaf, while major features were limited to their formal planar outlines as a form of abstraction.

In his chapter “*The Nature of Gothic*” (1853), Ruskin challenged the notion of perfection in idealising a figure for conventionalisation. The craftsman designing an ornament has to strive for all the characters of the foliage and the wall as much accurate as was compatible with the laws of his design and the nature of his material<sup>3</sup>. He should not be tempted to transgress the one and disguise the other<sup>(27)</sup>.

Among his sixth propositions on the theory of ornament, the fourth relates “*Ornamentation should be natural*”. Conventionalisation understood in the modification of the general law that all ornamentation composes of the adoption or imitation of the beauty of natural objects, since ‘all noble ornament is the expressions of man’s delight in God’s work’. Bad decorators were imitating and forgetting nature. When beauty fulfilled, work can be highly valued. The three modes of ornamentation for pure representation are conventionalism by cause of (1) colour, (2) inferiority, and (3) means<sup>2(28)</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>(1) Conventionalisation by cause of colour. Abstract colour is nature itself, not its imitation. Wherever colour is used, the ornamentation may stop to represent natural objects and consist in other condition of arrangement favourable to the colour. (2) Conventionalisation by cause of inferiority. Ornamentation is set upon certain services, subjected to certain systems, confined with certain limits. All kinds of ornamentation owe their special character to conventionalisation, due to inferiority. (3) Conventionalisation by cause of means. In art, imitation of nature is admitted as is consistent with the ease of the workman and the

Collingswood (1883) also suggested three canons as an ideal measure in judging decorative art. The first canon is 'adaptation'. Ornament must neither hinder nor conceal; instead, it should assist the usefulness of the thing decorated and express its construction. Greek and Gothic architects are excellent because pillars and capitals in a temple are embellished with ornament, showing the construction to the best advantage. The most salient point where eyes can rest is worthy of the most elaborate adornment.

The second is 'significance'. Ornament must have a meaning and be significant of the architect's interest in nature. Otherwise, it only works for covering up space and hiding the dirt. All good ornaments have significance more or less. The third is 'abstraction' or 'simplification' of natural beauty, to fit for the aim of art. It is often called "conventionalisation". If an architect wants his ornament similar to the natural object, he must sacrifice some of the utility of the article. 'Adapt beauty to use, not use to beauty'. Right conventionalisation should suit for imagination, material, and use. 'Don't copy anything as you see it, but as you think it ought to be.'

Conventionalisation does not imply that the modification of nature has already done; thus we should accept antiquity, the Middle Age, and the Renaissance, etc. Instead, new conventionalisation must repeatedly do. When ornament stops growing, decay replaces.

To accept a conventional ready-made is to compromise your own invention; to go on copying the accepted types, be they never so beautiful, is just to stifle it... Knowing all this, and being felt at home in the world of nature, one may set to work to conventionalise on one's own account. There is some chance of success then, not otherwise. (Day 1977)

The designer should be acquainted with nature, as there is a glimpse of nature in most detail. For example, the Greek scroll consists of branching spirals to clothe the dividing of the stem. The Roman one is bursting out into leafage but continues the Greek idea. It is a spiral covered in conventional leafage to disguise its lines primarily, and the branching of the lines particularly. It is the origin of the acanthus scroll.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque, which began with a crude rendering of the Roman detail, there was some return to nature. However, there was the freedom of the rendering for finding a starting point. This attitude continued to the Early Gothic and further, although the classic detail of the scroll remained because, in the Renaissance arabesque, the idea still to clothing lines is merely ornamental. Therefore, foliage and flower needed simple treatment. If the abstraction of a flower resembles other types, it is not dangerous. In Gothic art, one of the crockets can be a hawthorn leaf.

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capacities of the material. Whatever shortcomings are appointed on account of the intractableness of the material, come under this category. (ed. Cook 1904)

Sometimes sufficient technical reason demands the elaboration. If artists execute them by intelligence and taste, the result can be new and better. One form of elaboration popular during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries is the turning over and curling up of the ends and edges of the foliation of all kinds. This type occurred earlier in the scrollwork during antiquity, but in the late Gothic period, it became a distinctive and characteristic feature in the design, partly and probably, by the influence of ironworkers<sup>(29)3</sup>♦

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♦ <sup>(1)</sup> Bloomer 2002 <sup>(2)</sup> Smeets 1975 <sup>(3)</sup> Heath 1909 <sup>(4)</sup> Snodin 1996 <sup>(5)</sup> Smeets 1975 <sup>(6-7)</sup> Bloomer 2002 <sup>(8)</sup> Rykwert 1999 <sup>(9)</sup> Harvey 1972 <sup>(10)</sup> Snodin 1996 <sup>(11)</sup> Rykwert 1999 <sup>(12-13)</sup> Bloomer 2002 <sup>(14-15)</sup> Snodin 1996 <sup>(16)</sup> Cook 1904, Quill 2002 <sup>(17)</sup> Gombrich 1979 <sup>(18)</sup> Snodin 1996 <sup>(19)</sup> Rawson 1984 <sup>(20)</sup> Gravagnolo 1995 <sup>(21)</sup> Opel 1998 <sup>(22)</sup> Gombrich 1979 <sup>(23)</sup> Snodin 1996 <sup>(24)</sup> Trilling 2001 <sup>(25)</sup> Collings 1865 <sup>(26)</sup> Jones 1856, Hamlin 1916, Wilson 1994 <sup>(27)</sup> Bloomer 2002 <sup>(28)</sup> Cook 1904 <sup>(29)</sup> Day 1977

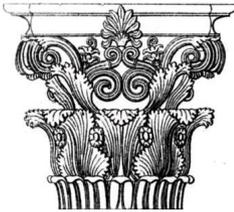
# ACANTHUS CAPITALS CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 discusses the function of acanthus either symbolic or aesthetic in different periods. Two types of acanthus, their origins and applications on capitals from antiquity to the Early Gothic mentioned. The reason for limiting the Early Gothic is due to (1) the lesser use of the traditional acanthus design and (2) the appearance of new acanthus form, and (3) the introduction of other floral in ornamentation.

## SPECIES

### The Corinthian Capital

Beyond different climates and races, the form and enrichment of a capital demonstrate a distinct similarity in the history of architecture and ornament. The capital sustains and transmits the columns to the weight of the entablature. Its beauty and appropriateness depend on (1) functional treatment of strength; (2) beauty of profile or mass; (3) enrichment and proportion of the capital.



Lysicrates, Athens 335 BC

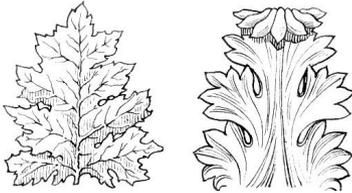
An order is a proportioning system. Called “module”, it is measured in multiples or divisions of the diameter of the lowest part of the column shaft<sup>(1)</sup>. The Corinthian columns are ten diameters in height with 24 flutings; the base is half a diameter height; the capital is a little bigger than a diameter in height and adorns with acanthus leaves and spiral volutes. The entablature is more affluent, the cornice deeper and more elaborate than those of other orders<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Corinthian order belongs to the Ionic: nothing distinct except its capital. The principal member, tall and compact with four similar faces, composes of a bell with a double ring of acanthus leaves. On each face, two pairs of vertical volutes spring from them: the outer volutes are bent forward to accommodate the counterparts on the adjoining faces of the capital, and the inner and lower volutes meet below a palmette or flower. Below the bell, the top of the shaft often has a simple roll moulding. The abacus is deeper than that of the Ionic capital and is complicated in

profile. In the plan, a concave quadrilateral sometimes cuts off at the corners<sup>(3)</sup>. The first Corinthian column was placed an internal Ionic colonnade as a cult statue, becoming the object of worship to one of Apollo's attributes, the god of sudden death<sup>(4)</sup>.

### *Acanthus Spinus* and *Acanthus Mollis*

The plant acanthus weaves its coils, a brilliant sight to see, whose marvel will delight your soul. (Theocritus, cited by Hauglid 1950)



*Acanthus Spinosus* (left) and *Acanthus Mollis* (right)

Acanthus is a native Mediterranean plant and has a large leaf with a broken edge. Two principal species are acanthus *spinus* and acanthus *mollis*. The former has narrow, spiky, and pointed lobes of the Greek origin, while the latter is broad, blunt, and soft of the Roman<sup>(5)</sup>. The motif started to support plant-like volutes in architectural enrichments and to form the calyx from which spiral scrolls arise<sup>(6)</sup>. Accordingly, it has been formalised, simplified, and modified in a variety. The leaf and its fluted stems were used to make a running decoration of spiralling leaves, and stalks tended to produce a form which resembles little to the natural plant. In the Middle Ages, acanthus was often executed by sculptors without any knowledge of either its derivation of the form or plant itself<sup>(7)</sup>.

The acanthus employed as (1) a standing leaf in Corinthian and Composite capitals and on some mouldings; (2) a moulding ornament; (3) a nest or bunch of leaves from which to start a rinceau; (4) a cauliculus or wrapping; (5) an ornament around the stems of candelabra and the bellies of vases; (6) a conventional plant to replace the anthemion, and (7) forming the petals of a rosette<sup>(8)</sup>.

# ORIGINS

## Historical Views

According to Hauglid's (1950) review on acanthus, at first, Homolle accepts the theory of Vitruvius, claiming that its origin should seek in Greek monumental art of the acanthus crowned stele. There was a tradition to adorn the Attic tombs with fresh leaves as an offering to the dead, and the acanthus was the most demanded ornamental plant. Hauglid questions to this, because the earliest acanthus from the monumental stele is too simple in form to have served as the type of natural offering. Of Callimachus, the Corinthian capital became popular a couple of generations after his time. Weigand had better an argument based on the old calathos capital and the double-volute capital. Both were used in Egypt and reached to Greece via Syria and Phœnicia. The question is that Weigand did not mention the Aeolic capital in this connection, because some elements could find in the development of the new capital. The capital is not the primary thing. The Corinthian capital is merely the transmission from the stele to the column in the process of the free palmette acroteria.

For the first time, Riegl undertook its origin in the broadest implication. In his work "*Stilfragen (Question of Style)*", he insisted that acanthus is not a direct imitation from a natural plant, instead it is from the palmette, reacting against the earlier Semper School which underlines naturalistic interpretation of art. Riegl tried to compare an indubitable row of palmettes and an early acanthus frieze from the Erechtheion.

However, Hauglid doubts about it because the influences of nature on the naturalistic leaf chalices of the pilaster capitals in the eastern entrance hall to the Erechtheion is too apparent to accept Riegl's theory<sup>4</sup>. In his thesis on "*Das griechische Akanthus Ornament und seine natürlicher Vorbilder*" (1896), Meurer rejects to Riegl's opinion and attempts to solve the problem based on natural models, and traces a definite relationship between the form of the ornaments and the acanthus leaves. Hauglid concludes that Riegl's idea on the origin of acanthus is the result of organic development in the formal field, but it cannot be the palmette as the primary source, because no example of the palmette became to be the acanthus. The ancient Greek palmette had its position as the crowning element and kept its tradition throughout the whole of Greek art and into the Roman. Riegl did not begin with the earliest and still-preserved forms of the acanthus ornament at a small leaf-bud (lacinia) detached itself from the curve of the volutes, such as on a Memnon bowl in the Louvre, before the abstract ornamentation of the volute and the palmette happened.

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<sup>4</sup> Riegl's approach focuses on the formal development of borders of lotus, palmette and acanthus found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria and Greece. (Rawson 1984)

Gradually, the little budding leaf started to resemble more a natural prototype of the acanthus leaf. This tendency, which the naturalistic forms later introduced, is a common phenomenon in the history of ornamentation, seen in the calathos motif from the first tender acanthus leaves on the “Venetian” stele in Berlin (c. 460 BC) to the fully developed stele acroteria hundreds of years later.

### Vitruvius (80-70 BC)

Vitruvius tells a story of the origin of the Corinthian capitals in chapter four of his book, “*Ten Books on Architecture*”. According to this story, the first Corinthian capital was invented by the sculptor and goldsmith Callimachus. He was inspired when he was passing through a grave of a Corinthian girl and saw a basket filled with acanthus leaves.

Now the third type, which is called Corinthian, imitates the slenderness of a young girl, because young girls, on account of the tenderness of their age, can be seen to have even more slender limbs and obtain even more charming effects when they adorn themselves. It is said that the invention of this type of capital occurred in the following manner.

A young Corinthian girl of citizen rank, already of marriageable age, was struck down by disease and passed away. After her burial, her nurse collected the few little things in which the girl had delighted during her life, and gathering them all in a basket, placed this basket on top of the grave so that the offering might last there a little longer, she covered the basket with a roof tile. This basket, supposedly, happened to have been put down on top of an acanthus root. By springtime therefore, the acanthus root, which had been pressed down in the middle all the while by the weight of the basket, began to send out leaves and tendrils, and its tendrils, as they grew up along the side of the basket, turned outward; when they met the obstacle of the corners of the roof tile, first they began to curl over at the ends and finally they were induced to create coils at the edges.

Callimachus, who was called “kataxitechnos” by the Athenians for the elegance and refinement of his work in marble, passed by this monument all noticed the basket and the fresh delicacy of the leaves enveloping it. Delighted with the nature and form of this novelty, he began to fashion columns for the Corinthians on this model, and he set up symmetries, and thus he drew up the principles for completing works of the Corinthian type. (translated by Rowland 1999)

Rawson (1984) considers this story to be ‘apocryphal’ because the Corinthian capitals did not seem to display the earliest examples of the acanthus. They were a special and rather late case of changes made to existing schemes of palmettes on volute. Day (1977) had the same view: ‘The fable about Callimachus and the Corinthian capital is the intention of a poet, not of a practical ornamentist’. Several interpretations gave to the Corinthian capital. To begin with, Adam (1990) claims that the city of Corinth was famous for bronze and Callimachus himself was noted for his

bronze work; thus these could be referred to simply ‘Corinthian work’. An original bronze can prove both the name and the way of the leaf decoration, like repeated casting to a central core.

Rowland (1999) shares it in part. If Bassae, or at least, its interiors, was built by the Parthenon architect Ictinus, then Vitruvius’s attribution about Callimachus of the late fifth century may represent a historical fact. The name of “Corinthian” may refer not to the place, but to the leaves which were first attached to the bronze. Collings (1865) attempts to find its origin much further, suggesting that it was transmitted to the Greeks in an imperfect state, despite no trace of the acanthus among the Assyrian sculpture. The Greeks elaborated and beautified the leaf with an occasional reference to nature. Glazier (1933) shares the view: the Corinthian capital with its volutes and acanthus is an architectural continuity of the Egyptian capital.



“Callimachus creating Corinthian capital” by Roland Freia Chambre (1606-74)

### Alois Riegl

Riegl is the foremost scholar to understand the acanthus. He had taken account of Goodyear,<sup>5</sup> whose work had explored the relationship of the lotus and palmette in search for a universal symbolism<sup>(9)</sup>. Riegl was sceptical about Vitruvius’ story and derivation of the Mediterranean plant motif which grows all over Greece and Italy. He had a hypothesis of continuity in certain early forms that the acanthus was precisely the old palmette which changed into a leaf. He compared palmettes and an early acanthus from the Erechtheion<sup>(10)</sup>.

However, he had to avoid several unsuitable facts such as the naturalistic rendering of the acanthus leaves on vase paintings in the funeral stele. And the leaf which he illustrated is far from the closest example because the earliest examples do not represent the acanthus leaves; instead, they resemble the supports of the chalice. The Greek architects placed them in the corresponding positions to the stem, and it is not the palmette which turned into a leaf. The palmette likely formed as blossom and the acanthus as the chalice. In the early acanthus scroll, the leaf has the function to mask the divisions of the stem.

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<sup>5</sup> Goodyear, W H (1892), *The Grammar of the Lotus*, London: Sampson Low & Co.

Therefore, “*Stilfragen*” was written with Riegl’s single-minded focus on individual’s problems, since no scholars map out the divisions and derivations of the acanthus scroll which embellished Byzantine stonework, Romanesque capitals, and Gothic foliage.<sup>6</sup> But his analysis helps to study the plant ornament in ancient India and China<sup>(11)</sup>.

## ACANTHUS *SPINOSUS*: GREEK, HELLENISTIC, BYZANTINE

### Greek Acanthus

The idea of the Greeks in the treatment of the acanthus leaf was to produce a perfect leaf, a thing which cannot possibly be found in nature- nor can a perfect human form be found... The Greeks sought to perfect their figures according to their own ideas. (Collings 1865)

The architecture of ancient Greece and its colonies dates from c.1100 to the first century BC. It was inspired by Egypt and the Near East and influenced the Roman and European architecture later. The Greeks kept distinctive qualities of intellect and aesthetic judgement, and architecture displayed levels of their full achievement<sup>(12)</sup>. In the ancient Greek architecture, Assyrian sculptures played an important role. There has no trace of the acanthus, but the sculptures imperfectly transferred to the Greeks who elaborated them with the true spirit. To some particular leaves and plants, certain principles in nature adopted than limited. The early acanthus leaf has zigzag outlines, separated eyes, circular lobes, and the moulding of its surface is worked into a slight V section for a stele at Athens<sup>(13)</sup>.

The palmette finial of a girl gravestone with the acanthus leaf from the Paros Island (c.460 BC) is the earliest known ornamental sculpture, displaying a variety and richness in its development from the fourth century to the end of the classical period. Made of Parian marble with its height 143 cm, the girl takes incense from a small box. The slender stele, which tapers toward the top, is crowned by a palmette finial. The lower part of the finial between the volutes displays two acanthus leaves, and these are a decorative motif, covering the juncture of the ends of the two volutes and the palmette with the moulding. It is preserved at the Staatliche Museen in Berlin<sup>(14)</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> In Egypt under Roman rule, there was a direct line of development from the floral capitals of the temples. The Temple of Khnum in Esna has the best example of the basket capitals of the early churches. These, in turn, influenced indirectly via Byzantine art on early Romanesque art. (Widlung 2001)



Erechtheion of Athens, an Ionic frieze of anthemion and palmette, 421-6 BC (left), Athens monument anthemion (right)

By the latter part of the fifth century BC, the acanthus often appeared as a covering leaf to mask the branching scrolls of carved anthemion in the Erechtheion, despite the uncertainty of its first appearance in Greek ornament. Another early example found in the Temple of Apollo at Phigalea of Basse in Attica. Paralleled with the development of carved ornament, the leaf became more elaborated, almost always associated with volutes or spiral scrolls, mainly employed to the anthemion-band, Corinthian capital, and carved stele-heads or rinceau. The Greek Corinthian of Bassae was a tightly compact form. In the Tholos of the Marmaria (c.400 BC) at Delphi, the volutes were independently reverse spirals, applied to the bell to support the abacus at the corners. At Tegea, the interior half columns had low compact capitals, but the leaves began to flare and the volutes to grow up from their midst.



Acanthus of Lysicrates Choregic Monument

In the capitals of the Choregic Monument of Lysicrates a few years later, the leaves and especially volutes had an almost detached form, similar to applied metal work. The acanthus of Lysicrates is over-elaborated, compared to a simpler form in the Tower of the Winds. A capital from the Tholos of Epidauros approached the later form from the Temple of Zeus at Athens and provided the prototype for the Roman Corinthian. In the Tholos at Epidauros, the leaves were looser; the volutes more slender and volatile. It was this form which prevailed; the developed form of the capitals of the Olympius at Athens in the second century connived of leaves and volutes, each of diminished intrinsic importance, growing and spreading one from behind the other, and reaching into space around in rich profusion<sup>(15)</sup>.

The first appearance of the acanthus on the exterior of a major building was in the Temple of Zeus Olympius (174 BC) at Athens<sup>(16)</sup>. Gradually, a standard form of the Corinthian capital established in the late first century. The acanthus leaves became taller, while the stalks of the volutes encased in a fluted sheath. The palmette or flower moves up from the volute member to rest on the abacus. The detail clearly did by colour<sup>(17)</sup>. In the styles which arose after the commencement of the Christian era, the ancient Greek seems to have been the type followed for the foliage of the Byzantine, or Eastern art, while the Roman gave its colouring to the foliage of the Romanesque, or Western art<sup>(18)</sup>.

#### TEMPLE OF APOLLO, EPIDAUROS, BASSAE (400 BC)

Temple of Apollo was built by Ictinus, the Parthenon architect, in the late fifth century BC, and the first Corinthian capital appeared internally among Ionic colonnades in the cellar of the temple. It centrally placed in significant isolation. Indicated by its position, the entablature did not develop with the column; slightly, it inclined to be added to an Ionic entablature. This invention is likely to be a combination of the simple bell shape of the calathos with the acanthus leaf and tendril which was becoming popular in Athenian grave stele at that time. It would typically have been the position of a cult statue, so the column may itself have been the ‘aniconic’ cult image, the object of veneration, perhaps a reference to one of Apollo’s many attributes as the god of sudden death<sup>(19)</sup>.

#### THE CHORAGIC MONUMENT OF LYSICRATES, ATHENS (334 BC)

The representation of the acanthus leaves on the Corinthian capital has a considerable variation, and the acanthus plant itself has different species with different leaf forms. The earliest surviving external use of the Corinthian order found on the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates at Athens. Lysicrates is characterised by more slender columns, replacing the spiral volutes with a tall decoration of finely carved leaves. The lower leaves are plain, and the middle ranges with flowers, while the tendrils above belong to a different plant capped by a small anthemion<sup>(20)</sup>.

### Hellenistic Acanthus

Although the Hellenistic period starts with the reign of Alexander the Great, the empire divided among his generals after his death. The new Greek civilisation developed to accommodate the more diverse world beyond the states of Greece<sup>(21)</sup>. The slender Corinthian order, more decorative and less severe than its Ionic forerunner, corresponded perfectly to the desire of Greek designers to decorate interiors. The order was treated as a secondary order for a long time and employed only to small monuments primarily. During the Hellenistic period, it chose for major architectural projects<sup>(22)</sup>.

An example is a column topped by a group of three dancing girls from Delphi in the third century BC. It manifests several motifs which used in large-scale architecture. Each column-drum

arises from a bell of broad leaves. Their tips curling back down towards the base became the forerunner of those later columns in the Ptolemaic palaces and wall paintings<sup>7</sup>. The floral motif spreads out to form a base for the sculptured group. The classical feature of the Corinthian capital in the Hellenistic version sees at the Olympius of Athens. The calathos is heavily laden with the acanthus leaves to form two high crowns, and from these, the leaves that follow the lateral volutes project to a higher level. In the centre, emerging from their rigid caudices, two decorative volutes face one another, while above them, in the central groove of the moulded abacus, the convolvulus flowers appear on the channel of the Ionic capital, as at Sarids.



Three dancing girls

At Didyma, sculptors spread out many decorative motifs with subtlety and brilliance. During the second and first centuries, and the Imperial period, succeeding sculptors improved all the resources, such as octagonal bases, historiated capitals, foliated friezes, and foliate motifs with animals. The Mausoleum at Belevi, near Ephesus, utilised all kinds of ornaments. The Corinthian capital, bearing an entablature, is connected to that of the tholos at Epidaurus, although its leaves are more voluminous, wider spreading and more deeply carved. The entablature expresses the same taste for somewhat blown, heavy decoration<sup>(23)</sup>.

### Byzantine Acanthus

Byzantium was inaugurated in 330 and lasted until the Ottoman conquest of 1453. Constantine was the first Christian emperor and the founder of new capital. His churches emphasised on the spiritual world, mysteries of Incarnation and sacrifice, and glorification of Christ. For the first time, Byzantine architecture was able to express the full range of Christian belief in visual terms<sup>(24)</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The acanthus motif played little after the collapse of the Roman Empire. It was not until the Carolingian renaissance that the old classical forms come to life once more in European ornamentation and the foundation for Romanesque art. (Hauglid 1950)



Byzantine acanthus, San Apollinare, Classe (left), Byzantine capital of St Sophia, characteristic lace surface (right)

The foliage of the eastern Byzantine inherited the ancient Greek type, while the Roman foliages influenced to that of the western Romanesque<sup>8</sup>. During the reign of the Emperor Justinian, who built Sancta Sophia, its foliage resembles the sharp foliage of the Greek<sup>(25)</sup>. After 300, an apparent change of style happened. The tendril became rigid. Details gradually neglected. The ornament became flat, sharply detached from its background, despite its placement on top of it. The Byzantine style of the flat acanthus was trendy in all over Europe. For example, on top of the capitals and arcade panels in Sancta Sophia (532-7), the foliage is spread so thickly that the background almost disappears. The stem and leaf became one; the tendril became a single leaf with barbed offshoots<sup>(26)</sup>.

The acanthus at the early Byzantine churches, such as St. Demetrius in Thessalonica (c.475), is little different from those in the late Roman Empire. However, the leaf ornamentation on columns seems a lacework, characterising the Byzantine innovation from the traditional capitals. The carving takes the old upright acanthus leaf pattern and sweeps it round as if 'blown up' by the wind. Abstract design and Christian symbols replaced in details, instead of the old motifs<sup>(27)</sup>. Moreover, the Byzantine capitals differ from those of the Greeks and Romans in its marked symbolism of detail and the prevalence of the cushion form. Functionally, this type of capital is admirable, yet it lacks the vigorous upward growth of the Egyptian and Early Gothic capitals. However, the Byzantine capitals have amazing complexity and variety of detail, such as interlacing circles and cross with their symbolism, basket work, chequered details, and the traditional sharp acanthus foliage of the Greeks<sup>(28)</sup>.

The classical Ionic and Corinthian orders, often together, existed for a while in a debased form, but in the next century, the adoption of the basket capital, probably invented by the Constantinople workshop, created a simple, entirely openwork form, with a mesh of stylised

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<sup>8</sup> Already during the sixth and seventh centuries, Christianity gradually introduced in the old Roman provinces, and major motif in the early Christian church art was intricate ribbon interlaced together with stylised leaves. This new leaf emerged into the eighth century as a leitmotif in the Carolingian art. (Wilson 1994)

vegetation or forcefully detached interlacing. It soon spread throughout the whole of the Mediterranean basin<sup>(29)</sup>.

#### SANCTA SOPHIA, CONSTANTINOPLE (532-7)

The building noted for a dome, supported by semi-domes and pendentives on a square plan, embellished with colourful mosaics and symbolism<sup>(30)</sup>. When the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, they inspired by the splendour of this church and adopted it as the model for their mosques. Even 107 fine interior columns of the rare marble, with their characteristic Byzantine lacework of capitals, do not distract from the dome. It is 180 feet high and 102 feet in diameter<sup>(31)</sup>.



St Sophia became a mosque in 1453, Illustration by Sparre Forsati and Louis Agui

Sancta Sophia is the biggest Byzantine edifice, and one of the most impressive of Christendom. The Byzantines themselves considered it to be 'the fruit of divine intervention'. Begun in 532 and consecrated in 537, it was the work of the architects Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus. Its interior reflects an impression of power and harmony. Emperor Justinian brought porphyry columns from Egypt to reuse in the exedrae. The white marble capitals, the plain basket shapes with decorative scrolls on either side, are entirely sculpted with stylised acanthus foliage<sup>(32)</sup>.

The impost-block is dispensed with, and the execution of capital is superior to any other works in Constantinople. The vigorous and elegant capitals with its corner volutes are of the Roman Composite and Byzantine flat acanthus<sup>(33)</sup>.

#### SAN VITALE, RAVENNA (526-47)

Begun around 526 and consecrated in 547, in San Vitale, the spatial effect, marble decoration and sculpted capitals with stylised acanthus foliage show the perfect Byzantine influence<sup>(34)</sup>. The capitals are a pure Byzantine style, imported from Constantinople. Some forms are the concave

Corinthian outline with the acanthus leaves and volutes, while others made of the plain basket shape, either with an Egyptian-like lotus within borders of plaited work, or covered with a network of scrolls which are undercut to detach from the bell. And the remains are composed of the melon shape, fluted from the corners and a projection in the middle of each face representing the Corinthian rosette.

The influence of classic models was not lost, and although the delicate undercutting and modelling of the Corinthian capital abandoned, the hollow abacus, volutes and rosette survived. The acanthus leaf was alternately arranged in two tiers as the ancient examples. Sometimes it twisted as if inquisitively blown by the wind. In churches of St. Demetrius at Salonica, the leaves in the two tiers are blowing in the opposite direction, while at St. Sophia of the same city they are both blown the same way. At St. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, they are blown flat open. The Byzantine leaf was not modelled so artificially as the Roman but treated as a flat surface on which shallow lines represented the pipings, and the raffling by sharply cut perforations and a productive use of the drill. The result is precious and delicate and reminds of the shell of the perforated sea-echinus<sup>(35)</sup>.

# ACANTHUS *MOLLIS*: ROMAN, ROMANESQUE, EARLY GOTHIC

## Roman Acanthus

In the use of the acanthus leaf, the Romans show little art. They received it from the Greeks beautifully conventionalised; they went much nearer to the general outlines, but exaggerated the surface-decoration. The Greeks confined themselves to expressing the principal of the foliation of the leaf, and bestowed all their care in the delicate undulation of its surface. (Jones 1856)

The Roman acanthus leaf is different from that of the Greek, as the sharp Greek foliage never appeared to Roman foliage<sup>(36)</sup>. Greek ornamentation had no direct influence; instead, the Romans invented the leafy tendrils. However, they adopted the delicate Greek stem tendrils<sup>(37)</sup>. Acanthus *mollis* described as a larger, thinner, more flexible, and complex leaf with developed eyes at the bases of the lobes and pipes or ribs curving from these to the base of the leaf. The Roman acanthus is less massive, less pointed, and more minutely modelled, compared with the Greek one. The Romans modified and conventionalised a variety of the acanthus, and their temples identify the extraordinary versatility, conception, skill, and power of assimilating the arts of other nations. They learned from the Greek, particularly from the Hellenistic<sup>(38)</sup>.



Vesta temple capital



Septimius Severus arch

The rounded serration of the acanthus scrolls, which is bold and vigorous in conception and execution, dominates the Roman architectural ornament, despite the deficiency in the refined, delicate Greek art. Besides, different types of foliation display on various capitals. The Corinthian capital of the Parthenon has the foliage of the simple olive leaf, but on the Composite capital of the

Arch of Septimus Severus, the foliage is serrated. The Corinthian capital of the Temple of Vesta, Tivoli is more of the parsley leaf type<sup>(39)</sup>.

An elaboration of the Greek Corinthian with a particular type of cornice is named the Roman Corinthian capital. Within the Greeks, it was a simple variant of the Ionic, but the Romans beautified it. The perfect examples are at the Pantheon, the Temple of Castor and Pollux, and the Temple of Faustina (7 BC) in Rome. Their leaves arranged in the series of two tiers of eight acanthus leaves each, the volutes springing from sheaths, and stems between the leaves which support the angle of the volutes. The upper part is hidden by sixteen spiral volutes which spring in branching pairs from eight caulicoli, set between the eight leaves of the upper row. These volutes meet in eight pairs under the four corners of the abacus and under rosettes at the centres of its four sides<sup>(40)</sup>.

The capital from Temple of Castor and Pollux has a more standard type with distinctive, lively leaf carving and intertwining smaller volutes. They simplified form with uncut leaves, either for the economy, intended effect, or contrast with more elaborate capitals. The widespread use of the Roman Corinthian capitals survived throughout the Middle Age, early Renaissance and until the present time. Its elegant proportions, sculptural opportunities of the capital, and prestige attached to the wealth of the carving, has remained the popularity<sup>(41)</sup>. Early French Gothic has similar characteristics and illustrates the continuity of style<sup>(42)</sup>.

#### THE MAISON CARREE, NIMES (16 BC)

The Maison Carree at Nîmes in southern France probably built in 16 BC. It is a hexastyle pseudo-peripheral of the Corinthian order, well carved in the local limestone with an admirable frieze of tendrill pattern. The abaci show the band of flute-like leaves as the characteristic early Empire<sup>(43)</sup>. The temple was erected during Augustus' reign and is the best preserved of Roman temples in the entire Empire. Its precise columns and decorative Tuscan Corinthian capitals are a perfect example of the Vitruvian approach to its most classical form<sup>(44)</sup>.

#### Romanesque Acanthus

The term "Romanesque" was originally used by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century art historians, perceived as the debased and derivative nature of the style and its dependency on the art of an earlier culture. Charlemagne crowned as the Holy Roman Emperor in 800, and a new centre of the development started at Aachen, beginning to build monasteries for the first time<sup>(45)</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Abbot Suger's reconstructions at the Benedictine church of St. Denis near Paris between 1140 and 1144 introduced the essential argument of Gothic. He aimed to increase the interior light of the building, and it was the beginning of Gothic, altering the massive Romanesque walls in the lighter structures so that light could penetrate the church. Because St-Denis was the burial place of the Capetian dynasty, St. Denis

During the Romanesque period where Charlemagne ruled, the acanthus reappeared in much of its old form. The tendril is often schematically treated, but with a naturalistic type which reveals its classical origins<sup>(46)</sup>. For example, the French Romanesque column originated from the classic column, modified for new uses as a member of a compound, such as a jamb-shaft or nook-column in a door or window. The influence of Lombard could share in its development. The capitals were the Corinthian type in general, but had a heavy abacus, and modified proportions and details. Capitals of Moissac display a Byzantine character with the Corinthian tradition<sup>(47)</sup>.



Cluny (upper left), San Cugat del Valles (upper right), Monreale (below left), Santo Domingo De Silos (below right)

Interestingly, the development of the Romanesque capital was derived from the simple cushion capital and ended to the figural ones. A variant of the cushion capital named the pyramidal capital, might be the prototype. The Ionic capital with its volute is an early adaptation, but the adornment of stylised leaves turns the cushion capital into an ornamental one. As a result, decorative motifs include spiral and floral patterns, inventing imaginative variations. Into this, masks and animal shapes, later figurative scenes, are added to highlight the figural capital<sup>(48)</sup>. In

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encouraged church rebuilding in the Ile de France in the second half of the twelfth century. (Norman 1990) Suger's theory of light from his theological statements based upon the Neo-Platonic philosophy attributed to Bionysius the Areopagite, who identified with the patron saint of the abbey. The theory argues that man could come to a closer understanding of the light of God through the light of material objects in the physical world. At the very point of the formation of the Gothic style, Suger could impress the importance of light on next generations of architects to create a monument in advance of its time. (Branner 1961)

other words, Romanesque capitals started from the substituting non-religious decorative motifs for the foliage on the Corinthian capital with the plasticity of conception and the depth of carving. Indeed, the most prominent characteristic of the Corinthian capital is the sculptural quality of its structure<sup>(49)</sup>.

The reason for starting sculpture on capitals is within the following context. The symbol of the column which has bases and capitals derives from the shape of trees, as the same as trees have roots and a crown reaching for the skies. This correlation has existed all the time in the sacred sphere. The column and vault bore the symbolical form of the cosmos, where God lived. An architectural intermediary between the support and burden was the capital; it was still earthy at the bottom; above it faced the heavens<sup>(50)</sup>. The best example of the first insertion of human figures on the Corinthian capitals is those at Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire, displaying a transition from the Corinthian to figured capital. Focillon (1963) relates,

The solidity and complexity of these powerful architectural compositions became in some sense the basis and inspiration on which the Romanesque decorators were to build. They respected the fundamental forms -collarets of acanthus, angle-volutes and medallions- but they gradually introduced among them men, animals, and figure compositions. Romanesque art was to make the church 'speak', space had to be found for an abundant iconography, without disturbing the architectural masses and their functions. It was necessary to set on top of the columns, at the same time avoiding the appearance of meagreness and insignificance, not one or two figures.



To understand the function of decoration on Romanesque capitals, an examination within the context of medieval culture and art should consider. A critical document on this matter is a passage in the “*Apologia*” to William of Saint-Thierry (c.1125), written by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. It gives much evidence for a real appreciation of Romanesque sculpture on condemning the figures on capitals. According to St. Bernard, all these deformed animals will destroy the mediation of the law of God, because monks will spend the whole

day looking at these things<sup>(51)</sup>.

O vanity of vanities, but more vain than foolish! The walls of the church are ablaze with riches, while the poor go hungry; its stones are covered in gold and its children go naked; the money for feeding the poor is spent on embellishments to charm the eyes of the rich [...]. What relation can there be between all this and the poor, the monks, the men of God? [...] What is the meaning in your cloisters, where the monks do their reading, of these ridiculous monsters these horrible beauties, these beautiful horrors? What is the point, in these places, of these Johan obscene monkeys, ferocious lions, chimeras, centaurs, monsters half man, half animal, these striped tigers, battling soldiers, and huntsmen with horns? Here is a body with any heads or a head with several bodies; there a quadruped with a serpent's tail, and next to it a fish with an animal head. Sometimes one can see a monster that is horse before and goat behind, or a horse with a

horned head. The number of such representations is so great and the diversity so charming and varied that we would prefer to look at these carvings than read from our scriptures, spending the day admiring them instead of meditating on the law of God. Ah, Lord! If we are not ashamed of such frivolities, we should at least regret what the cost! (Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem)

Architectural sculpture was served by the church as a means of mass-communication, addressed to increasing, but mostly illiterate public. At the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there were tentative but sustained experiments in the use of architectural sculpture in churches in Burgundy at the Loire valley, but these confined to the capitals surmounting columns<sup>(52)</sup>.

Focillon (1963) has a somewhat different approach to this. The problems set by the decoration of the capital were more complicated, since a form was determined by a function. The use of figures for emphasising and assisting such functional activity was probably the best achievement of the Romanesque sculpture. Unfortunately, the 11<sup>th</sup> century inherited a long tradition of foliage capitals which became dry and frail through the hands of many inferior and uncontrolled workshops. Therefore, the earliest sculptors of the Saint-Benoit porch can restore its nobility and grandeur to the Corinthian order, inserting each face figure on the central axis, instead of the conventional decorative rosettes.

Schapiro (1977) agrees with Focillon. Various designs of the Romanesque capitals mark the first pervasive example of such constantly individualized ornament on repeated architectural elements. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, this differentiation did not use for educational purposes in religious themes. On the contrary, non-religious motifs have no clear meaning. If no precise definition was found, then the goal is basically to decorate. The aim of sculpted capitals paralleled that of the marginal embellishment of medieval art in general. Almost every great work of the Middle Age has a similar frame of decoration, either it is floral, animal, figural, or abstract in design.

The contrast between the main theme and the decoration, often very marked, served to heighten the meaning and visual effectiveness of the principal subject. From this widespread practice it is safe to infer that the contrast was intended to make the work of art more striking and more impressive. (Hearn 1981)

#### PALATINE CHAPEL, CAROLINGIAN (792)

Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel in Aachen was intended as a monumental testimony to his claim to be the Roman Emperor. Designed by Odo of Metz and begun in 792, the Roman buildings of Trier inspired the chapel. The chapel has a central octagon, based upon the Italian-Byzantine church of St. Vitale in Ravenna<sup>(53)</sup>. The large arches located above the arcades on the ground floor and below the drum of the dome divided by two rows of tiered columns with capitals carved in white marble. It is a perfect imitation of classical capitals. Most of these re-used Roman or Byzantine works<sup>(54)</sup>.

The classical Corinthian columns brought from Ravenna on the instructions of Charlemagne himself<sup>(65)</sup>.

#### CLUNY HEMICYCLE CAPITALS (1100)

Figured capitals culminated Romanesque sculpture in Burgundy. The capitals of the former abbey church of Saint-Pierre-et-Saint-Paul in Cluny, around 1100, differ from the ancient Corinthian capitals. The church is famous for two capitals bearing eight personifications of the notes of Gregorian chant. Unfortunately, the Corinthian volutes at the corners were lost from the musical capitals when they forcefully dismantled, but remained in other places, such as the capital of the Fall of Man, show clearly a characteristic stylistic feature of Burgundian capitals. The tension between architectural interrelations and figural elements developed into an extraordinary plastic design, which relates to the individual side of the capitals to each other<sup>(66)</sup>. The Corinthian capital is a pure decoration without a symbolic meaning<sup>(67)</sup>.

#### Early Gothic Acanthus

It is not until the late German Gothic that we again meet the acanthus... The last great movement on the acanthus is the Italian Renaissance... From 1500 and onwards, however, the acanthus disappears almost entirely from pillar ornaments and is replaced by the grotesque. (Hauglid 1950)

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the West was relatively peaceful and stable, and centres of learning developed in cathedral cities. The mysticism of Christianity brought minds to a mysterious world of symbol and myth. Whenever cathedrals consecrated, builders had no interest in exact reproduction, and the buildings had duplicated symbolic dimensions and numbers of architectural features. Adam (1990) argues that the transcendentalism of medieval religious architecture has its position in Gothic churches<sup>10</sup> because medieval man considered himself an imperfect “refraction” of the Divine Light of God, where his temple stands for the Heavenly City of Jerusalem, according to the text of the dedication ritual<sup>(68)</sup>. By 1150, Romanesque masons could manage to all necessary demands for construction. The architectural setting was still the same, and Gothic emerged naturally from Romanesque. The new style was not because of engineering, but of symbolism and

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<sup>10</sup> The Gothic interpretation was to produce a visionary scale through space, light, structure and the plastic effects of the masonry. There was no fixed proportion, compared to a Greek column, and no standard relationship was between solid and void. It resulted as distortion: Gothic church became vast in appearance. Such a visionary character expressed not only the physical and spiritual needs of the church but also the general attitude of the people and the aspirations of the individual patron and architect. (Branner 1961)

mysticism. Gothic could express aspiration, a feeling of upward movement towards God that was impressible in Romanesque<sup>(59)</sup>.

Gothic sculpture inherited Romanesque premises. Despite a gradual transition, the difference is that the subordination of sculpture to architecture, dominant in Romanesque, has no place in Gothic monuments. Figure sculpture animates no longer components of the construction. On capitals, allegorical figures do not exist, instead, plant forms animate architecture itself in harmony with the sense of a living organism. This corresponds with the organic and geometrical quality of Gothic architecture, and emphasis is given by a style which is based on the power of a harmonious quality of line to express the living organism of the building as a whole.



Stiff-leaf: Canterbury Trinity Chapel (left), Wells Cathedral, England 1176-1450 (right)

Salvini (1996) relates,

Sculpture becomes more delicate, with graceful and undulating forms to go with the projecting and branching lines of a type of architecture which tended to reduce walls to a transparency, filtering the daylight through stained-glass windows to make a transcendental effect of coloured light, leaving the skeletal forms of the load-bearing members to express both the static forces and the spiritual tension of the building.

Early Gothic capital is vigorous and beautiful but lacks the delicate variety of details of the Byzantine. Gothic ornament is organic (Glazier 1933). As plants grow upwards to the light, the perfect decorative method of Gothic architecture is the foliage, with its upward thrust. The foliage carving became popular in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when buildings almost seemed to enliven with vegetation and animal carvings to visualize spiritualising and earthy<sup>(60)</sup>.

The ordinary and familiar world of nature is transformed into an ascending ladder as the decorative mouldings and capitals direct the gaze upwards; at the same time, the writhing masses of interlaced vegetation are touched by a primitive, almost pagan symbolism. (Norman 1990)

Jones (1856, 1972) says that the main character of this period is the perfect adaptability of its foliage to stone carving, the richness of its detail, the spiral growth of foliage, and dynamic contrast of light and shade. In other words, Gothic foliage is almost perfect in principle and execution, and harmonises with the structural features and grows naturally from them. However, the style should be conventional. If it resembles nature more, its beauties will disappear: 'It ceased to be ornamentation of structural features, but became ornament applied'. The ornament of the Early English capitals arises directly from the shaft, which above the necking splits up into a series of stems, each stem terminating in flower. It is analogous to the mode of decoration in the Egyptian capital.

To this point, Colling (1865) and Hamlin (1916) argue that in the Early Gothic, the classic type of Romanesque foliage showed in the early French capital of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, which recall the Corinthian type by their bell-shaped core, square abacus with the corners cut off, and volute-like corner crockets, but the abacus is always massive in proportion to the cap and shaft. The development of the Romanesque type is evident. For example, the round-lobed foliage of the Choir and Trinity Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral is similar to that of the early French. Capital in the south transept is precisely the same character as the foliage from the Mars Ultor at Rome.

#### CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL

The rebuilding of the Canterbury choir (1174-9) by William Sens, a French architect, was a start in the Early Gothic in England. The capitals of the presbytery including Trinity Chapel (1183) display the earliest pure French influence. Their shape based on the Corinthian, which was still popular in France, Normandy, and England in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

After the middle of this century, the French introduced both conventional Roman foliage and a more naturalistic kind. Consequently, the capitals in the Choir and particularly in the Trinity Chapel contain much of both types, well executed and highly finished. The work is stunning, but is not English, and has no position in the Corinthian development of the English foliage. The heavy curling crockets, untidy many-lobed leaves, the whole disorder effect, and three-dimensional feeling are unfamiliar in England. Instead, they resemble capitals of Saint-Rémi at Rheims (1170-81), indicating that at a very early stage, Gothic foliage sculpture brought into English art. However, for the next twenty years, the modification and transformation of this import were in progress according to insular tastes<sup>(6)</sup>.

The first result was the rejection of elaborate foliate crockets, and semi-naturalistic foliage of the early French Gothic, in favour of the stiff-leaf. It was a highly distinctive mannerism, developed from the three-dimensional leaf into rhythmical patterns. In 1179, William the Englishman took the job, and five years later, he produced abundant linear pattern and the most beautiful foliage. Collings (1865) claims,

At Canterbury, the Corinthian leaf was split up into leaflets, instead of lobes, but still attached to the centre stem. From this it passed into the Early English, and the leaf was divided into separately parts, forming distinct leaves, but the round lobes were still conspicuous, through the whole of the foliage of the thirteenth century, until the conventional leafage was thrown aside, and foliage was taken more directly from nature; but until that was the case, the Classic feeling retained its hold and exerted an influence upon the whole of the foliage of the Early Gothic period.<sup>11</sup> ♦

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♦ (1) Adam 1990 (2) Glazier 1933 (3) Cook 1997 (4) Adam 1990 (5) Collings 1865 (6) Wilson 1994 (7) Adam 1990 (8) Hamlin 1916 (9) Rawson 1984 (10) Gombrich 1979 (11) Rawson 1984 (12) Fletcher 1996 (13) Collings 1865 (14) Schuchhardt 1972 (15) Hamlin 1916, Scraton 1979 (16) Adam 1990 (17) Cook 1997 (18) Collings 1865 (19) Osborne 1998, Rowland 1999 (20) Adam 1990, Cook 1997 (21) Adam 1990 (22) Laisne 1995 (23) Charbonneaux 1973 (24) Norman 1990 (25) Collings 1865 (26) Hauglid 1950 (27) Jackson 1975 (28) Glazier 1933 (29) Durand 1999 (30) Glazier 1933 (31) Norman 1990 (32) Durand 1999 (33) Jackson 1975, Hamlin 1916 (34) Durand 1999 (35) Jackson 1975 (36) Collings 1865 (37) Hauglid 1950 (38) Hamlin 1916 (39) Glazier 1933 (40) Hamlin 1916, Glazier 1933 (41) Adam 1990 (42) Glazier 1933 (43) Wheeler 1971 (44) Stierlin 1996 (45) Rice 1952 (46) Hauglid 1950 (47) Hamlin 1915 (48) Toman 1977 (49) Hearn 1981 (50) Geese 1977 (51) Hearn 1981 (52) Petzold 1995 (53) Norman 1990 (54) Altet 1997 (55) Toman 1977 (56) Geese 1977 (57) Hearn 1981 (58) Branner 1961 (59) Norman 1990 (60) Branner 1961, Salvini 1996 (61) Collings 1865, Stone 1972

# FLORAL SYMBOLISM CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 verifies the acanthus as an ornament by tracing symbolic floral in antiquity and Christianity.

According to Adam (1990), all types of plant imply both decorative intention and association with something. And the symbolic connection enhances the meaning and interest to decoration. As the relationship between specific plants of magical qualities and gods shared with the primitive mentality of antiquity, paganism interpreted into an association of saints, plants and conventions of heraldry. An example is the sacred lotus blossom which represents the embodiment of all life.

In section 3.2, tree, flower, and plant selected due to their basic shapes and forms in nature. 'Tree of Life' on Romanesque capitals, lotus flowers in Egyptian and Indian temples and vine-scrolls in Islamic mosques discuss on their symbolic role. In the next, tracing their origins and uses in religious architecture testifies the acanthus as decorative, in contrast to the symbolic lotus in Ptolemaic Egypt and Gandharan India: 'Lotus in the hands of gods showed in the capitals of columns'<sup>(1)</sup>. 'Lotus was represented as a symbol of Upper Egypt, or a symbol of the sun and creation, because of its rebirth'<sup>(2)</sup>.

Moreover, the symbolic vine in paganism and Christianity explained in section 3.4. The vine rarely employed on religious capitals. However, Colledge (1976) claims that at Bel Sanctuary in Palmyra, the vine had a role as the background to figures on tesseræ and in funerary art. Inspired by Greek and Roman symbolism, it implies the drink of immortality, a foretaste of joy hereafter. Wilson (1994) also argues that the vine scroll connected wine drinking in the cult of Bacchus and acquired a new symbol of Christ during Christianity. Section 3.5 explains a metaphorical notion of Islam. Gardens, full with trees, flowers, and plants, are regarded as a Paradise where all livings started, despite no particular symbolism on floral decoration. Mosaics of the golden vine-scroll and big trees on the Dome of Rock are purely for decoration, regardless of their intentionally suggested meanings, such as a wish of fulfilling a peaceful Islamic world or evocations of Paradise itself<sup>(3)</sup>.

## 3.1. CONNOTATION

Symbolism is a means of knowledge and the earliest and basic way of expression: 'one which reveals aspects of reality which escape other modes of expression', explains Cooper (1978) in his "*An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*". Two different styles in the art found in the human mind. The first and simplest is the expression of certain intellectual ideas in symbolism, and the second is the unconscious betrayal of national character in style. All early art started some

mystery of life, nature, or divinity, and later became the token of ownership or advertisement of use. For instance, decorative patterns, executed by careless Gothic and Renaissance artists, represented as attributes of saints or heroes<sup>(4)</sup>. Hulme (1894) explains preferably in a different way. All ornamental arts have two divisions of symbolic and aesthetic. The former stands for significance primarily, while the latter does for beauty. Both proper judgements cannot be made until their roles comprehended, whether to knowledge and understanding or a taste.

The recognition of ornament may complicate by symbolism. A single lotus flower is interpreted as a symbol of Buddhism. When the viewer looks at a lotus, he must combine this shape with previous ones from his memories, although his mind recognised the lotus as a symbol. Rawson (1984) quotes Kubler's remark that 'every meaning requires support, or a vehicle or a holder'. The viewer must recognise the supports before, and then, can understand their meanings. As all types of ornament had some hidden meanings, viewers must search for their interpretation. This symbolic element is an agent between the identifiable reality and mysterious domain of religion, philosophy, and magic, extending the conscious understanding into the unconsciousness<sup>(5)</sup>.

It is fair to say that all flowers and ornament chosen by the mediaeval architect have a symbolic meaning<sup>12</sup>, and are not for its beauty just. Religious architecture should be truthful; 'to make it only *natural* will not realise its object, it should be also *spiritual*'<sup>(6)</sup>. Heath (1909) claims,

It is perhaps hardly necessary to say that religious symbolism means the expression of belief represented in outward and visible signs and forms; and a slight study of medieval literature and ornament will quickly convince us that the early writers, architects, and carvers, had a great love of mysticism, a real belief in the supernatural, and a fondness for the mysterious and unaccountable, and that these qualities in their minds occupied the place now taken by scientific observation and experiment.

### 3.2. SYMBOLIC FLORAL

The tree is the image of a connection between heaven and earth, and its structure has a marked symbolic content. Roots of trees in the depth of the earth grow at the axis of the world,

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<sup>12</sup> During the Middle Ages, the images of nature permeated with a variety of different meanings. The great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga expressed: "It was never forgotten that every object would be meaningless if its relevance went no farther than its immediate function and appearance, and as a result, all objects projected quite a way into the next world." The image of God could be apparent in almost every visible and tangible forms, such as a tree, rock or thunderstorm, because of his wish to reveal himself to humankind. And the light blue colour of sapphire can be directly related to the light blue of a clear sky, acquiring its position as a symbol of Heaven. It demonstrates how the symbolic power of the sapphire can have different meanings, depending on the context. (Geese 1977)

manifesting its time by adding rings, while its branch stretches into the realm of the air, the celestial<sup>(7)</sup>. Compared to an evergreen tree's immortal character, a deciduous tree represents constant renewal and regeneration. Both are a symbol of diversity in unity. As a world axis, the tree is connected with the mountain and pillar and all that is axial. The tree by itself can symbolize the entire cosmos, often located at the summit of a mountain or the top of a pillar.

The dependence of humankind on the tree for life led to the idea of the Tree of Life, together with the Tree of Knowledge to signify the regeneration and to return to the primaevial state of perfection in Paradise. It is the cosmic axis in unity; while the Tree of Knowledge has dualism: the knowledge of good and evil about the first human kind's fall from Paradise. Symbolic trees appeared on the Cluny hemicycle Romanesque capitals. The four trees (vine, fig, apple, almond) can be associated with the Gospels<sup>(8)</sup>. The column's symbolic content originates from the shape of trees. Just as trees have roots and a crown reaching for the skies, columns have bases and capitals. Somehow, this correlation has never disappeared in the sacred sphere. The column and vault bore the symbolical form of the cosmos, where God lived<sup>(9)</sup>.

The flower has a feminine and passive character. In a bud, it symbolizes potentiality and depicts progress when opening and expanding from the core outwards. The most popular are the lotus in the East and the rose and lily in the West. Its open form and expansion also represent the wheel with its rays flowing out from the centre. Flower gardens are associated with Paradise in the Islamic concept of Garden of Paradise, and the abode of souls. Plants are symbols for death and resurrection, and the cycle of life too. With flower, it relates to the Great Mother, goddess of the earth, fertility and vegetation. Plants and trees are often considered to be mythical ancestors, usually associated with the moon cult<sup>(10)</sup>.

### 3.3. LOTUS, PALM, PAPYRUS IN THE ANCIENT EGYPT AND INDIA

#### **Floral Capitals in Pagan Egypt**

The history of Egypt extends nearly from 4000 to 340 BC after the unification of the Upper and Lower Egypt. Egypt enjoyed three periods of prosperity and centralised power, known as the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms with the First, Second, and Third Intermediate Periods between. But without the Nile River, the Egyptian civilisation might be impossible. When spring comes in the Nile River, the lotus appears as the messenger to predict the coming abundance in agriculture. The priesthood worshipped this lotus as God's existence. The motif can be visible on all sacred architecture<sup>(11)</sup>.

Consequently, Egyptian architecture is a mirror of creation, a means of artistic expression that is firmly rooted in the realms of sensory perception. It is not a construct of mathematics,

technology and abstraction<sup>(12)</sup>. Egyptian temple is the home of gods<sup>13</sup> and a symbolic representation of the world and a model of its creation. The wavy rows of mud-brick walls enclosing the sacred areas are likely to represent the primordial waters, while the tiers of papyrus and lotus-shaped columns inside the enclosure symbolizes the earliest marsh vegetation<sup>(13)</sup>. The exterior wall of some temples embellished with stylised plant motifs. The palm, lotus, and papyrus columns in the hypostyle halls have capitals in the form of calyxes, appropriately closed in the semi-darkness.

The canon of the Egyptian temple reflects, I believe, not only the social system and the dogmas of the prevailing cult (or rather official cults); the temple decorations and the interior arrangement also exhibit a marked tendency toward the realistic re-creation of nature. The Egyptian temple is an image of Egypt's earthly nature, not of imaginary. (Michalowski 1968)

Jones (1856) argues that Egyptian ornament has three types: constructive, representative with conventionalisation, and merely decorative. And it contains ideas, allusions and symbolic messages because the representational art closely interweave with their religious beliefs. The ornament was primarily for religious purposes, to adorn the temples, sacrifices, and priests<sup>(14)</sup>.

In the tombs of the Old Kingdom (c.2400 BC), a slender column with the shaft embracing a bundle of plant stems appeared. At the top, the stems terminated in closed lotus blossoms, and small lotus buds placed between the stems. Despite its lightness and fragility to support the column, the lotus blossom has an iconographic meaning, which opens itself to the sun, giving the ceilings as the bright sky<sup>(15)</sup>. Papyrus plants and lotus buds represent the emblems of Upper and Lower Egypt respectively. As the papyrus linked with creation and the sun, its flowers, either opened or closed, were displayed on pillars to represent the path of the sun-god. The lotus, a type of water-lily, symbolised the primaeval ocean of creation. The sun-god Re often described reclining on a lotus flower<sup>(16)</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Egyptian religion is composed of multiple deities, and each of them has various forms which classified as a living animal or bird, or a human-made image either anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or a combination of the two, or some inanimate or vegetal form. They derived from local deities of their communities. Some gods acquired the state divinities, such as Amun (or Amun-Re) of Thebes, Ptah of Memphis, and Re (or Atum) of Heliopolis. (Malek 1999) The sun is one of the most popular deities, often displayed the solar disk in symbolic Egyptian art. (Wilkinson 1992) Generally, the images of the gods were inaccessible to people, so the pharaoh was acting for them, as a supreme being who maintained the unity and dignity of Egypt. (Putnam 1997)

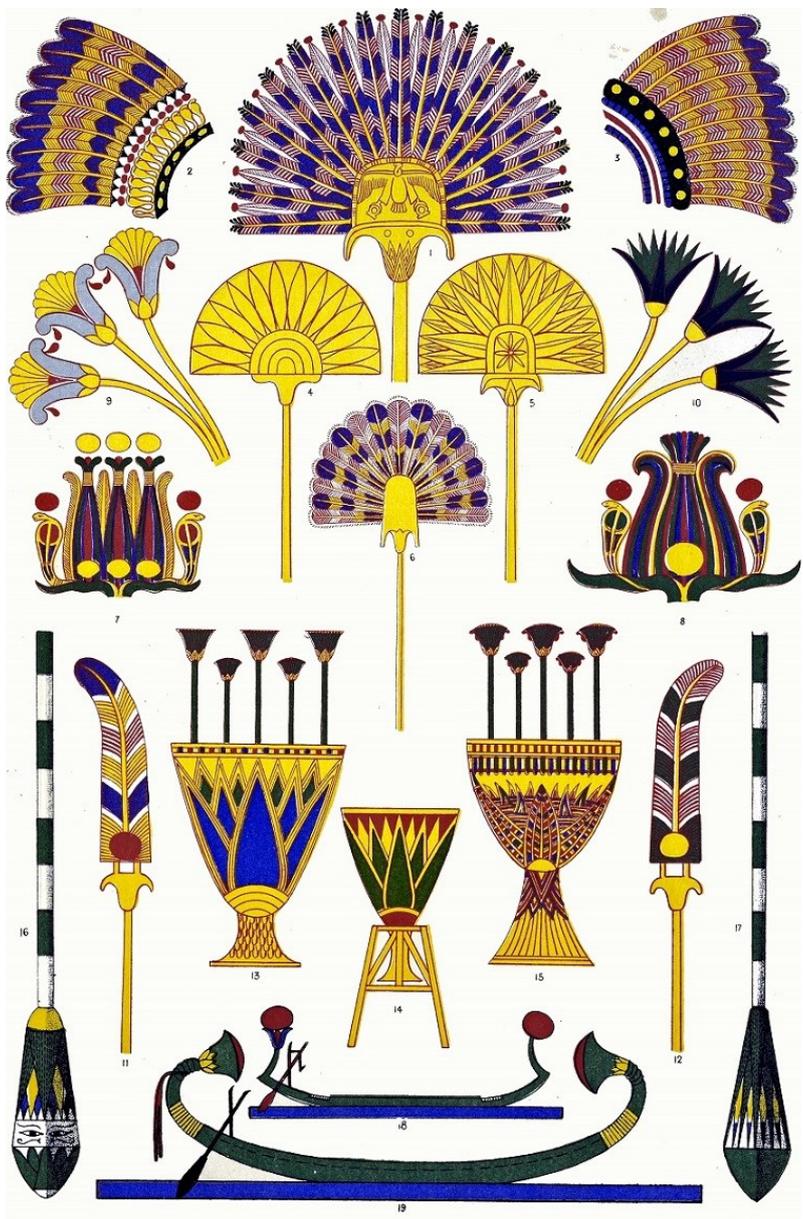
Egyptian capitals of columns<sup>14</sup> have a few main groups: single or clustered bud capital, single or compound bell-shaped (campaniform), palmiform, and Hathoric. Bud-capital was the most popular. The campaniform was mainly visible in the central aisles of hypostyle halls, such as at Karnak and Ramesseum. A variety of the compound campaniform, palmiform, and Hathoric belonged mostly to the Ptolemaic age<sup>(17)</sup>.



Birth goddess Hathor-papyrus-lotus at Philae Isis home, 380-362 BC (upper left), lotus in Karnak: papyrus and lotus bud represent Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt as heraldry (upper right), papyrus-palm (below left), papyrus-lotus (below rights)

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<sup>14</sup> Riegl (1992) says that the column was not primarily a supporter of the weight-bearing roof but a freely ending post. The lotus calyx and bud capitals were a crowning element. Later architects realised the need for a transition between the supporting column and the weight-bearing architrave.



Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* (1868)

## PAPYRUS

The papyrus plant, *Cyperus papyrus*, grows in dense groves throughout the Delta. It has a leafless stem of triangular cross-section with leaf-sheets at the base, and flowers carried on long fronds in a large umbel at the top, with a height of five meters<sup>(18)</sup>. As a natural symbol of life itself, a single stem and umbel of the plant in the hieroglyph M13 used as an amulet and a symbol for 'green,' and concepts such as 'flourish, joy, and youth.' It was also related to several deities, and representations of Hathor, Bastet, Neith, and other goddesses often bear a papyriform staff as an attribute<sup>(19)</sup>



Luxor in Upper Egypt, Rameseum papyrus bell capital and open capital as part of Necropolis

In his "*Grammar of the Lotus*," Goodyear (1892) claims that ornamental lotus motifs and pictorial representations were originated from the papyrus. Hamlin (1916) agrees that 'it is true, many forms in which, by convergence, the two types blended in one'.

At King Djoser's Funerary Complex of the Old Kingdom (2780-2680 BC), the papyrus column with its tulip-shaped capital showed as an engaged three-quarter column; both in its longitudinal section and its wedge-shaped cross section it traces the shape of a stylised papyrus stem, with an umbel opening about at the top<sup>(20)</sup>. The North Building to the north of the Heb-Sed court has papyrus columns, representing Upper Egypt<sup>(21)</sup>. During the Middle Kingdom at the temple of Karnak, the papyrus columns around the court and the adjacent pronaos reaches high up the sky, 'turning the heavens into the roof over the space and making this man-made temple into a part of the cosmos'<sup>(22)</sup>.

According to Hamlin (1916), the papyrus' straight, stiff triangular stem with four root-leaves wrapping its slightly swelling base is imitated in the clustered shafts of many columns and on bell-capitals, often alternating with conventional lotus. The stem bears a bunch of tiny flowers, forming with their stems a group of green filaments with reddish tops, growing out of a calyx of four leaves or bracts. These supply the suggestion for many bell-shaped forms in ornament, including the campaniform capitals of massive columns like those of the Karnak Hypostyle Hall.

## LOTUS

Two species of the lotus found in Egypt, the white *Nymphaea lotus*, and the blue *Nymphaea caerulea*. The former has its rounded buds and petals, and the latter by its more pointed buds and narrow petals. Both depicted in Egyptian art<sup>(23)</sup>. Hamlin (1916) argues that the lotus is the sacred flowers of Egypt. It is most common and beautiful of flowers, figuring in religious and royal ceremonies. As a life-giver, it symbolizes both the Nile River and the solar divinities that ruled the river's inundation. On the contrary, Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) denies its sacred and symbolic significance. Goodyear (1892) attempted to convince the lotus as the basis of all Egyptian ornament, underlining that the lotus should be regarded to be 'the apparent' of nearly all the historic ornament since all ornaments go back to Egypt. Of this, Hamlin opposes to Goodyear, arguing 'the thesis carry too far'. However, he accepts that a very considerable art of Egyptian ornament has an origin of the lotus, while many link up with the lotus type. Consequently, the influence of the lotus can be traced far beyond the area of actual lotus derivations.

The popularity of the lotus can be not only its derivation but is also its symbol. The petals of the flower closed at nights and reopened in the mornings was a symbol of the sun, and later became the reassurance of life. At Heliopolis, where the sun worshipped, priests taught the origin of the world as the appearance of the god Re - a personification of the sun - from a lotus growing out of the primaeval waters. At sunset, the god entered the flower, which folded its petals down on him, and he was reborn as the flower unfolded, the morning after morning<sup>(24)</sup>.

## PALM

A branch of the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) with stripped of its leaves and notched played a role as the standard method of recording years in ancient Egypt. From the Old Kingdom, the palm branch hieroglyph used in words as *renpet*, "year" and *ter*, "time" or "season", and its application was established fairly in common iconographic motifs by the Middle Kingdom. Its branch is the symbol of the god Heh, the personification of eternity, and he often illustrates with the *renpet* sign worn on his head and with notched palm branches grasped in each hand. As a symbol of time, the palm branch sometimes shows in more cryptic presentations<sup>(25)</sup>.

Wildung (2001) argues that during Dynasty V, the palmiform column was dominant in temples, and in the mosque of 'Amr (641-2) at Fustat much later in the Islamic period. It is almost sure that palm-trunks were used as columns to support beams of split palm-trunks and thatching of palm-leaves and mud<sup>(26)</sup>. Its smooth, round shaft tapers slightly towards the top where horizontal banding ties in the carved palm branches that fan out vertically in fine panicles. When looking at the towering trunks of an Egyptian palm grove, it is not hard to imagine where the Ancient Egyptian builders drew inspiration for the idea of a column supporting a temple roof in the form of a stone slab decorated on the underside with stars, to look like the heavens. The palm column turns into stone; it is the tree over which vaults the sky.

## THE COMPOSITE CAPITALS

Under the Ptolemaic period, floral capitals culminated the iconographic richness and stylistic balance<sup>(27)</sup>. The Composite capitals are made up of many layers of papyrus buds with a combination of grapes and different flowers. They led directly to the Egyptian basket capitals in the late classical period and became a prototype of early Christian art indirectly<sup>(28)</sup>. It was not until the end of this period and under the Roman rule that the relief decoration of the Temple of Isis on Philae completed, although most buildings finished in the third century BC under Ptolemy II and III. The Composite plant capital with a Hathor head at the colonnade of the Birth House beautifies the temple<sup>(29)</sup>. The Ptolemaic Composite capitals were praised by David Roberts in his diary when he saw the Pronaos of the Temple of Edfu on 23, November in 1838 (cited by Bourbon 1996).

The pronaos, with six columns facing onto the great courtyard, is perhaps the most spectral part of the temple. It clearly demonstrates the preference of Ptolemaic taste for capitals of highly complex forms, quite different from the classical designs; the two nearest to the portal area shaped like lotus flowers, the ones in the middle decorated with date-palm leaves, and the outer ones inspired by the fronds of *Hyphaene thebaica*, a palm tree typical of the region. Inside, 12 more columns arranged in pairs support the ceiling; here again, the capitals represent a vast variety of shapes.

## Lotus in Buddhist India

Buddhism is believed to be the first world religion known to history. During the Maurya Dynasty (c.324-187 BC), Emperor Ashoka accepted it as a spiritual and moral basis for his empire, and after that it spread across vast areas of Asia, bringing the universal doctrine of salvation for all men and living creatures, the philosophy, ethics, learning, and art. According to Seckel (1964), the Buddhist art has invited us through rich imagery, because the artwork aimed at goals beyond themselves and its image expresses so sublime and abstract that, especially in Mahayana art, almost everything is a symbol. The lotus is the most predominant symbolic flower, portraying the essence of nature in all human beings and things, unspoiled by delusion to attain Enlightenment. It is the throne of the Buddha and the centre of the mandala. Its stalk is called “the *axis mundi*”.

Many symbols in Buddhist art also contributed to a highly developed system of ornamentation on buildings, carved or painted figures, cult implements of every kind, and textiles, in different techniques. Some motifs are repeated in all the Buddhist lands, forming a common link between them. Plant and geometric motifs preferred to animal and consistent figures. Buddhist art has fulfilled a vital role in transforming motifs that had no original relation to the Buddhist thought or design. When Buddhism spread from India first into Central Asia in the early centuries AD and then into China, the lotus rosette and scroll together with other features of Buddhist architecture and objects were associated with the Buddhist faith<sup>(30)</sup>.

## THE INDIAN LOTUS

The Indian lotus has the same symbol as the Egyptian lotus, despite its distinction and non-connection. The flower closes at night and opens with the sun in the morning, suggesting the death and rebirth. The lotus predates its place in Buddhist iconography, and in art, has superiority, either ornamental or symbolic. The Indian lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera*, is based on the species of water-lily. It is a larger, beautiful plant than the blue and white Egyptian ones. It has bright pink, white or blue blossoms, 15-20cm in diameter, and stands above the surface of the water. Images of the Buddha and Bodhisattva, sitting or standing on stylised lotus flowers testify the lotus as one of the Buddha's signs<sup>(31)</sup>.

## LOTUS ON SARNATH CAPITAL

Many massive stone columns were built by Ashoka (?273-232 BC) after the removal of Alexander the Great's troops from India, to proclaim principles of the Buddha's teaching. There are animal figures and stylised lotus along with the Wheel of Truth, whose symbol is the preaching of the Truth<sup>(32)</sup>. One of the most famous columns found at Sarnath, the holy site where the Buddha first preached the doctrine of Dharma, putting the Wheel of the Law into motion. On the abacus of the capital, four animals (elephant: the east, horse: south, bull: west, lion: north) illustrate his teaching.



Allahabad column frieze of flame palmette surrounded by rosette flower, Bodi Gaya built by Asoka (upper left), Abacus of Asoka Lampurva capital, 3 BC (below left), Tree of life and lotus of Apadana in Persepolis (right)

During the Vedic period, 'Each animal here alternates with a solar wheel, to signify the true Law projected out to all four corners of the world, and thus combined they provide the base for the ultimate cosmic roar of Dharma which rises above'<sup>(33)</sup>. The campaniform shape of the capital derived from the lotus. Its recurrence in the Achaemenid and Maurya traditions suggests related symbolism<sup>(34)</sup>. Although the capital is not completely Indian in its stylistic execution, the ideas of these foreign shapes are Indian, and by derivation, it has particular Buddhist character. Every

religious memorial in Indian art has its primary functions as 'magical and auspicious, neither decorative nor architectural'<sup>(35)</sup>.



Asoka stone column of Sarnath, 3 BC (left), Achaemenid animal column with lotus capital in Persepolis, 6-4 BC, perhaps the origin of inspiration to Sarnath (right)

### 3.5. VINE IN ANTIQUITY AND CHRISTIANITY

Vines and grapes embellished both pagan and Christian tombs as a sign of life after death. Abundant traditions of pagan decoration exist due to the pagan wine in their religious ceremonies and Dionysus or Bacchus, the Greek and Roman god of wine, who was believed to have resurrected<sup>(36)</sup>. In Christianity, the vine associates with Christ and the Eucharist through the parable of the vine and the blood of the Saviour. It is an image of the Saviour, saying 'I am the true vine' (John 15:1). As Christ is the vine, the faithful are his branches; thus it is a symbol of the church<sup>(37)</sup>. For example, the declaration of Christ encourages the church mosaic higher above than its supreme ornamental beauty. Despite forbidding the representation of the cross on pavements by Theodosius and Valentinianus, the vine scroll, encircling birds and animals from the paganism, indicates a significance of Christianity<sup>15</sup>.



Drasius marble sarcophagus, Soisson, 12C, Louvre Museum (left), Longobardo temple portal (right)

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<sup>15</sup> At the runic cross at Ruthwell (7C), Dumfriesshire, the vines cluster with a vitality, catching the pecking birds and beasts that at the fruit in their coils. (Bann 1989)



Exterior wall of Quintanilla de las viñas



Monreale in Sicily (left), Mozac (right)

Bann (1989) claims,

If the vine does not (as in the words of Christ) have the force of a parable, it implies a sympathetic connection with the message of the Christian gospel with its radiating, proliferating, ever extending appropriation of the Mediterranean world. Even in the far north, where the use of vine ornament derives from the repertoire of peoples outside the Roman sphere, this congenitally of the motif to the Christian message is very marked.

The vine, one of the oldest, with the Good Shepherd and the Fish, did not exist as a sacred emblem after the first five or six centuries<sup>(38)</sup>. However, its popularity continued from antiquity via the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, because of the association of Christ and the Eucharist partly<sup>(39)</sup>. Despite this remarkable display of unity-in-diversity, the vine-scroll had its most lasting influence in the Islamic world. Probably no other motif has so long or complex history as the vine-scroll<sup>(40)</sup>.

### 3.6. METAPHORIC ISLAM: GARDEN OF PARADISE

The mosques are the Gardens of Paradise. (Pope Arthur)

The main problem with Islamic decoration is to ascertain its meaning: is it ornament to enhance beauty or has it a symbolic significance related to the mosque? The difficulty of the answer is the fact that almost all the designs can interpret as an ornament. The architectural

compositions of the Grand Mosque of Damascus can be a sheath of glitter without symbolism. It can be correct to regard the decoration of mosques as ornament primary; thus it has an importance in the history of pure ornament.

However, this decoration can suggest an iconographic meaning, because the architectural landscape on the same mosque reflects images of victory, glory, and paradise at that specific time. The vegetal ornamentation on the courtyard was meant to be a sort of Paradise<sup>(41)</sup> because every garden created in the Islamic world has tended to consider as a metaphor for Paradise<sup>(42)</sup>.

Moreover, the development of the vegetal scroll in Islamic ornament, called “arabesque”, had the same meaning, for the love of rich, complex, and decorative patterns is partly a tribute to the oasis-paradise concept. The enclosed garden is called “paradise”, based on the millennial, cosmological belief which identified paradise with the Garden of Eden and its four rivers. At the Grand Mosque in Damascus, the notion of paradise and the evocation of the courtyard calls to mind the elegant mosaic decoration on its walls exposed to full daylight. The courtyard of the mosque reflected the joys of paradise to come. Early Islamic art seemed to concentrate on visions of Paradise<sup>(43)</sup>. The many dwellings have interpreted as representing the cities conquered by the Muslims, but it is the most probable that the mosaics portray the Paradise which awaits the believer- a Paradise of beauty, in which would distinguish of rank or status continue to observe<sup>(44)</sup>.<sup>16</sup> ♦

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♦ (1) Hamlin 1916 (2) Wilkinson 1992 (3) Hillenbrand 1999 (4) Collingwood 1883 (5) Frutiger 1991 (6) Griffith 1852 (7) Cooper 1978, Frutiger 1991 (8) Hearn 1981 (9) Geese 1977 (10) Cooper 1978 (11) Dresser 1973 (12) Wildung 2001 (13) Putnam 1997 (14) Collingwood 1883, Dresser 1973, Hamlin 1916, Wilkinson 1992, Malek 1999 (15) Wildung 2001 (16) Jones 1856, 2001 (17) Hamlin 1916 (18) Wilson 1994 (19) Wilkinson 1992 (20) Wildung 2001 (21) Smith 1998 (22) Wildung 2001 (23) Wilkinson 1992 (24) Rawson 1984 (25) Wilkinson 1992 (26) Creswell 1968 (27) Malek 1999 (28) Wildung 2001 (29) Smith 1998 (30-31) Wilson 1994 (32) Seckel 1964 (33) Craven 1987 (34) Gajjar 1971 (35) Rowland 1971 (36) Macgregor 2000 (37) Heath 1909, Adam 1990 (38) Heath 1909 (39) Adam 1990 (40) Trilling 2001 (41) Grabar 1987 (42) Brend 1991, Hillenbrand 1999 (43) Stierlin 1966 (44) Brend 1991

## THE DEATHS OF ACANTHUS CHAPTER 4

In this chapter, six arguments will identify acanthus as decoration. Earlier chapter 3 mentioned that the acanthus was not used in temples and had no symbolic meanings. Since antiquity, no reference between the symbolic Greek acanthus in funerary and the decorative Christian acanthus in churches has been linked, despite a few efforts in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>17</sup>. The acanthus of the classical period has never been sufficiently studied<sup>(1)</sup>. Riegl knew the continuity of the classical plant ornament to the Renaissance<sup>(2)</sup>. These arguments cast questions. If the acanthus was a symbol, why did Egyptian paganism, Buddhism and Islam adopt it for decoration? Why Cistercians used water-leaf instead of acanthus? Decorated Gothic's foliage?

Chapter 4 tries the acanthus as an ornament in periods, areas and religions. Section 4.1 compares the motif between faiths and religions, and locations. During the Ptolemaic and Roman dynasties whose invention of Composite capitals with layers of flowers happened, the Kiosk of Naga in Sudan chose the Roman acanthus on its capitals. If the motif was symbolic, the Ptolemaic might avoid this.

Section 4.2 has various faiths (paganism, Buddhism) and areas (Hellenistic sites, India, China) in a similar period. In the Buddhist architecture and art of Gandhara in India and Yunkang in China, the Greco-Roman style of acanthus adopted. The Gandharan acanthus arrived with the conquest of Alexander the Great, while that of Yunkang was through trade and wars between China and other Central Asia where the Greco-Roman culture planted. If acanthus was symbolic, how could Buddhist India and China borrow the motif on their capitals?

In the next section, the transmission of acanthus from paganism to early Christianity observed in different religions (paganism and Christianity) within the same area, almost the same period. Again, how could Christianity inherit the pagan acanthus capitals without consideration if acanthus was symbolic? In section 4.4, simple and strict Cistercian ornaments discussed. It is almost the same period and location in Christianity. Against the rich Benedictine ornamentation, Bernard of Clairvaux appealed to avoid luxury, including church decoration. If acanthus was symbolic, why did the Cistercian replace the water-leaf instead of popular acanthus?

In section 4.5, Decorated Gothic foliage in England viewed as the case between Early and Decorated Gothic, within the same religion and location, but in different epochs. The Norman style used cushion-type capitals, full with chevrons, stars, and other foliated motifs. Acanthus was not popular after the Early Gothic. 'All traces of the acanthus leaf have disappeared, and we find a purely conventional style of ornament universally prevalent in all the buildings of the time'<sup>(3)</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> 'What perhaps was once the symbol of death became later on the life of life in European ornamentation'. (Hanglid 1950)

Acanthus on Islamic capitals in the last section approached through Islamic culture. Islamic architecture and art employed the acanthus scroll, called “arabesque”, due to the ban of using living ones in the sacred area. If acanthus was symbolic, how could Islam imitate the motif on the mosque capitals? The Dome of Rock was newly constructed, while the Grand Mosque of Damascus was a conversion from temple to mosque via Christian church. This comparison is between the different religion and location, but almost in the same epoch.

#### 4.1. REVIVAL TO THE KIOSK OF NAGA

The Kiosk of Naga, probably built in the third century, has a clumsy and provincial-looking in the Roman style. It locates at Naga in front of the Egyptian temple where the Meroitic King Natakamani erected, far from the Nile valley, to the south in Sudan. It was after Petronius in the reign of Augustus in 23 BC led an invading force as far as the old Kushite capital of Napata<sup>(4)</sup>. The kiosk has three elements of Meroitic architecture, despite no full archaeological investigation. First, the kiosk with its intercolumnar walls follows the old Pharaonic tradition. The temple itself, with its sequence of gates and halls, is a miniature version of the classical shrines in the Nile valley of Egypt.



Sudan, Nubia, Naga Roma kiosk

Second, the type of ‘one-room temple’ is not typical of Egyptian architecture but is a local form, found in several places in Sudan. Third, the component is Hellenistic. It is visible in several temple ground plans that adhere to the schemes laid down in the peripteros and dipteros type of Greek architecture, with a single or double ring of columns surrounding the actual temple building. Ancient Egyptian, Meroitic, and Hellenistic formal languages are not co-existed in Naga, but blended within individual buildings. The kiosk exemplifies the southernmost Hellenistic-Roman acanthus capitals and round arches over the windows. No similarity found in Pharaonic architecture, linking the Meroitic to the Roman world<sup>(5)</sup> and displaying the extension of acanthus.

## 4.2. INFLUENCES ON GRECO-ROMAN GANDHARA AND YUNKANG

### **Gandhara: Greco-Roman form and Indian iconography**

Following Alexander's conquest, Hellenistic architecture was borrowed in territories further east and combined with local building styles. From the second century BC to the second century, several parallel architectural traditions developed in the Near East, Iran and Central Asia, which shared common features, such as decorated facades, divided into storeys and enriched by pilasters surmounted by Doric, Ionic or Corinthian capitals.

Hellenistic ornaments were adapted and modified to suit the aim of Parthians and Kushans, due to different religions and cultures from the Hellenistic cities. As a result, Ionic and Corinthian orders appeared in classical temples and iwans (ceremonial halls) of the Parthians and Buddhist stupas (reliquary mounds) of Kushans<sup>(6)</sup>.



Buddha in Gandhara Corinthian capital

Gandharan art” is the official art of the Kushan Emperor Kanishka and his successors. Its term is used for architecture, sculpture, and painting, which flourished in north-western India from the first to the fifth centuries. However, Rowland (1971) claims that this designation derives from the ancient name of the region and is to be preferred to “Greco-Buddhist”, a term sometimes applied to the same art, but distinctly misleading as a derivation from Greek art. During the Parthian period at Taxila, the Ionic order was used in buildings, while the Corinthian almost universally built in the structures during the Kushan era. The Corinthian capitals of Gandhara have their nearest prototypes on Roman provincial examples in Syria and Palestine. And no originality is found in the arrangement of leaves and helices, and even the calyx cups from which the spiralling frond emerges in classic Corinthian. He further says,

In Corinthian examples, such an application of acanthus leaves to a form recalling the ancient Indian bracket type of capital results in a complete loss of the basket-like shape of the Corinthian.

Instead, figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were reintroduced into the foliage in many Corinthian capitals of Gandhara, a combination of elements suggestive of the Composite form of the

Roman order. The predominance of the Corinthian order, together with an almost total absence of the Doric and Ionic in the Gandharan Buddhist period, is one of the most persuasive arguments in favour of the entire Roman origin of the whole school. For example, the ornamentation on the walls often has motifs of arcades typical of late antique art, with classical capitals on the pilasters, but with an Indian ogee type of arch. In the centre of the acanthus leaves on the quasi-Corinthian capitals, Buddhas or Bodhisattvas placed with lavish embellishment<sup>7</sup>.

The acanthus, ivy and vine scrolls became disseminated throughout the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire, mainly as enrichments on buildings and in designs on wall-paintings and mosaics. Trading links by sea and overland routes maintained their dispersal through the Indian sub-continent, Central Asia, China and the western world. Gandhara was an important trade route between the Indian sub-continent and the West, influencing the Hellenistic heritage on Buddhist architecture and ornament, apparent on a simplified version of the Corinthian capital on a pilaster<sup>8</sup>.

Riegl's research might prove even more rewarding to any intrepid explorer who took up the etymology of motifs. I am referring to the astounding spread of the scroll across Asia into the Far East. It appears in China during the Han dynasty in the first centuries of our era, approximated to the Chinese idiom but still recognisable as the Greek scroll, and is finally adapted there to the great tradition of floral decoration without fully losing its Greek accents. In India, where it seems to have been associated at first with Buddhist imagery as on the halo of the Buddha from the fifth century. (Gombrich 1979)

### **Yunkang: Greco-Indian form and Chinese iconography**

Buddhism, together with the style of architecture and objects related to the faith, penetrated China along the trade routes through Central Asia. In the course of the downfall of a centralised Chinese empire, several different rulers divided her territory. In 398, Emperor Daowu of Wei dynasty made Datong its capital, which became the centre of political, cultural and religious life for nearly a century. During this period, Buddhist temples showed the first influential foliage patterns under the foreign influence, since the Chinese had to turn to Central Asia to learn of correct texts, images and temple plants in the worship of the Buddha<sup>9</sup>. From the second half of the fifth century, famous cave temples at Dunhuang and Yungang<sup>18</sup> near Datong, supplied figured sculptures and decorative motifs for a tribute to the Buddha. The east wall of the rear chamber in cave 7, probably decorated between 460 and 475, represents one of the early works at Yungang.

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<sup>18</sup> Yungang caves were carved at the south side of Wuzhu Mountain nearly one kilometre in length from east to west. The largest of ancient China, there now exist 53 large caves, as well as 1,100 small caves and niches. There are altogether 51,000 images, all of the different expressions sculpted. The importance of the Yungang grottoes lies in the fact that were not only Buddhist sculptures carved but also a large number of architectural construction and decorative details depicted too. (Liu 1989)

The iconography is a Greco-Buddhist style. Numbers 9 and 10 should note where in front of the caves are peristyles of three spans divided by richly carved columns. The fusion of Chinese aesthetics and foreign themes can be seen in rounded niches and in ornamental motifs where acanthus foliage used alongside curtains haled back by beading, and in the Chinese style roof. From numbers 16-20 of the first stage, the sculptures were influenced by the Greco-Indian Buddhist carvings of Gandhara, along with details of Iranian, Byzantine, Roman provincial. The second stage has five groups of caves. Buddhist images richly decorated with plants, lotus or other flowers, scrolls of vines, flames including animal figures such as phoenixes, dragons and tiger motifs. The Indian influence is visible in the clothing, the headdress, and the appearance of the elephant; the Iranian and Byzantine of the wearing of beads, the weapons and lions; and the Greek of the trident and the acanthus leaves<sup>(10)</sup>.

As debased versions of Corinthian and Ionic capitals, earlier caves provide several examples of pilasters bearing acanthus leaves or large volutes. The Yunkang caves are not an exception. From a drawing of a pier at the inner entrance of cave 7, the pier divided into three tiers by small zigzag borders, seen from Achaemenid and Gandharan sculpture. In each row, small figures are carved in relief, reflecting an eastern Mediterranean tradition. At the top of the pier, a figure of the Buddha appears between two large leaves, probably those of a debased acanthus.

From the first century BC, inhabited Corinthian capitals had applied in the eastern Mediterranean, such as a figure of Leda and the swan, embraced by acanthus leaves. Nevertheless, followed by the new demand of Buddhism, small figures of the Buddha replaced instead of the female figures in pilaster capitals in Kushan building. It is the combination of small flowers amid the acanthus leaves, a detail which reproduces the small flowers found in Hellenistic acanthus scrolls and Corinthian capitals<sup>(11)</sup>. Yungang is famous for its sculptures and carvings, preparing milestones of Buddhist architecture and the crystallisation of the circulation of art between East and West. The Buddha image, decorations and architectural details play the cultural bridge between China and India as well as Central Asia. 'The art form of the West had been circulated absorbed, infused, and assimilated, and finally resulted in a new form completely without precedent, which eventually became a part of the precious heritage of ancient Chinese culture'<sup>(12)</sup>.

Sekel (1964) argues that the vine-scroll, palmette or other motifs whose origins are the Near East and antiquity had no connection with Buddhism. The same as they penetrated to the early medieval West and Islam, they were also absorbed to Buddhism, and carried by Buddhist art as it spread across Asia. Therefore, there is a surprising affinity between, for example, the friezes comprising leaves and scrolls to be found in the Romanesque churches of central Europe and those in the cave-temples of Yunkang.

### 4.3. TRANSMISSION FROM PAGANISM TO CHRISTIANITY

During the early Christianised Byzantium, a new type of building invented without previous experiment or evolution for the places for worship. Its nearest predecessor was the Roman basilica, a large open hall. The first church St. Sophia at Constantinople, built by Emperor Constantine, is reported as a basilica type with a wooden roof<sup>(13)</sup>. The construction of all Constantine's churches was light and simple, without requiring architectural skill or constructional problems. The materials were often taken ready-made from pagan churches<sup>(14)</sup>. Constantine sacked the Roman world for the adornment of his new capital, and in some places, the existing pagan temples made into Christian churches, and in others, they were pulled down. Except for Constantinople, none of the cities of the Byzantine Empire went through radical changes until the seventh century<sup>(15)</sup>.

One of the surviving examples of the basilica style is the church of St. Sabina in Rome from the fifth-century BC. The nave colonnade has Corinthian columns from the ruins of pagan temples. The Doric temple of Athena at Syracuse in Sicily from the same period had its walls re-cut to form the aisles of the early church when a pagan temple incorporated into the structure of a new Christian basilica. The colonnades of Constantine's church at Bethlehem, St. Maria Maggiore, St. Maria in Trastevere and St. Peter's at Rome bear arches from the capital to capital, and ancient monuments, particularly the deserted pagan temples, became victims with an endless supply of ready-made columns and capitals<sup>(16)</sup>. Consequently, the columns of the same row often display various sizes and even different orders of capitals, caused by the churchmen's indifference to architectural regularity<sup>(17)</sup>.

The conversion took also place in Greek regions<sup>19</sup>. The pagan festivals, however, were continued under a new Christian attribution to make its transformation more accessible, and the ornamented temples themselves were often changed into churches and re-dedicated with an allusion to the old Divinity. Parthenon at Athens became the church of the Holy Wisdom; the temple of Theseus into the church of St. George; the temple of the Magna Mater at Ancyra into the church of the Mother of God. As a temple of all the Gods, the Pantheon in Rome was re-dedicated to the Virgin Mary and All Saints and Martyrs<sup>(18)</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> It happened during the Early Islamic period. Having abundant access to Egyptian, Greek, and Roman capitals, Arab architects were satisfied to use them to crown any shafts without consideration to the disparity that these capitals, of varying contours and styles, brought to their colonnades. (D'avennes 1983)

#### 4.4. REJECTION FROM CISTERCIAN CHURCH ORNAMENTATION

The Cistercian order was established in France in 1098 as a reformation against traditional monasticism<sup>20</sup> exercised by the Cluniacs. A group of monks from the Cluniac abbey of Molesme settled in Cîteaux, calling their community the New Monastery<sup>(19)</sup>. Against the rich Benedictine ornamentation, St. Bernard (1091-1153), abbot of Clairvaux in Burgundy appealed to return to the original rules of St. Benedict; prayer and physical work (*Ora et labora*), and avoidance from all luxuries. In Burgundy, he founded four new monasteries, the first of which, Cîteaux, gave the name to the new order to St. Benedict, the Cistercians<sup>(20)</sup>.

St. Bernard was one of the most eloquent orators and writers of his age, and a critique of traditional monastic practices and the artistic exercise, entitled *Apologia for Abbot William* (*Apologia ad Guilelmum abbatem*) was one of his writings. Written in 1125, the treatise takes its name from William, abbot of St. Thierry in the diocese of Rheims, who was a friend and admirer of St. Bernard and to whom the work addressed. The *Apologia* is one of the most perceptive contemporary documents about artistic use in the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21(21)</sup>.

The Cistercians' stricter asceticism with its requirements of poverty, work and silence brought a new type of church architecture, combining extreme austerity with a remarkable purity of line executed by high standards of masonry<sup>(22)</sup>. Stark simplicity and austerity, whose set total lack of adornment of any kind forms of the Cistercians contrast to the ornamentation of the Benedictine or Cluniac contemporaries<sup>(23)</sup>. The Cistercian statutes, compiled between 1134 and 1152, prohibited painting and sculpture, the use of colour or precious metals or fine fabrics within the churches, and the erection of ball towers without. The decoration entirely dispensed with simplicity<sup>(24)</sup>.

The Cistercian bell-shaped capital with its simple water-leaf ornament is to find in an increasing number of churches in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>(25)</sup>. Three great abbeys of Byland, Furness, and Jervaulx erected at the final stage of this century. At Byland, the detail of the vaulting and the masonry highly finished, and the capitals of the high piers, many of which

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<sup>20</sup> The social order of monasticism in the High Middle Ages was summed up in the 1020s by Adalbero, the Bishop of Laon: "The House of the Lord is in three parts, which some wrongly believe to be one: here on Earth one part prays (orant), another fights (pugnant), and yet another works (laborant); these three belong together and will not tolerate being set at variance with each other; to such a degree, that the functioning (officium) of one is necessary to the work (opera) of the other two, and each will bestow its aid on the others." (Toman 1977)

<sup>21</sup> This renunciation of visual beauty receives an almost lyric quality in the writings of St. Bernard. Nowhere else is there so vivid a contemporary description of Romanesque art, and well known as it is, it must once more quote. He writes in the twelfth chapter of his *Apologia* 1 of the curious carvings and lavish ornament which distract the mind of those who seek to pray. (Boas 1953)

recovered during excavation, show the curly edged water-leaf and concave bell of the transitional period, and even some graceful acanthus volutes<sup>(26)</sup>.



Cistercian typical waterleaf to emphasise the simplicity of the monastery

Cistercian architecture played an essential role in the introduction of the Gothic style both in France and in Spain<sup>(27)</sup>. Dore in England is a Cistercian building, influenced by the French Gothic, but, its capitals are local English with dominant palmette and waterleaf. In the choir, the new trefoil with hollow leaf is set flat upon the bell-shaped capitals<sup>(28)</sup>.

#### FONTENAY (1139-47)

One of the Cistercian monasteries in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century is that of Fontenay in Burgundy. Founded by St. Bernard in 1119, its abbey church built between 1139 and 1147. The simplicity of Fontenay reflects Cistercian ideals. Its severe lines and entirely dispensed decoration express the order's anti-Cluniac spirit. It has a cruciform plan and simple elevation of the nave and side-aisles. The church has a nave and side-aisles, a projecting transept and flat chevet, and the pointed barrel vault carries on transverse arches. The capitals are occasionally carved, only with geometric motifs<sup>(29)</sup>. The simplicity at Fontenay needs not to deprive an interior of its impact wholly. There is an altar with a few decorative items in the choir only. The stone of the interior embodies the Cistercian rules; a reduction of the building to its absolute essentials, by rejecting vanity and striving for clarity, dignity and sobriety<sup>(30)</sup>.

### 4.5. REPLACEMENT OF DECORATED GOTHIC FOLIAGE

Gothic art went further afield and gathered into its posy the lily and the rose, the pomegranate and the passion flower, the maple and the trefoil. (Day 1977)

Decorated Gothic is remarkable for its geometric or curving tracery, its natural types of foliage, and the undulating character of line and form, in its ornamental details. The foliage of oak, vine, maple, rose, and ivy was introduced in profusion, carved delicately and accurately. Lacking the dignity and architectonic qualities of the Early Gothic, foliage enriched with adaptations from

nature, attached around the bell. It gives variety and charm of modelling but lacks characteristic unity of the early work<sup>(31)</sup>. While the natural foliage of oak and maple made an undulating flowering line, seaweed and other intricate forms appeared later in a blending of highly conventional forms with naturalistic vines and flowers.

The tradition of the classic acanthus and its Byzantine modifications, evident in all Romanesque carved foliage, gradually disappeared in Gothic art. Instead, in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the French carvers started to turn for inspiration and suggestion to the common vegetation about them and developed an entirely new category of foliage forms<sup>(32)</sup>.

In the latter part of this century, when the conventionalised stiff-leaf was extremely culminated, and the limited resources about design and invention drained, the skilled handicraftsmen and real artists had to search for a fresh inspiration to demonstrate their intelligence, because the restrictions of the stiff-leaf made them restrain their expression without any guidance or assistance. The only solution was to return to nature<sup>(33)</sup>. Artists were no longer content to repeat the formulas of the studies they learnt to love nature, flowers of the fields, and leaves of the forest. This change also caused by the formation of guilds of free or non-monastic masons and carvers who moved from one place to another to work with their art, without any hindrance from the monastic traditions<sup>(34)</sup>.



Leaf sculpture of Southwell Minister

#### SOUTHWELL (c.1300)

The most famous foliage carving is the capitals and gables of the chapter house and entrance passage at Southwell Minister in England. Executed around 1300, a variety of natural foliage, such as the leaves of oak, hop, vine, ivy, maple, buttercup, and others, were dealt with a new realism to achieve an astonishing symmetry in their overall effect<sup>(35)</sup>. The spectacular foliate sculpture at Southwell originated from France or probably Germany in the 1270s. It is calm and purely ornamental in some instance, found in the maple and the ivy<sup>(36)</sup>.

## 4.6. CULTURAL MEDIATER IN UMMAYYAD MOSQUES

### Islamic Attitude to Art

The prohibition of the figurative imagery in Islamic art can find in the Koran and *hadith*, and Islamic law. The Koran itself has no formal statement opposing such representations. The unique omnipotence of God is an essential feature of Islam, and the artistic representation of life was seen as idolatry and considered sinful by most theologians<sup>22 (37)</sup>. It was the *hadith* (the Prophet's sayings) or traditions which took up a hostile attitude. As no figures were included in the mosaics, either of the Dome of the Rock or Damascus, the dictum was in force by about 690<sup>(38)</sup>.

According to Burckhardt, in Islam, there is no representational symbol system or narrative which can read. Instead, it reveals notions of the divine, not through devotional images but the totality of its form. And it is this totality of form that unties and characterises all the visual arts of Islam. Unlike other religion, Islam expresses the sacred and the divine abstractly and formally and rejects the representation of the human figure. This abstract order makes possible the expression of those transcendental and metaphysical values that untie the sacred and secular domains in architecture<sup>(39)</sup>.

The contact between Muslims and Christians took place through wars and trades. The Muslims' attitude toward the arts of the Christian culture blended with awe, admiration, contempt, and jealousy<sup>(40)</sup>. They had a deep impression on the magnificence of Christian art but also felt a degree of distaste and resentment towards a superior artistic culture which displayed its visual imagery for religious and state purposes.



Islamic Paradise garden in Islam, from façade of Damascus Grand Mosque

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<sup>22</sup> Gabar (1987) claims that these legal commentaries are retrospective in character, and attitudes towards the arts were more likely to have been formed at an early stage based on custom, taste and pragmatism, rather than on rigorous theological reasoning.

### **Adaptation of Acanthus on Mosques**

A mosque is a place where Muslims can pray on an equal basis. It is also an educational and political institution, such as notices of war and mobilisation, and a court of justice. The early mosques were either old Roman or Byzantine churches, adapted to their uses, or constructed on the ruins with the materials of ancient monuments<sup>23</sup>. In building mosques, they tried to copy the existing details, using old materials in part, but the result was crude and imperfect; thus new Islamic architecture was invented. Gradually, Muslims discarded old forms<sup>(41)</sup>.

Although the architectural impact of such conversions seems to have limited, a regional variant existed there as well. Columns were either removed or copied from older buildings. The column with its constituent parts used in traditional, pre-Islamic ways. Even capitals generally reused from older buildings. Nor can a multitude of small details associated with columns, capitals, mouldings, brackets, or bases, be identified as peculiarly Islamic<sup>(42)</sup>. For example, in Islamic Egypt, Arab architects had so much resource in decorating various parts of their edifices and had little attention to capitals in their particular style. With numerous accesses to Egyptian, Greek, and Roman capitals, they were satisfied to use them to crown any shafts without consideration; as a result, these capitals in a variety of contours and styles brought to their colonnades unequal.

Among the infinitely varied capitals from the late Roman Empire, the Corinthian bell mostly imitated. The leaves never show the beautiful contours of the ancient acanthus; the volutes are heavy; the floral ornament is nearly steadily supplanted by capricious decoration and often couched up with palmettes and interlaced motifs. Above all, the Arabs almost always insisted on adorning the columns of the mihrab with capitals in style in conformity with their ornamentation. Probably, in the most worship part of their mosque, it was too disgusting to them to employ capitals taken from Christian temples<sup>(43)</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> When the Muslim conquered a town in Syria, they usually took one of the churches and converted it as a mosque, or merely divided one of the churches if the town had surrendered without resistance. For at least a generation, Arab conquerors did not have any attention or interest in using the developed architectural talents of the conquered peoples. (Creswell 1968) The Arab rulers had to adopt an architectural language inspired by the forms and techniques of the monuments which were the pride of Christianity and the Eastern Empire to mix the cultures of the conquered masses and the conquerors and to make new converts to Islam. From this particular text, we can guess that acanthus did not use as a symbol; instead, it was rather for a political purpose. (Stierlin 1996)



Stylised acanthus capital, Cordoba mosque

The first mosque in Jerusalem, Aqsa Mosque, had 162 columns of the Corinthian order, set in four rows, of which the south was bonded into the outer wall, whereas the north formed the façade on the court, citing by the description of Josephus<sup>(44)</sup>. The Dome of the Rock owes to Byzantine architecture because the application of decorative mosaic and polychrome marble panelling implies Islam's early dependence on the skills of Greek builders and craftsmen<sup>(45)</sup>.

#### THE DOME OF ROCK, JERUSALEM (UMAYYAD, 690-2)

Greek architects invented new ways of building in which the dome supported on pendentives. By the time of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, the Hagia Sophia was built, becoming a model for the Christian architecture. After Islam's conquest of the territory of the Roman Empire a century later, Muslims learned architecture from Byzantine architects<sup>(46)</sup>.

The best example is the Dome of the Rock. The octagonal plan was a form of elaboration from SS Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople (526-37) and San Vitale at Ravenna (526-47) built by Justinian. The interior owes to the Christian Syria and Palestine, and the Byzantine world. The columns, capitals, and marble revetments of the walls are hardly distinct from a church in Constantinople<sup>(47)</sup>. The influence of Byzantine ornament on the Dome of Rock often mentioned. The lavish mosaic decoration reflects the Byzantine ornamental language. Stierlin (1996) borrows a quotation from Ibn Battuta: 'unable to find words for such beautiful work'.

All classical motifs vividly manifest the continuity of the Hellenistic tradition within Byzantium. It is visible in the inner ambulatory where gilded Corinthian capitals bear tie-beams festooned with vine scrolls, bunches of grapes, palmettes and pinecones. The capitals recall the more luxurious Hellenistic art, such as the gilded bronze capitals at the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, including Sasanian stylised plant motifs, Achaemenid Persian and Assyrian emblematic palms<sup>(48)</sup>. The columns of this octagonal arcade have capitals of varying type, some being Corinthian, others Composite<sup>(49)</sup>.

## THE GREAT MOSQUE, DAMASCUS (UMAYYAD, 709-15)

The Great Mosque of Damascus constructed within the enclosure of the Roman temple to Jupiter Damascenus, which in Byzantine times had converted to the Church of St John the Baptist<sup>24</sup>. Caliph al Walid purchased the entire site and demolished that church and every other structure within the walls<sup>25(50)</sup>.

The mosque has the classical basilica form. A prayer hall is composed of three aisles, almost along the south side of the ancient temenos. They are supported within by two rows of massive columns with Corinthian capitals<sup>(51)</sup>. The style, including capitals and marble revetments, is a reflection of Byzantine architecture, seen in the Dome of the Rock of Jerusalem<sup>(52)</sup>. Sir Charles Wilson saw them in 1865 and exclaimed: 'In the eastern half there is a variety of capitals; two at the southeast corner are Ionic; ... and many of the Corinthian capitals, which have been taken from other buildings, are too small for the columns on which they stand'<sup>(53)</sup>.<sup>26 ♦</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Vitruvius tells a story of the origin of the Corinthian capitals in his "*Ten Books on Architecture*". The first Corinthian capital was invented by the sculptor and goldsmith Callimachus when he was

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<sup>24</sup> Different theories of the site of the church on converting from pagan temples via Christian church to the mosque. Creswell (1968) analyses that on the victory of Christianity, the temple changed into a church which conversion would have been possible even if it turned towards the west (Thiersch/Watzinger/Wulzinger). It is impossible, as the temple was oriented in a direction the very opposite of a church. But many early churches, like St. John Lateran in Rome (began in 313) had its altar at the west end. (Dussaud)

<sup>25</sup> In the first Iraqi mosques and all Muslim regions west of Syria, it was the old unit of the column with its base, shaft, and capital. In Damascus or Jerusalem, columns took from Roman or Christian buildings or ruins. In the vast buildings (Cairene, Kairouan, or Cordoba), new columns added to the reused ones. In most cases, the former imitated the latter in all but the smallest details, and one of the traditional exercises of early Muslim archaeology has been the separation of one from the other. (Grabar 1987).

♦ (1) Collings 1895 (2) Gombrich 1979 (3) Jones 1856, 1972 (4) Smith 1998 (5) Wildung 2001 (6) Rawson 1984 (7) Seckel 1964 (8) Wilson 1994 (9) Rawson 1984 (10) Liu 1989 (11) Rawson 1984 (12) Liu 1989 (13) Norman 1990, Jackson 1975 (14) Hamlin 1916 (15) Jackson 1975, Durand 1999 (16) Norman 1990 (17) Hamlin 1916 (18) Jackson 1975 (19) Petzold 1995 (20) Laule 1977 (21) Petzold 1995 (22) Altet 2001 (23) Stone 1972 (24) Boas 1953, Altet 2001 (25) Stone 1972 (26) Boas 1953 (27) Altet 2001 (28) Stone 1972 (29) Altet 2001 (30) Toman 1977 (31) Glazier 1933 (32) Hamlin 1916 (33) Colling 1865 (34) Aubert 1959 (35) Norman 1990 (36) Coldstream 1994 (37) Hattstein 2000 (38) Rice 1989 (39) Yeomans 1999 (40) Grabar 1987, Yeomans 1999 (41) Jones 1856, 1972 (42) Grabar 1987 (43) D'avennes 1983 (44) Creswell 1968 (45) Yeomans 1999 (46) Allsopp 1971 (47) Rice 1989 (48) Yeomans 1999 (49) Creswell 1968 (50) Creswell 1968, Brend 1991, Hillenbrand 1999 (51) Brend 1991, Yeomans 1999 (52) Rice 1989, Stierlin 1996 (53) Creswell 1968

passing through a grave of a Corinthian girl and saw a basket filled with acanthus leaves. Greek mythology suggests that the thorny and barbed plant bears sepulchral significance and magic powers.

However, a hypothesis of the acanthus as a means for aesthetic beauty was confirmed by a thorough analysis among different faiths and religion, period, and regions in this book. In other words, the majority of the acanthus on pagan Greek and Roman temples, ancient Egyptian temples, Hindu-Buddhist Indian and Chinese temples, medieval Christian cathedrals, and Islamic mosques, were used to give visual pleasure to our eyes, transcending the existence of the almighty, beautifying his sanctuary, and endowing a close relationship between the Almighty and us.

## VEGETAL-FLORAL CAPITALS OF THE SAINT-PIERRE ABBEY CLOISTER, MOISSAC

As a leading example of French Romanesque art and the oldest surviving one, 46 of the 76 cloister capitals at the Abbey Church in Moissac (1063) illustrate themes from the scriptures or the lives of saints, while the remained ones display floral images, mainly acanthus, natural or conventionalized. Acanthus is a Mediterranean plant whose hidden meaning was immortality and pain/sin/punishment in Christianity. However, it decorated on Corinthian capitals as a supporting motif in ornamentation during the Middle Age. This paper discusses of (1) similarity between the floral form by design elements/principles and (2) re-evaluation of the flora as symbolic or aesthetic.



Moissac is a town and commune of the Tarn-et-Garonne in southwestern France. As it is on the ancient pilgrimage route, the Saint-Pierre Abbey Church listed in the World Heritage Sites of the Routes of Santiago de Compostela in France<sup>27</sup>. The abbey has the tympanum as one of the finest Romanesque art, and the oldest, largest cloister (1100) with narrative capitals.

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<sup>27</sup> In the late 11<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque art rediscovered classical sculpture. Artists began to reuse the Corinthian capital and adopted the monumentality of classical decorative schemes. And the principal directions taken by 12<sup>th</sup>-century Romanesque sculpture gained a wider currency by their diffusion along the Santiago Pilgrimage route. In France, the Languedoc was most influenced by the decoration at Toulouse. The churches of Saint-Sernin at Toulouse and the abbey church of Saint-Pierre at Moissac on the French side of the Pyrenees complete this group. A clear decorative scheme common appeared to three major contemporary buildings, those of Toulouse, Leon and Compostela. The sculptors of the collegiate church of Leon are thought to have drawn on a continuous tradition of decorative sculpture dating from the Spanish High Middle Ages, and those of Toulouse inspired by the sculpture of late antiquity in the region. Whatever the origin, they showed a taste for classical antiquity, using a kind of rough-hewn Corinthian, fleurons and palmettes. Acanthus leaves often decorated with balls and pinecones. To this, interlace added. This form of decoration developed in the mature Romanesque style, into a network of stems in clear relief on the base of the Corinthian capital.

According to legend, the abbey built by a Frankish king, Clovis, but historical information says Saint Didier, bishop of Cahors, as a founder in the middle of the seventh century (c.628-48). Despite the difficulty of establishing the monastery due to raids by the Moors and the Norsemen, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a first golden age when Moissac affiliated to the Burgundy abbey of Cluny (1047) and its Reformation under the guidance of Durand de Bredons (d.1072), the Abbot of Moissac and the bishop of Toulouse. In 1063 a new Abbey church was consecrated.

The sculpture at the tympanum and the Prophet Jeremiah on the trumeau (the central doorway column) on the portal were followed under Abbot Roger (?1115-35), inspired by the Book of Revelations. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Raymond de Montpezat (1229-45) and Bertrand de Montaigut (1260-95) ruled the abbey, but in 1466, the abbey was detached to the Cluny and lost its autonomy. The next century (1449-1501) saw a new golden age with abbots, Pierre and Antoine de Caraman, whose building program included the Gothic part of the abbey church.

The 1626 secularization of the abbey forced the Benedictine monks to leave the cloister, a centre of Benedictine life for nearly 1,000 years and was replaced by Augustinian canons under commendatory abbots including famous cardinals such as Mazarin and de Brienne. In 1790, the abbey closed, and the cloister was on sale. In 1793, the French Revolution put an end to monastic life in Moissac, looting the abbey. In 1789, the abbey transformed to saltpetre factory, and the figures on capitals at the cloister became mutilated. Despite the reconstruction of the abbey (1804-47) and its becoming a parish (1850), the laying of a railway track demolished the refectory. The cloister was saved and listed as a historic monument. Since 1910, the vault of the church repainted, the bell tower recessed, the church interior restored.

### The Cloister

The cloister, Latin *claustrum*, is a covered walk with an open colonnade on one side, running along the walls of buildings that face a quadrangle. It functioned as the exclusive use of the religious community and constituted a centre of monastery life. Located alongside one of the aisles of the nave, mostly the south aisle, it was a place of meditation and relaxation, and a passage leading to the various buildings (the chapter house, dormitory, *scriptorium*, refectory, cellar, kitchen, etc.) which was used every day by the monks. Certain rites, such as the washing of feet, might happen.

Its square or trapezoidal form derived from the atriums found in Roman houses and later incorporated in the basilicas of late antiquity. Capitals of the 11<sup>th</sup> century-cloister are not usually ornamented with sculpture, though some have stylised plant motifs. They are of irregular plan and comprise four arcaded galleries of semicircular barrel vaults resting on masonry pillars. Only over the 12<sup>th</sup> century, sculpture began to cover cloister capitals and pillar.

Moissac abbey has the oldest example of a cloister with carved figurative decoration to have survived intact. It comprises four timber-roofed<sup>28</sup> galleries<sup>29</sup> opening on to the central space through arcades resting on marble colonnettes. At the four corners and in the centre of each side stand quadrangular pillars. The cloister has 12 large pillar reliefs<sup>30</sup>, containing reliefs of Abbot Durand de Bredons, evangelists and disciples. The capitals were sculpted during the abbacy and under the direction of Ansquitil (1072-85-1115) and completed in 1100.

Shaped like upside-down pyramids, they beautifully carved over their entire surface, including the abacus. Of the 76 capitals on alternatively one or two columns, many have Latin inscriptions explaining the scenes. Forty-six depict of the Old Testament, the life of Christ, the Apostles, other saints, and the Apocalypse, while 30 are purely decorative floral motifs, such as acanthus, palmette, and animal. No scenes of Passion appear. All combined in a random order without a logical chronology.

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<sup>28</sup> The cloister gallery roofing was rebuilt in the late 1200s and again in the 1900s, but the original capitals and columns remained in place. The vault which connects the columns is not purely Romanesque, because they were destroyed and later restored in the 13th century.

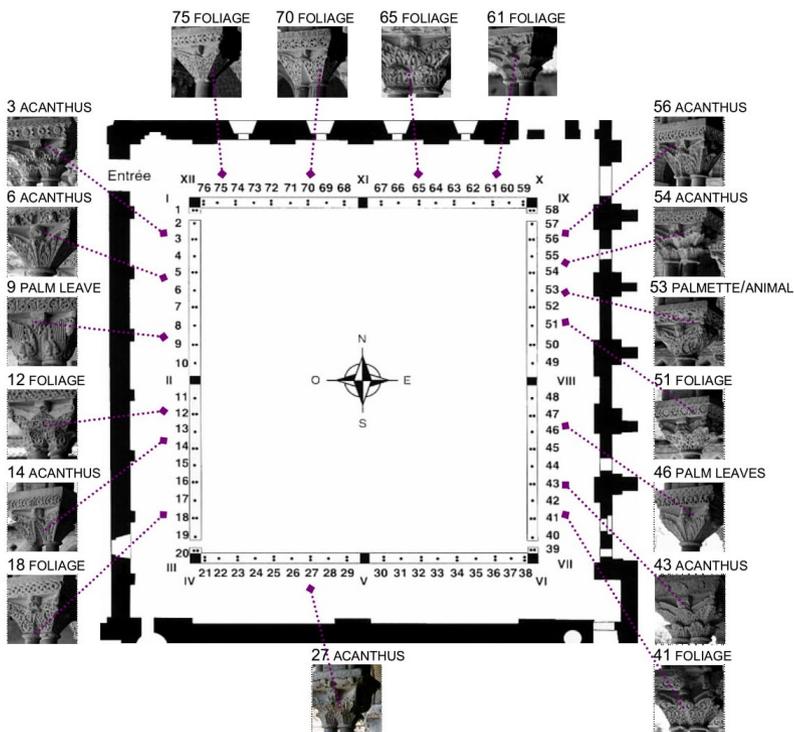
<sup>29</sup> The length of galleries measures 39.85 m (east & west) x 37.45 m (north & south). Arcade height is 2.10 m, and column height is 1.28-1.30 m.

<sup>30</sup> The originality of this cloister is these brick pillars which faced with marble slabs sculpted in low relief with figures of the Apostles depicted beneath arcades. This relief sculpture sees in panels on the two inner faces of the corner piers which reinforce the arcades. Intermediate piers also serve for support, but only one of those piers has relief sculpture, while another engraved with an inscription giving the date of the consecration of the cloister.

# 18 FLORAL CAPITALS IN THE CLOISTER OF THE SAINT-PIERRE ABBEY CHURCH

9,12,41,61,70,75

NORTH



WEST 6,14,46

SOUTH 3,27,43,54

Floor plan of Moissac cloister with numbered capitals.  
Plan © Quitterie Cazes.

WEST GALLERY

Capital 3: Naturalistic acanthus leaves with Chi-Ro, rosette flowers,

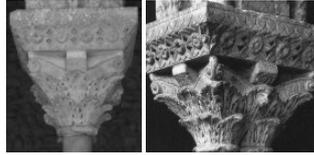
ABACUS OR IMPOST BLOCK



## fishbone



NORTH SIDE



EAST, NORTH/COURTYARD



FISHBONE, ROSETTE, CHI/RO

The capital has the acanthus leaves in two rows (similar to nr 27, 43, 54, 56). On the courtyard side, a small knob appears between the capital block and impost block (abacus in the form of a square), and a Christian monogram (X and P) runs on this cut cross-beam. Impost block: the echinus has four large rosettes on each side; the abacus with geometrical fishbone (scale) pattern, which can be purely ornamental, but one may read its meaning as protection, according to Cooper (1978).

In *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), Grabar discusses geometry as an intermediary. Owen Jones, the theoretician of ornament and a student of the Alhambra of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, put forward as general principles for decoration: “All ornament should be based upon a geometrical construction” (proposition 8). He sees geometry as a hidden value in architecture. If all ornament is composed of geometry, this theory should apply to all arts, testified in meanders on Greek vases.

And Islamic art proved the best in the use of Greek and Roma geometric patterns. As a function of framing/filling/linking motif, three types of geometry exist: (1) ‘regular’ geometric pattern in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century mosaic tiles and stuccoes, (2) rigid and more difficult to define than the first. Most vegetal motifs are enclosed as a circular unit, making a regular outline, and (3) ‘loose’ geometry which includes all repetitive and rhythmic motifs in border patterns and overall designs. Moreover, some scholars argue that its abstract patterns could associate with mystical thought because repetitive geometric patterns reveal an aspect of the multiplicity of the Creator. Grabar opposes this: “Geometry is a most dangerous mediator. It forces one to look and to decide what to think, what to feel, and see how to act...The penalty of freedom in the arts is a loss of meaning...It is meant only to be beautiful”.

Rose is a complex symbol of heavenly perfection and earthly passion. Its flower is Time and Eternity, life and earth, fertility and virginity. The fading rose represents death, mortality and sorrow; its thorns signify pain, blood and martyrdom. The four-petalled rose depicts the four-

square division of the cosmos; the five-petalled is the microcosm with the six-petalled as the macrocosm. Wilson (2001) claims that the rosette derived from the rose or lotus, and in ornamentation, it describes a design of radiating petals, a flower. It is a highly stylised motif without symbolic significance as a supporting or minor decoration. Rosettes and intersecting circle were popular in Egypt, becoming part of the Greek and Roman decoration. Since the early Middle Ages, they have applied in all kinds of decoration.

SIMILARITY OF NATURALISTIC ACANTHUS LEAVES ON CAPITAL WITH DIFFERENT MOTIF ON IMPOST BLOCK



C3: WEST (2 COLUMNS)  
E: ROSETTE. A: FISHBONE



C27: SOUTH (2)  
E: LION. A: FISHBONE



C43: EAST (2)  
E: LEAF. A: FISHBONE



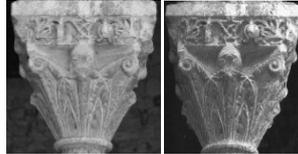
C54: EAST (2)  
E: PALMETTE. A: NONE

E (ECHINUS), A (ABACUS)

Capital 6: Stylised acanthus leaves, fruit garland, fishbone



NORTH SIDE



EAST, COURTYARD



GARLAND /FRUIT

The capital has upright, stylised, big acanthus leaves and palm branches with volutes. It has the same motif as nr 46, but the impost block is differently decorated. The echinus has a refined fruit garland whose botanical name is not exactly possible. The abacus has a fishbone pattern. Garland symbolizes dedication, holiness, honour, luck, and linking together, associated with sacrificial animals or captives of war as scarifies, while fruit represents immortality, the essence, and the culmination. It is the first sacrificial object too. Christ is the First Fruit of the Virgin. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is the Fall (self-consciousness separating from God), and the fruit of the Tree of Life is immortality.

SIMILARITY OF ACANTHUS STYLISED LEAVES ON CAPITAL WITH DIFFERENT MOTIF ON IMPOST BLOCK



C6: WEST (1 COLUMN)

E: FRUIT GARLAND

A: FISHBONE



C14: SOUTH (2)

E: PALMETTE. A: FISHBONE



C46: EAST (1)

E: LEAF SPIRAL, BIRD

A: FISHBONE



C56: EAST (2)

E: PALMETTE. A: NONE

Capital 9: Stylised palm leaves, palmette frieze, fishbone



NORTH SIDE



EAST, NORTH/COURTYARD



PALMETTE

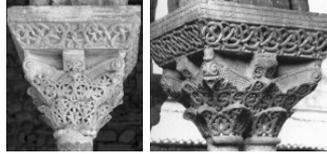
The capital has an upright stylised leaf form with natural accuracy of vegetal decoration. The leaves are created freely and vigorously in geometric order. This style developed to the sculpture of southwest France in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Cabanot 1987). This unique art has only remained in the cloister of Moissac. Impost block: the echinus has the broad palmette; the abacus with fishbone frieze.

Palmette represents exultation, righteousness, and fame. Growing erect, it means blessings and triumph as well. In Christianity, it is the righteous who 'shall flourish like a palm tree', immortality and depicts with the phoenix as a divine blessing. Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the martyr's resurrection over death connect to Paradise. The name 'palmette' suggests its origin from palm trees, as the stylised date-palm motif could have contributed certain features to the development of the palmette. With a symmetrical spiral base (volutes) and the fan-shaped uprights, its versatility was explored as one of the most essential decorative devises by the Romans. Its acanthus combination continued; the lotus one declined.

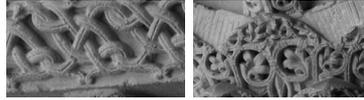
## Capital 12: Stylised arabesque, plaits



NORTH SIDE



EAST, SOUTH/PASSAGE



PLAITING, ARABESQUE

The capital has arabesque style, forming with nr 41, 61, 70, 75 as a group. Impost block: the echinus has refined, intricate plait pattern; the abacus has a triple division without ornamentation. Arabesque identified during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the primary characteristic of Islamic ornament. It is a distant relation of acanthus and vine scroll from the eastern Mediterranean area before the advance of Islam. In *Stilfragen (Problems of Style, 1893)*, Riegl limited the term “arabesque” to a stylised form of the vegetal, regarding it as the original creation of the Arab spirit. Its basic feature is geometrisation of the particular vegetal stems, growing from one another infinitely in any direction, instead of branching off from a single continuous stem. Kühnel also argued arabesque as the most expressive artistic manifestation in Islamic art, stressing its pure decoration. Its two aesthetic principles are rhythmical/harmonious movement and filling the entire surface.

On the contrary, Sufi scholars, Ardalan and Bakhtiar (1973) held that arabesque recreates the cosmic processes of the Creator through nature. Its rhythmic component reflects movement, manifests time, and symbolizes the infinity, glorifying the concept of ‘Garden of Paradise’. Combined with geometry and calligraphy, it exhibits harmony of unity and multiplicity.

For Wilson (2001), guilloche (plait/interlace/knot/twist/cable) can be traced back to the beginning of the Neolithic period when pottery started. Twisting and plaiting fibres to make cord and baskets were the earliest human activities, incidentally creating decorative patterns for other materials. They do not have symbolism except a few. Cooper (1978) rejects this that the nature of the spun thread comprises the mystery of infinity and the unrolling of life. They are beautiful, yet mysteriously entangled. Interlace has an important symbol, as it lacks any endings or beginnings; the eternal recurrence. Knots mean continuity, connection, a covenant, and Fate, which binds man to his destiny. Loosening the knot is freedom, salvation, and the solving of problems. In Christianity, the three knots in the monastic girdle are the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The plaited pattern was typically Roman, but later Romanesque adopted it.

**SIMILARITY OF ISLAMIC INFLUENCED FOLIAGE ON CAPITAL WITH DIFFERENT MOTIF ON IMPOST BLOCK**



C12: WEST (2 COLUMN)

E: ECHINUS: PLAIT. A: NONE



C41: EAST (2)

E: ROSETTE. A: ALPHABET



C61: NORTH (2)

E: GOAT, LION. A: NONE



C70: NORTH (2)

E: LEAF SCROLL. A: KUFIC

**Capital 14: Stylised acanthus leaves, palmette frieze, fishbone**



NORTH SIDE



EAST, SOUTH/PASSAGE



The capital has big flat acanthus leaves, covering the double colonettes. It groups with nr 6, 46. Impost block: the echinus has a naturalistic arabesque frieze; the abacus with fishbone pattern.

**Capital 18: Naturalistic vine tendrils, plaits, fishbone**



NORTH SIDE



EAST SOUTH/PASSAGE



A capital has vine tendrils, like nr 65. Impost block: the echinus has intricate plait bands; the abacus with fishbone pattern.

SIMILARITY OF VINE LEAVES ON CAPITAL WITH DIFFERENT MOTIF ON IMPOST BLOCK



C18: WEST (2 COLUMNS)

ECHINUS: GULLOCHE. ABACUS: FISHBONE



C51: EAST (1)

E: ROSETTE. A: FISHBONE



C65: NORTH (2)

E: STAG, HORSE. A: CORD

SOUTH GALLERY

Capital 27: Naturalistic acanthus leaves, lions, fishbone



WEST SIDE



EAST, WEST/PASSAGE



LION

The capital has exclusive floral decoration. Acanthus leaves rise in three rows one above the other. Impost block: the echinus bears eight crouched lions, two on the side, binding its back and front by its tail. Abacus has a fishbone pattern. The acanthus spreading from the central space was regarded as an ornament in the antiquity, forming a primary decorative element in the Corinthian capitals. Heinz-Mohr (1991) claims the motif to be a symbol for immortality in the medieval times.

Moreover, Frutiger (1989) explains that the association between human and beast rooted in the human psyche. Animals have always played a role as the essential archetypes of all that is instinctive, as symbols of the principles of material, spiritual, and even cosmic powers. The gods of many early cultures embodied in animal figures such as animal heads of Egyptian gods. Christ described as the Lamb of God, and the Holy Ghost was made visible in the form of a downward-flying dove. Lion has both good and evil symbolism. It represents the heat of the sun, the splendour and power, justice, the King of the beasts, but is also cruelty, ferocity, a symbol of war and an attribute of war gods. Cooper (1978) underlines that in Christianity, lion means Christ's power and might, his kingly nature as the Lion of Judah, or his power to deliver the Christian from the roaring lion, the Devil. As the lion sleeps with its eyes open, it depicted vigilance, the pillars of the Church. It is a symbol of resurrection. As a solitary animal, it signified the hermit and solitude. The lion was the emblem of St Mark as his gospel stressed on the royalty and

majesty of Christ. The story of Daniel in the lions' den is symbolic of God's redemption of his people.

**EAST GALLERY**

**Capital 41: Stylised arabesque, spiral rosettes, inscription**



SOUTH SIDE



PASSAGE



ALPHABET

Schapiro did a description of the capital and its meaning. On the twin cylinder capitals, a spiral motif is absolutely arabesque, a Byzantine-Islamic reproduction. In the spiral form, the centre stands out, and the parallel circles produce rotation and agitation. Cooper (1978) argues that the spiral is an ancient sign of the sun and life. Its constant rotation symbolizes the pulsation and periodicity of all life.

The capital testifies a highly qualified work, illustrating the double meanings of ornaments (decoration and order) in medieval times. The echinus has stylised spiral rosette, while the abacus has inscriptions, beginning on the passage side (ABCDEFGH), then the north (KLMNOPQRSTVZA) following Psalm verse 3. 54. It continues in the court (OMINE TUO SALVUM: Help me, God, in your name!), and leads to the south (AXBVCT). The letters at the beginning and the end exchange each other, and finally, four letters (MLYZ) stand on the passage side. The alphabet is a manifestation of God. On the south, letters begin logically with A (symbol for a start) and followed X instead of Z as the ending (symbol for Christ' aim to all things understood). The Latin X corresponds to Greek Chi, the beginning letter for the name of Christ.

**Capital 43: Naturalistic acanthus leaves, stylised leaves, fishbone**



SOUTH SIDE



COURTYARD/SOUTH

The capital has acanthus leaves in two rows one over another. The capital is a twin of nr 27. Impost block: the echinus has wider leaf form; the abacus fills two rows of fishbone pattern.

Capital 46: Stylised acanthus leaves, leafy spiral with the bird, fishbone



SOUTH SIDE



NORTH/COURTYARD



BIRD

The calyx of capitals encircles four big palm leaves with symbolic layers, such as life, the triumph to the Paradise, holiness, particularly for the martyr, and for the church in totality. Impost block: the echinus has a leafy spiral where the bird was sitting, and the abacus has two rows of fishbone.

In symbolism, the bird represents transcendence, the soul, divine manifestation, spirits of the dead, ability to communicate with gods or to enter into a higher state of consciousness, and imagination. Large birds identify with thunder and wind gods. Birds are a feature of tree symbolism as well: the divine power descends into the tree or on to its symbol, a pillar. So, a bird on a pillar is the union of spirit and matter. In Christianity, it is winged souls, the spiritual, souls in Paradise. The Christ Child is often depicted holding a bird.

Capital 51: Naturalistic vine leaves with pinecones, margarita rosettes, fishbone



SOUTH SIDE



NORTH/PASSAGE

A capital has pure plant motif with an artistic approach. It is the most beautiful at the cloister. Principally, vine tendrils encircle the capital, and pinecones rise in the middle of each side. Volutes show on the corner. Impost block: the echinus is similar to nr 41, and botanically the flower seems margarita. The abacus has a fishbone pattern in two levels. Interestingly the capital has a vegetal motif, but the impost block always displays flowers. In this case, it is a combination

of flower and fruit, having an idea that a tree crown directed to the sky, the celestial, and pillars understood like a tree since the antiquity.

The tree often mentions in the Bible. Mathew 3, 10 regards the tree as an allusion of good and sinned people. According to Johannes' vision, leaves and fruits are symbols of life (Apostle 22.2). Vine represents fecundity, life, Tree of Life, and Tree of Knowledge. In Christianity, Christ is the True Vine and the disciples are his branches (John 1, 1-35). Vine also depicts the Church and the faithful. Portrayed as a Tree of Life with doves resting in the branches, it symbolizes souls resting in Christ and spiritual fruitfulness. With the fig tree, it implies peace and plenty. Here, pinecone is a symbol of the rise from the dead and immortality.

Capital 53: Naturalistic palm leaves with lion masks, lions and griffins, fishbone



SOUTH SIDE



NORTH/PASSAGE

GRIFFIN

The capital encircles intricate shooting palm leaves. On the volutes sits four lion heads, and their masked mouths resemble intricate leaves. Big lion heads are in the middle of each capital, their opened mouths as well. They signify a demonic quality, corresponding to that of the trumeau on portals. Or they bear a certain comic, as their distorted mouths seem to grin. Cabanot (1978) underlines that this type of grinning lion can be a local character in the Gascogne sculpture in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The best example appeared in the original cloister of St-Sever Church.

The impost block is entirely different. A longer side of the echinus has a pair of lion attacked by a griffin. Here the prey animal plays a role of oppression and subjection. On the shorter side, two griffins bite a bird. The griffin (winged lion) can depict the union of two natures or the androgyny: half lion and half eagle. Its awesome character symbolizes power, magnanimity and knowledge. Its strength illustrates as it carries off a horse or other prey to its nest. The weak eagle flies towards the sun whose heat burns the mist from his eyes; he then dives into a spring to regain his strength. It means spiritual renewal. The abacus has renewed fishbone pattern.

Capital 54: Naturalistic acanthus leaves, palmette frieze



SOUTH SIDE



NORTH/PASSAGE

The capital has wider acanthus leaves in three rows one over another. It forms with nr 27, 43 as a group. Impost block: the echinus has leafy palmette; the abacus has two layers without ornamentation, probably renewed.

Capital 56: Stylised acanthus leaves, palmette frieze



SOUTH SIDE



COURTYARD/SOUTH

The double capital has big flat acanthus leaves which stretch from the shaft ring to the under part of the impost block, dissimilar to nr 27, 43, 54 whose smaller leaves rise in two or three rows one over the other. Impost block: the echinus has a leafy palmette frieze, similar to other examples. Abacus has two divisions without ornament.

## NORTH GALLERY

### Capital 61: Stylised arabesque, goats and lions



EAST SIDE



WEST/COURTYARD



GOAT

The capital has arabesque foliage in two rows one over the other. It is related to nr 12 in terms of Islamic art. Impost block: two goats are on the shorter side of the echinus, while a pair of a lion on the longer side. The abacus has three divisions. Goat symbolizes masculinity, vitality, and creative energy. Its living in high places means superiority. In Christianity, it is the Devil, the damned, sinner and lust. The scapegoat is Christ burdened with the sins of the world.

### Capital 65: Naturalistic vine tendril, stags and horses



EAST SIDE



EAST/COURTYARD



HORSE, STAG, GOOSE

The capital has intricate vine tendril, like nr 51. The echinus is one of the originals. On the shorter side at the passage-court side, two birds, probably goose, sling each other with the neck. On the longer side show a stag and a horse as a rider. The bird is a metaphor of the soul. In Christianity, it is vigilance, providence, an emblem of St Martin of Tours. Deer (stag) is frequently depicted with the Tree of Life, and is a metaphor of Christ in Romanesque art, according to the legend on holy Eustachius and Hubertus.

Goose means breath, wind, and love, while horse symbolizes life and death. The white, golden horses appear with sun gods, drawing their chariots. It also symbolizes the intellect, reason, nobility, power, the swiftness of thought and life. It is the magic powers of divination. In Christianity, it is the sun, courage, and generosity. The multi-layered connotations of the horse

extend to an eschatological meaning as a rider of soul. Despite its vague statement, Romanesque art made an opposing metaphor; thus animals have negative qualities too (goose as gossip, horse as a vice, stag as the embodiment of animals to the right chase). The abacus encircles cord pattern.

Capital 70: Stylised Mozarabic arabesque, leaf scroll, Kufic



EAST SIDE



EAST/COURTYARD



KUFIC

The double capital has Byzantine-Islamic foliage like nr 41, 61 as a group. Impost block; the echinus has a spiral band with flat leaves. The abacus has an unusual vegetal ornament, repeated a small perpendicular stroke against each other. It is an Arabic Kufic script and is the only cloister capital in the whole French Romanesque architecture where the Arabic script displays. There are three further places in France<sup>31</sup>. According to the Latin translation, a call to Allah, the God of Islam, was repeated: south (HLLAHAL), east (HLLAHLA), west (HLLAALLH), north (LLAALLH).

It has known that Islamic calligraphy is a major vehicle for aesthetic energies and symbolic meanings because the word of God is recorded in the Holy Koran. Its two main styles are *Kufic*, a rectilinear and angular form for decoration, and *Naskhi* for everyday writing. Calligraphy is considered to be ‘the geometry of line’, due to its mathematical calculations. Spiritual geometry means both the structure of calligraphy and the whole essence and spirit of Islamic art. A Sufi belief in awareness of God’s presence and purpose in His creation was exemplified in the iconic form in the art of calligraphy.

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<sup>31</sup> Watson (1989) talks of three further examples. She surveyed the capital in Toulouse and concluded to its incorrect position, that the capital in Moissac is the only capital of French Romanesque with *Kufic* inscription could be.

Capital 75: Stylised Mozarabic arabesque, leaf scroll, chevron



EAST SIDE



EAST/PASSAGE



CHEVRON

The capital has Mozarabic ornament like nr 41, 61, 70. Impost block: the echinus has twin pairs of leaves; the abacus with the chevron motif. Its stylised representation as the Tree of Life could be a symbol of fertility. Triangle (chevron) is the threefold nature of the universe (heaven/earth/man, father/mother/child, man as body/soul/spirit, the mystic number three). The equilateral triangle depicts completion. The upward-pointing triangle symbolizes life, fire, masculinity, the spiritual world, and the trinity of love/truth/wisdom; it denotes royal splendour. In Christianity, the equilateral triangle means the Trinity in unity, and the equality of the three persons.

Mozarabs are Iberian Christians living in Al-Andalus, the Muslim conquered territories, preserving their religion and some ecclesiastical and judicial autonomy. The term "Mozarabic" is designated the architectural form and all of the related art constructed in Christian territory from the end of the ninth until the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Mozarabic communities maintained some of the Visigothic churches which were older than the Arab occupation for their religious practices and could hardly construct new ones. Despite a certain religious tolerance, the authorizations for building new churches were very limited. If permitted, new churches were in rural areas or in the cities' suburbs, and of modest size.

# COMPARISON OF 18 FLORAL CAPITALS

NR	IMAGE	GALLERY	COLUMN TYPE	MOTIF	ROW	STYLE	ADDITION	IMPOST BLOCK ECHINUS	ABACUS	GROUP WITH	INFLUENCE	MEANING
3		WEST	DOUBLE	ACANTHUS	2	NATURALIS TIC	CHI-RO	ROSETTE	FISHBONE	27,43, 54	ROMAN	AESTHETIC SYMBOLIC
6		WEST	SINGLE	ACANTHUS	1	STYLISED		FRUIT - GARLAND	FISHBONE	14,46, 56	ROMAN	AESTHETIC SYMBOLIC
9		WEST	DOUBLE	PALM	1	STYLISED		PALMETTE	FISHBONE		ROMAN	SYMBOLIC
12		WEST	DOUBLE	ARABESQUE	2	STYLISED		PLAIT		41,61, 70,75	BYZANTINE ISLAMIC	AESTHETIC
14		WEST	DOUBLE	ACANTHUS	1	STYLISED		PALMETTE	FINSBHON	6,46 56	ROMAN	AESTHETIC
18		WEST	DOUBLE	VEIN	1	NATURALIS TIC		PLAIT	FISHBONE	51,65	ROMAN	SYMBOLIC
27		SOUTH	DOUBLE	ACANTHUS	2	NATURALIS TIC		LION	FISHBONE	3,43, 54	ROMAN	AESTHETIC SYMBOLIC
41		EAST	DOUBLE	ARABESQUE	1	STYLISED		ROSETTE	ALPHABET	12,61, 70,75	MOZARABIC	AESTHETIC
43		EAST	DOUBLE	ACANTHUS	2	NATURALIS TIC		LEAF	FISHBONE	3,27, 54	ROMAN	AESTHEIC
46		EAST	SINGLE	ACANTHUS	1	STYLISED		LEAF - SPIRIAL BIRD	FISHBONE	6,14, 56	ROMAN	SYMBOLIC
51		EAST	SINGLE	VINE	1	NATURALIS TIC	PINE- CONE	ROSETTE	FISHBONE	18,65	BYZANTINE	SYMBOLIC
53		EAST	SINGLE	PALM	1	NATURALIS TIC	LION	LION, GRIFFIN	FISHBONE		ROMAN	SYMBOLIC
54		EAST	DOUBLE	ACANTHUS	2	NATURALIS TIC		PALMETTE		3,27, 43	ROMAN	AESTHETIC
56		EAST	DOUBLE	ACANTHUS	1	STYLISED		PALMETTE		6,14, 46	ROMAN	AESTHETIC
61		NORTH	DOUBLE	ARABESQUE	2	STYLISED		GOAT, LION		12,41, 70,75	ROMAN	AESTHETIC SYMBOLIC
65		NORTH	DOUBLE	VEIN	2	NATURALIS TIC		STAG, HORSE	CORD	18,51	ROMAN	SYMBOLIC
70		NORTH	DOUBLE	ARABESQUE	1	STYLISED		LEAF- SCROLL	KUFIC	12,41, 61,75	MOZARABIC	AESTHETIC
75		NORTH	SINGLE	ARABESQUE	1	STYLISED		LEAF- SCROLL	CHEVRON	12,41, 61,70	MOZARABIC	AESTHETIC SYMBOLIC
		EAST:7	SINGLE:5	ACANTHUS:8	ONE	NATURALIS TIC:8	LEAF:12	GEOMETRY: 12	GEOMETRY: 12	CLASSIC:14	SYMBOLIC: 10	
		WEST:6	DOUBLE: 13	PALM:2	:11	TIC:8	ANIMAL:5	INSCRIPTI ON:2	INSCRIPTI ON:2	BYZANTINE-2:	10	AESTHETIC: 12
		SOUTH:1		VEIN:3	TWO	STYLISED:10	GEOMETRY: 2			MOZARABIC:2		
		NORTH:4		ARABESQUE:5	:7							

Of 18 capitals' location, 7 are on the east gallery, 6 west, 4 north, and 1 south. Of the column type, 13 are doubled, 5 single. Of floral, acanthus display 8 capitals, 7 arabesque, 3 vine tendril, and 2 palm leaves. 11 capitals have the two rows of leaves, 7 single. Almost half of capitals are naturalistic or stylised. On the echinus, 12 have leaf motif such as palmette, 5 animal, and 2 geometry. On the abacus, geometry is on 2 capitals, 2 inscription, and 4 without ornament. 14 capitals are from the classic antiquity, 4 Byzantine-

Islamic or Mozarabic. More than half of capitals are symbolic and aesthetic. In short, a single layer of naturalistic acanthus with palmette and geometry are the most popular. First, they are found on the double columns of the east gallery.

#### CONCLUSION: TREE OF LIFE IN TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

A church has its sacredness of the site on which it built, creating its style, either for religious rites or celebrations or martyrdoms. And the church cloister displays the most evident form with multiple meanings. Firstly the cloister has a passage whose metaphor is a change from the profane to the sacred world to return to Paradise where God lives. Secondly, the cloister has pillars, the world axis, joining Heaven and Earth. The pillar is Tree of Life as well in terms of a similar symbolism with a tree.

Tree of Life, and Tree of Knowledge grow in Paradise where God lives. Tree of Life is located in the centre and signifies regeneration, and the return to the primordial state of perfection, while Tree of Knowledge is dualistic with the knowledge of good and evil, proved in the first man's fall from the paradisaic state as death and resurrection. Tree of Life with twelve fruits is the beginning and end of a cycle. Like trees and flowers, plants represent death and resurrection, the cycle of life.

The Moissac cloister stood, stands, and will stand at crossroads of passages with its history. And crossroads are powerful places, sites of labyrinths, to transfer our souls from one state to another by virtue of Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge. Probably, the creators of cloister sculpture must have taken into account its relationship to each soul who moved through the cloister.

The research betrays the beauty of the acanthus and its significance in different forms; naturalistic or stylised, single or double columns, carrying animals or not, and whatever they accompany. Interestingly, acanthus became vine or palm or even Islamic arabesque in the metamorphosis by creative sculptors. Why so? The reason is each longing soul knows that the cloister of Saint-Pierre Abbey in Moissac has many passages, many pillars, many trees and plants, thus it is the best transit from the earth to the Paradise where God is waiting.

The forms of branching or radiating- and combine them in so flexible and sensitive a way that it [ACANTHUS] offers the perfect instrument of the organization of areas. Moreover, the animation of the line which turns it into a lively organic motif offers many pleasant associations with flowers and greenery so closely linked since time immemorial with the habit of decoration. (Gombrich 1979)

# G L O S S A R Y

**Acanthus:** The deeply serrated and scalloped leaves and strong, graceful, curving stems of this European plant inspired the formalised decorative motif since Greco-Roman times. In classical Greek and Roman ornamentation, its appearance on the capitals of columns of the Corinthian and Composite orders makes the motif synonymous with classic formal architecture. It has also been used to enrich mouldings, surfaces, cresting, borders, scrolls and convolutions, often interwoven in continuous coiling spirals of leaves, and as a termination for chair and table legs, sometimes called acanthus feet. *Acanthus spinosus* (prickly-leaved), and *Acanthus mollis* (soft-leaved), are the two varieties on which the motif is based.

**Anthemion:** A conventional floral motif of antiquity, probably based on the honeysuckle flower and leaves. Some think it to have originated in the Egyptian lotus and buds, or the palm tree branch of leaves stretched out like an open hand: the formalised flowers and leaves may appear as a single ornament in a continuous band, joined by a running scroll. A form of anthemion ornament, combined with pinecones, embellished the Sacred Tree. The formalised palmette, or a honeysuckle ornament, is known as a typical classical motif, used decoratively in sculpture and architecture, on furniture, ceramics or painted surfaces, by Etruscans, Greeks, Romans, and later in Romanesque, Renaissance and late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Arabesque:** The word means Arabian to describe the intricate interlace, geometric patterns evolved in the Arabian civilisations of the Middle East and North Africa, and in the Moor Spain after its invasion of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This oriental style had classical affinities: flowering lines fanciful combinations of figures, animals, foliage, landscapes, scrolls, flowers and fruit, were used for surface decoration by the Greeks, Romans, and in the Byzantine Eastern Empire. After the collapse of the Roman Empire and the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs, the characteristics of the style were appropriated by the Muslim invaders, omitting all living figures and leaving geometrical patterns.

**Caulicoli:** An architectural term for the eight small curled acanthus stalks that support the volutes on Corinthian capitals: two of these stalks appear on each face.

**Lily:** A Cretan ornamental motif of c. 1550 BC; in the classical world a symbol of purity, innocence and fruitfulness and an emblem of deities who protected hunters, fishers and sailors. Later, as the Christian emblem of the Virgin Mary, chastity, and prorate, it becomes — as ubiquitous in Christian ornament as the lotus in Egyptian, and frequently appeared on the tombs of early Christian virgins. A heraldic flower is believed to be the prototype of the fleur-de-lys.

**Lotus:** The buds and flowers were ornamentally used in ancient Egypt, Assyria, India and the Far East, and in classical times. It is the species *Nymphaea nelumbo*, whose leaves grow up out of the water and do not lie flat on the surface. Its appearance in the period between the ebbing of the Nile flood and the spring up of the cross, established it as a sacred emblem of plenty, goodness and water, symbolising Osiris and Isis, the recurrent renewal of life, and immortality. In Egyptian architecture, columns designed as a complete plant,

the root forming the base, a bundle of stalks the shaft, and the flower and buds the capital: as decoration on walls, ceilings, and pottery, the alternating flower and bud sometimes combined with a zigzag motif, representing water. The lotus flower and bud may have been the prototype of the Greek anthemion or palmate, egg-and-tongue, and fleur-de-lys. The device as adopted by the Assyrians, and in India, China and Japan, and acquired a religious association with Buddha, who often represented seated on a lotus: the flowering plant is one of the Eight Buddhist Emblems of Happy Augury. During the revival of interest in Egyptian ornament between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the lotus motif used for the decoration of furniture.

Palmette: Of Assyrian origin, this motif has many variations: basically, it consists of an uneven number of narrow leaves springing from a tongue-like shape, the whole device resembling a palm leaf or the palm of a hand outspread: the central leaf is the largest, those on each side diminished in size towards the outer edge. Much used in ancient Greece as a frieze, cornice, and border ornament, singly, in series, or conjunction with some other motif. In Persia, palmette was in the form of a series of lotus-like flowers, joined by circles and a continuous band. The palmette is often called an anthemion, which it closely resembles.

Papyrus: Conventionalised representations of the water plant, *Cyperus papyrus*, were widely used in Egypt as an ornamental motif, in painted decoration, sculpture and on such objects as wooden spoons: in architecture, the papyrus column represented the whole plant—the base was the root, the shaft the stalk, the capital the bud and flower, and a group of such columns would typify a grove of papyri. Often, it is used in conjunction with the lotus and palm as a Nile fertility symbol.

Pinecone and trees: Originating in primitive tree worship, and possessing qualities and a shape that linked it with fire and fertility rites, the pine or fir cone was an ornamental and symbolic motif among the ancient civilisations of Egypt, India, Assyria, Greece and Rome: prophylactic and evergreen properties were responsible for the use of both tree and cone as emblems of fertile and regeneration. In ancient Egypt, the tree was used as a motif in coffin decoration, and the cones on monuments: the branches of the Assyrian sacred tree, often terminated in pinecones, sometimes combined with buds: in India and Persia the tree was a popular motif, a highly formalised elongated flame or pear shape with a spiral twist at the top. In ancient Greece and Rome, where pinecones were used to flavour wine and burned on sacrificial altars of the fragrance of their pungent scent, they adorned the thyrsus, carried by Dionysus and his votaries, and the tree was sacred to him. As a regenerative symbol, the cone decorated Etruscan tombs and urns: it appears only occasionally in Norman and Renaissance ornament and is sometimes called a fir apple.

Rose: In ancient Rome, roses were an obligatory decoration at ceremonies and feasts. It was occasionally used as an ornamental motif in Norman architecture. In heraldry, it is a conventional five-petalled flower, with sepals or barbs between the petals, sometimes with an intern circle of five more petals: the cadence mark of a seventh son. The heraldic Tudor rose was a combination of the red and white roses of Lancaster and York, and the rose remains the Royal badge of England. In early and medieval Christianity, it symbolised the Virgin Mary and Paradise.

**Sacred tree:** The mythology of the Sacred Tree, or Tree of Life, is found, with local variations, throughout the ancient world: the idea of a divine, miraculous tree providing food that would rejuvenate, restore and prolong life fulfilled an old human desire that was playing an important part in religious practices. The species of the tree thus venerated varied according to its local importance as a producer of food, drink and shelter, and this accounts for the many versions of the motif its foliage, flowers, fruits, and attendants. Subject to these variations, the tree is always a highly stylised: leaves, fruits and flowers wear strictly symmetrical: two figures-monsters, reptiles, birds, animals or humans, according to their local and religious affinities- regard each other from either side of the trunk: and the whole form has a geometrical rigidity. The earliest sacred tree motifs are probably the round engraved on Chaldean stones of c.3500 BC: throughout subsequent ages, widely different versions continued to adorn sculpture, paintings, mosaics and textiles; the fundamental principle of the life-sustaining tree and its attendant figures is discernible in the symbolic tree motifs of all regions.

**Scroll:** A curvilinear motif, based on a C-curve, the ends terminating in tiny circles: of Greco-Roman origin, the word is sometimes used to describe an Ionic volute. Used singly, or in series when a pattern of continuous scrolls forms an undulating band of spirals, each flowing from and into its neighbour: the scrolls may all run in the same direction, or be reversed, and embellished with a continuous curving meander or ornamental foliage, notable the acanthus, when the points at which the spirals join are concealed by the stalk sheaths and leaves: presented thus, it frequently occurs in Roman ornament. Because it identified with pagan design, the scroll precluded from early Byzantine decoration, but it gradually assumed great importance, acquiring much Christian symbolism. The scroll motif has been widely used in the decoration of furniture, for example, in a scroll chair back, a scroll of the foot, and a scrolled leg.

**Spiral:** A continuously coiled line; a circular motif, used singly or in series, or combined with other curved flowing lines to form an intricate pattern. An ancient device closely linked with the primitive sun-snake, it appears on Bronze Age weapons, armour, and utensils: used in Chinese decoration from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries BC and known as thunder pattern. Characteristic of Celtic ornamentation when, starting from a fixed point, two or three spiral lines form an intricate design of coils within coils. In classical decoration the spiral is the basis of the scroll and volute: in Gothic ornament spiral foliage devices addend crockets, capitals and spandrels.

**Stiff leaf:** Used in Early English Gothic decoration as a continuous band carved on foliated capitals: based on the trefoil. The three-lobed leaves have a strong mid-rib or a hollow in the central lobe: in more elaborate versions the tips of the lobes curl over towards each other.

**Vine:** A decorative motif of antiquity and universal use. In ancient China, it took the form of a realistic trail of grapes, leaves and tendrils, and later a highly stylised type of scroll. In Egypt, it appeared in combination with the lotus, ivy and papyrus as an adornment to capitals and a decoration on tomb ceilings: the Assyrian version was much more formal, revealing symmetrical arrangements of branches and square grapes. Originally sacred to Dionysus (Bacchus), the vine, with ivy, was the Roman sign for a tavern. Formalised vine

ornament used throughout Greco-Roman, Byzantine, Gothic and Renaissance decoration: the device revived in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Combined with ears of wheat, it is a symbolic motif of the Eucharist (Texts are taken from “*An Illustrated Dictionary of Ornament*” by D. Ware and M. Stafford).

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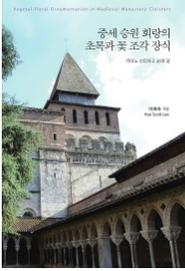
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Detailed information on Acanthus can be found in a Korean book version, called “Vegetal-Floral Ornamentation in Medieval Monastery Cloisters” Published by Korean Studies Information, 2018. <http://ebook.kstudy.com>

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