CHAPTER LIV

PAINTING.—WALL DECORATION

The inner walls of houses and public buildings at Pompeii were plastered, and usually decorated with colors; only storerooms, kitchens, and apartments designed for the use of slaves were left in the white. Outer walls were as a rule plastered, except when built of hewn stone, a kind of construction not employed after the Tufa Period. Stucco was occasionally used on façades of ashlar work where special ornamentation seemed to be needed, as at the entrance of the house of the Faun; and in later times, now and then, a front with reticulate or brick facing was left unplastered. Previous to the time of Augustus the stucco coating of outer walls ordinarily remained uncolored. Afterwards color was employed, but only to a limited extent, as in the addition of a dark base to a wall the rest of which remained white.

The painting upon Pompeian walls, as shown by the painstaking investigations of Otto Donner, was fresco, that is, executed in water colors upon the moist stucco of a freshly plastered surface. The method of preparing the wall was less elaborate than that recommended by Vitruvius, who advises the use of seven coats of plaster, first a rough coat, then three of sand mortar and three of stucco made with powdered marble, each coat being finer than the one preceding. In the better rooms, however, we find upon the walls at least one, often several, layers of sand mortar, and one or more coats of marble stucco; the entire thickness of the plastering varies from two to three inches. In unfinished or neglected rooms walls are sometimes found with a single coat of sand mortar. Occasionally powdered brick was used in the stucco as a substitute for marble dust.

Plastering so thick as that ordinarily used must have remained moist for a considerable length of time, much longer than the plastering of our day; yet it could not have retained its moisture long enough to complete the painting of an entire wall as one piece. Walls which are elaborately decorated sometimes show traces of a seam, where a moist section was laid on next to one that had already become partially dry. When the decorative design included pictures, usually the divisions and borders and other decorative elements were finished rapidly while the surface was moist; then a square or round hole was cut where a picture was to be inserted, and filled with fresh stucco, on which the picture was painted. In this way a carefully executed painting could be set in a wall already dry.

In the last years of the city pictures were sometimes painted on the dry surface of a wall that had previously received its decorative framework; some of the figures seen in the middle of the large panels furnish examples of this method of work. A size of some kind must have been used in such cases, but chemical analysis thus far has failed to determine its nature. The distemper painting was much less durable than the fresco, the colors of which became fixed with the hardening of the wall.

Sometimes, as in the house of Lucretius, the place of paintings upon stucco was taken by paintings upon wood, the wooden panels being let into the wall. As these panels were thin and lacked durability, we may perhaps believe that the paintings which they contained were of inferior quality.

The artistic value of Pompeian painting varies from the routine work of indifferent decorators to pictures of genuine merit, such as those found in the house of the Tragic Poet, the house of the Vettii, and the house of Castor and Pollux. Viewed as a whole, the wall decoration has a peculiar interest for us; it not only richly illustrates the application of painting by the ancients to decorative uses, but also affords a striking example of the evolution of decorative designs from simple architectural motives to intricate patterns, in which the scheme of coloring is hardly less complicated than that of the ornamental forms.

The four styles of wall decoration were briefly characterized in the Introduction, in connection with our survey of the periods
of construction. It now remains to illustrate these by typical examples and to trace their inner connection. We are here concerned only with the decorative designs, or ornamental framework of the walls; the paintings, which formed the centre of interest in the later styles, are reserved for consideration in a separate chapter.

The development of ancient wall decoration came comparatively late, after the art of painting, in the hands of the Greek masters, had reached and passed its climax. Yet we know almost nothing in regard to the earlier stages. Apparently the system which we find at Pompeii originated in the period following the death of Alexander the Great, and received its impulse of development from the contact of Greece with the Orient. But whatever the origin, from the time to which the earliest specimens at Pompeii belong—the second century B.C.—to the destruction of the city, we can trace an uninterrupted development, which, nevertheless, comes to an end in the latter part of the first century A.D.

The decline is characterized by increasing poverty of design, with feeble imitation of past styles. Just as it is setting in, however, extant examples become rare. Some specimens of the wall decoration of later times, as of the period of the Antonines and the reign of Septimius Severus, are preserved, but they are isolated and not sufficient in number to enable us to follow the stages of the decline. Thus it happens that the only period in the history of ancient wall decoration in regard to which we have the materials for a full and satisfactory study, is the period exemplified in the remains at Pompeii, the chronological sequence of which extends over two centuries.

The oldest houses, those belonging to the Period of the Lime-stone Atriums (p. 39), have preserved no traces of wall decoration beyond the limited application of white stucco.

The remains of the decoration of the Tufa Period are fairly abundant, and are well preserved on account of the excellent quality of the stucco to which the colors were applied. They belong to the first or Incrustation Style. A good example has already been given, the end wall of a bedroom in the house of the Centaur (Fig. 122); we present here, for more detailed examination, the left wall of the atrium in the house of Sallust (Fig. 261).

Notwithstanding the lack of color in our illustration, the divisions of the wall are plainly seen—a dado, painted yellow; a relatively low middle division, the upper edge of which is set off by a projecting cornice; and an upper part reaching from the first cornice, which appears in three sections on account of the doors, to the second. The surface of the main part of the wall is moulded in stucco to represent slabs or blocks with bevelled edges, which are painted in imitation of different kinds of marble. Above the high double doors opening into rooms connected with the atrium, frames of lattice-work for the admission of air and light have been assumed in our restoration.

The dado in the Incrustation Style is generally treated as a separate member; in rare instances the imitation of marble blocks is extended to the floor. It has a smooth surface and is painted a bright color, usually yellow; there is no suggestion of the practice of later times, which gave a darker color to the base than to the rest of the wall. This independent handling is undoubtedly to be explained as a survival from a previous decorative style, in which the lower part of the wall, as at Tiryns, was protected by a baseboard; the conventional yellow color with which it is painted, as in the case of the lower stripe of the Doric architrave in the house of the Faun (p. 51), is a reminiscence of the use of wood. The upper edge of the dado was ordinarily distinguished by a smooth, narrow projecting band or fillet.

The blocks moulded in slight relief upon the main part of the wall are of different sizes. In our illustration we see first a series of three large slabs, which are painted black. Above these are three narrow blocks of magenta. The rest present a considerable variety of size and color, until we reach those just under the cornice, which again are all of the same shade, magenta.

The cornice in this style is always of the Ionic type, with dentils. In many cases, as that of the bedroom in the house of the Centaur, it serves as an upper border for the decoration, the wall above being unpainted. Sometimes, however, the
imitation of marble is carried above the cornice, the wall surface being divided to represent smoothly joined blocks without bevelled edges, or painted in plain masses of color separated by a narrow white stripe, as in the atrium of the house of Sallust. Above these brilliant panels we see in Fig. 261 a second cornice of simple design; the wall between this cornice and the ceiling was left without decoration.

This system made no provision for paintings; their place was taken in the general scheme of decoration by elaborate mosaic pictures upon the floor. The taste of the age evidently preferred representations in mosaic; otherwise the painting of pictures upon the walls, which was brought to so high a degree of perfection by Polycletus and his contemporaries, would not have been abandoned.

The Incrustation Style, as exemplified at Pompeii, is in a secondary stage; it must have been worked out originally in genuine materials, at a time when walls were actually veneered, to a certain height, with slabs of various kinds of marble, cut and arranged to represent ashlar work; above the cornice marking the upper edge of the veneering, the surface was left in the white. The use of different varieties of marble points to an active commercial intercourse between the countries about the Mediterranean Sea, such as first became possible after the conquests of Alexander. So characteristic a style, requiring the use of costly materials, could only have been developed in an important centre of wealth and culture.

In view of all the circumstances, we are probably safe in concluding that the Incrustation Style originated in Alexandria, in the third century B.C. From Alexandria it spread to other cities of the East and West, stucco being used in imitation of marble, where marble could not be procured; scanty remains similar to those at Pompeii, and of approximately the same period — the second century B.C. — have been found at Pergamon, on the island of Delos, and lately in Priene. This style represents for us the wall decoration of the Hellenistic age. It is characterized by the same poverty of form and obvious striving after simplicity which we have noticed in the architecture of the Tufa Period. The projecting cornice above the body of the wall is always of the same type; yet the second century B.C. enjoyed a rich heritage of architectural forms, and lack of variety in this and other details of ornamentation was due, not to dearth of materials, but to the prevailing taste.
The earliest known example of the decoration of the second or Architectural Style, is on the walls of the Small Theatre, which was built soon after 80 B.C. The style remained in vogue till the middle of the reign of Augustus; it may be loosely characterized as the wall decoration of the first century B.C. It shows an interesting development from simpler to richer and more complex forms. The more elaborate and finished designs are not so well exemplified at Pompeii as in Rome, where two beautiful series have been found, both dating from the earlier part of the reign of Augustus. One series is in the so-called house of Livia or Germanicus on the Palatine. The other was found in a house on the right bank of the Tiber, excavated in 1878; the paintings were removed to the new Museo delle Terme. The specimen shown in Plate XII, however, is from a Pompeian wall; the room in which it was found opens off from the peristyle of a house in the fifth Region (V. i. 18).

The oldest walls of the second style closely resemble those of the first, with this characteristic difference: the imitation of marble veneering is no longer produced with the aid of relief; color alone is employed, upon a plane surface, as in the cella of the temple of Jupiter (Fig. 20). The earlier division of the wall into three parts is retained, but the painted cornice, no longer restricted to the dentil type, appears in a variety of forms. The base also is treated with greater freedom. Frequently it is painted in strong projection, as if the rest of the wall above it were further from the eye, while upon the shelf thus formed are painted columns reaching to the ceiling and seemingly in front of the main part of the wall; such columns and pillars, with Corinthian capitals, are seen in Plate XII, at the right and the left.

Thus the designs of this style at first comprised only simple elements, a wall made up of painted blocks or panels with a dado painted in projection supporting columns that seemed to carry an architrave on which the ceiling rested; there is an excellent example in the house of the Labyrinth, on the walls of a room at the rear of the garden. But the designs gradually became more complex, partly through the differentiation of the simple elements, partly through the introduction of new motives, until
a complete architectural system was developed. This system differs from that of the fourth style, which is also architectural, in that it adheres in the main to actual or possible structural forms, while those of the fourth style are fantastic in their proportions and arrangement.

In this process of development two clearly defined tendencies become manifest, one affecting the treatment of the upper division of the wall, the other the elaboration of a characteristic motive which now first appears, a framework for the principal painting; for architectural designs are well adapted for the display of pictures, and wall paintings now begin to have a prominent place in Pompeian decoration.

The upper division tends more and more to be represented as an open space, behind the plane of projection in which the main part appears. Thus in Plate XII we see on either side a silver vase with fruits and vine leaves, standing on the cornice of the main wall, in the open. Often the upper space is painted blue, as if one caught a glimpse of the sky above the wall; sometimes the outline of a wall further beyond is seen, or columns in the rear connected with those in front by a decorative framework; and not infrequently small architectural designs, in perspective, rest upon the cornice where the vases are shown in our plate. But in all the designs of this style, complex as well as simple, the threefold division of the wall carried over from the first style is retained; very often the distinction between the base, main wall, and upper portion is emphasized by painting them so that they seem to be in three planes of projection.

The ornamental framework for the painting, consistently with the architectural character of the decoration as a whole, is generally conceived as a pavilion projecting from the wall; so in Plate XII, where we see two columns sustaining a roof, upon the front of which winged figures stand, each with a hand extended upward to the entablature of the large pillars at the sides. The design of the pavilion is suggested by that of a shrine, such a shrine as the one in the apse of the sanctuary of the City Lares (Fig. 41).

This conception is here borne out by the subject of the painting, which represents a statue of Dionysus resting, ivy-crowned,
with a thyrsus in his left hand; the right hand is thrown gracefully over the head, and at the feet of the god the lifelike figure of a panther is seen. The round high pedestal supporting the group is in the open, and the background affords a charming vista among the trees.

This framing of the principal painting led further to the division of the body of the wall vertically into three sections, a broad central section, included within the outline of the pavilion, and two panels, one at each side. The arrangement is well illustrated in our plate, the side panels of which are adorned with painted statues of tastefully draped figures, one of them holding a lyre. The later styles of decoration retained this symmetrical division of the wall space, which made prominent the picture of greatest interest without detracting from the finish of the decorative setting; but in the fourth style it is often obscured by the intricacy of the designs.

The third style came into vogue during the reign of Augustus, and was prevalent until about 50 A.D.; we shall call it the Ornate Style, from its free use of ornament. It was developed out of the second style in the same way that the second style was developed out of the first; but the transition was not accomplished at Pompeii, which, like the provincial cities of our day, received its fashions from the great centres.

The characteristics of the Ornate Style, as regards both the main design and the ornamentation, may easily be perceived from the example presented in Fig. 263, especially if this is viewed in contrast with the specimen of the preceding style shown in Plate XII. The architectural design has now lost all semblance of real construction. Columns, entablatures, and other members are treated conventionally, as subordinate parts of a decorative scheme; they are, with few exceptions, reduced to narrow bands or stripes of color dividing the surface of the wall. The elaborate border of the central painting suggests a pavilion, yet the projecting base, which in the second style gave this design its significance, is lacking. Hardly less noteworthy is the treatment of the upper portion of the wall. Fanciful architectural forms and various ornaments stand out against a white background, suggestive of the open sky; yet in our example, as often in this style, there is no organic connection between the decoration of the main part of the wall and that of the ceiling.

Every part of the framework of the third style is profusely ornamented. The ornamental system is seen to have a certain affinity with that of Egypt, and Egyptian figures occasionally appear; whence we infer that it was developed in Alexandria. Early in the reign of Augustus, in consequence of the relations with Egypt following the battle of Actium, a new impulse may well have been given to the introduction into Italy of Alexandrian art.

The specimen of the third style shown in Fig. 263 is from the beautiful decoration of the house of Spurius Mesor, portions of which are well preserved. The base of our specimen consists of two parts, a lower border and a broad stripe of black divided into sections of different shapes and sizes by lines of light color. In the small sections ornaments are seen painted in delicate shades, two of them being faces.

The large painting presents a mythological scene, but the subject is not clear. The priestess seems to be performing a ceremony of expiation in order to free from the taint of some crime the young man who, with a wreath on his head and a sword, pointed downward, in his right hand, bends over the hind just slain as a sacrifice. The colors are subdued and effective; the painting from the technical point of view is among the best found at Pompeii.

Around the painting are narrow black stripes separated by white lines; in the broader stripe underneath, between the columns, are two light blue birds upon a dull red ground. The small squares in the flat cornice above are of many colors, shades of green, pink, and brown predominating. The broad panels on either side of the painting are of the color often called Pompeian red; they have an ornamented border, and a small winged figure in the centre. The stripe below these shows vases and other ornaments on an orange-yellow ground; that above, interrupted by the cornice over the painting, is black, with various ornaments, as baskets of fruit, sistrums, and geese, painted in neutral colors. Among the ornaments of the upper
tones gives the walls a somewhat cold and formal appearance when we bring into contrast the warm coloring of the next period.

The fourth or Intricate Style first appears about the middle of the first century A.D. It started, as did the third, with the symmetrical division of the wall developed in the second style; it differs from the third in that it always retained a sense of architectural form. The columns are often fluted, as in a specimen in the Naples Museum (Fig. 264). The entablatures and coffered ceilings, light and airy as they often seem, have nevertheless a suggestion of reality; we know that architectural forms are presented, and not mere stripes of color. Yet the difference between the fourth and the second style is no less apparent. In the latter the architectural designs are not inconsistent with real construction; in the former the imagination of the designer had free scope, producing patterns so fantastic and intricate that the fundamental idea at the basis of the wall divisions seems entirely lost sight of at times.

The preference for architectural forms was carried so far that between the large panels of black, red, or yellow, vertical sections of wall were left which were filled with airy structures on a white background; the parts represented as nearest the beholder were painted yellow, those further back were adorned with all the colors of the rainbow, thus forming a kind of color perspective (Fig. 265). The designs of the main part were extended into the upper division, and frequently the whole wall appears as an intricate scaffolding, partially concealed by the large panels; these sometimes have the appearance of tapestries hanging suspended from the scaffolding, and are so treated, as in the case of the curtains shown in Plate XIII. The fundamental conception of the decorative system is lost when the background of the upper part and of the airy scaffolding is no longer left white, but painted the same color as the rest of the wall, so that the effect of distance and perspective is obscured. Occasionally, also, the architectural framework of the upper portion of the wall has no connection with that of the main part.

The ornaments of the fourth style were taken largely from the domain of plastic art. Groups of statuary as well as single
figures appear either upon projecting portions of the architectural framework, as in Fig. 264, or in the background. They are frequently painted yellow, suggesting the gilding applied to ancient statues, particularly those of bronze, and present a striking contrast to the masses of strong color in the large panels and the brilliant shades of the architectural designs. They are in harmony with the taste of the period, which, as we have seen, manifested a fondness for ornamentation in stucco relief, the effect of which was heightened by the free use of color.

The large panels contained paintings of various sizes, sometimes copies of masterpieces, more often a simple floating figure or a Cupid; groups are also found, as Cupid and Psyche, or a satyr with a bacchante. The appearance of a picture worked in tapestry is given by a border just inside the framework of the panel, as often in the decoration of the fourth style.

The fourth style cannot have been derived from the third. It is organically related with the second, out of which it was developed by laying stress on precisely that element, the architectural, the suppression of which gave rise to the third style of decoration. The most reasonable explanation of the relations of the four styles, briefly stated, is this:—

The Incrustation Style, a direct offshoot of Hellenistic art, was prevalent in eastern cities, where it was naturally followed by the Architectural Style; this may have been developed at one centre or, in different phases, at different centres contemporaneously.

At some prominent centre, probably Alexandria, the Architectural Style passed over into the Ornate Style, which was introduced into Italy in the reign of Augustus and remained in vogue till the middle of the first century A.D.

Meanwhile, at some other centre of culture, possibly Antioch, the Architectural Style, by an equally natural course of develop-
ment, had passed over into the Intricate Style, which was first brought to Pompeii about 50 B.C. and remained in fashion till the destruction of the city.

The earthquake of the year 63 threw down some buildings and made necessary the thorough-going repair of many others. Between that year and 79, more walls were freshly decorated, probably, than in any previous period of equal length in the history of the city. For this reason, examples of decoration in the Intricate Style are much more numerous than might have been expected from the length of time that it was in vogue; they give the prevailing cast to the remains of painting in the ruins, and this style is ordinarily thought of when Pompeian wall decoration is referred to. The complex designs and brilliant colors form a decorative scheme which is often most effective, although the system of the third style reveals a finer and more correct taste.

If no remains of the two earlier styles had survived to modern times, the antecedents and relations of the other two could not possibly be understood. But with the first two in mind, we are able to see clearly how the most complex forms of the later decoration may be reduced, in last analysis, to simple elements. Even in the example of the Intricate Style given in Plate XIII, we find a suggestion of the threefold division of the wall into base, main part, and upper part, which was so prominent in the Incrustation Style; and also an elaborate structural form at the middle of the wall recalling the pavilion framework of the second style, with a symmetrical arrangement of the architectural designs on either side, suggesting the panels at the sides of the principal painting.

The slabs of colored marble in the Incrustation Style are represented by panels for pictures or ornamental forms of all shapes and sizes; and the architectural designs, so simple at the beginning, have by almost imperceptible changes and additions become decorative patterns so varied and intricate that taken by themselves they give no hint of their origin.