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Vere Foster's complete course of drawing

Freehand ornament

Foster, Vere

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General Instructions.

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VERE FOSTER'S COMPLETE COURSE OF DRAWING.

PART VII.—FREEHAND ORNAMENT.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS.

FREEHAND, though perhaps not so interesting in its nature as many other branches of Drawing, is an essential feature in art-training, since by its means the eye is educated to a due perception of form, and the hand gains power in its delineation. Hence a double advantage is gained:—*first*, the power to appreciate beauty or to detect error, and, *secondly*, the faculty of producing really accurate representations of such forms. Thanks to the felt need of technical education, that time is now rapidly approaching when drawing will cease to be classed as an accomplishment merely. Seeing, then, this growing demand for art instruction, it becomes a matter of grave importance that examples of a suitable kind, and proper methods of instruction, should be provided, if drawing is really to possess that practical value which is now claimed for it. On the other hand, it is no less needful that the student—such examples being provided—should bear in mind that perfection is a plant of slow growth. Hence arises one of the difficulties of the teacher; for, while many are willing to undergo what we may call the drudgery of the earlier lessons—those attempts that seem so disheartening before the interest is aroused and the mind encouraged by progress made—others (and they are not few) cast aside such restraints. They see no value in their work: they are machinists, and want at once to draw plan and elevation of a locomotive; or they are cabinet-makers, and they must begin at once to design for furniture; or they may be amateurs—persons who need not study drawing with a view to increased efficiency in their business, and the corollary of such additional power, more wages to receive—and, therefore, they think that, to them at least, no such course of study is necessary. Thus many a pupil has come to me desiring to sketch in water-colors who was unable even so much as to outline correctly, and yet too proud to learn. Such do not realise that the loftiest buildings have the deepest foundations; that the tree must be tended many a year before its fruit is gathered; that the facile touch they admire so much in some eminent man's work has been acquired by dint of long years of devotion to his art; and that the clever sketch they saw done in some twenty minutes was but the gathering in of the fruit of many months of previous practice.

While thus cautioning the student, however, I may also dishearten him: for he will say, "How can I now give years of my life to this pursuit?" I would, therefore, hasten to add that, while eminence can only thus be attained, yet, if only the foundation be truly laid, enough art-power may be speedily acquired to become both pleasure and profit to its possessor.

In almost all trades, decorative art in some way makes its presence felt; but in some, as we are all aware, it is present in a marked degree. In these branches of business, more especially, the power of drawing is of great value. Many persons are not aware at what disadvantage we are placed, nationally, by this past neglect of the art-power, which it is not unreasonable to suppose is latent amongst us. The following quotations from a Blue Book, compiled on the Government inquiry, in 1864, into the working of the Schools of Art throughout the country, may not be without interest. One of the leading Manchester calico manufacturers, during the course of his examination, says: "I have made a calculation, which I believe to be within the mark. I believe the amount paid by calico printers alone, at this very time, is enormous. I may state at once that I know twelve houses that pay from £25,000 to £30,000 a-year for designs. I believe the entire payment now in the trade, in French designs alone, is upwards of £50,000 a year. We get much better designs in Paris: unless it were so, we should not go there, of course." One of the chief manufacturers in the Staffordshire china trade, in answer to the question—"Are your best designers now foreign or English?" replies—"Our best painters, with the exception of one, are foreigners; and I may state, also, that our best modeller is a foreigner." In France and Germany, technical art training has been in full practice for a great many years, with what valuable results the foregoing extracts will show.

Freehand Drawing possesses this great advantage over many other kinds of art-work, that it impresses on the beginner the necessity of scrupulous accuracy. Beginners are frequently set to a much more seductive kind of work—little picturesque details of gables, rustic gates, and so forth; but these, though more attractive, and

therefore more dangerous, are not nearly so good for the preliminary practice. When the hand has acquired the needful accuracy, then the freedom of touch will come in due course; but the attempted freedom without firm basis is only hurtful and mischievous. For this same reason, geometry makes an excellent study in alternation with the freehand work, as, in that too, the most careful work is required. In geometry, as in freehand drawing, the eye readily detects error, even when the hand, from want of present skill, is unable to remedy it. The pupil must be careful to keep the two modes of working quite distinct. Freehand drawing is so called, because it is quite independent of any such mechanical aids as the ruler or compass; in fact, their use is not permissible, as it ceases to be freehand if they are employed. On the other hand, geometry absolutely requires their use; and it is as much an error (and one commonly indulged in) for the student to sketch his geometrical problems by hand as to use any artificial helps in overcoming the difficulties he may encounter in his freehand. I have seen many a student, after sketching a problem freely on the black board, utterly unable to work it rigidly out with his instruments on a sheet of paper, the two things being so very different in their nature. In the same way, the student who allows himself the use of compasses or ruler while engaged in so-called freehand becomes their slave: their use cramps his progress, and he is under a painful feeling of restraint directly a stroke has to be attempted without their aid.

While anything like ruling, or bending the paper down the middle, or such-like little subterfuges, are thus, from the nature of the work, inadmissible, it is a question in my own mind how far an occasional measurement, after the completion of the work, is at times allowable. If resorted to at all, it should always be in the order just named—not first the measurement and then the drawing made to fit it—but first the drawing honestly striven for, and then, if at all, the measuring test. The temptation to resort to its use, even under these limited conditions, is very great; but its only value lies in this, that where a beginner's untrained eye fails to show him how grievously he may be wrong, and the teacher fails to convince him of his fault, a strip of paper judiciously applied, first to the copy and then to the student's work, is an irresistible argument—an umpire whose decision cannot be impugned. Bear in mind, however, that it can hardly be too little used, and that its use may very easily degenerate into an abuse.

It will not in all cases be necessary for the pupil to go through the whole of these examples. Some will show more natural aptitude

than others; and while a few may find it necessary, not only to go through the entire set, but even to draw some again and again, others will feel justified by their progress in missing one occasionally, while the great number to select from will be a welcome feature in the present course. Be the number attempted few or many, let the work, so far as it goes, be thorough. If at any time the task grows wearisome, either subdue the feeling by sheer force of will, or failing that, let the work be put aside for awhile, as half-hearted work is of little value. Above all, beware of that constant temptation to young beginners—the desire to get a thing done and out of the way. This is doubly wrong; for, first, to finish one drawing is but the first step towards beginning another; the subject truly has altered, but the next subject brings its own share of difficulty and labour to be gone through no less than its predecessor; and, secondly, it raises a false standard in the pupil's mind: quality should be striven for rather than mere quantity. The practical question is not, "How many done?" but rather, "How well done?" Let the student conquer as he proceeds. If his first attempt is a failure, let that rather spur him to a fresh endeavour. There is nothing heroic in being beaten, and, if any of these examples present an amount of difficulty that seems hard to overcome, the learner must not rest satisfied with the sense of failure, but try again.

Practise frequently rather than for any considerable time at one sitting. Drawing is so essentially a thing of practice and habit, of hand and eye, that he who is half-hearted enough about it to put it aside for a few weeks at a stretch, must be content to find, when he resumes his work, that his faculties have rusted somewhat, that his eye has lost its nice discrimination, his hand some, at least, of its old cunning. By little and little, if steadily adhered to, the sense of growing power will arise, and thus the student, having tided over the earlier days of disappointment, will begin to see some show of fruit, some return for his labour. Let him beware, however, of an overweening confidence in himself. No student is worthy of the name who does not realize that the road to perfection stretches before him for many a mile to come; and such an one will hardly care to repose on his laurels at this early stage of the journey. In requiring the student, so far as our influence extends, to retrace his steps, and try again and again at any of these examples which he fails to manage at first, I am aware that the teacher is imposing a somewhat heavy burden on him; but I have nowhere throughout this little essay told him that drawing is all sunshine: I have, on the contrary, tried to impress on him, without discouraging him, that drawing is real work. A boy at school will go through the

same French exercises time after time, till he has mastered them ; the girl will sit at the piano for hours together, going over the same scales ; the child has many a fall before it runs alone : why then expect that drawing alone should be an exception, and that, in this, to attempt is to achieve?

In looking carefully through this book, the pupil will easily discern that the examples may be conveniently divided into two broad classes : the first consisting of representations of natural leaves, the second of arbitrary, ornamental forms, more or less based upon such natural growth. During the time he is at work upon the first of these sections, he will find it a pleasant variation in his task, if he occasionally try a real leaf instead. He will find it a more difficult study than the other ; but as it is perhaps pleasanter, and also the sort of thing his practice in these outlines ought speedily to lead to, it will give him a sense of greater reality in his labours. We do not want him to feel that these few outlines sum up the whole of what we may legitimately call freehand. When I once again remind him that freehand, in the broad sense of the word, means any kind of drawing in which instruments have no share, he will see that the subject has far wider range. To draw a cat is as much an exercise in freehand as to draw an ornamental scroll, and it is no less so if your model is a veritable living animal. We merely give the ornamental forms first, because they present fewer difficulties to the beginner, and their rigid precision is a valuable discipline at the outset. In drawing the section following the natural leaf forms, the work may also be pleasantly varied by finding other examples of a similar type. The acanthus leaf in this series having been drawn, it would be excellent practice to find such another on the capital of some column, and attempt it when in relief. The designs embossed on book-covers will often afford good examples for a change of work, or the monograms so often stamped on envelopes. By thus at times diverging from the beaten course, the student will realize what his drawing power is doing for him, and see and comprehend more fully its service.

In drawing any object, it is often an advantage to lightly draw an enclosing line passing through all the salient points. Thus, in the oak leaf in this present series, the learner will notice that all the lobes of the leaf could be just fitted, so to speak, within an elliptical line. It is a good plan, then, to draw such a line, as it gives greater accuracy frequently to his work, and it can, when done with, be removed. He will see that, in the drawing of natural leaves, this principle has in every case been applied. Where any leaf is ser-

rated, that is to say, the edge of it cut like the teeth of a saw, let him draw a line first of all to get the general shape of the leaf—such a line as would touch the points of the leading serrations. After this has been successfully managed, the smaller toothing of the edges can more easily be added. The copy based on the leaf of the strawberry is a very good illustration of this, which is also indicated in the acanthus leaf already referred to.

Whenever the copy has both sides alike, let him begin by drawing a central line, and in this, as in all constructive lines, let the work be as good as he has the power of making it. He must not think, because these lines really form no part of the finished work, and are destined on its completion to be removed, that, therefore, they need not be drawn with much care ; for on their accuracy or inaccuracy depends, in a very great measure, the question whether the drawing built up by their means shall be a success or a failure. The drawing that thus begins askew must end askew, and no amount of added detail, however good, can hide the fact that the drawing was too hastily commenced. Having got the central line true, the pupil should begin at the top and draw a portion of the left side, selecting first those parts that are contiguous to the middle line, and afterwards adding the outlying parts. He should not, however, finish the whole of the left side first, and then endeavour to reproduce it on the right hand ; but rather, having drawn one curve on the one side, draw the corresponding balancing curve on the other side. When a curve starting from the central line ends at some distance from it, a line should be drawn from the outlying point at right angles to the upright line in the middle of the work, and then, judging the distance very carefully by the eye, should be continued from the middle, until it is equal in length on each side of the central axis ; its extremity will then give the point for the termination of the corresponding curve on the right hand side. The learner may draw as many such lines as he pleases from all the leading points, bearing in mind that the distances must be judged by the eye alone, and that the lines must be truly perpendicular to the centre line.

The concluding and more elaborate examples, it will be seen, are selected from existing remains of past ornamental art, chiefly of the Renaissance period. It has been thought advisable in these closing sheets, after the student has had preliminary practice at the forms which have been specially designed to facilitate his progress, to set before him some illustrations from authentic sources of the direct application of the power in freehand drawing that he has

thus acquired to decorative art, as exemplified in the works of others. He will thus, we trust, see to what end his labours have been tending, and so derive, possibly, greater encouragement to go forward than he might do from the mere copying of arbitrary forms which, though excellent as exercises, may not, perhaps, sufficiently in themselves satisfy the student as to their utility and ultimate bearing. These examples are all what is technically termed "flat"—all ornamental art, whatsoever, being capable of classification under two great divisions, the "flat" and the "round"—or, in other words, surface ornament, be it painted, woven, enamelled, engraved, inlaid, &c., and relief ornament—work resulting from carving, stamping, or modelling. In the first great class, the decorative effect is produced by lines or masses of colour, and in the second by masses of light and shade. A fictitious effect of relief can be produced in surface decorations, as in many sixteenth century illuminated MSS.; but such treatment is not really legitimate, and is never met with in the best periods of ornamental art.

Should the student, on arriving at this point, feel desirous of emulating the skill in design of others, we would recommend him, before entering upon a too ambitious and independent trial, to take one of the present advanced illustrations, and, after studying the general arrangement of lines, to adapt some other foliated forms to them, the leaves of the ivy, strawberry, arrowhead, and many others given in the earlier examples, being admirably suited to such a purpose. It must be remembered, however, that true ornament does not consist in the mere re-production of natural growth, but in its due adaptation to decorative forms. A certain "conventionalism" of treatment to fit the design for its service is the true principle to adopt, although "naturalism" may, according to circumstances, be more or less suggested. It is a very difficult problem to define how far either principle may be developed in a given design, but if the student will bear in mind the distinction between pictorial and decorative art—the one dealing with the actual appearance, a direct transcript of Nature's loveliness, while the other is a more or less idealized rendering, a suggestion of the natural beauty, rather than an attempt to directly imitate it in an unsuitable material—such consideration will prove a sufficiently safe guide to indicate the right course to adopt, though it is impossible to lay down any general rule to regulate the precise degree of conventionalism that may in any special case be desirable.

Though these examples will be found to be of the best practical size for working from, it will sometimes be a piece of good discipline

to re-draw them to a larger or smaller scale, and more especially if any tendency to unfair measuring manifests itself. In all examinations, too, in which freehand enters, the examples have always to be enlarged or reduced. If, therefore, the intention is to go in for any such examination, it will be well to bear this in mind from time to time. In thus altering the scale, the pupil must be careful to keep his work in the due proportion seen in the copy. As his work progresses, even if it appears satisfactory, let him turn it upside down occasionally: his eye will then, very probably, notice little inaccuracies that would otherwise escape observation, as he sees his work under fresh conditions; and the eye, somewhat jaded before, detects more readily any errors that may have crept in. Let him avoid using bread, or the preparation known as ink-eraser—the bread, because the crumbs will frequently get under the paper, and so spoil a good curve by the unevenness they cause, and the ink-eraser because it leads to carelessness of work. The pupil using it does not take the pains he should do, as he knows that, no matter how bad the line, this preparation will remove it. It also damages the surface of the paper. The slovenly style of work to which it leads is, however, the greatest objection to its use. India rubber is sufficient for all purposes. No line should be drawn in the first sketch so darkly that that would not remove it: while, in the finished drawing, the darker lines employed are those which the preliminary sketch should have shown to be correct, and all erasure then becomes needless. Bread may be occasionally used to clean the whole surface of the paper; but if due care be taken, and a piece of clean paper kept under the hand during the progress of the work, the paper need never get so soiled as to render the use of bread necessary.

Where one form passes in front of another, draw the lower one faintly through, as indicated by the dotted lines seen in several of the examples. Without this precaution, the forms are very likely to have a disjointed look.

In conclusion, let me once more urge on the student that, while the discipline is a valuable one if due pains are exercised, the value will be very slight without such care. No arithmetician is satisfied with a working that comes *nearly* right; no mathematician will accept an *approximation* to the truth merely: let me then impress upon the learner the importance of attaining as full a measure of proficiency, step by step, as lies in his power, since a *few* of the examples well drawn, will have a value a hundred-fold greater than could possibly result from a slurred execution of the whole series.

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