

RHYTHM AND DESIGN IN ART

At the basis of all expressed life the two elements of rhythm and design operate with such interdependence that it is impossible to think thoroughly of one without taking account of the other. Precedence in time is probably decided by temperament. The individual of static disposition will more likely than not see design as the fundamental condition of life. The individual of dynamic disposition will attribute precedence to rhythm. "In the beginning was rhythm," said Hans Von Bulow, the fussy, electric collaborator of Richard Wagner in the presentation of the latter's masterpieces of rhythmical sound. But perceptible rhythm could not exist alone or *in vacuo*. To be rhythmical in the original Greek sense of the word is to flow; and flowing requires something to flow, somewhere to flow from-to, and time to do it in.

Music is probably the most tenuous expression of rhythm: yet it consists of sound-substance, of progression from sound to sound with place in a piece of music, and duration to move from place to place. Much the same may be said of poetry. There is, however, a difference and a similarity in the way in which the rhythm of music and of poetry are perceived.

Music and Poetry

The rhythm of music reaches the consciousness through the ear. Visible physical movements in India, and the beating of "time" by a conductor in Europe, do not create musical rhythm: they are only accessories to the aural reception of the rhythm that is inherent in the music and that without sound cannot be perceived as music. The rhythm of poetry, too, is primarily and essentially aural. This was its original intention, and remains so in most of the poetry of India which is known to vast numbers of people who are illiterate. For aids to memory, the



Capital of Wooden Pillar in Padmanabhapuram Palace

poets of Eire in the Druidical era 2000 years ago carved the first few words of a poem in codes of notches on the edges of wooden staves: but the poem itself was in their aural memory: it had no visual counterpart.

With the development of writing and

later of printing, the entrance of poetry to the consciousness of the literate was divided between ear and

eye. Ultimately, as to-day, among the literate, poetry entered consciousness first by the accessory eye-gate, and then found its essential entrance, ear-gate; for, though poetry is now a matter of sight in printed words, its real nature remains aural: even if it is not spoken, it is judged by its sound-rhythm and also by the sound-richness of its words. Poetry, in fact, cannot strictly be included in "literature," as the basis of poetry is verbal sound, whereas the essence of literature is *litera*, the seen letter.

BY
DR. J. H. COUSINS



Nataraja bronze image in Trivandrum Museum

Notation in music has, of course, its demand on the eye, and there are musicians of such high training that they can to a considerable extent translate notation into consciousness. But they cannot convey music without sound; the most expert ability in steeple-jacking with the eye down and up an orchestral score and gathering an impression regarding it, is nothing compared to the full simultaneous sound of a single pulsation of the music in performance.

Dance and Drama

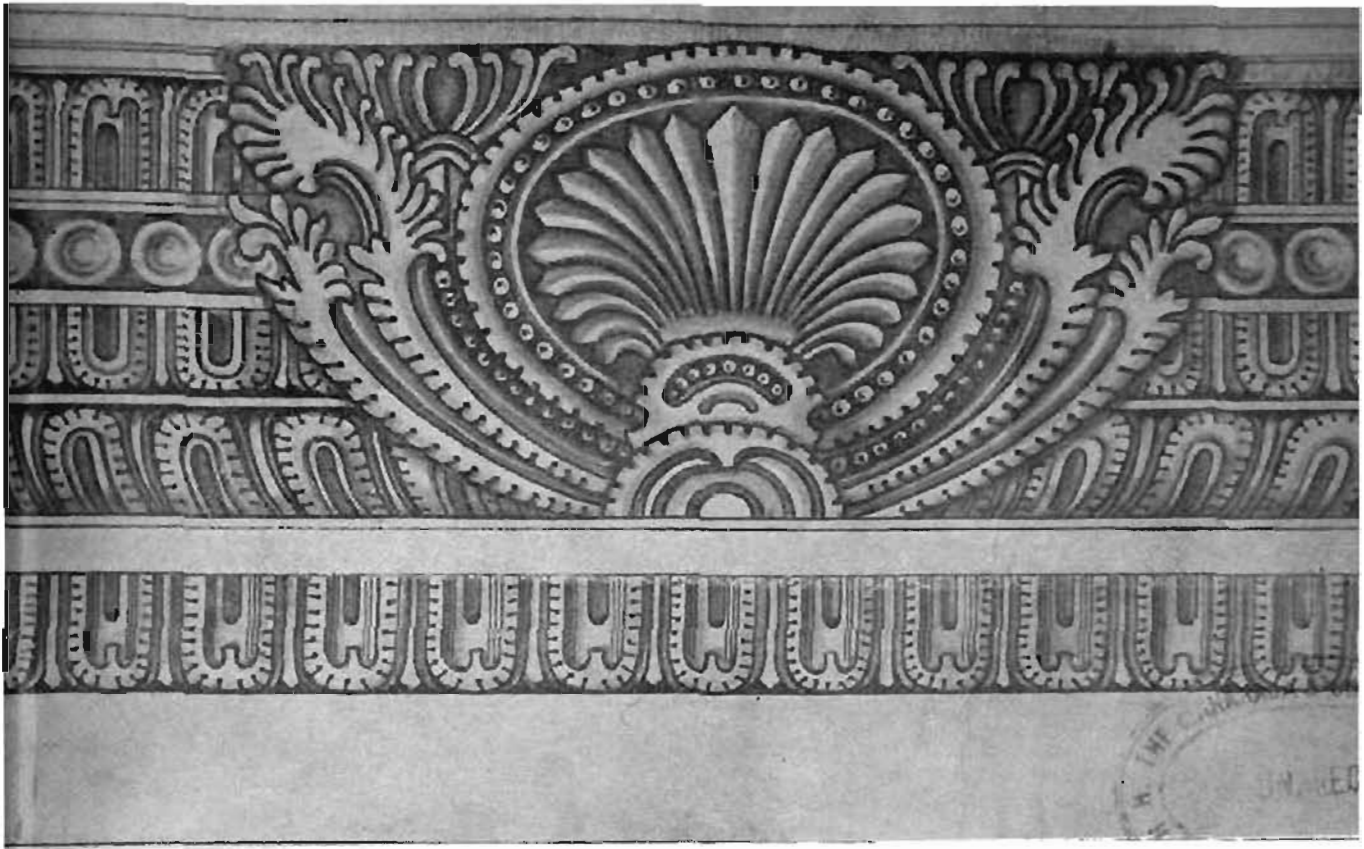
In drama and the dance there is a mutually helpful collaboration between eye and ear; between visual movement and audible accompaniment, as in the

drama. In ordinary western dance visible rhythmical movement is controlled by rhythmical sound in musical accompaniment; its intention is physically sensuous and emotionally sentimental. Dance in India, that is, the Bharata-natya and its variants or developments like the Kathakali, uses both eye and ear, and reinforces both by imparting the sound-value of language to the visible language of gesture and finger-codes (*mudras*), and by adding the force of the latter to the musical accompaniment.

So closely has rhythm become identified with aural and visual motion, that to speak of rhythm in the plastic and graphic arts (sculpture, painting and their affinities) may, to the uninformed, sound like nonsense. Yet it is a fact of aesthetic experience that a statue or a picture, to be felt as alive, though static in itself, must be capable of inducing the eye to move in certain directions and along particular lines, and of thus imparting through the eye to consciousness a perception similar to that of rhythmical motion.

The Static Arts

We can test this rhythm-inducing perception in static art by looking attentively at the ancient bronze image of Nataraja in the Government Museum at Trivandrum, or at the Tibetan *tanka* (banner) in the Sri Chitralayam showing one of the Guardians of the world destroying a snake. The statue achieves rhythm-inducing power by its simulation of a passing phase of the dance in which the mind perceives what the statically represented instant has moved from and what it is moving to. The banner has no simulation of movement; the figure is in an entirely static position save for the two hands that are crushing the serpent of evil and its egg. But the disposition of the draperies of the figure is such that the eye is induced to follow the extraordinarily intricate but never confused arrangement of the variously coloured articles of dress; and out of this comes the inner perception of rhythm that makes the banner, for all its static fantasy, appear to be alive.



Shell Design in carved wooden band in the Nerapura, Padmanabhapuram

When we ask how this rhythmical effect is achieved in the static arts, we come upon the other side of the duality of art-expression, the laying out of a *design*, static in the arrangement of details that never alter (as the limbs of Nataraja and the clothes of the Deva of Tibet never change their position), yet capable of inducing the impression of rhythmical movement. Whatever temperamental characteristic in the observer leans towards one or other of these two fundamentals of art as having precedence, it becomes clear, after attentive observation of a finished work of art, that, at the finished stage, rhythm and design are simultaneous. They are also interactive: design is given life in so far as it induces rhythmical perception; rhythm rises from a mere succession of monotonous pulsations, to beauty and impressiveness, according to the nature of the design that is imposed upon it. So immediate, is the relationship of rhythm and design that we cannot as already said,

realize one without the other. Essentially they are one; their apparent difference lies in emphasis and predominance in a particular work of art. Rhythm is dynamic design; design is static rhythm.

Music—Eastern and Western

Perhaps the most marked difference in rhythm and design is found in oriental and occidental music. The large number of *talams* (time, rhythmical pulsation) in Indian music come as a revelation to the occidental musician accustomed to hardly any rhythm beyond waltz-time (three pulsations with the accent on the first) and march-time (four pulsations with the accent on the first and third). In the design into which rhythmical sound falls, again the occidental musician, limited to three "scales" (major, minor and chromatic), gets a revelation as to sound-arrangement when he hears the 72 *melakartha ragams* (scales) of Indian music - not to mention the numerous *raginis* (derivatives from the *ragams*). In the lay-out



Carved Wooden Door in Nerapura, Padmanabhapuram

of musical material (in paragraphs, so to speak) both oriental and occidental music respond to a sense of design—in the *pallavi*, *anupallavi* and *charanam* of Indian music and the succession of themes in a western sonata. But the widest difference between the two musics is in the absence of harmony (designed grouping of sounds) in Indian music. Indian music moves in “Indian file”; its design is linear: western music moves in mainly quadruple files; its design is in masses. A similar difference will be seen as between Rajput and European painting.

It would require more space than an article to bring out the relationships that may be surmised, and to some extent verified, between sound-rhythms and human group-characteristics and circumstances. In a general way we may note the difference between the rhythm of a tom-tommed announcement in India and

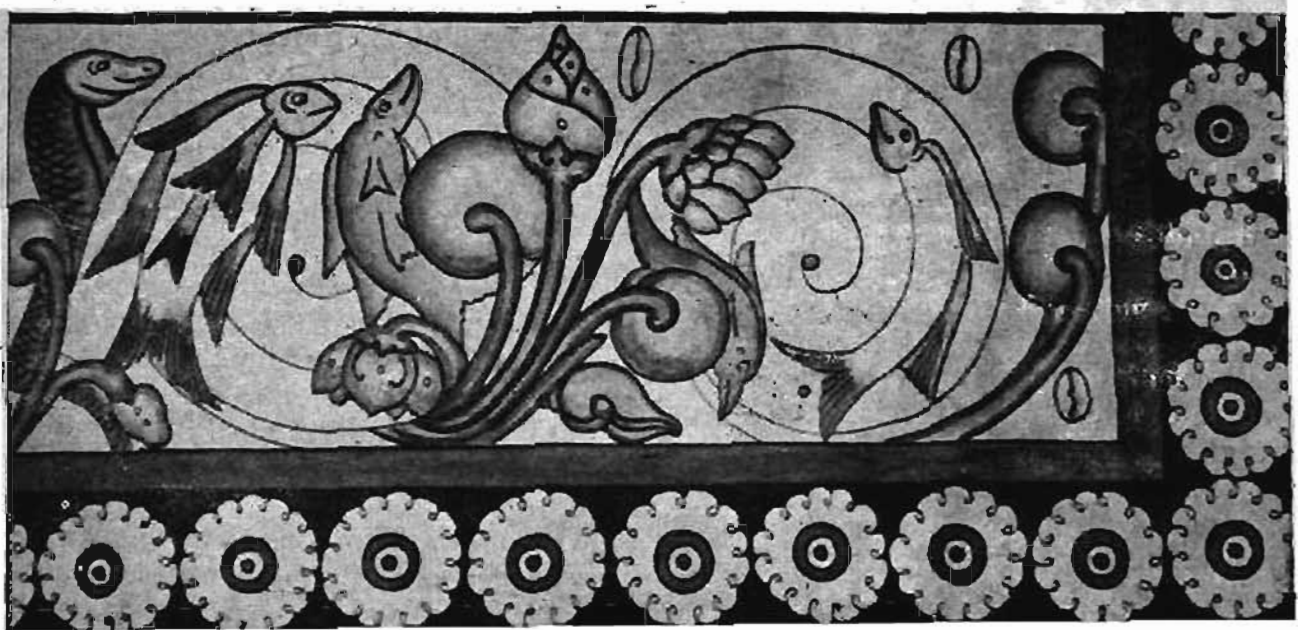
a British army bugle-call. There is a marked difference between the rhythm of a western hymn and that of an Indian “song to God”. Such difference may be partly decided by the nature of the instruments used (rapidity and emphasis may be more in affinity with drums than with a plucked instrument); it may also arise from the phrased music of the West as distinct from the one-note-one-syllable characteristic of Indian music. But deeper than these secondary causes of rhythmical difference may be detected, in comparative hymnology, a characteristic difference that has its roots in group-feeling and religious conceptions. Western religious solemnity would not fit into Indian modes; and the Indian familiarity with objective representations of deity, and the Indian optimism regarding the nature and destiny of the human soul, would impart an incongruity to the serious sentiments that western hymn-music conveys. But we

must leave this aspect of the matter and turn to visual design.

Art Tradition

In the incalculable variety of the world of nature that sight conveys to the consciousness of humanity, there is an apparently unlimited choice for the artist, compelled as he is by his temperament to try to create, from the materials of his environment, universes of his own to satisfy the impulse that he appears to share with the Creative Spirit of the universe. Such visual material of art-creation is more amenable than audible material to the expression of group differences, for it is shaped and coloured, warmed or chilled, elaborated by moisture or wizened by aridity, affluent on the level and indigent on the height, and gathered into species and strata and all

part and parcel of the life of the individual and of the local group, enters into the mental and emotional phases of the inner nature, and in the process of time becomes identified by the still deeper imagination and intuition as the most authentic and efficient means of their outer expression, (2) that, conversely, it is incumbent on the artist, if he or she desires to achieve true self-expression and to make the finest appeal through art to the local group, to utilize the objects of nature at hand as origins of figures of speech in poetry and as archetypes of design in the plastic and graphic arts. This is the basis of tradition in the arts, the recognition and use of certain typical forms abstracted from visual nature, and the maintenance of life in tradition by the imaginative creation of



Fish-Design of Mural Border in Padmanabhapuram Palace

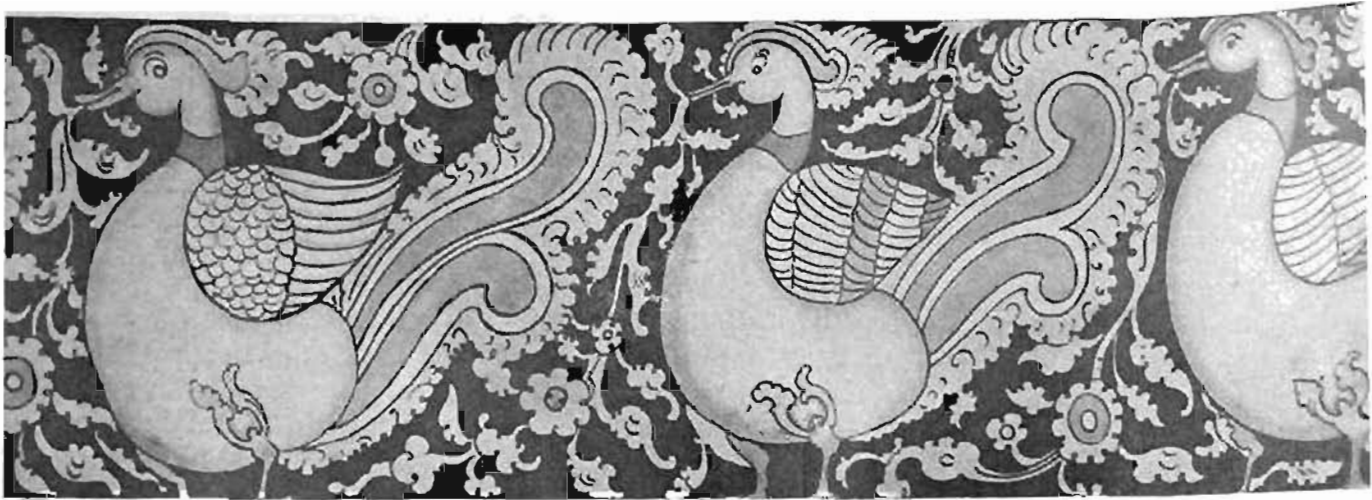
the assortments that differentiate the locations of the race, interact with human characteristics and ideas, and equip human expression with definable groupings of natural objects that become counters of local idiom and indigenous elements in the vocabulary of the plastic and graphic arts.

In the use of this visual nomenclature of art-creation two principles emerge: (1) that such visual nomenclature, being

permutations and combinations of such typical forms.

Indigenous Motifs

In addition to specifically indigenous motifs in design, art-history shows that certain of these which have become associated with particular forms of culture, move the culture to regions beyond the original habitat of the natural archetype of the design. The lotus, for example, which is not indigenous to all India, has



Hamsa—Design of Mural Border in Padmanabhapuram Palace

become an all-India symbol. A typical but somewhat difficult figure to handle in design, is the elephant which is at home in Travancore. A few years ago an art-object carved meticulously in sandal-wood and for centuries an object of veneration outside India, found its way to Travancore. On the back of it, serving as a support for the main carving, an elephant-figure was found, flatly conventionalized, and indicating that the elephant-design covered an enormous area in Asia. But we shall not follow up the geographical movements of design in this article. We shall conclude our study by looking at certain elements of rhythmical and visual design which have become indigenous in the art of the past in Travancore, and are at hand for all movements in the direction of restoring and fostering the arts and crafts in the State.

First we shall take three examples of wood-carving, an art in which Travancore, through the coincidence of plentiful and suitable material in its forests with eager creativeness attained high eminence.

(1) *Capital of a wooden pillar in Padmanabhapuram Palace.* The capital rises, not from, but as if out of its unadorned base (not shown in the illustration) in a supreme effort, characteristic of Hindu art as distinct from Buddhist or Islamic art, to break from relatively inexpressive simplicity into a rich efflorescence of designed beauty. Looked at

with an eye for visual rhythm, the pillar seems to make a first effort to shake its spirit out of bodily fore-squareness in three ascending and intensifying shrugs (seen in the bottom of the illustration.) From the uppermost of these horizontal shrugs it ascends into perpendicularity, carrying with it a rhythmical intensity through the four subsidiary pillars (pilasters: two fully seen in the illustration, one partly seen on the left, the fourth hidden at the back) whose increasing energy of rhythmical design culminates in ornamented brackets that express in their downward curves the intention of arresting and concentrating the rhythmical upsurge, and putting it to the service of supporting into full flowering the inverted terminals of the capital. The four superb terminals are created out of one piece that rests on the pilasters and the core of the pillar. But in the total rhythmical design they form the triumphant attainment of the aspiration of the whole pillar, an attainment that throws out its arms victoriously, and in token of fulfilled desire turns its triumph downwards towards the simplicity from which it has sprung.

(2) *Carved wooden band around rooms in the Nerapura at Padmanabhapuram.* An interesting combination of static and mobile motifs in wood-carving is seen in the wooden band that goes around certain walls of the all-wood triple-building, the

Nerapura at Padmanabhapuram. Four of the five lines of simple ornament appear at a stand-still. The fifth line (second from the bottom in the illustration) attains a plain movement to left and right of the "shell pattern" in the tilt and bend of the figures of the line. These lines make a background for a major design that, in the disposition of its parts, forms a unit of various rhythms, fan-wise in the "shell," ovoid in the lines of "bubbles" around the shell, floating and reaching outwards in the "seaweed" on both sides of the design. (The words in commas indicate speculation as to the exact subject of the design, there being at present no available direct description of a piece of craft that was created two hundred years or more ago.) The "shell" pattern is continuous in some bands; in others it is in a repeated sequence of similar designs with three parrots in one and flowers in the other.

(3) *Wood-carved architrave of door in the Nerapura, Padmanabhapuram.* That the constructors of the remarkable group of small houses known as the Nerapura had a particular set of designs in their imagination as being congruous to the work they had in hand is seen by the occurrence, in the richly carved architrave of the door in the illustration, of motifs seen in the previous illustration. The static figures reappear in long lines. The "shell" pattern is repeated in the cornice, the complete pattern alternating with the ovoid centre-piece in a satisfying pulsation of strong and weak. And as if to make amends for the omission of the "sea-weed" extensions in the full "shell" pattern, the artists gave the whole bottom line of the cornice to more than enough of the omitted "seaweed" motif rising to right and

left of the central point of the line. The most notable feature of the architrave is the lintel, with its succession of swirls moving rhythmically away from the centre-point, the core of each whorl being occupied by a bird-form of the parrot order, the second from each end being upside-down, a position frequently taken by parrots. The depth of the cutting and the sureness of the placing of the balanced details are a delight to the eye; and satisfaction is increased by the minute variations that give the sense of human handiwork that is so much more admirable than the mechanical perfections of modern machine-made articles. The beading under the lintel and down the jambs is simple but artistic. Two lizards, entirely realistic, but artistically balanced, occupy the upper corners of the doorway. Elsewhere in the Nerapura two lizards face a fly in the centre of the line under the lintel.

(4) *Mural border in Padmanabhapuram Palace.* The technique of the plastic arts has itself no relationship with the ultimate appearance of the finished



Perpendicular Yali-
Design of Mural Border
Padmanabhapuram

work. A series of blows and cuttings in stone and wood, or the heating and cooling of wax and molten metal in image-casting, will terminate in an object of rhythmical design, with no sign of the surgery it has endured or the fire through which it has passed. But the technique of the graphic arts, with its movement of the brush in painting, or of the pencil and crayon in drawing, has more affinity with the rhythmical capacity of the body, and subtly influences the work of art; it gives it more swing, even in subjects of an ostensibly static nature, like the Tibetan figure mentioned above. The plastic technique may be thought of as a translation of a percussion instrument in music, the pianoforte, for example; the graphic technique is another version of the fiddle-bow wielded in the western manner. The illustration now before us, a mural border from Padmanabhapuram Palace, shows the impartation of almost living rhythmical movement through the circular vigour of the convolutions in the water, a movement that is shared by the fish, and apparently enjoyed by the sea-horse who watches it on the left; it is also shared by the water-weeds. This is only a fragment of the many fish-designs in the Padmanabhapuram murals; and, observing the prominence of this motif in the imaginations of the painters, the speculation as to the "shell" motif in the wood-work of the Neralpura, described above, feels less of a

speculation and more of a certainty. The indigenous origin of the motif may perhaps be found in the neighbouring waters of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, with Cape Comorin as a familiar centre of religious pilgrimage.

(5) *A second mural border in Padmanabhapuram Palace.* The figure of the mythological animal (yali) and the floral design in ascending oscillations is familiar in stone sculpture. In the mural border now illustrated, from Padmanabhapuram Palace, the pliability of the brush-work and the variety of colours (which unfortunately we cannot reproduce here) give a special life and vividness to the rhythmical design.

(6) *A third mural border from Padmanabhapuram Palace.* Here the rhythm of the design is reduced to a simple movement from right to left. Though the feet of the birds (the *hamsa*, sometimes Englished as swan) are both set on the ground the attention of the bird is forward, and the imagination perceives the feet as placed at the instant of change from one step to the next. The arrangement of the floral decoration predominantly towards the left adds to the motion.

The foregoing is only an indication of a vast subject of high aesthetical and patriotic importance in the production of generations of citizens of good taste and good expression.