Execution and Design.

We have received the following communication from Mr. T. J. Cobden Sanderson, the well known amateur bookbinder:—

SIR,—I have not seen the French Exhibition, and am unable to offer any remarks upon the specimens of Binding there exhibited, but it may be useful to consider some of the criticisms upon them which have been made by your critic in The Bookbinder, as they affect principles or standards by which bindings may or should be judged.

There are two points involved in those criticisms which appear to me to be of importance, viz., (1) What it is your critic admires, and would commend to the admiration of the readers of The Bookbinder, and (2) The nature of design as applied to binding.

As to the first, I notice chiefly admiration for execution; and as to the latter, I notice that "a button-hole" (to use your critic's own phrase) of carnations is called a "design."

Upon these two points, which, in fact, blend into one, as the execution of the "button-hole" is particularly dwelt upon as admirable, I shall be obliged if you will allow me to make the following remarks:—

Execution, then, in decoration is a secondary matter. It is of importance, but of importance only as aptly and fully expressing that which is executed, viz., pattern or design. If that which is elaborately executed is not design or pattern, is not an idea of some kind, the more perfect the execution the more foolish it is, and the more it is praised the more does it deserve to be blamed.

And now, what is design or pattern? Certainly the "button-hole" upon which so much praise is lavished is not design or pattern or an idea of any kind; it is only an absurd mistake, and the execution of it in the elaborate way described is only an elaborate folly.

Design or pattern has relation to the space which it fills or covers, and purports to decorate; the "button-hole" has none. Design or pattern is organic, its parts are distributed upon a plan with a view to the fulfilment of a purpose. The "button-hole" is not organic, nor are its parts distributed upon any plan with a view to any purpose except to imitate—"a button-hole." Pattern or design is a creation; the "button-hole" is not a creation, it is a plagiarising. In fine, whatever goes to constitute pattern or design is absent from the "button-hole," and whatever goes to constitute the common-place of common imitation and to carry it by elaborate execution into finished imbecility is present in the "button-hole."

To conclude. In the decoration of a book several things have to be considered, to wit:

(1.) The aim of the decoration.
(2.) The amount of it.
(3.) The motive (motif).
(4.) The development and variation of the motive upon the different parts of the book so as to constitute for the entire decoration one organic whole.
(5.) The execution, i.e. the expression with certain tools upon and with a certain material, of the pattern.

And it is to be noted that the main energy is to be thrown into the creation of the design, lest we come to realise in our own persons that terrible sentence on an empty-headed Frenchman gifted only with his mother tongue—"Il dit tout ce qu’il veut, mais malheureusement il n’a rien à dire."
Our Competition.

In order to create a deeper interest among the workers of our craft in their daily occupation, we have pleasure in this month formulating the conditions of a competition such as we trust will be feasible to all classes and sizes of London and provincial binderies.

Our first competition will be for a half-bound book in calf or morocco, the size to be nothing beyond a demy octavo.

Competitors must send in their work to the Editor, The Bookbinder, 13, Charing Cross, on or before the 20th of November, accompanied by a letter from employers, guaranteeing that the work was done in their shop, and by the persons sending in their names as competitors.

Employers will not be allowed to compete.

Competitors must pay cost of carriage to and fro.

The book may be forwarded by one man and finished by another; but both names must be given.

Three leading London binders will adjudge upon the work sent in, and a sum of 10s. will be awarded the most creditable specimen. A free copy of The Bookbinder for twelve months will be sent to those who are highly commended.

The names of all competitors, with their addresses, will be published in The Bookbinder in order of merit.

The conditions of the award will be based principally upon excellence of design and execution. The nature of the forwarding will be an important matter.

As every effort will be made to return the books sent in as early as possible, competitors might make use of work executed for customers with the sanction of the latter.

In conclusion, the Editor of The Bookbinder sincerely trusts that many will compete and in no way be fearful that a few leading London firms will carry off the honours. A half-bound book affords opportunity for the graceful use of a few simple tools such as are in the possession of every respectable shop.

Should this effort meet with a hearty response, the competition will be continued monthly.

Execution and Design.

Reply to Mr. Cobden-Sanderson.

Our readers will remember that in the last issue of The Bookbinder, Mr. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson criticised our review of a certain specimen of binding as exhibited at the Paris Exhibition. The author of the series of Exhibition articles has forwarded us the following reply to Mr. Cobden-Sanderson's criticism:—

Dear Sir,—I should feel diffident about replying to Mr. Sanderson's letter in your last issue if I were assured that the binder whose work I admired could defend his own production; but since M. Michel may not see that letter, or, if he does, that his scant
acquaintance with our tongue may not be sufficient to discern its import, I feel impelled to reply. As regards the "design," I would rather he had done it, as he is an artist of known and proved ability.

Perhaps I was a little unfortunate in being unable to find a word that could better express my meaning than "button-hole;" yet it is a well-known word expressing a certain quantity of flowers. Neither bunch, spray, sprig, nor branch would meet the case, therefore it was "your critic's own phrase."

The question raised, however, is whether the "button-hole of carnations" constitutes "design." Mr. Sanderson recognizes that I dwelt chiefly upon execution. Why? Because I saw little originality in design, and complained that "copyists of copyists, there appears to be very little new under the sun, especially in bookbinding." With little new, the next thing was execution. This "secondary matter" that engrossed my attention, Mr. Sanderson also admits to be "secondary matter." When he penned that, was he thinking of his own imperfections, and that on the debatable ground of "design" he might stand a better chance?

He lashes out at what I called design in this one particular case without asking for, or apparently thinking of what was the subject of the book, the title of which, through some inadvertence, I did not note down. As far as my recollection serves, the book was about flowers; and I contend that the "button-hole of carnations" on the side was design, and complied with the laws even Mr. Sanderson has laid down.

It had "aim" in its decoration.
"The amount of it" was considered.
"The motive" was present.
It had "one organic whole."
And "the execution" was perfect.

I complain of Mr. Sanderson's criticism in that he only recognizes the "creation" of design, and allows no place for the adaptation of various forms to design. It required certain modifications and adaptation to perfect the idea of decoration by means of a "button-hole of carnations," and the thing was fitly and pleasingly done. Hence it became design.

When I read Mr. Sanderson's letter, I thought him impracticable and too strait-laced. I questioned if his work would bear his own tests, and how he would succeed in the revelation of his "motive." His "things to be considered" are simply the ordinary considerations of every good binder; the difficulty lies in the revelation of the motive; so I went to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition to see his work. The Daily News had a glowing description of it; The Star a sharp critique; but The Star was right. It says:—"Mr. Cobden-Sanderson has a case of bindings all of which certainly have a character of their own, but Mr. Sanderson has told us that bookbinding is homage, that the cover of each book should be the keynote of its contents, that it should express the author's theme; therefore each binding should be quite distinctive. But Mr. Sanderson has also discovered, judging by his bindings which are virtually the same, that there is no difference between Swinburne, Matthew Arnold, and Wagner. This is a discovery! To such an outer barbarian as myself the only binding which gives any clue whatever to its contents is the one with 'Aucassin et Nicolette' legibly lettered on it. Original designs produced specially by an artist for a cover are the only ones which do give character to books. No amount of
mechanical tooling by hand even by such a great man as Mr. Cobden-Sanderson compare with them.” The keynote of the situation is that the powers of a finisher are limited by the tools he works with, and the material he works on.

A more extraordinary case of modern bindings I have never seen. I will have mercy on the forwarding, for it is design that is Mr. Sanderson’s strong point, but I must point out that most books have convex backs, some have a tendency to flatness, but I never before saw books, supposed to be well bound, with concave backs. The execution of the pattern was certainly “secondary.” As regards the design the majority are treated similarly, and in a manner, no doubt, Mr. Sanderson’s very own, since it is questionable if any binder would find it pay to produce work like it. But I challenge any one to tell me the author of, or the character of, any one work in the case by the ornamentation on the covers. The designs seem to have been subject to these considerations:—

The aim—imitation of certain wall papers.
The amount—to cover the side.
The motive—undiscorable.
The development—incapable of it.
The execution—not sufficiently practised.

If to copy a flower is a plagiarism, what is the copying of an empty calyx, or seed pod? If both, why choose that which is least pleasing for the purpose of decoration? Empty calyxes and seed pods are the chief tools used by Mr. Sanderson, with sprays of leaves. But is the copying of a flower a plagiarism? I commend Mr. Sanderson to a dictionary. In my opinion it is far nearer a plagiarism to reduce a wall paper to the size required for a book cover, and very ill-advised to run a fine one-line border through the pattern. His “motive” cannot be discerned.

Now, Sir, Mr. Sanderson assumes the office of censor and even of teacher, and we must subject his pretensions to a little examination. Your true artist reveals his motive in his work, the man who cannot do that is simply a workman, and since he has signally failed to prove himself an artist by what right does he set himself up as a censor and teacher? Surely not by reason of his workmanship, for “the main energy is to be thrown into design,” and as he has not succeeded, his execution is but poorly “finished imbecility.” He had better leave Bookbinders alone, for they have little time to attend to fads. They are a set of hard-worked men who have to earn a living by fierce competition with each other in their efforts to please the public’s taste, not members of a coterie who can afford to say nice things to each other concerning their own doings, and secure good places in a mutual admiration society’s show, while affecting to be very philanthropic to the poor workers.

To conclude, Mr. Sanderson’s remarks seem directed against the work of a practical binder without due consideration of his own rules, which appear to be even less considered in his own work.

The Writer of the Article.