

Britain : Art.

Livesey.

A Note on Threshold and Hearth Design in N.W. Cumberland.**93***By the Rev. Herbert Livesey, B.A., L.Th., F.R.A.I.*

Under the title of "Door-step Art—a traditional Folk Art," Mr. F. H. Newbury, in 1907, before the Leicester meeting of the British Association, put forward a very interesting theory. His interest was, of course, directed mainly by his specialist knowledge of the fine arts, and he stated that "the early "scribblings of children, though apparently meaningless, may be shown to be "instinctive art products. These drawings become more purposeful and regulated "as the mental and physical development proceeds, and the doorstep art is filled "with the designs and application of geometrical patterns and drawings created "in this stage of artistic evolution."

Professor Bryce, remarking on its anthropological bearings, stated that the designs were traditional in character, being handed down from generation to generation, and to this I can myself testify, for in all cases where I have questioned the artist I have been informed that "my mother always did it like that." The designs are nearly always purely geometrical and conventional and there is no zoomorphic motive, and I have found no attempt to represent any natural vegetable form. The only one which had any definite plant form was obviously spurious, and upon questioning was found not to be traditional. Here it may be desirable that the concluding remarks of Professor Bryce be mentioned: "Attention should "be directed to the existence in this country of such primitive, untaught, folk "designs, so that some adequate collection of examples may be formed before "the art of the Board School kills the spontaneity of the designs."

The art which concerns us is done entirely by women, and is quite independent of any outside influence. The media in which the designs are executed depends largely upon the class of stone upon which it will be used. In Cumberland the doorsteps are chiefly of red sandstone, and the designs of necessity must be of some other colour if they are to be seen. So the usual medium is either white chalk or a soft grey sandstone, or even a white stone known locally as "alabaster." The hearths are of slate slabs or of granite; here the medium of decoration is either one of the above or ruddle, known as rud, a kidney-shaped stone found between the layers of sandstone, or in iron ore deposits, and of a bright red colour. These rubbing stones are often purchased from pedlars, one such pedlar being known only as "Rud" Mary.

The question arises whether the designs are, as Mr. Newbury interprets them, the expression of a primitive art instinct, or whether they are a survival. Professor Bryce desired to ascertain the archæological value of the art and hoped that it could be proved to have relations to some type of art of the past, and that if we could get collections of the designs from different districts it would, in all probability, throw some indirect light on the distribution of cults and peoples. That it is a survival I do not for one moment doubt, my own interest being specifically the magico-religious. I was immediately struck with the similarity of idea in the spiral design to the soul-traps of Danger Isle, and was interested to find if any tradition as to the meaning still existed. Generally, my search has been futile, but an old woman whom I asked concerning the doorstep design said smilingly that when she was a child she was told that it was to keep the devil out; and I asked a youth if he had ever been told why it was done, and he later told me that his grandfather said it used to keep the pixies away. It is held now to be a criterion of a clean house; whether this is just a modern material fact or a survival, the house being considered free from demons, is difficult to say; but there is no doubt that the threshold certainly even yet plays a very important part in this part of the world, and even in other districts. The immemorial sacredness

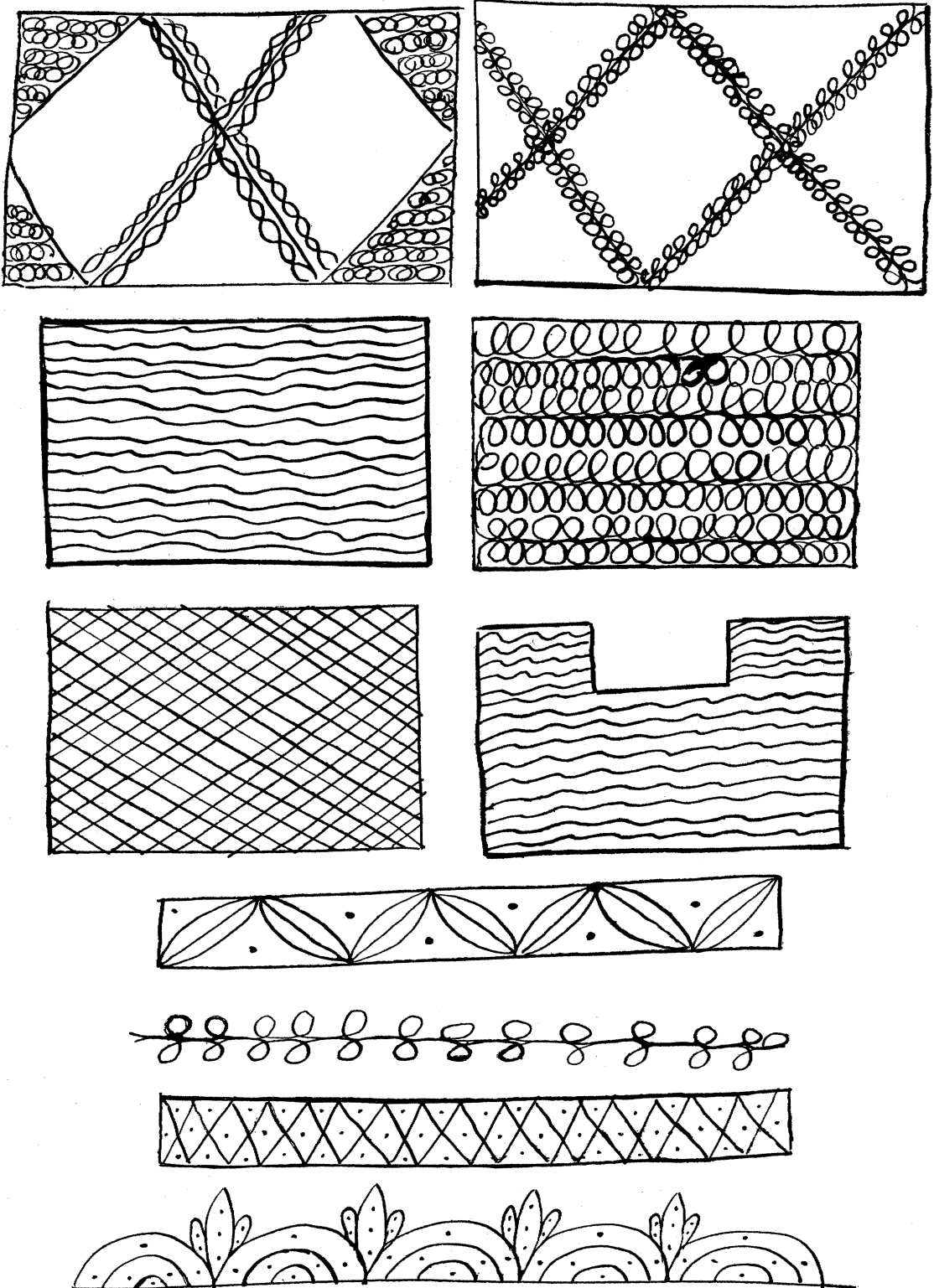


FIG. 1.—HEARTH AND DOORSTEP DESIGNS FROM N.W. CUMBERLAND.

of it may have some connection with its decoration. The idea of first-foot on New Year's Day, when the luck of the year depends on the person who first sets foot on your threshold; also a new baby must not be taken across the doorstep of another's house until it has been christened; nor must the mother go into a neighbour's house until she has been "churched." Of course, it is obvious that some connection may have existed in the likeness of the ruddle to blood, and may have signified some sacrificial element when used on the threshold which either appeased or frightened away evil spirits. I fear I am not competent to discuss the art motives; it requires a more specialised knowledge of art forms and their evolution. It would be interesting to learn if the origin of the art is Celtic, and in what way it differs in different places. The illustrations are all by the people in the district, from whom I have endeavoured to get information. Although in some cases crude, I felt it better to keep them so.

HERBERT LIVESEY.

Torres Strait: Puberty Customs.

Done.

A Girl's Puberty Custom in Boigu. *By Rev. J. Done.*

94

In the island of Boigu, Torres Strait, I recently came across a native custom which does not appear to be known outside. At all events Mr. John Bruce, of Murray Island, whose experience of Torres Strait is unique, says he has not heard of it in the eastern islands. A feast was given in honour of a young girl which set the island gossips talking. It seems the first signs of menstruation had appeared, and the occurrence was made the occasion for some jollification. I was told by the old men "we always do this thing, this proper fashion belong this island, only we do "him inside along bush;" it was the publicity which caused the talk.

At the first sign the mother (*apu*) would tell the father (*tati*). The girl's maternal aunt (*nagwam*)—(Murray Island it would be *negwam*)—took the girl to the bush, where she was instructed what to do, and was kept in seclusion for the duration of the period, while the uncle (the chief on the maternal side) (*waduap*) called together the adult relatives for a feast, which always took place away from the village and without the knowledge of the younger people.

So far as I am able to trace, this feast is peculiar to Boigu, and probably comes from Papua, which is only three or four miles away.

Note that the maternal side takes the lead. In other customs in these islands, as far as I know, it is the father's brother who figures, who is the big father (*koi tati*), while the mother's sister then becomes merely little mother (*magi apu*).—J. DONE.

Women's puberty customs have been recorded for Saibai, Yam and Tutu, Mabuig, and Muralug (see Vol. V. of the "Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits," 1904, pp. 201-205). Boigu must now be added. This custom differentiates the western from the eastern islanders, since it appears to be unknown among the latter. Dr. Seligman also records (*l.c.*, p. 205) similar customs from North Queensland.—A. C. HADDON.

India: Religion.

Gordon.

Some Notes on "Possession by Bhūts*" in the Punjab. *By Capt. D. H. Gordon, D.S.O.*

95

The belief in "possession by bhūts" is common to all the less educated people of the Punjab. The occurrence of "possession" is indeed so common that very little notice is taken of it. The man may become "possessed" in a number of

* Bhūt, a spirit.

WILEY



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