A DESIGN-SEQUENCE FROM NEW MEXICO

By A. V. Kidder

PHILLIPS ACADEMY, ANDOVER, MASS.

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Much has been written on the development of geometrical decoration among primitive people, and many design-sequences have been arranged; the latter, however, have almost always been based on preconceived theoretical ideas, and the material for them has usually been selected from specimens whose relative ages have not been known. Such sequences cannot, therefore, be regarded as indicating surely the tendencies of design growth, for the specimens regarded as early may in fact have been late, and the development may thus have taken place in the opposite direction to the one postulated; or, again, the specimens may all have been of one period and may represent either contemporary variants of a single design-phase, or entirely unrelated parts of other unsuspected sequences. It has accordingly been impossible in most cases to do more than guess as to whether any given change in design has been from the natural to the conventional or vice versa; whether toward simplification or toward elaboration.

The only safe method for the working out of developments in decorative art is to build up one's sequences from chronologically sequent material, and so let one's theories form themselves from the sequences. In the case of aboriginal American art this ideal has been very hard to attain because of the scarcity of stratified sites and the corresponding difficulty of obtaining relatively datable specimens.

In the Rio Grande district of New Mexico, however, students have recently been recovering stratigraphical data which establish an orderly
succession of several pottery styles; so that almost any vessel may be placed in its proper chronological relation to any other. Close studies of the decoration of these vessels should enable us to recognize and tabulate enough true design-sequences to form the basis for a correct appreciation of the art tendencies in that area. Several such sequences are already becoming apparent; the accompanying incomplete example is given as an illustration.

While the five units in the series are from vessels from various sites, stratigraphical studies by Mr. Nelson at San Cristobal and by me at Pecos allow it to be stated positively that they are arranged in their proper chronological order. A description follows.

In the early black-on-white pottery a common design consists of a large triangle with two of its corners filled in with black; a pair of opposed stepped figures mounted on interlocking 'stalks' occupies the remaining rectangular space (fig. 1). In a primitive type of biscuitware which succeeds the black-on-white the same triangular element is often seen, and the two opposed stepped figures are also present but have lost their interlocking 'stalks' and hang suspended in the open space (fig. 2). In the biscuitware of a slightly later period the stepped elements drop out altogether, but the triangle holds to its original shape (fig. 3). In still later examples a progressive modification takes place in the cut-off and filled-in corners of the triangle; they become smaller and their two contiguous sides are no longer at right angles to each other (fig. 4). A final step is shown in figure 5; it is characteristic of the last type of biscuitware with which we are familiar.

This series represents, of course, only a short period in the life of this particular design; what phases it passed through in reaching the complicated form in which we first encounter it are as yet unknown; nor can we tell whether or not it had any later developments. In this short sequence we see: first, a progressive simplification due to the dropping out of elements (figs. 1, 2, 3); second, a modification in the shape of the remaining elements (figs. 4, 5). These data are, of course, too scanty for general conclusions, as they illustrate only one of many designs; they show, however, what interesting results may confidently be expected.