

Decorated Ostrich Eggs.

BY LAURA B. STARR.



IN all countries of the world the egg is regarded as symbolical of the eternal cycle of life, and as such figures more or less in Church ceremonial, particularly at Easter time. But the Copts, who claim to be the oldest Christian Church, differentiate the ostrich egg from all others as their particular symbol because of the remarkable and ceaseless care with which the parent birds guard their eggs. The vigilance of the ostrich has passed into a proverb among them, and the egg is regarded as a symbol reminding the believer that his thoughts should be fixed continually on spiritual things.

The old Coptic church in Cairo is very handsomely decorated with them; before the sanctuary screen hang six silver lamps, and over each one an ostrich egg. The Romans also attached great value to ostrich eggs, and freely used them to decorate their homes and temples. The Greeks decorate their churches with plain and ornamented eggs, hanging them in festoons, or suspending them singly from any convenient hook. The ostrich egg is considered as much an emblem of good luck with them as the horse-shoe is with us. This is a belief inherited from the ancient Greek, who taught that if man were not watchful over his own soul it would grow bad, even as the egg addles when it is neglected.

These eggs are occasionally found in Mohammedan mosques. The tomb mosque of Kait Bey, in Cairo, contains some very fine specimens. As a rule they are mounted in a metal frame and hung by a silver wire from the roof, usually before the

altar screen. Now and again one is threaded by a silken cord and hung above a lamp or from a wooden arm projecting from one of the pillars of the nave. When the real eggs cannot be had artificial ones are used.

The Hottentots eat the eggs, and consider them a great delicacy. They have rather a mean way of abstracting the eggs from the nest by means of a long stick with a crook at the end. They cheat the poor bird by taking an egg every day; she seems not to remember how many she has laid, and so keeps on so long as her work seems unfinished.

Among the souvenirs which all travellers bring from the Orient are always found one or more ostrich eggs, plain or decorated. The great ostrich park at Matarieh, near Cairo, furnishes a large number, but quantities are also brought from

Somali and the Soudan.

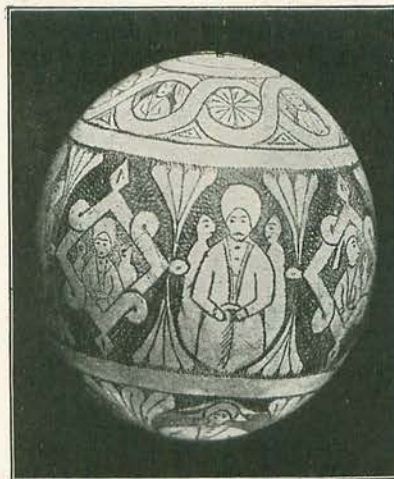
There are in the Frederick Stearn's collection in the Detroit Museum of Art some very fine specimens of decorated eggs showing a great variety of native work. A cream-white egg from the Soudan is covered with an etching of men and animals filled in with black and white, which, while very crudely done, is very effective (Fig. 1).

An Egyptian egg in the same collection is of a light-brown shade; an Arab artist has depicted an archaic fishing craft with various scenes familiar to Nile visitors.

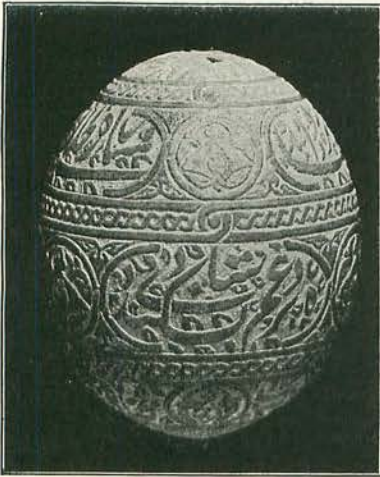
Another Egyptian egg, the work of a Cairene artist (Fig. 2), is etched with ancient figures, copied from some of the recently discovered tombs, with curious scroll and figure designs at the ends. The egg is left in its natural colouring.



1.—EGG FROM THE SOUDAN.



2.—EGG ETCHED IN CAIRO.



3.—EGYPTIAN EGG WITH VERSES FROM THE KORAN.

The finest specimen of Egyptian eggs in the collection is one from the Soudan, with quotations from the Moslem's Bible, done in intaglio, covering its entire surface (Fig. 3). These flowing characters are very decorative, and one is not likely to weary of them.

The handsomest and most artistic work done in this line is that of the Japanese artists, who never fail to improve upon whatever they imitate. Given the egg which comes to them from Egypt, Australia, or San Francisco, they return you an exquisite piece of work most ingeniously typifying Japanese



4.—A FINE SPECIMEN OF JAPANESE WORK.

art. They produce a variety of effects by producing lacquer in low relief and by etching in delicate outline upon the surface.

The finest specimen in this collection, or

any other which the writer has seen, is the work of a Japanese artist of great skill (Fig. 4). The egg is that of an emu—the Australian ostrich—and is of a dark blue colour naturally. The design is wrought in cameo, which shows the gradations of colour to the inner lining, which is almost white. A Japanese mountain road with torrents and bits of scenery are in the background. A Japanese lady of the ancient *régime*, clad in the graceful Court kimono, fills the foreground and the eye of the beholder. The work is exquisitely done, but the beauty and delicacy are almost lost in the reproduction.

A crane's egg is converted into an ornamental incense-box, which the Japanese call a "kogo." This is decorated with wild flowers



5.—A JAPANESE INCENSE-BOX.

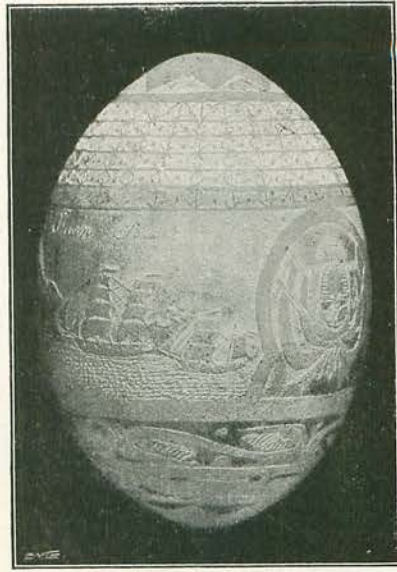
and grasses, done with gold in low relief. It is a charming specimen (Fig. 5).

Another one, the work of a Japanese artist, stands in a lacquered frame, and is intended for a table ornament. It shows a simple design of roots, leaves, and blossoms, with singing birds lacquered with gold in low relief (Fig. 6).

An etched rhea's egg from Argentine has for its subject a *gaucho*—or cowboy—on horseback with a girl behind him (Fig. 7). This egg is deeply pitted, as are all those from South America. The *gauchos* are familiar objects in South America; they chase the ostrich on horseback and catch them with bolas—two heavy balls attached to the end of a rope. They grasp one ball in the hand and whirl



6.—ANOTHER JAPANESE "KOGO."



8.—A RHEA'S EGG FROM SOUTH AMERICA.

the other round their heads, like a lasso coil ; when near the bird they let go, and the two balls will, if skilfully managed, wind round the long legs of the ostrich and send him into a somersault into the sand.

A rhea's egg from South America (Fig. 8) displays on one side the Argentine coat of arms, on the other is depicted a naval engagement, probably an historic scene; the rounded ends are finished with scroll work and a geometrical border, above which rise several mountain peaks.

An egg in the writer's possession is one of the smooth, cream-coloured ones from North Africa. A quotation from the Koran is cut around either end, while the central circle is taken up with symbolic figures. There is a Nile boat with lateen sails; the three great pyramids; catching and plucking an ostrich (Fig. 9); a scarabæus with outstretched wings, and the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt. The contrast of the cream surface and the white background is very beautiful.



7.—A RHEA'S EGG FROM ARGENTINE.



9.—EGG FROM AFRICA SHOWING MEN PLUCKING AN OSTRICH.