TIME'S CHANGES IN THE DESTINIES OF ART

That art is one of the essentials of human life may be proven by its adaptability to time, place and circumstance. Under the form of personal ornament, it is rightly characterized by Carlyle, in his "Sartor Resartus," as the first spiritual need of the "barbarous man;" for food and shelter, however primitive having been provided, the savage turns to gratify his finer sensuous instincts by the use of brilliant color and by the adornment of his few household goods, his weapons and his clothing. His so-called "play-impulse" leads him to imitate the things that please him in the nature by which he is surrounded. He comes to recognize the touch of the Divine Hand in sky and water, bird and plant. His delight in his rudimentary painting and carving and building turns him aside from crime and violence. To him art is God's gift, the most powerful means of his ascent and civilization.

In his stage of fetish-worship, man uses art to glorify the objects that he adores, to declare the powers that protect him; as we find by reference to Egyptian symbolism, wherein the hawk, the crane and the cat, nature's scavengers and hunters, are represented as national deities. And such indeed they were; for had they not done their work of extermination upon the scourges of animal and insect life that followed the inundations of the Nile, there had remained but one inhabitant of the land, and that inhabitant malaria.

In the ancient world, certain highly gifted races having become dominant, polytheism being greatly favored through the mixture of races,—each of which stood for its own gods,—the development of commerce producing great wealth at the centers of civilization, art became the handmaid of luxury. With the faculties of the imagination and manual skill at their fullest, aesthetic expression reached its maximum. But
when Greece had been absorbed into Rome, and Rome had lost its political ideals, then beauty came to be measured by costliness, and art fell to its lowest decline; since it can flourish in organic periods only, side by side with faith, love of country and pure emotions, whatever be their source and direction.

Under the deep, restorative influence of Christianity it rose again, appealing in a new form to a new world lighted by hope. It passed wholly into the service of religion: in the East slowly settling into the inactivity and languor native to the region; in the West, retiring into the monasteries, as into arks of safety, to escape the deluge of barbarians. When six centuries rolled away, in which waiting had passed from the anxious to the apathetic state, fear of invasion and fear of the end of the world ceased; the new nations and governments consolidated, and the great churches and cathedrals sprang into being as votive offerings for preservation. During the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the mysteries of the Christian faith, and the story of man's origin, fall and redemption, as taught by the Bible, furnished abundant and rich material for artistic expression. The great Italians and Germans flourished, displaying their racial traits and their personal genius, but all uniting in glorifying a common creed and a single church. The exalted and the positive, the ascetic and the carnally-minded, wrought together fraternally, preserving the traditions of their elders and believing their art to be all-satisfying, complete in its aims and final in its form.

With the Revival of Learning and the development of free thought consequent upon it, art was released from a service of centuries. It came to be regarded as a means of realizing life. It reflected the spirit of the age in its exuberance, its frank paganism and its acceptance of material from the most opposite and varied sources. But the spirit of the age was negative, and negation is essentially destructive. Denial by force of
repetition loses its note of sincerity. So the art of the
Renascence, at first ingenuous, then strong, impetuous,
and splendidly tyrannous, degenerated into a vain display
of form, which, since it contained no message from man
to man, failed long to hold the respect and the attention of
the world.

In our own time, we have seen
art assume a phase, which has but one historical parallel.
As in the days of the cathedral builders, it becomes the
teacher of the handicrafts. All honor then be to the two
sons of Oxford, who, a half-century ago, turned toward
mediaevalism as to the true fount of a popular art, and
with voice, influence, wealth and personal sacrifice, gave
their knowledge to the world, and the impetus to the
movement which is now forceful in England, America
and France. These men went to their work in no spirit
of imitation, but seizing the significance of a period in
which the "lesser arts of life" co-operated with the higher
intellectual ones, they felt that were this union again
effected, there would result from it benefits to society simi-
lar to those which prevailed in the age of the nameless
masters of Nuremberg and Amiens, Strasbourg and
Cologne. They understood, with the clearness of their
intellect, that art as the teacher of the handicrafts is also
the friend of the people, creating beauty out of the common-
place, leading the adult away from the sordid cares of
life, and giving to the child room for the exercise of his
imitative and imaginative powers, which otherwise are
harmfully restrained and dwarfed. Ruskin and Morris
having gained the attention of the most matter-of-fact of
civilized nations, in an age of industrialism, proceeded to
labor for the increase of pleasure in life: pleasure of the
craftsman in his work; of the farmer in the country by
which he is surrounded; of the entire people in a sim-
licity, order and symmetry to result from a wise and
economical choice of the material objects which serve the
needs of daily existence. Art so understood and so
received to the heart of the people, corresponds to the words of Cicero, when, in his plea for the poet Archias, he described the joys of literary attainment:

"These studies nourish youth, delight old age, adorn prosperity and offer a refuge and solace against adversity."