THE ECONOMIC FOUNDATION
OF ART

EVERY organism, whether it be social or biological, if it is to survive, must seek pleasure and avoid pain. Without accepting any particular theory of ethics, it is safe at least to say that the things which give pleasure are better than those which give pain. The best social relations are those securing the greatest amount of happiness to those who maintain them.

Pleasure consists in the satisfaction of impulses and desires. Hitherto the struggle for existence has been so hard that the great majority of mankind have found all their energies exhausted in the effort simply to avoid hunger and cold, and the idea of a society that would secure even these primal necessities to all its members has been looked upon as Utopian.

Our analysis of man’s wants, instincts and impulses has usually been very imperfect; excluding some of the motive forces, which from the point of view of the social student are fundamental. Prof. Jacques Loeb of the University of Chicago, in his work on the comparative physiology of the brain, has expressed this fact as follows:

“Human happiness is based upon the possibility of a natural and harmonious satisfaction of the instincts. One of the most important instincts is usually not even recognized as such, namely: the instinct of workmanship. Lawyers, criminologists, and philosophers frequently imagine that only want makes man work. This is an erroneous view. We are forced to be active in the same way as ants or bees. The instinct of workmanship would be the greatest source of happiness, if it were not for the fact that our present social and eco-
nomic organization allows only a few to gratify this instinct.”

The present social organization has divided the functions of the social body, and then failed to correlate them in such a manner as to obtain that unity and completeness which is essential to either human happiness or artistic beauty. Turn in whatever direction we will, only disfigured fragments appear. Every human function fails of any adequate healthful, natural gratification. None of them succeeds in giving any large, full measure of pleasure, while nearly all give rise to great pain and suffering.

The importance of this fact cannot be overestimated. The words artist and artistic have come to be so much the playthings of certain coteries that it is only when a Ruskin or a Morris uses them, and in some way correlates them with the whole of life that they interest any save the dilettanti. But if it be true that that thing is artistic which gives the greatest pleasure to the minds most fitted to understand it, and if the chief end of life is to seek pleasure, the conclusion follows that the aim of social workers should be to make society artistic. Viewed in this way, the word artistic obtains a deeper meaning than when spoken at an afternoon tea concerning some elaborate piece of bric-a-brac.

Artistic, in the sense in which I wish to use it, (and I believe that it will be generally admitted that this is the true and best sense of the word), means possessing such a unity, and correlation of parts to the whole, as to give the greatest amount of pleasure possible. Incidentally this implies a similar artistic wholeness and power of appreciation on the part of the persons who come in contact with the object. It implies, that, if the greatest possible pleasure is to be derived, both man and environment should possess this quality of symmetrical completion and correlation.

Using the word artistic in this
broad and true sense, let us glance for a moment to see wherein our present society fails of being artistic. In the first place, the word art has been stolen from this very sense and applied to something which is perhaps more isolated and detached from the essential portions of life than almost any other one feature. The word is to-day ordinarily used only in speaking of painted canvases or highly specialized tone combinations, which are not only utterly unrelated to the remainder of society, but which demand that both those who produce this “art,” and those who enjoy it, shall be isolated from all connection with the vital essential social processes. What the result has been upon both “art” and the “artistic public” has been told often enough by those much more fitted than I to tell the story, and need not detain us here. Very few of these “artists” have ever dreamed that they should seek to make all of life artistic, rather than to produce something whose beauty is appreciable only because of contrast with the hideous ugliness of the life by which it is surrounded. Isolated art is never truly pleasurable.

Other phases of society present this same inartistic isolation with its painful accompaniments. It is a fact of frequent observation by social students that the modern person does not know how to “play.” Play, if it is to have any essential meaning, should signify the pleasurable exercise of human faculties. But it is true that the majority of mankind at the present time, even if they had the opportunity, would not know how to obtain any intense pleasure from such an exercise.

The classical example of this ignorance is the London cabman, whose idea of a holiday is to rent a friend’s cab and ride on the inside over the same route that he follows, seated on the box, every other day in the year. But how much wiser are the remainder of the population? Great buildings with expensive apparatus are constructed simply for the purpose of giving
an opportunity to move different muscles of the body in a healthful manner. Even then, the gymnasium soon becomes a “bore,” and the daily “exercise” a “task.” So, various games are invented, and the more completely these can be isolated from all vital social relations, the more highly they are valued, until golf, polo, steam-yachting, and automobile racing become the ideal of social recreation. But in every one of these fields, it soon becomes evident that the main element of enjoyment is the utterly unsocial one of snobbishness. These games are principally enjoyed because their practice conveys a certain badge of respectability. This is proven by the fact that those who can do these things best: the “professionals,” the pugilists, wrestlers, jockeys, chauffeurs, etc., not only do not find any enjoyment in their “work,” but are despised by those who claim to be aiming at the very goal which the others have attained.

But it is when we come to study the “amusements” of the great mass of the people that the painfulness of their pleasures becomes fully apparent. Their idea of enjoyment is generally based upon some form of eating or drinking; a most significant commentary in itself on the nature of the daily life of the great toiling masses of mankind. The principal pleasurable thought connected with Thanksgiving and Christmas, in the minds of millions of people, is the possibility of eating and drinking to a condition of stupid satiety. The very idea of marking off one day from the remainder of the year to indicate the time when the sense of hunger and taste is fully satisfied, is enough to answer those who would call the critics of our present society “pig philosophers.” Incidentally it might be worth while to notice another sign that commercialism has influenced nearly all so-called amusements by the introduction of a financial consideration in the form of gambling. This shows once more the absolute impossibility of completely isolating any phase of life from the industrial basis of society.
Let us examine another social function and observe how near it comes to meeting the test which we have set up as artistic. Education, as well as "play" and "art," has been isolated from all social relations. The result has been painful to the child, as well as ineffectual in reaching the end of instruction. The "cramming" process, especially when it deals with dry facts isolated from all relation to the social whole, is now recognized to be a painful, and hence an injurious process to those who are subjected to it.

We have thus seen that owing to their isolation from vital social relations, neither art, education, nor even amusement, as now understood, gives pleasure, and this just because all these interests are defective in those relations toward society as a whole, which would make them truly artistic.

If we turn now to the actual social basis, the productive process, the creation of "goods," what do we see? Is there any pleasure for the great producing masses in their work? To ask the question is to answer it. On every hand, performance of the essential labor of society is looked upon as an evil to be avoided, and few indeed who are actually concerned with it, ever think of looking there for something pleasurable, artistic, enjoyable. The production of "goods" has become an evil. Here we find the fundamental cause of the whole "inartistic," and hence painful, character of our present society. This is one more witness to the truth of the philosophy of economic determinism. Unless the production of the necessities of life can be made beautiful, pleasurable and instructive, our whole society must remain disorganized, disintegrated, productive of pain, and inartistic. A school, a factory, a studio, or a gymnasium, as a thing by itself, is an anomaly and must fail of its purpose. What is needed at the present time is a process of synthesis and correlation. Tolstoi has seen a portion of this truth, but he becomes ridiculous in proposing his remedy.
He can only rail at division of labor and specialization of function. He demands that we go back to the period of cumbersome individualistic labor, with its imperfect production, but better correlation, rather than that we push on to the possibilities of a higher, grander and more artistic correlation of the marvelously more perfect processes of to-day.

This truth has been partially seen by workers in many fields and, in consequence, many partial attempts at correlation have been made. One of the most interesting of these attempts is found in the field of education. In the kindergarten movement an effort is made to unite play and instruction, and in the manual training work to unite creative processes with instruction. But perhaps the most significant of the attempts as yet made is the new handicrafts movement. There are two reasons why this movement is more significant than the others. In the first place, it aims at a somewhat wider correlation than any of the other movements, since it includes in its synthesis three factors, instead of two. It aims at the correlation of productive work, beautiful forms, and to some extent, pleasurable exertion. Its representatives would unite workshop, studio and playroom. More important still, they have realized in an indefinite and as yet often very imperfect way, that the basis of any social movement must be the fundamental productive process. Therefore they have begun their work in connection with that process. Nevertheless, this movement, also, in many ways, is fundamentally defective. One of its defects is that among the social factors which we have enumerated, (and our classification makes no pretense of being exhaustive), the handicrafts movement neglects the educational factor. Save through occasional lectures, publications, exhibitions, and a few apprentices, it does little educational work. It bears little effective relation to the great formative forces that are really determining the minds of future generations.
The problem before him who would make modern society "artistic," is so to synthesize its activities as to make the work of those who perform the great productive processes at once pleasant and educational. This sounds simple, but when once the people of any society shall find their highest pleasure and fullest education in creating the necessities of that society, we shall have come as close to a perfect system as the mind of man has yet been able to conceive.

At the same time, any adequate examination of our present social organization should convince anyone that such an ideal is utterly impossible of even approximate realization, without a complete revolution. All attempts to realize any portion of this ideal within that society must be recognized as largely Utopian. Moreover unless these facts are fully comprehended, such attempts are liable to become ridiculous. It is necessary only to study the movements already mentioned to show how they deteriorate in present society. A kindergarten established as an "institution" apart from the home becomes a place where tired, over-worked mothers "get rid" of their children, and where maiden ladies deprived of normal family relationship, play at motherhood. The very philosophy itself degenerates into a dilettante, parrot-like repetition of phrases, and the whole thing becomes to a great degree farcical. Manual training and "domestic science," kept apart from the productive sources of society and directed by a parasitic class, become either "fads," and burlesques upon the thing originally conceived, or, worse, they reverse the philosophy upon which they rest, and become training schools for servants and subordinates. Industrial handicraft shops cut off from all connection with the actual creative productive social processes, become the playthings of dilettanti, and the generators of "aesthetic crazes."

All such efforts are imperfect, unsymmetrical and "inartistic," because they lack that
wholeness and unity which artistic goodness and beauty demand. They only deal with a small portion of society, and, most important of all, not with the essential portion. The only real, vital portion of present society, as indeed of every other society, is the portion which supplies wants, produces goods, and maintains life. All the movements enumerated leave this portion of society untouched.

Finding themselves shut out from the actual productive processes, too many of these would-be craftsmen play at production in private workshops. Seeing no way to correlate the gigantic industrial forces of to-day, and to use them for their purposes, they look backward to a simpler and inferior social stage, and become reactionary. Even Morris was not wholly free from this defect. But one thing William Morris never did, (and in this he was unlike too many of his imitators), and that was to cut himself off from all the forces that were working to make his ideals possible. He was able to see that the difficulties confronting him were inherent in the society within which he was working, and that the only hope of realizing his ideals lay in overthrowing that society, or rather in hastening its growth through the capitalist stage into the co-operative stage, the next step in social evolution. Let me emphasize this point, since it is the most vital one in this whole discussion. From a hundred points, Capitalism presents a hostile attitude toward all efforts to restore the conditions of healthful, pleasurable, beautiful workmanship. Competition denies the product entrance to the actual social market, and compels it to circulate within a limited, unnatural, subsidized market. Wage-slavery deprives the producer of all desire to improve his product, or of the possibility of individual initiative did he desire it. Exploitation deprives the overwhelming majority of the hope of ever possessing anything of actual beauty or artistic merit. An environment of greed develops the coarseness of the parvenu among the bourgeoisie and the coarseness of a debased animality
among the proletariat. Under these conditions any movement toward the revival of the beautiful, the pleasant, and the good,—in short of the artistic,—which does not connect itself with the great revolutionary movement of the proletariat, has cut itself off from the only hope of realizing its own ideal. It has condemned itself to a narrow, incomplete, and unsymmetrical synthesis, to a most inartistic and uncraftsmanlike attitude, to a stultification in in fact of everything for which it claims to stand. Its followers can have no vital connection with society, no broad outlook, unless they can connect themselves with the actual productive forces of society. But they cannot do this in the privately-owned competitive factories of to-day. The only place in which they can come in contact with the real producers of goods is in the political socialist movement. Here they can join hands with those who constitute the essential productive factor of the present society, and who must be the dominant factor in the coming society, and can work with them for a common end. In this way, they can really make their force felt upon the coming generation and strengthen their influence with the present.

The founders of the movement recognized this, and William Morris is known fully as well for his activity in the political socialist movement, as for his efforts in the revival of artistic work. But his followers to-day have very generally forgotten the most essential portion of his teachings, and know absolutely nothing of the actual laborers and the labor movement. It would be an easy but ungracious task to point out specific instances of the degradation of the movement brought about by this isolation from what should be its foundation. Suffice to say that separated from all fundamental connection with social life, it has lapsed into vagaries, and has often strayed so far from its original paths as to be well-nigh lost in dilettantism and eccentricity. I am glad to see that there are, at present, signs of a true revival of craftsmanship
which, by virtue of the fact that it will embrace a wider, fuller synthesis than any previous movement, shall be fully entitled to call itself "artistic."

THE MODERN CRAFTSMAN:
The Question of His Livelihood

IT remains to be seen whether the Arts and Crafts movement, which is spreading so rapidly throughout our country, will prove a passing fancy, or whether it means a revival of the true art spirit.

The first society of Arts and Crafts is not more than five years old, and immediately following its early exhibition there came announcements from many cities, and then from the larger towns of similar exhibitions by societies which had just sprung into existence. From this fact, one is led to question whether this activity is an expression of genuine interest in handicrafts, or whether it is prompted by a spirit of imitation and rivalry.

For my own part, I am not inclined to take these societies too seriously; as I believe that much of both these motives underlies their patronage, and that it rests with the craftsmen themselves whether handicrafts shall have a permanent place in American life, or whether the societies and the work shall ultimately fail through want of support.

The fact that it is a reawakening of an old spirit brings with it peculiar difficulties that cannot be ignored. Both men and conditions have