THE ART-HANDICRAFTS OF ITALY

ITALY, more than any other country of Europe, is the home of local art-industries. It is necessary only to name her cities, in order to recall the peculiar handicraft of each. Venice produces glass, mosaics and lace; Florence, wood carvings and gilding, marble inlays and painted parchment; Rome, silks of characteristic design and pearl beads; Naples, majolica, lava-carvings and tortoise-shell work. Among the smaller cities and towns, Siena and Sorrento are known for their wood carvings; Leghorn for straw-plaiting, and Bellagio for her silk blanket industry. The more modern and commercial cities, like Milan, in which art-handicrafts do not flourish, lack the interest, the animation, and the picturesque quality which distinguish the cities of busy workshops.

The traveler in Italy is liable to ignore the artistic, as well as the social value of these handicrafts. He sighs as he studies the modern Italian buildings and many of the modern paintings. He fails to recognize that the most picturesque and the best loved of all the countries of Europe holds her past within her grasp.

But this fact is plain, if Italy be compared with Germany. In Hildesheim and Nuremberg, the most distinctive of Teutonic towns, the past and the present stand far apart. The old buildings remain, but the old life is gone. Wood and labor are both too expensive for men to cover their houses with carvings, as they did in the days of Adam Kraft and Vischer and Stoss, while smaller artistic enterprises are disdained. There, as in America, the artist is lost in the artisan. It is almost impossible for the visitor to gain that vista into the past and to experience that joy in the present which come to him almost at the moment of his entrance into Italy. Venice has no longer the wealth, the materials and the great artists to build a second Ducal Palace, but, still
animated by the spirit of her great works of art, she makes beautiful small objects and cherishes her small artists. In the lace schools, the glass and the mosaic factories, the workers are not without claims to be regarded as artists. Each man or woman carries out his or her design, and chooses a color scheme, with results that are seldom crude or unpleasing.

It is never well to yield to the prejudice that the art of a country exists solely in its churches, palaces and galleries. For it is in the shops that one must seek much of the art of the present day. In illustration of this fact, one may instance the Piazza San Marco, at Venice, upon which fronts one of the greatest of mediaeval monuments. Within the shops of this square are collected the results of the labors of the art-artisans of the city. Among the objects displayed, there is, perhaps, not a single great work of art, but, on the contrary, there are few which are not decoratively good; so that a strikingly brilliant general effect is obtained, which, when examined in detail, is found to consist of many windows; each containing, as it were, a mosaic of harmonious form and color, composed of wares, many of them within the purchasing power of the poor. What is true of the handicrafts of Venice is equally true of those of Florence, Rome and Naples; the combined results of which produce a decorative art which is infinitely superior to that of other countries, with the exception of certain of the Swiss carvings, and the hand-made pottery of Switzerland and Germany. The visitor to the Italian cities who ignores the shops, who sees nothing of the artists working in them, or in the small closet-like rooms behind them, fails to know one of the greatest charms of the country: that of the craftsman who lives with his art, loving it with his whole heart, and putting into it his best energies, efforts and ideas.

The effect of the maintenance of an art-handicraft by a city is shown in a comparison
between Siena and Perugia. "I feel at home in Siena,"—was the remark of a visitor to that town,—"its people are so kindly, so alert and so interesting, and the place itself is so picturesque." This judgment is correct, for Siena holds her visitors, while Perugia, although possessing great historical interest, is picturesque only in parts, and is wanting in lasting charm. A like difference exists between Florence and Milan in favor of the former industrial city, and no traveler will deny that the interest of the beautiful Bellagio, with its lake and mountain scenery, is enhanced by the shops and hand-loom factories of the silk weavers, and the picturesqueness of the artisans themselves.

The theory that the art-handicrafts make one of the greatest attractions of the Italian cities would seem, for the moment, to lack confirmation in the case of Rome. But the contradiction is only an apparent one. The passing visitor is, at first, disappointed with the ancient city, for there past and present are not united to the degree found in Florence and Venice. The student is at once satisfied with the Forum, and the art-student with the Vatican, but the actual life of the city manifests itself at few points: in the Campo de' Fiori on Rag Fair Day, and at all times in the Spanish Square, in which centers the modern life of Rome. There, are found the shops brilliant with the wares produced by the art-handicrafts of the city: the gay silks, the pearls, the bronzes, the mosaics and the books bound in vellum. There, are the flowers, the artists' models and all the latest types of the Roman citizen.

From this brief comment we may learn that the Italian handicrafts serve at once to prolong the art-life of the country, and to preserve the individuality of the separate communities. Between the great art of the Renascence and the architecture, sculpture, and painting of modern Italy continuity is broken. But the art-handicrafts have come down the centuries without
gap, and are still Florentine, Venetian, Roman or Neapolitan; so that each industry is peculiar to the place in which it thrives, and has preserved the life and characteristics of the people who exercise it. Each art-handicraft also reflects the local color of its environment. The glass and mosaics of Venice recall the brilliant tints of sky and sea, while both the materials and the treatment shown in the Florentine wares correspond to the severer scenery of Tuscany, and the sterner character of the Tuscan mind. These differences, seldom analysed by the traveler, nevertheless exist, and the art-handicrafts are the agents which keep them sharp and clear.

Nor are there wanting among the Italians strictly modern instances of this communal desire to give expression to individuality in craftsmanship. Cortina, a small town, Italian in language, manners and customs, although it is under Austrian rule, has developed a new and peculiar handicraft. This is the production of articles in wood inlaid with brass and copper. The metal wire thus used is thicker than that employed in the Japanese cloisonne, and itself forms the design, instead of outlining a pattern in other materials and colors. The object, after receiving the inlay, is highly polished upon the surface; the process producing a satiny finish which harmonizes with the pronounced colors of the metal. This handicraft, artistic and peculiar to the community in which it is exercised, is unique in having no long past, and no traditions to maintain.

The vigor of these crafts, the old and the new, is due to their democratic character. They influence in equal degree, although in different ways, the maker and the user of the articles produced by them. They bring into contact with one another the poor and the rich. The craftsman sells his wares to the consumer, for the most part, without aid of an intermediate merchant. In Cortina, the handicraft above described is carried on exclusively in a school, and the pro-
duct is sold only in a connected salesroom. In this in-
stance, it is probable that the industry is so conducted be-
cause the enterprise is still so new that the craftsmen are
not yet prepared to work in their own homes; but the
same system exists in Venice, where women are taught
lace-making in rooms through which visitors must pass in
order to reach the shop attached to the school. In the
glass and mosaic factories also, the purchaser generally
passes through the work-rooms before reaching the sales-
rooms, and the largest of these latter are those connected
with the manufactories. By this meeting of the purchaser
and the worker, the first named is interested deeply in the
article made, while the latter is stimulated by the attention
and the praise given to his labor; so that something of his
own enthusiasm and love for the thing which he creates,
inflames every one with whom he comes into contact
or relations. The bringing together of the worker and
the purchaser is more important, more far-reaching in its
consequences than would be casually supposed. Its sig-
nificance resides in the fact that a sense of ownership is
acquired by watching the making of an article, and that
the power of appreciation comes through the realization of
artistic skill. The purchaser who has followed the pro-
cesses of the worker, has made them to a certain extent
his own, although his lack of manual skill prevent him
from repeating them; while the worker, in the praise and
sympathy which are given to him, gains a richer and more
helpful reward than can be estimated in money value.

But while the Italian handicrafts
represent the democratic spirit and communal individuality,
they are open to criticism, as to the modes of their exercise:
a condition partly due to the deplorable financial state of
Italy, and the moral depression of its people; also, partly due
to the fact that a great proportion of the work passes into
the hands of foreigners. The craftsman who creates for his
neighborhood, of which, he knows the taste and temper,
finds pleasure in his labor, and his labor is good in propor-
tion to the pleasure which he experiences in performing it. In the mediaeval period, the craftsman's product was purchased by the burghers of his own city, and his work was so highly prized that he might rise to a high social position and become a political factor. As for example, in Murano, the seat of the Venetian glass industry, the Commune possessed a "golden book" of descent, and the daughters of master glass-workers, like those of Venetian patricians, could inherit their fathers' fortunes and rank. But, to-day, in Italy, the art-artisans are underpaid, while another element of failure consists in the uselessness of many of the articles produced,—a stricture which can also be applied to the product of the new art-handicrafts of Germany, Great Britain and the United States. Still another cause of failure is the lack of careful workmanship and of a truly artistic simplicity. The Italian craftsman too often uses poor material, and he works indifferently and dishonestly. His wood is not properly seasoned, and, being subjected to changes of temperature, it warps and cracks. His glass-mosaics, through some fault in the "smalto," loosens and falls apart. His silks are not firmly woven, His pearls shed their enamel, and his jewelry breaks after short service. Therefore, until usefulness, durability and careful workmanship shall be assured, the Italian art-handicrafts can not hold the position which would seem to be theirs by right of position in both their own country and the world at large. It is to be hoped that much may be accomplished for them through the economic wisdom and the democratic spirit of the young Victor Emanuel who so lately ascended the throne. And in bettering the financial and social conditions of the Peninsula, he will but follow the traditions of the House of Savoy, whose princes have always accomplished for their people the reforms demanded by the needs of the times in which they lived.