ART IN INDUSTRIES AND THE OUTLOOK FOR THE ART STUDENT

By Caryl Coleman

The subject, "Art in Industries and the Outlook for the Art Student" is in truth two subjects, not one; although there is no doubt a correlation between them. Correctly to understand the present status of Art in Industries and its possible future advancement, it will be necessary to consider its standing in the past, and the reasons for its presence then; for there have been periods in the world's history when many of the objects produced were constantly and distinctively marked by one or more artistic attributes. At these times, even objects of a purely utilitarian character bore the impress of beauty, and shadowed forth the individuality of the maker and his love for the outcome of his handiwork: the child of his heart and brain.

In this very statement I have given the reasons why the objects of industry at these particular periods were more or less manifestations of art; for it is obvious they were the result of handicraft, which gives free play to the fancy and invention of the craftsman, offering him a field in which he can give expression to his apprehension of beauty; the merit of the expression of course depending upon his art knowledge: his natural appreciation of form, color, and composition, in union with skill of hand. The craftsmen and the artists belonging to these epochs differed in no way from their fellow craftsmen and artists of to-day, except in their method of training: not having to compete with cheap mechanical processes, to face an excessive and wasteful consumption artificially stimulated by commercial greed, and a childish demand for novelty, engendered by suddenly acquired wealth, time saving instruments, and a superficial knowledge of the canons of good taste.

The more these artistic industrial periods are studied, the more they teach the value of handicraft, and force the student to a single conclusion, when he compares period with period; namely: that art
in industry is markedly present wherever and whenever its products are the children of handicraft. Hence, he cannot expect art in industries when there is an absence of handicraft. All this makes it evident that art in industries is the result of craftsmen and artists attempting to give expression to the art-sense within them, to their love of beauty, yes, and more than that, to their love of truth; for, believe me, this question is largely an ethical one belonging to the department of political economy. The more complicated the industrial organization, and the more each workman is employed, not on his own property working for himself, but on another's property, for a master, or on joint property for a body of which he is but one small constituent, the less motive there is for careful work, the greater likelihood of negligence; hence, a deadening of his artistic faculties, and a decay of his sense of beauty.

Further to prove the truth of this reasoning, let us take the history of some one industry: an industry in which art is an important factor, that of textile fabrics for example.

Textiles made on hand-loom call for great skill and care on the part of the craftsman. The work develops his ingenuity, stimulates his pride, offers him a field in which he can exhibit his art sense and creative faculty; and when he finishes his task, he feels that it is a part of himself, and if it proves to be a "thing of beauty," he cannot help feeling that he has not worked in vain, that it is not only a joy to himself, but that it will also be to others. Because of the truth of all this, artists and collectors are always seeking hand-made fabrics, just as they seek the paintings of master artists. At the same time, they pass by almost with contempt the products of machinery.

An oriental rug is of greater value than the same rug from a carpet factory. Why? Because it is the handiwork of a man, a master-weaver, who has given it an individuality, has impressed upon it
an artistic quality, and, in addition, it is an honest piece of work, made from honest materials. On the other hand, the factory rug is at best an imitation, a copy, painful in its mechanical perfection, too often made from dishonest materials, the mere product of an inanimate contrivance run by a human automaton.

Prior to 1750 all textile fabrics were the joint product of men and women: husbands, wives, daughters and sons. It was largely a home industry; it had over and around it the affection and blessing of family life. The first blow at the life of this cottage industry was given by the inventions of John Kay, which were followed by the introduction, in 1767, of the spinning-jenny of Hargreave, and shortly after by Arkwright’s water-frames; all of which at once and forever took out of the hands of women the distaff; thus reducing the word spinster to a legal term, and webster to an obsolete word, suppressing “the principal manufacturing function of one-half the human race.”

In 1785, Cartwright’s power loom, and, in 1792, Whitney’s cotton-gin were produced: two inventions which struck almost as great a blow at the domestic industry of men as the spinning-machines had at that of women; changing the whole textile fabric industry from hand-work into machine-work, breaking up the home, creating the tenement house and its attendant evils, and making the craftsman a factory hand, the feeder of a machine. From this time on, textile fabrics were without artistic value, ugliness superseded beauty, the commonplace reigned in place of art. So they have remained very largely to our own day, although brave men have from time to time, attempted to bring to life hand-weaving—men like the late William Morris—but with only moderate success; for the great public was not ready to return to the products of handicraft; it had been too long debauched by the great enemy of art, commercialism, to take kindly to what it was pleased to term the
vagary of a few artists; according to the accepted opinion, it was a retrograde movement, not to be tolerated.

All this sounds extremely pessimistic, but, believe me, there is a way out of this darkness, and you, drawing-teachers, are the torch-bearers to lead the way. You are the ones to distribute the leaven, to plant the seed of the tree of beauty among the masses, to revive that which is dead, to call into life an appreciation of the artistic, to spread a correct knowledge of form, color and composition among the people at large, so that at last they will demand art in industries. It is a noble work to restore handicraft to its rightful position, but coupled with it, there is a nobler work, viz: the saving of man from the heartless factory system, with its strain and over-pressure, which makes the operative an old man at forty. Art in industries! There is no such thing among us, except where the industry is carried on by handicraft. There is no such thing among us, in spite of the flaming advertisements of the tradesmen: art wall-paper, art furniture, art this and art that, until every true lover of art becomes sick of the word, and avoids it as a thing of evil.

The future of "Art in Industries" is largely in your hands, for it is within your office to create, not artists, for they are born, but to raise up an appreciative public, from the youth entrusted to your care, by implanting in their minds a knowledge of form, of color, of composition, of the motives of design, and the history of ornament; by stimulating their curiosity to know the reason why one picture is better than another, why one style of ornament in a particular case is better than another; by revealing to them their own talent, if they have any, or if they have not, by making them more modest in their judgment in matters of art.

This brings me to the second division of my subject: "The Outlook for the Art Student." And here occurs the correlation to which I referred in my opening remarks.
It is obvious that an appreciative public must of necessity make a place for the art student. Take the history among us of a sister art—that of music! It is within the memory of some of us when a general appreciation of good music did not exist; while now, we all know, music must be of a very high order, in order to interest the public. What is the reason for this? Why are the people so critical? Because of the increased knowledge of the art, and the cultivation of the public ear, through school instruction, for years past, of the youth in vocal and instrumental music. And it is strange that this movement originated from a most frivolous motive. For music at first was regarded, in this country, as a drawing-room accomplishment,—as one of the elements of a fashionable education.

Yes, my friends, there is a great and useful future for a well trained art student. But mark me, we must make haste slowly, for it is my belief that we have been going far too fast. We must take care that our methods of instruction are the right ones. Every practical worker in the arts will agree with me that there has been heretofore something wrong in methods; for our everyday experience tells us that the majority of students graduating from the art schools,—those expecting to earn their daily bread by the knowledge and skill of hand they have acquired—have to begin anew. And this is a sad fact; for we must not forget that the larger number of these students are poor, and that their parents often have to make great sacrifices to enable their children to pursue their studies.

In the course of years, I have had not one, but hundreds of these graduates come to me seeking places, and I have been forced to turn them away, because their knowledge was superficial, because they had never been taught to think, because they were mere copyists. When I asked them what they knew, they showed me their studies from life, from models, from his-
torical ornament, their so-called original compositions for book covers, wall papers, textiles, colored glass windows, furniture, jewelry, leather-work, wood-carving, or burnt-wood. Sometimes, their skill of hand was excellent, more often faulty; and as for their compositions, usually they were very bad, absolutely without merit, and in many cases,—more particularly in ornament,—they were nothing more or less than imperfectly remembered pages from Owen Jones or Racinet. When there was an idea of value, it was usually unpractical, owing to the student’s insufficient acquaintance with the possibilities of the material in which it was to be rendered, or from lack of knowledge of the technical demands of the art or craft for which it was designed.

Without irreverence, it may be said of the art student, “many are called and few chosen.”

Surely something is wrong in our methods of instruction that we have such unsatisfactory results. Is it not possible that the reason for this miscarriage lies in the attempt to cover too much ground in too short a time? Would it not be better to insist upon good draughtsmanship, and when that is acquired, and only then, to allow the student to study exhaustively one subject, and not the whole field of design; guiding him in the course for which he shows a special aptitude.

It is hardly necessary for me to say more. One word and I shall have finished. It is addressed to you, teachers.

It is a noble work that you have in hand: the diffusion of that particular knowledge which is indispensable to an intelligent appreciation of the arts: a most valuable element in the general education of man, making for his greater culture; “for man without artistic culture, no matter how superior he may be in other respects, lacks an instrument which is indispensable to his complete enjoyment and his use of life.”