PRIVATE SIMPLICITY AS A PROMO-
TER OF PUBLIC ART  BY IRENE 
SARGENT

The modern city is ever changing, loose in organiza-
tion, casual in form. In the newer countries, like
our own, it grows up within a generation, sometimes
within a single decade. Its inhabitants come and go,
pass on, and are wholly renewed every few years, thus
contrasting with the citizens of ancient or mediaeval towns,
in which families dwelt in the same city for twenty gen-
erations. Ideas of patriotism, art, culture, social organiza-
tion, as identified with the city, as arising from it and
stimulated by it, are beyond the conception of the self-
centered individual for whom the place of his actual resi-
dence is but a convenient workshop or market-place. Civic patriotisms and municipal life, once so vigorous, so
productive of beauty, so rich in sources of real and elevated
pleasure, have suffered, declined, nay, almost died out in
an age of industrialism; leaving in the old world certain
survivals to witness their educative effect, as in Paris, the
Italian towns, Hamburg and Berne; and in the new world
vitalizing perhaps a single city—Boston.

Four or five millions of souls do
not of necessity make a body of fellow-citizens; an unstable
population can have no interest in one another's lives, no
impulse toward concerted action, no common sympathies,
enjoyments and pride. A city, in order to be an effective
agent of civilization and culture, must have the conscious-
ness of organic life. Such was the power of London
town,—that limited but famous area extending between
the Tower and Temple Bar; such the force of old Paris
whose coat-of-arms picturing a tempest-tossed galley is
commented upon by the significant inscription: “It rocks
but it does not sink”; such, also, was the strength of the
Commune of Florence, whose gilds of Arts and Crafts
ruled for a not inconsiderable period the finances and even
the politics of the world. The organic city has every-
where left its marks upon the pages of history. But not
so mere aggregations of individuals, like the great indus-
trial towns of England and the United States, which have no corporate consciousness. In them beauty, dignity, culture and society are left largely to care for themselves, while the masses are almost cut off from physical comfort and means of moral elevation. There, the factory system, the clouding soot, the pollution of air and water reduce life to a mere enforced, dismal, and hopeless existence. How far behind and above these towns lies the City, which was, so to speak, the germ-cell, the type and the measure, of antique civilization! How much freer and higher the life of the ancient slave than that of the modern operative, even though the first was bound to the body of his master and dependent upon the will of his superior! What needs and lack oppress the inhabitant of our strongholds of industrialism, in which everything is made by machinery, except beauty and happiness.

Not that it would be well, even were it possible, to recall any obsolete type of social life. But as each organic age has its own peculiar strength, it is instructive to compare the civic qualities which have in times past—ancient and mediaeval—produced durable beneficent results, in that they have developed society by successive and ascending stages.

Among these fertile qualities one stands prominent and alone; that is: simplicity in private life. The citizens of Athens who lived among supreme works of art, listened habitually to lofty tragedies, and mingled in the most impressive ceremonies ever devised, were men whose food, garments and dwellings were plain even to the verge of rudeness. Theburghers of the Middle Ages, who created the labyrinthine richness and vastness of the Gothic cathedrals, passed their lives "cribbed, cabined and confined" in narrow, darkened streets, while their brain and hands were set to willing, fruitful labor, and their souls satisfied with the religion of beauty. Indeed, it may be asserted,—since it is proven by history—that simplicity in private life is at once the
first essential and the source of public strength, morality and art; that the ostentatious extravagance and display of the individual are the agents of rapid degeneration and decay in all that stands for good government and civilization. To that simplicity, which has differed in form but not in nature, as it has animated the lives of all sorts and conditions of men, society must return, if it is to develop a new and higher type of life for the ages to follow. The effects of the moral earthquake wrought by modern industrialism must be obliterated, the gulfs separating capitalist from laborer must be closed through the operation of the civic spirit, of good-will, of culture and of art. And in order that this work may be accomplished, lessons must be taken from the past and the present,—from the ancient, the mediaeval and the modern city. Then, by such process of selection, assimilation and development, the Ideal City may become a fact accomplished and a living actuality.

For our instruction and profit, let us study, one by one, the three types: the first two according to the records of them preserved from the past, the third according to our own knowledge.

The ancient city, in its very conception and constitution, necessitated the subordination of the individual. It was the object of a cult, a religion. It stood for Country, Church, school, university, gild and club. The very legends which told the story of its origin bespoke the awe and reverence in which it was held by the people. Its founder was supposedly a god or a hero, himself an ideal of some admirable human quality, some form of culture, useful craft or commerce, or of some divine art. The city was then the permanent home of the citizen, and not, as now, a chance place of residence fixed by business affairs of which the center of operations may change with every decade or twelve-month. The ancient city bestowed upon the citizen legal rights and religious privileges which were lost outside its limits,
while it granted to the foreigner and sojourner only an undesirable status, something between the condition of a citizen and that of a slave. Banishment from the city was a kind of civil death, a moral and spiritual degradation comparable with what in a later age was known as excommunication from the Church. The ancient city, it can not be too often repeated, was the cherished Country, Church and home of the citizen. The private hearth was secondary to that ideal public altar of sacrifice whereon were offered the most precious sentiments and the loftiest aspirations. For the Greek or the Roman, the idea of the City was inseparably connected with the worship of the gods, since the ritual consisted in a constant succession of public ceremonies which combined artistic display with civic festival. Thereby the love of splendor, innate in every human being, was satisfied, and did not seek superfluous expression in private life with those disastrous effects upon individual simplicity and modesty which it exerts throughout modern society. These ceremonies were public in the broadest sense. They were free like the art privileges of modern Paris, and they combined divine service with patriotic function. All forms of art were represented in the open squares and colonnades, where statues, pictures and processions were displayed with quasi-sacramental intent and effect. Piety and public spirit filled each market-place with a shrine, the image of a god, a fountain, or a portico. And thus the emulative and imitative luxury of rich nobles and commoners educated public taste and increased public pleasure and comfort, instead of declining to the lower level to-day manifest in ill-advised private expenditure. It was indeed a civil obligation of the rich and well-born Greeks and Romans to offer to their fellow-citizens these artistic displays and these means of worship; it was even a part of the inheritance which they derived from their ancestors, or, to say better, it was a tribute which they paid to the State, to the patron gods of their family, and to the souls of their forefathers.
And being thus intent upon a public service suited to the type and point of the existing civilization and to the racial temperament of their fellow-citizens, they dignified their own existence. For themselves they maintained a fixed purpose, which is the source of individual simplicity and austerity. By their wealth and culture, they created public splendor and brightened public life. And whatever brightens life tends toward happiness and virtue. In the ancient cities, intercourse among the citizens was free and uninterrupted, since the temples, colonnades and gardens constituted a kind of open-air clubs at which political affairs and questions of art and literature were discussed from varied, individual points of view. Thus, all the higher pleasures being pursued in common, the idea of personal possession was subordinate in the minds of the opulent, and not intense among the poor. Oftentimes, private estates, mansions, villas or pleasure-grounds were bequeathed by their owners to the citizens, as we remember Julius Caesar to have done. And by this common ownership, beauty, splendor and wealth were assigned their proper parts and functions in civilized life. Another consideration most important in the government of ancient cities was that of public health. Indeed, it was a matter of religion; while cleanliness and sanitary discipline were sacred duties, as well as affairs of personal pride. And since every open place was consecrated to some god or hero, every fountain to some triton or nymph, it was sacrilege to defile the earth with litter or to pollute the water with refuse. A Greek or Roman who should have submitted to live in the midst of conditions as uncleanly and unsanitary as those to which we now condemn the masses of our laboring people, would have felt himself a rebel to the gods and an outcast from the society of reputable citizens.

Summing up now the characteristics of the ancient city, we find it to have been a close civic aristocracy, which, within its own order, gave fine
examples of equality, simplicity, sociability and public devotion. It would be neither possible nor desirable to restore it, since Christian ideals have substituted for its veneration and worship a broader patriotism and a deeper sense of human duty. But the contrasts which it offers with the present form of society and in which it holds the advantage are: the profusion of art to which our industrial age prefers material production; a common system of education and culture which we have replaced by a specialization dividing interests and acting as a barrier to congeniality; lastly, a public splendor satisfying, civilizing and refining, which finds its opposite in modern private luxuriousness, exclusive and selfish.

In the decay of the first organic form of society—that of the ancient city-republics—in the development, by means of Teutonic individualism, of the mediaeval fortress-town, patriotism, culture and the ideal of companionship suffered no diminution or essential change. They were simply subjected to the laws of evolution. Necessarily too, as their resultant and adjunct, simplicity prevailed in the private life of the burghers. It became, as it had been in the ancient city, the prolific source of beauty, culture and high standards of life. Kings and nobles were made to acknowledge the superior force—intellectual and material—of the plain people, until at the end of the Middle Ages, the greatest sovereigns trembled before the commoners who were craftsmen and merchants, exercising constantly and simultaneously their brains and their hands, finding extreme pleasure in their work and pursuits, and building up by their zeal and industry the body politic which was attacked in its vital parts by the corruption, the idleness and the selfishness of the high-born. Before this civic power generated by private simplicity, Francis First of France dared not flaunt the extravagance of his vicious court, lest the honest, laborious burghers of Paris would not suffer the presence among them of the white-handed, frivolous cavaliers and
ladies, for whose occupation and pleasure were afterward created the unique castles of the Loire region. Nor did Queen Elizabeth acknowledge to a less degree the burgher spirit of her own capital, when she issued her mandate that no houses be built by the citizens of London to the westward, within three miles of the Tudor palace. It was the same steadfast, whole-hearted simplicity of life that created the might of the Commune of Florence, and made its citizens the trustees of the peace of Europe.

The burgher of the Middle Ages, as fully as the citizen of antiquity, possessed the love of splendor, and, like his predecessor, exerted it unselfishly, in a corporate spirit, and to the furtherance of the power and the beauty of his city. His type is found in Hans Sachs, Adam Kraft, and the Italian, French, Flemish or English contemporaries and similars of these forthright craftsmen, who sat at their benches or looms singing from the very joy of their work, and absorbed in realizing with their hands the perfection which their brains had conceived. They adorned their cathedrals and their town-halls with the richest and most varied works of art; making these edifices, not only the citadels of faith and good government, but adding to them as well the attributes of the school, the art-museum and the workshop. The burgher condition was, in all points, adapted to promote simplicity of life. Every mediaeval town was first a fortress, and secondarily a place of residence. Space was too valuable to permit of extensive ground plans. Homes were narrow and dark, relying for area upon superposed storeys, and for light and air upon windows cut in the roof, as in the German Hanse towns, or upon the open loggia, as in the Italian cities. From these dwellings, which were, as we have before seen, also studios and workshops, superfluous objects were excluded. These did not, as with us, dispute with the inmates for room and gain the mastery. There were then practically none of those useless articles from the acquisition and dis-
play of which the middle classes of to-day seek to acquire the reputation for refinement and good taste. But, as with the modern Japanese who offer excellent examples of the simple, artistic life, the objects of daily use were things of beauty. They were the respected and beloved companions of human life; not, as now, chance possessions chosen in obedience to the caprice of an hour, and with the reservation that they should be discarded with the establishment of new standards of taste, or upon the possession of ampler means. The chair, the chest, the tankard, the table-knife, were adorned in obedience to the laws of design and often with the most minute elaboration, yet never to the detriment of their qualities of use and service. Their value both material and aesthetic—since they represented honest material, skilled labor, and often genius,—made them precious in the sight of their owners, as did their permanent occupancy of the home, and their association with the domestic dramas to which they served as background and accessories.

In summing up the conditions which made for simple citizen-life during the Middle Ages, first place must be given to the existence of the gilds which diffused throughout Europe a strong corporate spirit. And since the common enjoyment of objects and pleasures weakens equally the love and the envy of possession, it is plain that the influence of the gilds was to maintain private simplicity and to further public art. The celebrations which formed so large a part of the outward manifestations of the life of these companies, satisfied the love of splendor which advances with civilization. The beauty produced by large numbers of artists and craftsmen working toward a single end, was in itself an inspiration and incentive to yet higher accomplishment. Imitative luxury was not, as now, an issue rudely joined between man and man, but a strife involving the creation of beauty, ceaselessly maintained among the gilds and between city and city. If we consider for a moment what
intellectual force and what artistic skill were required for the building of a cathedral, an important church, or a town hall—and every mediaeval town contained a fine specimens of one or the other of these edifices—we shall find that all classes of the towns-people were concerned therein, either as donors, builders, sculptors, or decorative artists. Therefore, the minds of all being fixed upon an important purpose to which were attached most desirable results, slight occasion arose for the private strife which we see to-day manifesting itself among the middle classes in the display of those articles of extreme luxury whose possession should be reserved for the richest alone. In such communities, the portion of the burghers who were devoted to the arts and crafts were met by grave difficulties, since science had not come among them with her rapid means and her accurate processes. Long calculations, vigorous effort, remarkable patience were the cost of those miracles of art whose creators wrought with no intent to exalt or even preserve their individual names, but simply to make their gild famous and their city beautiful above its rivals. The careless tourist of our own time who admires because he must, little values the study, the deep understanding of natural laws, the genius, the citizen-spirit which created the great Gothic structures. The mathematics involved in the vaulting of the nave of Amiens cathedral, the knowledge of chemistry and mineralogy possessed by the mediaeval artists in stained glass and mosaic, the craftsmanship displayed in the textiles of the Florentines and Flemings all speak eloquently of long successions of lives devoted to a single master principle: the devotion to some science or art. In the days “when art was still religion,” paintings, frescoes, statues, gold and silver vessels, bronzes, ivories, embroideries, beautiful books, rare musical instruments—all lovely and delightful things—were not, as now, the jealously guarded treasures of the few, or the transplanted, exotic ornaments of museums. They were the sincere spontaneous
expression of an art created by the people, for the people, as a reciprocal joy for the artist and the layman.

The art and social organization of the Middle Ages lie far behind us. We cannot galvanize the one into a semblance of life without affectation or falsity. We can not revert to a form of political existence preceding our own in natural development. For all growth proceeds by fixed laws, and what at first seems degeneration may in truth be progression. Nay, even, to quote the words of Robert Browning, "Decay is richer life." The principles of the French Revolution, the great inventions of the late eighteenth and of the entire nineteenth centuries, industrialism, the problems of labor and capital stand between the mediaeval and the modern world, constituting impassable barriers as inexorable as time itself. It matters not that a portion of these events, facts, principles and issues are negations: destructive, rather than upbuilding agents and forces. They are all integral parts of a scheme which humanity, society, civilization must follow, and to which each successive age and generation must yield, without hopelessly deploiring what of value appears to be lost, and without excessive pride in what would seem to be unqualified good. The strongly organized city or town of the Middle Ages exists no more. The gilds with their lusty life and vigorous corporate spirit are forms too primitive to exist under the complex conditions of modern finance, industry, commerce, transit and communication. "The sentiment of the infinite," felt to an overpowering degree, which engendered mediaeval art, has given place to a spirit which battles with the invisible powers of nature and makes man their master. Both loss and gain are attached to the modern system of life as compared with the two phases which have preceded it. But the increased ease of all accomplishment, whether mental or material, should outweigh existing disadvantages and make for such progress as to render the age next following our own incontestably superior in all points to
any earlier form of social organization. And in certain essentials we have already attained the most signal advantages over the civilization of the Middle Ages. In the matter of physical culture and sanitation we have reverted to Greek ideals, if we have not put in practice Greek methods. We prize the value, if not the beauty of cleanliness. In spite of steam, smoke, factories and the other accompaniments of our industrial existence, many of our modern cities by zealous sanitary science and by the passion for combating disease which marks our age, have reduced the death-rate to one-half the figures achieved in mediaeval and Oriental towns; London, with allowance being made for special conditions, standing as the city of the world least noxious to human life. Such care for cleanliness and sanitation is in itself a step toward the simple life. For the demands made in these interests for free space and the consequent employment of few articles of daily use lead toward plain living, and this, in its turn, advances the cause of the religion of beauty. Instances of these successive steps, or it may be, of the inversion of these steps, frequently occur in the experience of University Settlement visitors to the tenements of the city poor. The gift of a plant, the loan of a picture, often achieve what years of teaching and preaching fail to accomplish. Beauty brings its own blessing, and the need of preparing for it a fit home is apparent even to those confined in the meanest and most sordid surroundings. The doctrines of the simple life should be no more forceful among the rich than among the poor. To eliminate from the laboring classes, above all, from the poor of the large centers, that same imitative luxury differing in degree, not in kind, from the infectious poison which saps the social life of the rich, is a present and pressing duty of the modern philanthropist. And with the two sharply defined divisions of the people similar means must be employed. Beauty must be substituted for ugliness in public places by means of a national art. Education, or rather culture,
must be made general, that the poor may be led through
the promise of real enjoyment away from the tavern and
the gaming-table, just as, by the same means, the rich
must be deflected from an excessive indulgence in modish
sports. The simple, the free life, as opposed to a complex,
slave-like existence, is necessary to the happiness and sal-
vation of both high and low. Practical results toward
the advancement of health, morality, culture and pleasure
—the elements of the simple life—have already been at-
tained among the unfortunate classes in London, and the
larger American cities by trained students and lovers of
their kind. And there is no less a movement among the
favored classes toward the use of their wealth for the
highest good of the people. We indeed lack the spirit of
civic life and energy, the ever-present love for art, the
zeal for good work and the deep sense of social duty
which characterized the Middle Ages: a state of affairs
which constituted what has been called a patriotism of
duty: the highest form of secular life—in ideal, although
not in practice—that society has yet reached. This sense
of obligation in industry was recognized between master
and man, rich and poor, wise and ignorant. It was lost
in the age of negation known as the Renascence, and to
restore it the world is now seeking with eagerness and
persistence.

In the City of the Future this
bond will be renewed, and the sense of mutual obligation
will become keener and more delicate than ever before.
The workshop, as the Russian Kropotkin advocates, will
be elevated to a place beside the school, or rather, the
training of the hand and the brain will be carried on
within the same walls. The power to produce material
and serviceable objects,—which we know under the name
of industry,—the power to market those objects with the
greatest reciprocal advantage to the maker and the
user,—which we call commerce:—these two powers
will be equally honored with the human faculties brought
into play in the exercise of those means of livelihood which, with an echo of mediaevalism, we name "the learned professions." The segregation of classes will be done away with, when the simple life shall have proven its value to all citizens; to the poor by the removal of the tawdry from their dwellings and persons, and the introduction of high aims and honest purposes into their lives; to the rich by the elimination of imitative, competitive luxury from the complex problem of their existence. The ancient rule to live in simple lodgings, to have ever in view beautiful and stately public buildings will prevail in the City of the Future. The people will rejoice in the common possession of objects to enjoy and by which to be educated and elevated. The models of Paris and Berne, Munich and Berlin will be surpassed in beauty, civic organization, fresh air, pure water supplies, and whatever best that each of these municipalities contributes to the cause of civilization. The City of the Future will realize the prophecies and conceptions of the Golden Age, which have allured and encouraged humanity throughout the course of history, and which have witnessed their essential truth by their persistence and by their varied form suited to successive periods and differing civilizations.

As we look about us and read the signs of the times, we see provision everywhere making for the founding and upbuilding of the Ideal City, for the living of the Simple Life. These signs and provisions reside in the love of nature which increases among the people year by year; in the world-wide interest in physical development; in the revival of the long disused handicrafts; in the work of municipal art societies; in the bestowal of great gifts for the maintenance of libraries and museums; all of which manifestations merge into one mighty impulse toward the corporate life, to be lived more broadly and grandly than in its former period of activity.