A Visit to the Workshops of The United Crafts at Eastwood, New York

The lives and the work of many foreign leaders of artistic, economic and social movements have been somewhat extensively treated in the pages of The Craftsman. Through these articles it was hoped to combat the spirit of commercialism which is the worst peril of our prosperous new century. But in the first anniversary number of the periodical founded in the interests of art allied to labor, and designed to be the organ of a body of sincere and forthright workmen, known under the name of The United Crafts, it is well, nay, necessary, to acquaint those who shall be interested, with the work, the aims and the principles of the company which has newly been formed in a village of Central New York.

The workshops of the United Crafts are situated among the green hills of Onondaga, three miles from Syracuse, in a country which is beautiful, refreshing, varying in every direction, yet always restful. Surely, if there be anything in the claim that a beautiful environment adds a tonic to the worker and is a stimulant to his ideals and ambitions, this band of workers has all that nature can supply. The shops are modern, accessible by both electric and steam railways, and we paused a moment to contrast them with that half ruined group of buildings selected by William Morris at Merton Abbey, where the River Wandel often caused appalling disaster by frequently driving the laborers out of house and home. But no floods can reach the workshops of the United Crafts.

From the drafting office in New York to the workshops in Eastwood is a great step. Here surely is the place to handle the problems before us. No genuine artist can visit this hive of workers without being impressed with its healthy condition. Here is the co-operative force of the old guilds with less of the speculations with which most of our commercial offices are crowded. It would be foolish to claim for any colony of workers in this country the inherent ability displayed by the great craftsmen in the Normandy, Tuscany, or Bavaria of the Middle Ages, or in the colonies established by William Morris and his followers in England,
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which in our own day have flourished to so wonderful an extent. The claim of the United Crafts to serious consideration at our hands is established because they have made so signal a start in the right direction. Their work is excellent. It has been tested. There is something bold, clear and distinguished about these chairs, tables and interiors. The workers have a knack of giving flashlight pictures with a few bold strokes. There is evidence of no little thought. There is freedom about the shapes, a breezy independence, a sturdy human democracy. This furniture is made to withstand daily use. It is the product of a quaint, moving, strong personality. These craftsmen are no mere copyists. Mr. Gustave Stickley, of Syracuse, will succeed; he is the leader of the United Crafts, controlling their destinies. If he has done but one thing in the world, and nothing more, he has prompted many of us to review the simple lives of a great people. This man rose, as it were, out of the forests, in answer to the cry: “Who shall deliver us from the expensive living, the thralldom of extravagance, the hereditament of conventions?” This man helps us because he is a student of life in all its phases and aspects.

The severe furniture made by the United Crafts has done something to foster rugged independence and masterful resolution, and to exhibit a resourcefulness greatly needed in these times. Because the problem of living a simple life is the easier for simple surroundings which tend to bring people closer together, and because the press of this country is so often clamoring against the over-indulgence of the rich as a national calamity, it is refreshing to find a member of the intellectual minority bold enough to raise the banner in favor of a grave, sober, simple environment, pregnant with underlying sense of brotherhood and community of interests. It has been said that a man must first make himself before he can make others.

The control of the United Crafts is secure in the hands of so sagacious and resourceful a leader. In these days we are compelled to seek distinction in the field of commerce as well as in that of art. These enthusiasts exhibit consummate tact; using material which they understand, which is in itself a protest against the false ap-
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pearance of the modern world in its insatiable love of novelty and glitter. It is significant of the material used by the United Crafts that it is as old as the everlasting hills. These workers have no secret compounds, no manipulations or trade secrets to divert attention from the essence of their work. The materials are frankly handled.

The general character and tone of their furniture is wonderfully healthy, soothing and refreshing. It is very difficult to estimate the permanent value of work such as this which captivates at the first glance. The work of the United Crafts produced dismay among the furniture dealers, when it was shown at their annual exposition two years ago, and the first temptation was to copy. This led to exaggeration and crudities wholly out of keeping with the original. There is a frankness of construction everywhere evident. Pins, wedges, mortise and tenon frankly appear, not unlike the method adopted in Medieval days and again reminding us of Spanish work. There is a ring and rhythm in this work when at its best. Wood, metal and leather unite in melodious chorus; the whole treatment showing great skill, strength and delicacy.

Few things have been more interesting than a summary of the search for the oak: the seasoned timber with which so much of this furniture is made. Its excellence calls for special mention. It is delightfully subtile in appearance; while a closer examination leads to the discovery of other qualities. In the first place, it is curious to note how regularly it cuts. It might be alive, it is so willing to be shaped, as if endowed with life, that one is greatly tempted to carve it, or to test the addition of some quaint inlays of metal, ivory or bone, as used by the early guilds. This oak accepts color, is strangely sensitive to the chemical action of spirits, is vigorous, beautifully marked, yet delicate to a degree. The hunt for this oak was well worth the trouble, because of the bitter clamor against the ordinary material doing duty for that name. American oak has been unjustly maligned, in spite of the coarseness and rankness of the wood offered in the open market.

Among the productions of the Eastwood craftwork, metal and leather play almost as important a part as that filled by oak.
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The utmost care has been taken to secure metal workers who can shape handles, door knobs, hinges, metal bands, nail heads, and a thousand and one enrichments invited and required in this work. Iron and copper seem on the whole to have suffered less by the change of fashion and to be more workable than any of our commoner materials. Difficult of course it is, but not impossible, to secure a man who will hammer out of the simplest materials shapes that are delightful, free, vigorous, and which do not involve complicated conditions at every turn.

As to the tanning of leather, I greatly regret not being able to write intelligently about this. Not that I feel ignorant of the result, but despairingly so of the cause. An examination of the leather used by the United Crafts discloses a material of singular charm. The leather is not only yielding to the touch, beautiful to handle, but elastic and distinctly leathery, if I may coin the last word.

The leather workers have undoubtedly discovered some process by which the hides of sheep and cattle can be tanned; preserving, at the same time, the grain, the fibre, and the softness, yet retaining the strength, durability and wearing properties of a live hide. Again, this leather seems susceptible to the influence of any color and resembles oak in this respect. Ornament is scarcely welcome as a proposed enrichment. The leather is good enough to leave alone. At the same time, experiments are making with such ornaments as lacing and rough modeling of the surface and back in a crude fashion, resembling the quaint markings of the Mexican Indians on their green hides.

There is certainly a strange fascination in seeing rushes, reeds, and other tenants of our swamps run through a small hand press to extract the water and air, and in watching them as they are twisted in various plaits and deftly woven into a solid surface for the seats of chairs and panels for screens.

The designing and making of furniture and metal work, the tanning of leather and weaving of fabrics are by no means the main contribution to the furnishing of the home. The main strength of the United Crafts, in the future, will lie in preparing the house itself. It is intended that staircases, partitions, panels, door and window
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trimmings, floorings, and in fact everything that contributes to the interior of the house, shall be made at these shops. This the craftsmen have been forced to do, in order that their furniture may be acceptable, and because of the poverty and singularly misleading background of the average home. It is not enough to preach simplicity or to illustrate charming and skilfully contrived interiors; to discourse learnedly or otherwise about "the atmosphere," and, at the same time, be blind to the knowledge that much of the furniture made here will ultimately be found crowded into some modern interior, very expensive possibly, and very beautifully made, but often inconsistent and singularly out of harmony with the cult of simplicity of which we all have just now so much to say.

The United Crafts believe in the brotherhood of man. In the hope that to an extent their workmen may be inspired with the same feeling, it is intended to hold weekly meetings for them in the new establishment in Syracuse, where friendly debate, brief addresses, and genial discussion will be used as methods to secure harmony and unity of effort. Meanwhile, an irresistible enthusiasm is evident to all who visit their workshops.

Much will be done during the coming winter to make the lives of the workmen pleasant. There will be music, brief lectures illustrating subjects of current interest, and some intelligent attention will be paid to the social and personal requirements of the men and women workers.

This is one way of solving the problems of the workshop. It is luminous and thorough. It charms with rude sturdiness of character, with directness of things, and exhibits a freedom of spirit. This wholesome, happy company curiously assorted, breathes mountain air which does much to break the passion of discontent. To leave the United Crafts at Eastwood and to return to the city is like relinquishing so much power and inspiration.

The United Crafts in their efforts to preserve the character of their work, think of it as a whole, in that it should harmoniously express an idea and an emotion. Whatever may be the ultimate policy of the public in employing workers to assist them in the construction of their houses, the claim of the workshop should certainly always
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have the preference. Workmen may not always succeed in the clever manufacture of sketches—pictorial art is not their strong point,— but their ability to grapple with the practical needs of the moment, their close touch with the requirements of the occasion, their intrinsic and inherent knowledge of the cost, nature and character of the work itself, is an evidence of their fitness to do it. Their work is vital.