The Revival of the Lesser Arts in Foreign Countries: From the French of H.-L. Alphonse Blanchon

Translated by Irene Sargent

The authoritative French magazine, "La Revue," published in its September issue of the current year, the original of the paper which is here offered in translation. With the justice characteristic of the truly enlightened French critic, M. Blanchon recognizes the significance and value of the revival of the lesser arts which is now stirring with spring-like fervency throughout rural England. He writes in the hope that in his own country a similar impulse may be awakened; since he foresees the desirable results, social and economic, as well as artistic, surely to be derived therefrom.

Such benefits would be no less valuable and durable for America than for France. The lesser arts and fireside industries being active, have always and everywhere produced national or regional contentment and prosperity: offering agreeable and refining occupations to those who might otherwise suffer from lack of companionship; creating a source of income for those to whom agriculture is a grudging mistress; giving interest to life by stimulating the inventive faculties toward the production of things uniting use with beauty.

With due allowance made for the difference existing between our own rural population and that of M. Blanchon's fatherland, the plea of the French writer deserves careful consideration from American thinkers and philanthropists. Might not the systematic development of simple art-industries in the more isolated portions of our country, not only lighten the gloomy economic situation at times there prevalent, but also lessen the alarming tendency toward melancholia and insanity which is noted by alienists among the women of our poorer farming districts.—[The Editor.]

I

The guests of a great lord in the sixteenth century must have been overwhelmed, when, at their entrance into the banquet-hall, they perceived the magnificence of the surroundings and the exquisite arrangement of the table. Let us omit the mention of the rich furniture, among which were especially remarkable the carven chairs ornamented with chiselled and gilded leathers everywhere known as Cordovan, but in reality dressed at Montpellier, in southern France. Let us speak only in passing of the splendid tapestries storied, in brilliant colors heightened by threads of gold, with the adventures
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of demi-gods and heroes, the prowess of a Hector, the high deeds of an Achilles; the whole designed and wrought out to the very life in the city of Lille in Flanders, according to the cartoons of skilful painters.

The sun, at the stroke of twelve, flashed into the apartment and played through variegated enamels, through heraldic devices with great supporters and lofty crests which brightened the dazzling painted windows of some cunning master of Beauvais.

In the fire-place great andirons of copper, the work of obscure artisans of the valley of the Meuse, or of Avignon reflected the countless rubies of the hearth.

The dresser, the climax of all these splendors, was heavily laden with gold and silver plate, wrought by the chisel, the graving-tool and the hammer of the goldsmiths of Paris, Amiens and Lyons. There, also, glittered superb enamels which, rippling with a liquid color congealed here and there into the shining gold of spangles, displayed beneath their transparent surface the legend of Venus, the labors of Hercules, or the sports of the Nereids: thus carrying far and wide the fame of the master workers in enamel of the city of Limoges on the river Vienne.

Upon the table-covering itself, upon a fine linen fabric, woven in some thatched cottage in Flanders, there shone, side by side, Majolica, Italian faience, the glazed terra-cotta of Oiron, and the pottery of Beauvais. And if we neglect the inanimate objects in order to observe the guests, we see the latter passing before our eyes in their garments of embroidered velvet, in their mantles, doublets and trunks, enriched with braidings and embroideries of pure gold thread and with lace fully as costly and curious: ornaments whose names recall some small city, town, or hamlet, where obscure artisans created marvels of workmanship and beauty which, in spite of a too often apparent ingenuousness, were replete with a real sentiment of art.

After the Renascence, this artistic decentralization continued to extend, until there was no province without one or several localities renowned for the artistic works therein executed. In these domestic studios work was pursued with fervor and in the love of
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the thing to be executed. Iron was forged, copper beaten, leath-
er stamped, flax woven, or again the housewife, laying aside for
a time the cares of her family, seated herself at her frame or
pillow to arrange the arabesques of an intricate and delicate lace.
Every one made it a point of honor to produce good and beauti-
ful work—good because of the excellence of handwork executed
with care; beautiful often because of the personal expression
which the worker gave to it unconsciously and, as it were, in
spite of himself.

What has become of the laces of Argentan, of Eu, of Dieppe, if
we wish to cite examples among feminine arts only? Are the
peasant-women of these regions less skilful to-day than formerly?
They have abandoned the old spinning wheel which lies in a
corner of the stable beneath a thick accumulation of dust. Do
they no longer know how to spin?

Mechanical industry, the centralization caused by the factory-
system, has killed all the fireside arts so active and thriving in
former times. The machine produces quickly and more cheap-
ly; an essential quality at the dawn of the twentieth century, when
it is demanded that luxury be within the reach of all. But the
machine, incapable of producing work artistic in the true sense
of the word, deprives the families of our small towns and rural
localities of assured earnings, while it injures to an equal degree
artistic development and feeling throughout the entire nation.

II

It does not lie within our province to study here the means of
developing artistic feeling among the people, but it must be ob-
served that pure art is within the reach of the privileged few
only, and that the hope of awakening an artist in a person to
whom a picture is shown, however admirable may be that pic-
ture, is an idle expectation. The sole means of encouraging any
one in a just desire of creating something beautiful is to display
to him a work really artistic, but, at the same time, one that is
simple enough to inspire him directly with the desire to repro-
duce or imitate it. This is the reason why the revival of the fire-
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side arts to which all may aspire is full of promise. This is the way to bring the means of artistic expression within the reach of the entire people.

While artists have applied themselves to produce masterpieces in painting and sculpture, that art which is no less true, but which consists in creating objects at once beautiful and useful, has been left to the mercy of machines and industrialism. Furthermore, the popular belief obtains that art has no economic value and that the whole attraction of work lies in the sole hope of earnings. It is of use to demonstrate that artistic objects can have a practical value, and that the real revival of art is largely dependent upon the manual execution of work that is now mechanically done. The substitution of the hand for the machine offers an incontestable advantage in numerous cases in which the strength and the durability of materials is important; from the artistic point of view, the importance would be less, if the hand of the artisan did not impress upon his work a personal touch which the machine cannot give. A man possesses ideas which are his own, artistic or otherwise; the machine is without ideas, and if the man can (as he too often does) become a machine in his work, the machine can never become a thinking, reasoning being. To learn to express our sentiments harmoniously is to become an artist. Art, indeed, is only such expression well co-ordinated, and although no one can become a true musician without learning to sing or to play an instrument, nor become an artist without instruction in the practice of a special art, it should not be forgotten that the merit of either depends more upon the value and the intensity of sentiment than upon technical execution.

Therefore, from the purely artistic point of view, it is most interesting to revive these simple forms of expression which are recognized as excellent, because they are full of sentiment. And toward this end the best means lies in fashioning by hand simple and useful objects. For it is by the decoration and the purity of form of these objects that art begins to exist.

To separate the ideas of beauty from those of practical utility, that is, to produce objects of luxury pure and simple, is to attack
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art most seriously. In a word, art must be, not the acceptance by
man of the necessity to work, but, above all, the expression of the
pleasure and the pride that he finds in his work.
One of the principal causes of the decay of the lesser arts resides
in the extinction of the artistic feeling which inspired the early
artisans; the success of certain works, of special designs, has
produced imitation and thus weakened or deadened the creative
faculty. As a result of such imitation, the artisan has descended
to the level of a machine, and is absolutely without artistic feeling.
This paralysis of artistic intelligence has been such that the most
execrable works have come into existence. To prevent their fur-
ther propagation artistic instruction must be established or re-
newed.

III

If we assume the economic point of view, the question of the
lesser arts is not less important. While providing an occupation,
an agreeable pastime to those comfortably circumstanced—and it
is only among such persons that small art-industries still exist—
these employments offer a remuneration which is not to be de-
spised by the inhabitants of provincial towns and rural districts,
who thus find a profitable occupation during the enforced idle-
ness of the winter season. For example, in a certain region of
France, paper-box making has gained real importance, and the
success of this industry results principally from the freedom of
the women employed to work in their homes, without detriment
to their ordinary domestic tasks. The spinning of flax and hemp,
hand-weaving, leather-work, metal-beating, embroidery and lace-
making are lesser arts which offer the same advantages. They
can be exercised at leisure, and they provide the housewife with
an additional income more or less important, without forcing her
to leave her home to the great loss and injury of her family. We
shall not attempt to describe the gloomy picture made by the
house of a working-woman who passes the entire day in a factory:
this depressing interior has often been described, and often too
has the remedy for it been sought. The lesser arts could make
a first step in this direction.

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Certainly, it is not necessary to compete with mechanical industry; it is only a question of producing works which both by quality and beauty, shall offer great advantages over manufactured products; their cost price will be, perhaps, a trifle higher, and their sale more restricted; but the production itself, as a result of the nature of the work executed at home in leisure moments will be equally limited.

The interest residing in a revival of the lesser arts has been understood and appreciated in England for several years past. In order to favor this movement there have been formed numerous organizations of which the most important and oldest is: "The Home Arts and Industries Association." Its object is to encourage artistic employments among the working and agricultural classes. In order to obtain the desired results, this society has established throughout the territory of Great Britain and Ireland, in towns, villages and hamlets, classes or courses in which by practical lessons the most varied manual arts are taught by special professors or by competent persons interested in this work. The Association assigns models to these classes and advances them in the most profitable directions; beside, it arranges annually an exhibition of the work of the classes.

These exhibitions are especially interesting; they include examples of all the lesser arts: beaten copper, pottery, chiselled brass, wood-carvings, incised leather, book-bindings, inlaid pieces of furniture, peasant tapestries, homespuns, textiles of flax, hemp and wool, all hand-woven, embroideries and other artistic articles of use.

Although these objects differ widely from one another, they all show that the artisan has been inspired by the desire to do artistic work, while producing an article of exceptional quality, and these combined sentiments are everywhere perceptible even in the shade of the homespuns; thus transforming the trade of the weaver into a real and distinct art. These exhibitions are arranged by geographical classification, according to the localities in which the classes are held, and great importance is justly attached to this classification.
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“In our time, indeed, this question of origin,” said an English critic, “has become a pleasantry. No one ignores that a great part of the Sheffield cutlery is manufactured elsewhere, and the same is true of the Kidderminster carpets and the Honiton laces. An energetic struggle must be made, in the direction of industrial reforms for the principle of absolute loyalty in designating the place of production. ‘The Home Arts and Industries Association’ is therefore right in always adding to the name of its artisans the name of their district. It is by remaining loyal to this spirit that the level of the movement will rise.”

It is often true that the presence in a village of a conscientious artisan becomes for the locality the point of departure for a new industry. The Association, by exhibitions, and by publications attempts to convince the buyer that he will find in the market products of home manufacture, truly original and of real value, and to encourage him by all possible means to seek and to prefer such products. We read in a recent publication that “there will soon no longer be excuse for an Englishwoman to clothe herself in a factory-woven camelot, and for her betrothed to buy in an ordinary shop machine-made jewelry.” How much more pleasing is the thing which bears in all its parts an impress of humanity and which is an expression full and sincere of the joy of living!

IV

Assuredly the revival of the lesser arts thus caused by the classes maintained in fishing villages, in obscure mountain hamlets, is worthy of interest and full of hope; for a flourishing industry has the secondary advantage of arresting the exodus of the inhabitants of the country toward the towns; providing beside a means of living under excellent hygienic conditions to entire districts of people who could not subsist exclusively upon the products of their region. Although this initial idea is good and practical, it is still possible to pass a slight criticism upon it. The growing demand for elegant objects of art and ornament has led to the production of things of which the primitive purpose has been
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entirely forgotten, and craftsmen have adapted themselves to the prevailing custom. Therefore, the education of both the producers and the buyers must be modified. Above all, the producers must be permitted to gain a livelihood by creating useful objects; while the public must be undeceived in its belief that an object must be abundantly and richly ornamented in order to be artistic, and that art itself consists essentially in decoration.

Let us further say that, for several years past, "The Home Arts and Industries Association" has recognized the mistaken path into which it was led in spite of itself. The later exhibitions have not shown the former excess of trifles in which skill and patience have subjected materials to ill-advised and improper uses. There has been an absence of "bazaar articles" in which an untrained fancy has prevented the exercise of true artistic imagination. According to the statement of a recent report, a considerable number of exhibitors have, on the contrary, attained that precise point of conception at which "the hand restrains itself," and at which "by means of the discipline of accurate measure and proportions, the mind reaches some slight fragment of its ideal."

Such is the work of "The Home Arts and Industries Association," a society organized with a charitable purpose and maintained by private gifts. The number of its classes increases year by year, and many of these are pensioned by various committees of persons who, for the most part, are greatly interested in this movement. It is to be observed that now that the impulse is given, the classes recently formed soon equal, if they do not indeed surpass their elders.

With "The Home Arts and Industries Association" are grouped various societies similar in purpose, but much more specialized: as for instance "the School of Basket-making," which advances principles according to which artistic baskets may be produced. The "Gild of Women Binders" undertakes to teach women the art of book-binding, and the results of this association have been unexpectedly successful. The students seize quickly and fully the subject, and if the least adroit, must be content to execute billboard bindings of good and solid appearance, the great number
of the members of the association do not hesitate to confront the
difficulties offered by the most artistic work. Among the pieces
exhibited, certain books show an infinite and original grace in the
use of iron clasps and ornaments; on other covers, leather em-
bossed, or in mosaic, displays exquisite beauties of color and relief.
The craftswomen of the “Gild of Women Binders” are not found
exclusively in the great centers. Many of them live in the rural
cottages which, with their red-tiled roofs, strike a cheerful note in
the neutral-tinted plains, valleys and moors of England, Scotland
and Ireland. Although not strictly intended for the daughters
of peasants, the “Gild of Women Binders” largely recruits its
members among persons whose families are connected with agri-
culture. The exhibition of this society at Paris in 1900 and the
prize there awarded to it clearly show the value of these bindings
which all reveal individuality, sometimes open to criticism, but
always very attractive.
“The Chiswick Art Workers’ Gild,” formed on a similar basis,
is devoted to embroidery, and, in exhibitions of decorative art, are
found works of the greatest interest executed by members belong-
ing to all grades of society.
Halesmere, a suburb of London, owes to its “Peasant Art Society”
a specialized industry of “Peasant Tapestries.” Tapestry is not,
perhaps, the exact term by which to designate the works of the
class which is directed by Mr. Godfrey Blount. They are rather
designs applied upon linen in a broad and unpretentious style.
The peasant workers execute with perfect finish and often with
great richness of effect simple and elegant designs in appliqué.
In the same region “The Peasant Art Society” has established an-
other class in which the villagers are taught to weave by hand
woolen and linen fabrics suitable to receive the applied designs.
The society also markets the products of the tapestry-makers in
a shop specially established in London for the sale of artistic work
executed in villages.
“The British-Irish Spinning, Weaving and Lace School” was
founded to encourage textile industries among women. It seeks
especially to aid peasant women whose time and energy are often
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wasted through the want of useful employment. The society teaches them to weave woolen and cotton fabrics. It assists equally persons of better condition who wish to increase their income by artistic work; assigning them laces and embroideries to execute. Further, it employs infirm women, such as epileptics and deaf and dumb persons, to spin wool, flax and hemp. And it is with these materials spun by hand that the embroideries are executed, while the fabrics are produced by other women workers of the society.

It is to be observed that a large number of these societies are intent upon reviving old processes of hand-spinning and hand-weaving. It is recognized that the textiles thus produced possess great durability and elegance; since threads of inferior quality could not at all support the strain necessitated in the manufacture. The homespuns have especially gained the favor of fashion. And members of the Windermere class, directed by Miss Garnett, with their experiments in mingling threads of silk with cotton, interesting in color and texture, have proven that art can be displayed in even the most modest fabrics. To reach this result Miss Garnett was forced to re-establish among the peasants the old custom of spinning at the wheel. Previously to this reform or revival, she published a very practical and elegant manual in which she presented the advantages offered by such combinations of woolen and flaxen threads. She ended her argument by giving technical details very clearly and by making an appeal to the women of the neighboring villages, to whom she offered the free loan of the necessary spinning-wheels. At the present time, the Windermere class has twenty-four spinning wheels in action in rural cottages, and ninety women employed in continuous work. Miss Garnett also supervises the execution by her associates of distinctive and highly artistic embroideries. The Windermere textiles have acquired a wide reputation and are principally desired as foundations for elegant embroideries.

At Landlaff, under the direction of Miss Mabel Hints, craftspeople are employed not only in weaving, but especially in experiments and tests in dyeing, to the end of replacing by vegetable
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colors the aniline dyes now employed. The results already obtained are most satisfactory and artistic, and have made the locality a center of interesting activity. We have thus noted only in passing the movement created by "The Home Arts and Industries Association," without reference to the classes in leather work at Leighton Buzzard and at Porlock Weir, the metal-works at Five Miles Town, and Kiswick, and the marquetry works at Cheltenham. We have wished simply to attract attention to the revival of the lesser arts which grows more and more accentuated among our neighbors beyond the Straits of Dover.

For a country like France, which has always striven to occupy the first place in the fine arts, and which for long years has in truth maintained that place, would it not be of great value to play an important part also in the revival of those lesser arts, which are so full of promise from both the artistic and the social point of view? For several years past, schools of decorative art have been held in many of our cities, but these can be attended only by the urban population. Therefore, would not a society similar to "The Home Art and Industry Association" accomplish useful work in broadcasting anew through our rural districts long-forgotten art-ideas, and in affording large numbers of our village compatriots useful and healthful occupation? Then, in our turn, as writers and critics, we might, like our English brethren, advise the purchase of truly national products which would bear in all their parts the impress of humanity, and be an expression free, sincere and intelligent of the joy of living.