The Revival of the Craftsman

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The illustrations accompanying Mr. Belknap’s article are photographs from artistic objects exhibited at the International Gallery, 1 East 40th Street, New York.
— [The Editors.]

At the present time, Arts and Crafts Societies, Gilds and other similar Associations promise a revival of that interest in the lesser arts, which was so strong a feature of the Middle Ages, and which has always played an important part in China, Japan and throughout the East, but which for some generations has so far declined as to indicate a feeling that in Architecture, Painting and Sculpture, the end of Art is reached.

Slowly and with uncertainty at first, but of late with rapidly increasing speed, the movement has gained impetus to the encouragement of the artisans in every trade, and to the satisfaction of the founders and supporters of the many technical schools, who are ready to extend their work, to make their courses more comprehensive, if only students will present themselves to make use of the new opportunities.

These schools are many of them already well equipped, and all have, at least, a good foundation which needs only to be built upon to enable them to impart a valuable education in the various branches of art-craftsmanship.

Doubtless much that is taught is not perfect, and the standards may not be so elevated as might be desired, but, upon the whole, good is being done, and the healthful influence exerted in certain places is very marked. If we turn over the sketches and designs of any fairly gifted pupil of some of these schools, and note the restraint and simplicity of the ornament, and the tendency to use conventionalized natural forms, rather than the realistic treatment which has produced such painful results, we shall discover that real progress is making.
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There seems always to be a supply of those who, with more or less talent, are ready and anxious to adopt some form of Art as a calling, even though it necessitates life in a garret and uncertainty as to where and when the next meal is to be found. There is also a fairly large, and of late years a rapidly increasing number of persons, who are more or less cultured in their taste for artistic things, together with others who feign an interest, in their effort to appear sophisticated. Many of these last quite unconsciously learn discrimination, and actually join the ranks to which they aspire. It is to both these classes that the craftsman must look for encouragement and support. The garret-haunting proclivity of the artist of narrow means calls for time and energy on the part of those who would track him to his studio, and it is unfortunate for all concerned, that a large number of the patrons of art are so hampered by social duties as to have little time to search out the workers; while the producer of artistic wares is either a very poor salesman of his own work or else too proud to exploit it. He is more than liable to think that if his productions do not proclaim their own merit to such a degree as to compel a purchase, the ignorance of the Philistine is too hopeless to be worth an effort to correct it.

In many places, the Societies of Arts and Crafts are providing means for bringing together the craftsmen and the public; but in some of these organizations the standard of excellence necessary to the admission of work is so high as to exclude all save a very few, and to discourage many workers who need only the incentive of a little help and a small increase in their income in order to do better work. Beside this, too many of these societies are dependent upon the financial support of a few enthusiasts and philanthropists, and are liable to fail at any moment if this aid is withdrawn, since they have no means of self-support.

It would seem, therefore, that a field is open for an enterprise which, while having its commercial side, is yet upon a higher plane than the ordinary shop, and in which the articles shown shall be selected with discrimination and taste. It is probable that in order to make such a place sufficiently profit-
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able to attract capital, work must be admitted which is not strictly that of the individual craftsman: a step likely to accomplish the very desirable result of improving the quality of production in factories and shops, by creating a greater demand for well-designed, and well-executed machine work. No one but the idealist imagines that we can eliminate the machine. Nor would it be desirable to do this, for the cost of handwork must always place it beyond the reach of all save the wealthy. But we may reasonably expect to see marked advancement in many kinds of mechanical products. It is not the manufacturer who is slow to improve. It is the lack of refined taste in those who buy his wares; which conditions render it unprofitable for him to produce artistic things. Our public schools are doing much and can do still more to refine the taste of the public. Once this influence is felt, the support of the craftsman, working alone in his attic-studio, or in the designing room of some great factory, will be assured. We believe that this influence is now active, and a visit to any one of the splendid museums which are rising throughout the country will prove the great interest which they have awakened in the public.

Too much can not be done for the education of the popular taste, since it may be proven again and again from history that the cultivation of the arts and crafts is a sure index of the moral, intellectual and material well being of a people. The museum, the school and the wisely controlled shop have each a part to perform in advancing this most dignified cause. The part of each is a separate and different one. But who shall say which is the greatest and which the least?