In Defence of Fire

THE text is taken from a recent issue of a popular magazine, and the words are as follows: “It cannot be too often urged that this way of adorning a piece is, in a sense, a shirking of the difficulty. If you cannot decorate, you can at least splash: that seems to be the thought at the bottom of such adornment. But let it be recognized that the taste for such happy-accident decoration is widespread, prevailing in the Orient as well as in European lands, and that it is a growing taste with us to-day. Even the most artistically minded will value ‘single color’ pieces and ‘flashed’ or ‘flambé’ pieces; often caring more for them, apparently, than for the wares decorated with more elaborately designed, and certainly more intelligent decoration by hand painting.”

The occasion which called forth this passage was the illustration of a number of works by American artist-potters. Some exhibited the much lauded “hand-painting,” some the effects of flowing glaze, and the explanation offered is that “if you cannot decorate, you can at least splash!”

About a thousand years ago, certain Chinese potters wrought. Toiling with indifferent success, with imperfect knowledge and crude materials, they eventually succeeded in clothing their clay with clear, translucent glazes, in which the utmost delicacy of color was displayed. Practice made them perfect, and they passed on their knowledge to their descendants, who cherished the memory of their forefathers and achieved still greater triumphs in their kilns. Their glazes glowed with vibrant hues and in their delicate fancy they produced the “violet of wild apples,” the “liquid dawn,” and many other equally poetic and precious effects.

“The old order changeth, giving place to new,” but, like one who is offered a draught of wine, we say: “The old is better.”

The purist school of Chinese potters was succeeded by a line of “artists” who sought in the elaboration of “hand-painted” detail to show how much labor could be expended in decoration. These two schools are typical of styles which have existed, side by side, ever since.

Let us examine their claims to consideration!
In Defence of Fire

First, the most important factor in the production of pottery is the fire. This it is which changes the clay so that its substance becomes durable. Its influence draws out the latent quality of the materials used, fuses the glaze, vitrifies the body, and develops the colors. The fire may be almost said to be the measure of quality, as, with but few exceptions, it is true that “the harder the fire the better the ware.”

The skill of the early Chinese potters was directed largely toward discovering a substance upon which the fire could exert its influence. They sought vitrifiable rocks and earths, for pigments which should at once be yielding and resistent: yielding, so that the fire might penetrate, purify and perpetuate; resistent, that they might not destroy. With such success were they rewarded that their art has represented the “Ultima Thule” of artist potters ever since their day.

They toyed with fire, those ancient Chinese. Of science they little recked. The chemistry of glazes and the physics of the furnace were alike unknown to them, but their work stands unrivaled today.

Second. The second school of ceramists used the same porcelain body and a pure white glaze. After the porcelain was completely fashioned and burned, neither skill nor patience lacking, they painted upon the ware, in rich colors and gold, scenes of varied character. Human figures, stories of life interest, scenes from history: all were depicted with marvelous fidelity and care. This decorative work was fixed at a lower heat than that at which the glaze had been burned, and it remained on the surface. The colors are fused, but do not penetrate the glaze; they are superb but superficial.

The excellence of this class of work lies in the intricate handling of a mass of detail, in a perfect mastery of the principles of decoration, and in a lavish indulgence, qualified by artistic feeling, in the use of gorgeous colors and elaborate gilding.

What, then, are the essential differences between the two schools? The former considers the porcelain as a single note amid harmonious surroundings. The individuality of the vase is empha-
In Defence of Fire

sized by the peculiar quality of the color of which it is an expos-
ent. The result is repose, satisfaction, and delight.
The latter school makes of the porcelain piece a complete chord, often beautiful, always full and resonant. It must be considered apart from its environment, for it is not easily brought into har-
mony with other things. It is a triumphant display of exuberant skill, but it is not restful. It does not satisfy.
The writer of the paragraph quoted at the head of this article con-
trasts the two modern schools,—which are the lineal descendants of those described,—to the apparent disadvantage of the former.
We are told that “hand painting” is “more intelligent” than the work described as “splashed,” and we are asked to open our eyes in wonder at the fatuity of “even the most artistically minded,” who have the temerity to care more for single colors and flambé glazes than for “hand painted” decoration. The fact that these colors are preferred by artists conveys no significance to this author, except as if to say: “So much the worse for the artists!”
The fact is that in all decorative arts there is a fitness and propriety, the existence or absence of which makes or mars a work. By gen-
eral consent certain forms and treatments are deemed applicable to wood, certain others to metal. There is an appropriate method for leather and another for basketry. So the essence of the ceramic art is the fire. But, it will be argued, both the examples of work cited have passed through the kiln. True, but, in the “decorated” wares, the fire simply fixed the colors which had been previously prepared. In the work of the purist school, the fire itself was the decorator. The body of the porcelain being formed and lightly baked, or even without any preliminary hardening, the substance of the glaze was compounded and spread over the surface. “Splashing,” in the sense of a haphazard distribution of colors, was unknown, but a second glaze was often superimposed by dipping. The whole work was then submitted to the fire. Not only must we take into account the skill involved in the preparation of the re-
quired compound, but, also, the accurate discrimination, the iron nerve, and the ceaseless vigilance by which the fierce flames are now stimulated and now subdued. The pride of the potter is that
In Defence of Fire

his clay shall yield to the furnace: flowing and mingling in matchless beauty and endless variety. But the glazes must also acknowledge the artistic restraint by which his whole work is controlled. Not a tear or drop of molten glaze must pass the limit. At the bottom of every piece is a tiny rim of dead ground, a biscuit line of demarcation. Thus far the fluid glaze can come, but no farther. This is the work designated by our author with a contemptuous gesture, as he writes: "You can, at least, splash."

There is a delicate discrimination shown between the words "decorate" and "adorn," in the passage quoted, but the dictionary makes no such distinction. It would appear that the development of color by means of fire is not decoration. Let us be thankful that it is not! A piece of brilliant porcelain is, in itself, a decoration, and to daub it with painted flowers or distorted landscapes would be an attempt "to gild refined gold or paint the lily." To endow either porcelain or pottery with brilliant color, pulsing with life and radiance, or with tender texture, soft and caressing: color and texture which owe their existence and their quality to the fire,—this is art. For this the artist-potter lives; rejoicing if his kilns, even through weariness and pain, shall once and again give birth to some precious piece, which is, in itself, a justification and a joy.

THINGS DONE WELL,
AND WITH A CARE, EXEMPT THEMSELVES FROM FEAR:
THINGS DONE WITHOUT EXAMPLE, IN THEIR ISSUE
ARE TO BE FEARED.

SHAKSPERE