French Art for French Children

IRENE SARGENT

FROM an excellent foreign contemporary, "Art et Décoration," The Craftsman reproduces a number of designs for nursery wall-paper: the result of a prize competition recently held by the editors of the French magazine. These designs are nationally characteristic of the artists who produced them; yet, in several instances, they show the strong influence exerted in the France of to-day by English decorative art: especially by the composition, figure-drawing and coloring of Walter Crane and of Kate Greenaway. But every one of these delicate little motifs witnesses, as well, the eager interest and delight which adults in France, irrespective of class, take in all that pertains to childhood. In that country, indeed, the mature and the young are bound together by that strongest of all ties—community of interests—and this to a degree quite inexplicable to the American upon his first visit. Simple pleasures apparently never lose their keenness for the most world-weary strollers of the boulevards, with whom it is a current phrase and a not infrequent action "to dip themselves anew at Nature's source." The foreigner can interest himself profitably for hours by watching the Parisian families who, on pleasant summer days, resort to the public gardens, like the Luxembourg, there to pass the greater part of the working hours. If one follows such a group, say, from some quiet shop-keeping street of the Latin quarter, one sees mother and children emerge from some open court, making against "the common grayness" of wall and pavement a bright picture worthy of the brush of that favorite painter of a generation ago, Edouard Frère. Parent and children alike are laden with wraps, food-supplies and toys; the latter, for the most part, being miniature-boats, dolls and tin railway-trains, in which the mother takes an equal interest with her boys and girls, if one may judge from her bright glances and lively comments given in that charming way which colloquial French, among all the idioms of the world, makes possible. They take their way, eager with anticipated pleasure, to the beautiful gardens which were given in inalienable right by Marie de Médicis to the Parisian people. They are judges of the loveliness of the spot and they have in it all the pride of ownership. They differ radically
French Art for French Children

from a group of the corresponding class in America whom one meets, at the same season, going to spend a holiday in the unbeautiful, sordid, money-making grounds provided by private capital. In the Luxembourg, or any other typical Parisian garden, the members of our French family have before their eyes the beauty which educates the young and which soothes and satisfies the adult. Vistas, fountains, arrangements of turf and flower-beds, so harmonious as to suggest the canvas of some master colorist reproduced on a great scale,—all these elements combine into a whole affording a refined, sensuous pleasure to be compared only with that which is produced by the music of a well-trained orchestra. Amid these surroundings, our French children play the entire day; the mother watching that they neither endanger themselves nor encroach upon the rights of others: the latter provision being made in accordance with that praiseworthy characteristic so noticeable among the French, when they congregate in public places. And a word must be said of the supervision exercised by the French mother, as indicative of the strong bond which exists in France between the parent and the child. This is no union irksome to both individuals, as it often appears to be in America. It is pleasurable, because it is cemented by a sense of companionship. Something of the child: that is, his spontaneous power to enjoy, to free himself from care, and to enter at will a fairy world—something of this freshness remains in the heart of every French adult. This quality is made apparent to the foreigner as he travels in railway-coaches through the country, strolls in the streets, visits the flower markets, or, perchance, a provincial theatre, where “Beauty and the Beast,” or one of its companion pieces, is playing. Landscape effects, animals, flowers, spectacular scenes, all have charms which those who enjoy them so keenly translate into glances, gestures and words natural and truthful,—
French Art for French Children

quite different from the forced and conventional expressions of pleasure which the Anglo-Saxons employ. As we have said, the children play through the long sunny day: not without the disputes, outbursts and quick revulsions of feeling and will, that have been the property of the Gallic nature ever since Julius Caesar's time; but, as a whole, so that educators, mothers and children, on this side of the Atlantic, might learn of them. That they are open to impressions of beauty more than those of corresponding years in all other countries save perhaps Italy, will be readily conceded. But it is more difficult to inspire the belief that they possess certain other qualities which go far toward the making of successful men and women. However, one who studies them without prejudice will soon discover that they are thrifty and non-destructive: that they care for and respect their toys in the spirit of young capitalists; further, that their facility of speech, their nicety of expression, is no mask for poverty of thought. They philosophize in their simple way; they reason from cause to effect, and seem constantly—if we may borrow a commercial phrase—to be "turning over" their fund of ideas; to be using what they have learned at school. This is especially true of all that relates to the history of France, which they regard as a drama easily represented and of absorbing interest. In the parks or squares of our American cities, it would be strange indeed to witness juvenile, mimic battles of Lexington, or to find youthful impersonators of Washington or Lincoln. But in France, the national heroes, Gallic, Frankish and modern, are so vitalized in the minds of the children, that a Vercingetorix, a Charlemagne or a Gambetta fights or declaims at every street-corner. Into the very heart of the children's pleasures the French mother enters. She is not regarded by her charges as a "kill-joy," watching and forbidding. She is held by them as a companion of ex-
French Art for French Children

experience, skill and resource superior to their own; one devoted to their pleasures and able to set right their wrongs, but in no wise removed or removable from the scenes of their daily life.

This same bond between the mature and the young, resulting largely from the mental attitude of the former class, one sees exemplified in Paris in other similar and not less attractive ways.

During the pleasant season, in the gardens of the Tuileries and the groves of the Champs Elysées, the national "Punch," known as Guignol, daily recites his domestic woes and comes to his evil end at the hands of the hangman. And daily large and merry audiences of children flock to his booth at the sound of his shrill trumpet. Neither here is the mature element wanting. There is a sprinkling of adults who are attracted by the farce itself, and these, for the most part, are elderly men and women, apparently those who have few holidays and little to spend, but who, with true French economy, are striving to make the most of their resources. The mothers and the nurses who accompany their charges, are attractive, as showing how strongly the dramatic sentiment permeates all classes of French society. This fact is especially apparent in the case of the maids, who are not listless hirelings, but who, being themselves interested in Punch, his wife and baby, the dog and the deuce, make such comments upon the characters and the action as are no less eagerly sought for by the foreign listener than by the children themselves; since they are characterized by a sparkling, although familiar wit. Indeed, the audience of the French Guignol quite differs from the haphazard concourse found about the "Punch and Judy" of our American squares, or of the London streets. In Paris the place of exhibition is carefully chosen; little seats like orchestra chairs are quickly put in position, a rope is stretched about the whole, and, while the drama lasts, its precincts are invaded by no one save the waffle-men and the madeleine vender, whose cakes find an equal sale with the adults and with the children.

Still another personage of importance for all sorts, conditions and ages of the Parisians is the bird-charmer, who, elderly and wearing a workman's blouse, is seen, throughout the year, when the weather permits, in the gardens of the Louvre, or the Tuileries,
French Art for French Children

calling the wild birds by name, feeding them, exercising them in adroit little tricks, and then dispersing them by a quick signal of his hand. This man can not but recall Saint Francis of Assisi, who felt so keenly the bond existing between man and the peoples of feather and fin, and who, according to the old legend, is seen throughout Europe, pictured in missal, or on painted wall or window, as preaching to his little brothers of the air and water. By the modern workman the legend is again verified, and as long as there remain those of his kind (and they are many), there will be hope for the Latin races.

But we have wandered far from the designs presented by the French magazine. They are too engaging to be neglected longer. The first prize represented by our illustration, number one, shows a dance of children, in which the art nouveau line is used with discretion, forming harmonious spirals free from confusion. The separate strands of the spirals are managed with fine effect, as may be found upon close examination of the drawing, which shows them at their least expansion circling, like vine-branches, the feet and the neck of the same child; thence they pass on to form a swing for a baby seen from the back; next they are a point of support for the pirouettes of a miniature ballet-girl; finally they describe a wider figure which, as it spreads, accentuates a garland-like procession of girls and boys. The coloring too is modern: recalling Claude Monet’s palette and also his use of “the spot:” whites, blues, heliotropes and reds appearing against a background of green turf and of rust-brown foliage.

The second prize, number two, of our illustrations, has also fine artistic qualities. It is, moreover, suited to the childish comprehension, which would certainly fail to grasp the subtlety of the first composition. Here the baby-and-cat motif is adroitly man-
aged: giving a rapid impression of form, and pleasing by its full and sweeping curves. The design has, therefore, the first essential of all good things in modern art: it represents; it does not imitate. It is judged by the French editors as being highly original and well composed. It is also recognized as subject to the criticism that it resembles a design for a painted window, more than one for a wall-hanging. The stricture is just, in regard to both the drawing and the disposition of the color, which occurs in masses: spots of intense blue for the babies’ gowns; pronounced green for the background; orange for the cats and the babies’ shoes. But its remaining qualities should, perhaps, have given it first place. It is piquant and,—if the word may be allowed—witty. It provokes a smile at first sight. The gestures of the drinking children, the pose of the cat equally eager for the milk, the funny pointed collars circling the babies’ necks, and the sharp ears of the cat have a style and accent unexpected in so slight a composition.

The third prize design composed of a villa, fountain with swans, trees, and a dance of children wearing wooden shoes, is one which is well adapted to its intended use. Nor can it fail to please the little people of the nursery to whom it will seem a flat picture of their wooden, toy village with which they are accustomed, now and then, to spend a happy hour. The older critic regrets that the French designer should have somewhat repressed his French spirit which shows, in the detail of the children’s dance, in order to follow too closely the style of Walter Crane.

A fine design receiving honorable mention, recalls also, although more distantly, the school of decorative art beyond the channel. And yet it might have been composed by Bastien-Lepage for the background of one of his figure-pieces: for example, his Jeanne
French Art for French Children

d'Arc. The white sheep, the blooming apple-tree with its crowns of foliage and flowers, are excellently grouped and massed, meeting all the requirements of line, light and shade. But the color-scheme, in the opinion of the French editors, shows a heavy predominance of green, which, according to the plan of Nature, was intended by the Great Mother as an anodyne or an opiate for the vision: from which it is easily deduced that a too great proportion of green introduced into a picture will cause a corresponding loss of sensuous pleasure to the spectator, especially to the child.

The competition, criticised as a whole by the French judges failed in certain qualities which juvenile books, as well, are wont to lack. Among the many drawings offered for examination one defect was prominent, and that may be defined as a bold, insistent presentation of the subject, a lack of interesting detail, a poverty of thought and touch of which children would soon weary. From this defect or rather this group of faults, the “toy-villa design” is practically free: the motif being drawn on a small scale; the trees, the flowers, the swans swimming in the basins, the little villa and the fountain offering to the child as many themes for fairy-tales. Thus to appeal to the developing imagination and so to afford surroundings and belongings which are full of variety and charm, should be the first endeavor of all artists who devote their time and talents to the pleasure and the instruction of children.

---

THERE'S A WORLD OF CAPABILITY
FOR JOY, SPREAD ROUND ABOUT US, MEANT FOR US,
INVITING US.

ROBERT BROWNING