The Plant in Decoration

As a telling and significant evidence of the dominant characteristic of the new art, whether it be studied in France, Germany, England, or America,—a careful criticism of some recent German work, written by a French expert, and published in "Art et Décoration" for May, is here presented almost in its entirety.

The very existence of the work criticised, is a proof,—although none is needed—that conventions are dead; that the impulse of the times is toward the study of life: whether this study be pursued to preserve the race, to further civilization and morals, or to solve the secrets of creation for the pure joy of discovery and possession; or yet again, in order to delight the eye with subtle suggestions of the forms occurring in Nature. It is brilliantly evident that science, philosophy and art are united, as never before, in one common movement, spontaneous and irresistible, which should make our time illustrious in history, as a unified, organic period, comparable with the thirteenth century, so honored by students, but yet far exceeding it in permanent services to humanity.

The sources of life and of activity are sought to-day with the same intensity that characterized the mediaeval search for the fountain of youth, or the philosopher’s stone. And viewed by modern light, the alchemist and the wizard were the forerunners of the practical scientist who now, in some measure, controls the forces of Nature most hostile to man and has gained the most signal victories over disease; who has annihilated space and constructed the most subtle instruments. As Victor Hugo once said, "the fables of yesterday become the truths of to-day." Paracelsus and Leonardo da Vinci, condemned by their own age as charlatans, scoffers or dreamers, are justified after the lapse of four centuries. They, guided by the intuition of genius, groped amid intellectual darkness, suspecting and divining relations between things which, by means of experiments and methods slowly and progressively followed, stand at present clearly revealed, and are seen to constitute the working basis of all useful human endeavor. Abstract sciences, once considered quite apart and remote from the world of matter, are now studied by comparison with other sciences treating of things having actual existence. The sociologist and the biolo-
The Plant in Decoration

gist labor side by side, recognizing that they are helpful and necessary, each to the other, and that each is dealing with a complete organism subject to laws of life which prevail equally in the visible and in the invisible world. Kropotkin, in tracing the development and ramifications of the law of "mutual aid," in which he sees the vital principle of society, reasons by analogies drawn from the polity of bees and ants and other of the smaller peoples of the animal kingdom. It will be remembered, too, that Darwin and Sir Henry Maine, working in widely different fields of research and labor, traced almost simultaneously, the one the origin of species, the other the formation of society through the evolution of a very restricted number of legal principles. Indeed, evidence is overwhelming to prove the unity of impulse and thought which has prevailed for the last half-century and which has given these years a high place among the significant periods of history. And from such existing conditions, it follows that the trend toward unity, the impulse toward Nature must be expressed in art, which is but the reflection of contemporary life: a reflection dim and wavering, if the times themselves be agitated and stirred with conflicting purposes, but clear and sharply defined, if the underlying depths be permeated by a single thought-element.

It can not be—it is not—impractical and visionary thus to explain the new phase of art which is manifesting itself with the same intensity, although with varying expression, among all the aesthetic nations of to-day. The rejection by them of historical precedent and influence; the simplification of theme and form found in the work of all eminent contemporary artists; the return to Nature, as to the primitive, unfailing, overflowing source of inspiration: all such indications reveal a mood and movement grave and grand; a thing not to be explained away by the unsympathetic and the short-sighted critics, who misunderstand the new art as a creative and convention of the studio, pure and simple: ignoring and denying its broader meaning and its higher character; misinterpreting those who profess it as experimentalists more or less skilful, seeking a new variation of the undulating line. Such, indeed, there are, as well as many who put their technical powers to an ignoble use in efforts to produce the uncommon, the
The Plant in Decoration

striking and the grotesque. These last are but the mercenaries of the cause, enlisted under its banner, while having no part or lot in the principles which it involves.

The new art has an incontestable place among the important phenomena of the times. It can not be ignored any more than the great advances in physical and social science. It merits and demands attention, as it reveals itself in manifold forms and among peoples widely differing from one another in race, traditions, education, and customs. It is, therefore, interesting to meet with the report of a recent art exposition held in Saxony; more especially as the report comes from the pen of a Parisian critic, enlightened, appreciative and untinged by the Chauvinism with which the French are often taxed, but for the most part, of late years, without foundation of justice.

The critic of the magazine "Art et Décoration" thus writes:

"An important manifestation of art has just occurred at Leipzig: one which may be classed as a consultation, as well as an illustrated lesson. Both as an evidence of the new orientation of decorative art, and as an example of the teaching of that branch among our neighbors, the exposition was too important not to receive notice. Further, we can, in France, profit by the lesson which it offered.

"After the incontestable success of the German section at the Turin Exposition of 1902,—a success which well repaid the efforts of the estimable artists who produced it—the belief in a national German style in process of formation was generally felt to be inadmissible. On the contrary, individual tendencies were strongly revealed, with no appearance of artistic bonds other than those created by the very spirit of the race. Such bonds gave indeed a family air to the objects exhibited, but yet between this general resemblance and a style proper the difference was great. These conditions became a source of anxiety to the artistic element in Germany.

"It can not be asserted that our neighbors would wish wholly to suppress individual initiative. However, the ardent desire of creating a national style appears to induce the artists of that country to submit themselves to a general rule. For such action they
The Plant in Decoration

can not be censured, and this new manifestation of the strict discipline under which our neighbors produce their artistic work, ought to serve us as an example: since it is well known to what extreme lengths we Frenchmen are led by our exaggerated cult of artistic individualism, which allows so many undeniable talents to be wasted in efforts sterilized through isolation.

"The methodical German mind naturally noted with concern the conditions which we have described as observable at the Turin Exposition. To modify them efforts were made rationally, and, for the most part, through the medium of instruction given in the decorative arts. The work of Herr Meurer upon the systematic study of the plant was the point of departure, and the Leipzig Exposition had no other end than, by showing results, to record the progress already made.

"The idea of exerting these efforts of centralization upon talents in process of development, rather than upon those in full control and possession of themselves, was judicious and practical. The same idea led to the formation of a complete scheme of instruction in the decorative arts, which we will here rapidly outline.

"Herr Meurer, as we have before said, seems to have been the precursor of the present movement. It was he who formulated, in several works, the rules for the rational and systematic study of the plant, making of it almost a branch of architecture; since he discussed warmly and at length plant-construction considered in itself. Following this division of the subject, the artist not only derives from the plant themes of ornament; but further: from the architectural forms of the plant he deduces the architectural forms of objects which he will afterward decorate. Yet he will do this in a new and rational way, quite unlike the system which gives to a vase the realistic appearance of a bulb or a bud.

"In studying the plant according to the new system: that is, no longer from the point of view of the picturesque, the artist seeks to discover in its various constructive parts rhythms (measures) of form, relations of volumes or proportions, and treatments of line. The eye refining itself by this study and these researches, is afterward more liable to create in a rational manner, since the original, inspiring idea will have been drawn from the study of nature.
The Plant in Decoration

Therefore, admitting that nature is the basis of all logical construction, the artist, guided by her, will compose in perfect safety. He will not, after the manner of his predecessors, give to an object the form of a flower or a fruit; but from this flower or fruit he will logically deduce an architectural or a purely decorative form.

"Thus, as is evident, nature here serves only as a basis for decorative developments, varied to infinitude, derived incontestably from her, but no longer giving the natural object an exact or even a faint and distant representation. Such evolution is noted, not alone in ornament proper, but in construction also. Naturalistic ornament is now avoided; that is, ornament in which the representation of a natural object—even though it be very much conventionalized—is recognizable. For example, we are weary of the iris or the poppy taken as decorative themes, for their realistic and too frequent interpretation has, of necessity, fatigued us, and this in spite of their beauty of form. On the contrary, we can not grow tired of ornament constantly renewed, of which these flowers shall be the first inspiration, but in which nothing shall recall their natural forms. This is, therefore, the reason why artists employ the details—even the minor characteristics of the plant, or the flower,—rather than the plant or the flower itself. For instance, from the stamens, or from cross-sections of the flower, they derive ornaments possessing undeniable character and accent.

"The new ornament is, therefore, a question of form and not of objects.

"Let us add that the plant is not the only source of inspiration; animals and even minerals furnish numerous themes: the wings of a butterfly, the feathers of a bird, the scales of a fish, the most widely differing crystallizations, invite study, and afford an almost infinite scope for ornamental derivations.

"The school following Van de Velde, and professing a line which may be compared with the curves described by a whip-lash, no longer exists. This was a linear ornamentation absolutely without basis, without logic, for the most part without reason for existence other than the caprice of the decorator: a style which quickly grew wearisome. The basis of the new school is stronger, and if its aspect is slightly severe, slightly monotonous, a firmness and
The Plant in Decoration

security are there recognizable, which before were unknown.

"The points to be summed up are, therefore:

"No more exact representation of natural forms. But from elements occurring in nature ornament is logically derived, in forms which oftentimes show no traces of their origin.

"To what end this new conception will lead German decorators it is at present difficult to foresee. Meanwhile, it is certain that they are deriving from it lessons of which the interesting results have already been shown in the Leipzig exposition."

From this point, the French writer just quoted, continues his criticism upon the study of natural forms in decorative art: devising schemes of instruction to be put into practice in his own country, and comparing the work of various German professors and decorators. He proceeds:

"It would be well that the idea of an exposition founded upon the study of the plant—which idea originated in France and was developed in Germany—should be resumed among us.

"It would be well to determine where we ourselves are, and a general appeal made, not only to the schools of applied art in Paris, but also to those situated in the provinces, would enable us to decide whether the instruction there given really bears the fruit which we have the right to expect from it. The consultation thus made possible could not fail to be useful, and a general participation of artists would assure the success of the enterprise."

Regarding instruction in Germany the French critic writes:

"Herr Richard Graul, director of the Art-Crafts Museum of Leipzig, frequently arranges in his own institution expositions of decorative art. During the past winter, exhibits of ceramics and needlework have permitted the public to inform itself regarding the condition of these branches of decorative art in Germany.

"Taking up anew the idea put forth in France fifteen or twenty years since by Mr. Falize—a valuable idea, which, unhappily, could not be realized among us,—Herr Graul, in organizing an exposition of the Plant in Decoration, wished above all to emphasize the principles which we have already outlined. He succeeded in showing a whole extremely interesting, although not so complete, as might have been desired. But completeness was not an essen-
The Plant in Decoration

tial, since the exhibitors were expected to indicate the direction which they had followed, rather than to present finished works. For this reason, the exposition was better fitted to interest professionals than the public in general. The object of the organizer was to show that the employment of the element drawn from nature must entail that conventionalism which in turn produces valuable ornamental and architectural effects. Further, the title of the Plant in Decoration was taken simply to restrict the too extensive field offered by nature to decorative interpretation, and not to indicate a preference in the source itself of this interpretation.

"Not the least interesting part of this exposition was the ready response to the appeal thus made to the schools of applied art. It is with their participation that we shall deal, more than with the works of the matured artists, in which the new tendencies are affirmed with less precision.

"Three among those schools claim special attention: the Royal Art-Crafts School of Dresden, the Art-Crafts and Mechanics' School of Magdeburg, and the Royal Academy of the Graphic Arts and Bookbinding of Leipzig.

"The Dresden School appears to sum up the modern tendencies, and excellent instruction is there afforded by the professors Naumann, Preissler and Gross. Professor Preissler would seem to direct his students toward a study of the plant seen somewhat from the Japanese point of view. The instruction of Professor Naumann is more systematic. He presents to his students the separate elements of the plant, and, even in this first presentation, he already conventionalizes the parts. Then, from a succession of drawings in which he conventionalizes progressively, he derives interesting decorative forms. He finds his themes everywhere: transforming the flowers of the dielytra by changing proportions; deriving from the scales of fishes varied units of decoration; seizing ideas from the general effect or from the detail of buds, stems, flowrets, flowers, and ears of wheat; studying the stamen, the pistil, the seed, and the vertical or the transverse section of the seed-vessel.

"But it must again be insisted that all this work is directly inspired by nature. The student conventionalizes from the plant, producing thus an interpretation personal and decorative, made
The Plant in Decoration

with the express purpose of serving as a basis for later and successive developments of the theme, not only in form but as well in color.

"The third instructor of the group, Professor Gross, also devotes himself to the study and the systematic conventionalizing of natural growths. The models produced by his pupils are of the highest interest; they are finely architectural, and show an original, rational inspiration. The same method as that employed by Professor Naumann develops from a bud, a vase, a capital, or a frieze purely architectural. For these models, also, the source of inspiration is left without restriction: embracing flowers, fruits, fresh foliage and even withered leaves.

"Together with the above-described studies, there were shown examples of lithography, decorated porcelains and book-covers, which placed before the spectator practical work produced from theoretical teaching. Whence it resulted that the Dresden school was the one best represented at Leipzig. It also appears to be the one enjoying the strongest and most vitalized instruction.

"Another interesting feature of the exposition was the work of the Leipzig school of book-decoration, which is an institution very recently founded. Devoted to the training of craftsmen of the book, the instruction there afforded is at once practical and very artistic, while the courses are exceedingly well conceived and carried out. Thus the students receive, printed in its final form, the page for which they are to make an ornamental border: a method of work which allows them to harmonize their details; which does not force them, as is too often the case with book designers, to compose a border, without having regard to the text contained within it. The examples exhibited included excellent designs for head and tail-pieces, decorative letters in black or two colors, commercial bindings, and also bindings destined for the cabinet of the amateur. To all those designs were joined preliminary studies, showing the sources from which the student had taken his decorative element.

"Among other fine exhibits was that of the Royal Academy of Design of Hanau, which excelled in designs for work in the precious metals and jewelry. These were modern in conception and
The Plant in Decoration

showed plainly the influence of Lalique. The representation on a single sheet of paper of the plant giving the inspiration and of the piece of jewelry derived from it allowed the spectator to follow the artistic process by which a branch of cypress was transformed into a pendant, a brooch, a necklace, a clasp, and a paper-knife.

“Other schools of decorative art and ceramics showed specimens of creditable work, all contributing to an exposition which was essentially theoretical: the studies of the plant, of flowers and of fruits being much more numerous than the objects executed; the whole appealing less to the public than to professional artists.”

From this critical report and résumé, which is without national prejudice, which is sympathetic and appreciative in the extreme, it would appear that Germany now leads the other artistic nations as a propagator of the sound and real principles of the new art. The French critic, with racial acumen, notes the value of this widely disseminated instruction, this thorough training of students; finding in these methods the sincerest promises for the development of a national, or rather a universal modern style. He would seem to favor the introduction of the German system into his own country, which is the parent of the decorative idea now threatening the extinction of the effete historic styles. His suggestions, attractive at the outset, have the quality of deepening in interest, as they are more carefully studied. He indicates the value of a direct inspiration from Nature, and of the repeated and cumulative conventionalizing of the natural object. From this suggestion we can easily deduce that the function of art is not to imitate but to represent; also that the designer, conformably to his purpose, choosing some suitable decorative element, must needs make that element dominant, by increasing its power through successive drawings, until his climax is reached; just as a plant or an animal, by the development,—even the exaggeration,—of an organ or a function, slowly fits itself for its surroundings.

The French idea, to be propagated by German methods, to be developed and chastened by Anglo-Saxon severity, undoubtedly contains the promise of the future. Why, then, should not the study of the Plant in Decoration be followed in America, with the same earnestness that is now displayed in the older countries?