Building in Clay

THE above title has reference, not to brick and terra-cotta, but to the recently revived art of vase building which has been fortunate enough to attract notice both favorable and adverse.

The formation of clay vessels by means of the unaided hand is almost as old as the human race. Artificial supports were used at first, such as baskets and woven twigs, but the essence of building is the absence of the wheel as an aid to the development of form. While the majority of primitive peoples abandoned this method as soon as they became acquainted with the mysteries of the wheel, there remained some tribes and even nations to whom this knowledge never came. The greater speed of wheel work pushed aside the primitive method of building and, hence, where the wheel became known, the earlier work was never studied or improved upon. But in those cases in which the aggression of the wheel was not felt, attention was exclusively confined to building, with the natural result that great skill was acquired by the workers.

Prominent among the exponents of clay-building were certain of the Indian tribes of North America. They were untaught, and simply followed the bent of their inclination; but the result has been the opening to the modern world of a new avenue of expressive handicraft.

The Indian women were experts in basket weaving, and their method of construction,—sewing together an endless coil of twisted cord,—may have suggested the coils of clay with which their vases were built. The main difference lies in the adhesion. Basket coils must be sewn together. Clay coils adhere, when moist, until the fire gives them a permanent bond.

Early pottery was, without exception, formed to meet a need. No thought of ornament was present, and such beauty as the work possessed was in the fitness and utility which constituted the main, or indeed the only, claim to existence.

Thus, the examples which remain, while varying greatly in form, are of few types. The early British made the funeral urn, the food vessel, and the drinking cup. The Indian wares are mainly of the same class and comprise water-bottles, storage jars, and open vessels for grain or meal. The forms thus evolved are simple
Building in Clay

and strong in outline, well adapted to their purpose, and such as could be fashioned with the least possible labor. The claims of clay are strong and must be heeded. The successful rearing of a plastic wall, of whatever shape, eight or ten inches in height and less than a quarter of an inch in thickness is not to be regarded as a matter of course, and many failures taught that the forms attempted must be those for which the clay was suited. It is not by accident that one type of work is produced in wood, another in iron, another in marble, and another in clay. One recognizes almost by intuition the appropriate outline. In the days when nations and even tribes were isolated, each had to depend upon its own creative and productive skill: hence it is that ancient handicraft is so suggestive and inspirational.

For the craftsman nothing is more important than a careful study of early work. This will not lead to copying, but will supply a motive power which cannot be secured in any other way.

A suggestion may be received here from the habit of the Japanese artist. He spends hours among the birds and flowers, but draws not a line. In the quiet of his home he notes his impressions. The memory of what he has seen is imprinted upon his brain, and, like the latent photographic image, is developed by his facile pencil. He is never accused of copying nature. He does not copy, nor need the student of ancient works of art be subject to the cheap accusation of copying, because he has drawn an inspiration from some better man. Of course, there is such a thing as open and shameless copying,—forging were the better term,—where an inferior producer shelters himself beneath the reputation of some master mind and puts forth worthless imitations. But an action like this is recognized everywhere as reprehensible, and the danger is that the legitimate craftsman who draws an inspiration and makes it his own, giving to the work his individuality and skill, shall be likewise condemned. The fear of this has driven many to feed upon their own thoughts, striving to produce work which shall be original in name, but which lacks character, beauty and truth.

In clay building there are certain type forms which are the natural outcome of the material. It would be absurd to contend that the Indian women had copied the ancient British, and yet
Building in Clay

many pieces are very similar, though produced thousands of miles apart. In like manner, many a piece has been made, in a modern studio, which closely resembles the work of the past, but without the maker ever having seen that which he is accused of copying. It is not to be expected that anyone, before sitting down to shape his clay, shall institute a search in every available quarter, in order that he may not trespass upon any pre-existing form. No such thought was present to hamper and cripple the enterprise of long ago. The Egyptian, the Greek, the Chinaman, and the Indian, each expressed himself in his material, and it is unfair to deny a similar privilege to the workers of to-day.

The modern manufacturer is persecuted by the cry for novelty. The senseless demand for new things, new shapes, new colors, new designs, has resulted, on the one hand, in an indiscriminate use of old shapes with some slight change to justify a different name, and, on the other, in the production of certain outrageous objects which may, fortunately, claim to be new. Such things are always new, for they never live long enough to grow old; whereas, the precious productions of ancient time live among men as literature lives. They cannot die, for the world cannot do without them.

AN ART CAN ONLY BE LEARNED IN THE WORKSHOPS OF THOSE WHO ARE WINNING THEIR BREAD BY IT

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