THE SILVERSMITH'S ART
IN THE MIDDLE AGES—THE TWELFTH CENTURY

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Translated from the French by IRENE SARGENT

THE great movement which is observed to-day in the industrial arts, and which, under the name of L'Art Nouveau, has excited so many arguments, interests all serious minds; because, by whatever name one designates it, it is a real revival of the decorative styles which our predecessors had allowed to reach the final degree of decadence. We know well that we are not creating a new art; we know that time is a necessary coadjutor; but we are certain that we are right in not contenting ourselves with what exists, and in striving to do better: that thus, in the great work of civilization, we shall not be an obstacle to progress, but rather that we shall lighten the task of those who shall succeed us.

The duty of the critic, the function of the art reviews, is to exercise a judicious censorship over the productions of artists, and thus to contribute toward forming the public taste. But criticism is valid only when it is based upon principles firm, evident, and of value recognized by all. But where shall we find rules and principles? We shall not form them a priori, through a process of pure reasoning. We can discover them only by examining the beautiful works of the past. The attentive, intelligent examination of old master-pieces will permit us to establish for every art, for every substance or material, the rules which, more or less consciously, workers in the industrial arts have followed in creating their works: rules which are to-day, as they were yesterday and will be to-morrow, good and stable, since they proceed from qualities peculiar to the method employed, which remains invariable throughout time; gold being gold, to-day, as it was twenty centuries ago.

It is, therefore, in the past that we must seek rules for the art of the future.

"The study of the past"—one might object—"Again and always! It appears to have been done so thoroughly that there is no return to be made to it. We have been nourished upon the past, until it no longer contains sustenance. The past, it would seem, is precisely what we should avoid!"

Now, in truth, there is nothing less known than the past. During the nineteenth century, for example, the industrial arts reproduced only a few unvarying models, each of which, enjoyed, one knows not why, the singular privilege of representing an epoch. One had thus a Gothic coffer, two or three buffets in the Renaissance style, a Louis XIV. writing-desk and chairs, Louis XV. silver,—and we were greatly surprised on entering a museum to witness the large liberty reigning in these styles, of which the modern imitators reproduced only
a few of the more striking characteristics. The decorative artists had no precise knowledge of the riches of the past. They had before them only a few pieces which fashion required them to reproduce.

But there was a still graver aspect of the existing conditions. Artists knew the past only to copy it. Instead of studying the old models, they exerted all their efforts to reproduce them with understanding and accuracy. They fashioned works of copyists, and not of creators. In that fact lay their principal error. A decorative art which enters the path of reproduction is a dead art. They copied so extensively that, when the innovators appeared, these latter were thoroughly alienated from the past which existed only in dead remains, and of which the same examples were offered in endless series. Affected by such conditions, many of those who cast themselves on the side of the new art, said: “Let us fix our gaze upon the present! Let us no longer have consideration for the past, which has been for us a frightful burden! Let our work be independent and original!”

But a style can not be improvised. There are rules which govern the production of a vase, a dresser, an arm-chair, just as there are rules for building a house. Imagination alone and unaided is impotent, dangerous, lawless. Let us praise the artists who say: “Let us fix our gaze upon the present,” but let us complete their unfinished formula. We shall say: “Let us fix our gaze upon the present, with eyes that have studied the past.” If we wish our modern work to be strong and lasting, it must not be in opposition to the changeless rules of art. It is to seek these rules that we study the past.

In reviewing fine models of historic styles, we should not regard them as objects to be copied. Our aim is not imitation. We say: “Here are admirable productions; but if you wish in turn to create a really beautiful work, deserving to be preserved and made known, understand that you will not gain your end by copying; but by
receiving inspiration from the lessons which the past can give you.” These lessons, it is our duty, as historians and critics, to specify. “The artist who made this object,” we shall say, “produced a work of art, because, first of all, he possessed an exact knowledge of the material he employed. Each material has its qualities and its defects. He has avoided the latter, and thrown the former into strong relief. The decorative effects which he has attained are precisely those which can be drawn from that special material and from no other medium. Furthermore, he has shown respect for his material. He has treated it honestly, without subterfuge or deceit. Thirdly, in order to create his work, he has sought inspiration only from the functions which the object of his labors was to serve. Utility dictated to him the choice of forms, which are beautiful, because they are necessary. Again, he has understood the part to be played by ornament, which should not be applied artificially upon the object, but rather should form an integral part of it, issuing from it as the leaf and flower issue from the stem, of which they are the expansion.

“This is not all; the artist-workman has shown respect for himself. He would have abased himself in his own opinion by copying an earlier work. He recognized the dignity of his art which resides in the invention of beautiful shapes. Therefore, he disdained even to repeat himself. And in case of the smallest ornament he submitted himself to the task of creating. Consequently, in the minutest detail, there has resulted an indefinable savor of originality, of personality.

“Lastly, he has respected his trade, his craft. He has employed only the best and surest processes, although they might be the longest and the most costly. He esteemed time spent as of little consequence, provided the resulting work were beautiful.”

Many more points remain to be noted, and they are those of primary importance. All these things the past can teach us. The lessons which we are to seek therein are not in the least dead or withered things. They are principles valuable for us: of present value, since they are constant and changeless. This is the way in which to question the past, the method by which we are here to study one of the most fruitful of the industrial arts: that of the silversmith, as developed in France from the Middle Ages to our own times.

Antique vase of porphyry, mounted in silver during the twelfth century; now in the galleries of the Louvre and known as the “Suger Vase.”
The precious metals, gold and silver, were employed by men as soon as they could fashion and ornament objects. The desire of pleasing innate in both sexes, the pride of displaying riches, have placed jewels in the number of the oldest documents that we have preserved regarding primitive humanity. Weapons were chiseled at an early period. Everyone is acquainted with the Homeric descriptions of scenes from the lives of the gods represented on the shields of heroes. In the period of the high Greek and Roman civilization, luxury engendered superb works of the goldsmith’s and silversmith’s arts, of which only a few specimens are extant. For a later period of Roman civilization, the Bosco Reale collection offers a series of important pieces for those who study the history of work in the precious metals.

The barbarian invasions ensued. The antique world crumbled away. The overwhelming floods of devastating peoples passed over the world and renewed its face. It is not within the limits of our subject to study here that which these barbarians brought with them; the Goths, Visigoths, Lombards, Franks, Saxons, Burgundians and Normands, of whom we are the sons. They had a taste for art which they translated in a manner both original and beautiful. We might indeed show specimens of their work which are related to the gold- and silversmith’s art, and date from Merovingian times: that is to say, which are anterior to the ninth century. For example, bindings of missals, whose silver settings, encrusted with uncut gems or colored glass, framed some Byzantine ivory carving. There are also beautiful examples of the Carolingian period. But we wish to begin with finished works, which will show us the perfection of the new civilization in modern Europe. We shall, therefore, open this study with the twelfth century.

This period, it is true, epitomizes in a masterly way, the life of the previous Christian centuries. It attained the point of perfection toward which the arts unconsciously tended from the time when a new civilization arose. We may call the twelfth the great century of the Middle Ages. And with truth, since, if it shows us the height of attainment of the preceding ages, it gives also the point of departure; it opened a long path for civilization. It was the twelfth century which gave the solution of the architectural problem of vaulting, in a manner, solid, economical and beautiful, the
great edifices devoted to religion. The style called Gothic put forth its first attempts during the first half of the twelfth century, in the province of the Ile de France, of which Paris was the capital. In sculpture, there was a similar development. Monumental sculpture arose in France in the twelfth century. The thirteenth merely continued in the path already traced. As for the industrial arts, they had then reached such a degree of perfection that it can be affirmed that there has since been no progress, and too often only decadence. As for work in the precious metals, the pieces which we illustrate have never been surpassed.

There were then, as now, two principal methods of working silver: the one casting; the other beating the metal in a thin sheet over a hard form or matrix. In both cases, the silver was retouched by the chisel after being cast or beaten. Finally, the twelfth and the thirteenth century silversmiths used extensively patterns in relief, and also silver filigree, which they riveted upon the body of the piece, or, with great skill, soldered to it. Often, also, they retouched their pieces with the graving-tool, and traced decorative motifs on flat surfaces. Silver, has, indeed, defects as a material. It does not coat, like ivory, bronze and copper. It stains easily. When polished, it glistens with high-lights which sometimes change the appearance of the shapes. To overcome these defects there has been devised an entire series of ingenious methods: incising, hammering and engraving, which dull the surfaces.

In the Middle Ages none of these processes were neglected. The delicacy of the work is astonishing. Time was then an unimportant factor. The artisan proceeded slowly and worked through days and weeks necessary to complete, according to rule, the piece upon which he was engaged. We, on the contrary, economize time always and everywhere. For us time is the only precious thing. We are forced to create much, and consequently quickly. To produce the greatest quantity in the least time, at the cheapest rate; such is the desire of the manufacturers who have industrialized the art of our times and who, in doing this, have killed it.

In the Middle Ages, other conditions prevailed. Time had not the same value. The artisan neglected nothing to render perfect the object which he fashioned. There are many individuals who form an indefinite, sublime idea of art, and persuade themselves that it is above and independent of small

Crucifix in gilded silver: from the Treasury of the Cathedral of Sens
things of craftsmanship. This is a grave error. Art resides first of all in a faultless execution, in a perfect knowledge of technical processes, whether it is a question of a picture or of a jewel-box. These technical processes were transmitted from generation to generation in the workshops of the Middle Ages. The practical study of the craft constituted the entire apprenticeship of the aspirants to art. When the apprentice knew his craft thoroughly, he gained the mastership, and it resulted that the objects made with so much care and material labor were also works of art.

In our own time, art is taught in schools. But technical process has degenerated to nothing. What industrial art shall we leave after us, in spite of the lessons given in our schools by very learned artists who write Art with a capital A? Let us first learn from the Middle Ages respect for qualities of craftsmanship which are indispensable in the industrial arts, and without which the highest gifts of invention and composition are useless.

We show first in illustration two antiques mounted in the twelfth century, at the time when, under the influence of the abbot Suger, minister of Louis VII., the arts received great encouragement in France.

In the eighteenth century, under Louis XV. and Louis XVI., beautiful Chinese porcelain vases were mounted in chiseled bronze. Such are now highly prized by connoisseurs. In the twelfth century the degree of refinement was equal, if not superior. There were antique vases of porphyry or rock-crystal mounted in precious metal, or classic cameos framed in gold and precious stones. Of these certain pieces have been preserved.

The first example which we illustrate (Plate I) comes from the old Treasury of Saint Denis, and is now in the Museum of the Louvre. It was mounted in silver, at the middle of the twelfth century. It shows the decorative taste peculiar to the times and the methods of work then employed. As in the earlier centuries, uncut gems were held in high favor: garnets, amethysts, turquoises, sapphires and opals were encrusted in the metal. This is a decorative method, characteristic of the barbarian styles and observed from the Merovingian period downward. Instituted by craftsmen of unerring taste, it produced a rich and striking effect. I see no reason why the artists of our own time should not return to it, and why they should not study from this point of view the work of the craftsmen in the
precious metals up to the twelfth century. We shall present here examples of the same style more accentuated and complete.

We find, also, upon the mounting of the vase, applied silver ornaments in relief, such as occur throughout this period. The manner in which they are either riveted or soldered to the background is very remarkable. But aside from the workmanship, every one capable of appreciating artistic things, recognizes the beauty and breadth of style of the vase, the bold character of the ornament, the accentuation of its contours. We should carefully study the models of this period to understand what style is, to appreciate the delicacy of taste which can be employed in the composition of an object of art.

The following example (Plates II and III) is again an antique vase, this time in porphyry, belonging to the first half of the twelfth century, and known as the Suger Vase. It is preserved in the Museum of the Louvre. This piece of gilded silver is one of the treasures of the Apollo Gallery, in which are assembled all the objects of art in the Louvre. It has a character wholly different from any of the other pieces which we illustrate, and it shows how perfectly the art of the twelfth century could interpret animate Nature. There are no geometric designs, no uncut gems, no volutes or spirals. An eagle is represented. The neck continues the neck of the vase, the wings are attached to the handles, the vase itself, supported by powerful claws, does not lose its original character. It is a work of striking individuality and singular force. The head rises majestically; the widely opened beak is effective; above all, the eye, set in the flat skull, is eloquent and threatening. It is a magnificent work of art, unequalled in modern times in both strength and restraint. To find its rivals we must seek among the bronzes of the great periods of Japanese art.

In the series of crosses with figures of the same period we give a piece from the Treasury of the cathedral of Sens, which is of a simple and beautiful design (Plate IV). An opal is encrusted at the extremity of each of the branches of the cross upon
Reliquary in gilded silver: from the church of Saint Machon, at Bar-sur-Aube
which the Christ is extended, after the manner of the statues of the time. Crosses of the twelfth century are still numerous in France and Germany.

But let us first examine attentively the series of works in which the representation of the human figure does not enter. We find, indeed, fewer figures in the gold and silver work of the period which we are studying, than in the following centuries, when the human figure begins to be the most important part of the work of the craftsman in the precious metals. Generally speaking, the works of the twelfth century show a purely decorative treatment which has never been surpassed.

As an example of such treatment we may cite the chalice of Saint Rémy (Plate V), which is preserved in the cathedral of Reims. It is a characteristic work of the twelfth century, very rich in decoration, exquisitely finished, and treated in the grand style. We find here again, disposed with sure and sumptuous taste, the delicate filigree and the uncut gems which we have observed in our previous examples. This piece and the one following it are eloquent in themselves. No description is necessary.

The second piece, similar in style, is the Cross of Clairmarais (Plate VI), preserved in the Treasury of the church of Notre Dame at Saint Omer. It is, perhaps, the most typical work in precious metals of the period. It is, at all events, the one which gives the strongest impression of the peculiar style of decoration: the volutes, the applied filigree, the deeply-set stones so characteristic of the art of the twelfth century. The powerful general effect, the strong, restrained outlines are allied to the most delicate grace, to the most abundant richness of detail. Scrolls winding about the precious gems, terminate in clusters of berries, or in floral forms resembling daisies.

At Bar-sur-Aube, we find a beautiful example of the same period. It is a reliquary of Saint Maclou, in the church of the same name (Plate VII). It is of elegant form, rich also as to decoration, and, like all the works of this period, it is supported upon a solid base of considerable diameter and excellent lines.

We now reach a charming work of the end of the same century. It is a reliquary
in gilded silver, which is one of the treasures of the church of Charroux (Plates VIII and IX). It is a work perfect in composition and execution. Plate VIII represents the reliquary as closed. It is decorated with silver filigree of exquisite workmanship. The receptacle, when opened, (Plate IX) shows two angels displaying the relics of the saint. The front face of the plates of the cover bears engraved figures of the Christ and the kneeling donors. It is a singularity of the art of the Middle Ages that it almost never offers representations of God. The only form in which He appears, and rarely then, is that of a hand. Was it because the men of that period did not dare to attempt to figure forth the Almighty? I do not believe that to be the reason. The sculptors and the painters of windows preferred the Christ, the Son of Man, and His Mother, the Virgin, who were nearer humanity and who appeared to them the most effectual mediators between them and God the Father.

We present, as a final example, a beautiful cross of the same period, preserved in the Museum of the Louvre (Plate X). It is a perfect type of the silver work of the last part of the twelfth century. It is decorated in filigree and uncut gems, and also with figures: the crucified Christ,—not the dying Savior, but the Victor over death; then, on two branches rising from the central support, St. John and the Virgin in the attitude of grief, exquisite in line and expression. Upon the foot of the cross there are plates of silver enamel in a style which produced masterpieces of mediaeval art. But as this work may be classed under the head of enameling, rather than under silver, we shall not further describe it.

We are now to leave the twelfth century. From the point of view of workmanship in gold and silver, it is perhaps the greatest century that we include in our study. We have, therefore, lingered here, and made it the subject of an entire article.

Beside the qualities which we have already noted in the objects illustrated, there is yet one of great importance of which we have not spoken. This is that the objects fashioned at this period, while differing greatly among themselves, have yet a common characteristic: they were designed with the sole intention of discovering forms to which the metal most easily adapts itself, and which, furthermore, are suited to the proposed use of the object. Neither forms nor decoration were borrowed from any allied art. They are peculiar to work in the precious metals. They are excellent.

It might appear that to reserve for each
art the forms peculiar to it would be a simple matter. In fact, nothing is more rare. The arts incessantly borrow from allied arts, and the things borrowed, for the most part, bring misfortune. They seek to appropriate to themselves foreign and hostile forms. For example, wooden furniture has long imitated architecture. Our dressers and buffets boastfully display lines which were created for architecture pure and simple, and architecture in stone only. Inversely, at a certain period of the Renascence, the façade of palaces imitated the fronts of coffers. Stone was treated like wood.

In work in the precious metals, the same conditions have obtained. Beginning with the thirteenth century, this art borrowed also forms from architecture. We shall see appear in objects wrought from metal the pointed arches, the pinnacles, the sculptured gables peculiar to the Gothic style. Even entire monuments will be imitated. We shall have dwarf chapels and miniature churches, the whole wrought with remarkable skill and delicacy. But therein lay the danger. The art of the smith in precious metals departed from the rules which had governed it up to that time, rendering it so beautiful throughout the twelfth century. It was about to lose its originality. We shall meet with excellent work in the three closing centuries of the Middle Ages. But we shall find no more works as perfect as those which we have already examined.

It is, therefore, the art of the twelfth century that the modern craftsman must study with the greatest care. For, it is necessary in all things, to reach primary sources. It is there that we find the purest and clearest water. The work in the precious metals of the twelfth century offers us the finished types of an art which was then in all its richness, as also in all its purity.