CIVIC BEAUTY

HANDICRAFT WORKERS AND CIVIC BEAUTY. BY CHARLES MULFORD ROBINSON.*

One of the national organizations engaged in furthering the cause of civic beauty reports that it has found no richer field for recruits than among the workers in handicraft. It has even discovered that in furthering the arts and crafts movement, it furthers its own movement for beautifying towns and villages. So certain has proved this connection that it has established an Arts and Crafts Section as one of the regular departments of its activity.

Very little thought will dissipate the surprise that may at first be felt in discovering such a connection. For what could be more natural than that those who work patiently with their hands, to the end that personality and beauty—whose sum is art—may enter into their product, should be quick to see and deplore all the uncalled-for ugliness of town and city life, and should long for the substitution of the beautiful where there is now the unnecessarily hideous? These workers are trained critics. They cannot help recognizing the success or the shortcomings in the work around them; all the force of their training, in supplementing their natural taste, has made them love the true and hate the false, and the genuineness and intensity of their feeling constrains to protest.

The workers are, however, or rightfully ought to be, something more than critics. They should be the leaders in taste of the community, with the leadership thrust upon them because they know. To lead is not to their own advantage, except as they are members of an afflicted community; it is to the community’s profit. The leadership which essentially belongs to expert knowledge ought to be given to them; but if it is not given, it is their right to take it—not through self pride, but through public spirit. Knowledge, we have to remember, involves not only power but responsibility. To know the truth and not brand the false, is to lie; to behold the hideous and see without protest how it may be made beautiful, is a greater crime than ignorantly to create the hideous. So those who know have to speak. The handicraft worker does know, if it is the real art impulse that has put him to work and not a fad or fashion. He has to be a critic of the hurried, thoughtless, heartless work about him, and he has to be critical not only because the spirit moves him, but because of his obligation to the community.

Hence it is that that movement for “a more beautiful America,” which is finding its chief field of activity in the villages, towns and cities of the land, discovers a host of valuable allies among the handicraft workers. They, happily, are in these very villages, towns and cities; and in appealing to them for aid, we are asking that they beautify their own loved home and its surroundings. A warm personal interest is thus sure to enhance the general interest that they would naturally feel; and it is not in the least extraordinary that they furnish many and good recruits to a movement that must so heartily enlist their sympathy.

But the critic’s role is a thankless one, and he does scant service to the public or to himself who by his criticism merely destroys

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without creating, who blocks one way and points out no other. This charge can hardly be laid at the door of the worker in the arts and crafts. The greater knowledge which is required to create than to denounce he abundantly possesses; and that public obligation which is his higher call to the service of criticism is his warrant for dedicating to the community's use the taste, skill and knowledge he possesses. If the familiar utilities of the street are needlessly hideous, if the electric light pole is graceless, the trolley pole an eyesore, the advertisement barbaric, the street name-sign a blot on the vista of the way, it is his duty to do something more than say so with tremendous energy. He must make a better street furnishing, or show how it can be made; and he must do this fearlessly, without regard to the very probable, but incidental, advantage to himself in so doing.

This is the higher call to the craftsman, as distinguished from other men and women, for an interest in civic art. That there are opportunities for great personal advantage in the movement do not invalidate the higher call, and in almost every individual case they must strengthen it. The fairly certain reward is, indeed, a proper fee for the great service which the arts and crafts may lend to civic art; and so there is emphasized the interdependence—or at least the mutual assistance—of the two movements.

Modern civic art has been described as "a civic renascence." The phrase suggests a turning back for precedents to the great Renascence when beauty woke again to the world after her sleep through the dark ages. Then, when civic art last flourished so notably in Italian and Flemish cities, there was clearly proved the closeness of its connexion with the arts and crafts. The wrought iron of the street lantern in the wall of the Strozzi palace in Florence, and of the well of Quinten Matsys in Antwerp—which are still the delight of artists—or the terra cotta reliefs of Luca della Robbia,—are not these, the products of handicraft, quite as inseparable a factor in the glory of that ancient civic Renascence as is even the dome of Brunelleschi or town hall in Louvain? Indeed, Blashfield, in his "Italian Cities," says of the Florentine artist: "Art did not mean the production of pictures and statues only; it meant a practical application of the knowledge of the beautiful to the needs of daily life. . . . If orders came in his absence, the apprentices were to accept them all, even those for insignificant trifles; the master would furnish the design and the pupil would execute. . . . There were constant opportunities. . . . Now it was a group of brown Carmelites who called master and men to their church, to be at once scene-setters, costumers, carpenters and machinists during the Ascension Day ceremonies, and for the angel-filled scaffolding from which various sacred personages would mount to heaven . . . Some wealthy merchant, just made purveyor of Florentine goods to the most Holy Father, would put the papal escutcheon on the cornice of his house, and wish to know what the master might demand for his drawing. . . . Sometimes there would come an embassy in gowns of state from some neighboring city, with armed guards and sealed parchments, bringing a commission for the painting of the church or town hall." To these Renascence artists art was, plainly, not a thing apart and distinct from daily life; it was the embellishment of that life. Hence the glory
and vitality of their art, and hence the prominence in it of the arts and crafts, and the inseparableness of the products of craftsmanship from the lovely civic art of the time.

Nor was this merely an accident. The artists interpreted “art” as broadly as they did because they loved the town or city, and, lover-like, found no task too mean or small if so they gave pleasure to her. And by their love they transformed the task that had been mean and small until it became the worthy product of their skill. Lucca has been immortalized by a Luechesan artist who, with the exception of six statues for a chapel in the Duomo at Genoa, did no work that was not destined for his native city and its territory. “To this day, outside Lucca,” says Carmichael, “one cannot well study Civitali.” Florence owes her proud title of “The Beautiful” to the circumstance that the artist who was the greatest of her sons, freely as he scattered his riches over Italy, reserved for his own city his most precious gifts.

There is, then, splendid precedent for an assertion that civic art and the arts and crafts are mutually concerned. But the connection had been obvious without a precedent, which is, therefore, of only historical interest; and the interdependence steadily is growing in closeness as urban evolution adds more furnishings to the street.

It is significant in this connection that the civic art crusade in Belgium, which was started in 1894 and promptly secured so notable a revival of the Flemish art-of-the-town, began with the following as the expressed purposes of L’Oeuvre Nationale Belge, the national society that was organized to further it:

To clothe in an artistic form all that progress has made useful in the public life.

To transform the streets into picturesque museums comprising various elements of education for the people.

To restore to art its one time social mission, etc.

To make advertisements artistic and to secure the competition of advertisers in art and beauty instead of in size and hideousness; to obtain graceful electric light poles, artistic flag staffs, correctly designed kiosks, street signs and trolley poles, were the first and the most popular steps which the society took to bring art into the street and to revive the ancient glory of the Flemish cities. That in every one of these efforts there is an opportunity for the arts and crafts movement, in the extension of its field and the bestowal upon it of civic usefulness, requires no explanation. Belgium has been already so far educated, by these men who dared to be leaders, that she entrusts, on occasion, the preparation of her civic pageants to the artists; she has learned that the artistic in public work is as cheap as is the hideous and is far more to be desired; and she has convinced the world of the interest and value of municipal exhibitions, so that now our own St. Louis is to follow with a special section the examples set successively, and more generously, by Brussels, Paris, and Dresden, not to say Turin.

The work that has been done in Belgium points the way, with sufficient certainty, to the work that may be done here. But long before it is made with us a national movement, in the sense not so much of extent as of organization, it may be locally undertaken wherever there is an arts and crafts
society, or a handicraftsman. In the case of the society, it not only may be undertaken, but it should be. There is no better field of activity than the town itself, nor is there any which is worthier of the craftsman’s zeal, nor any toward which he has a more definite obligation.

If in the village or small town there are lacking some of the utilities of the street that in cities present an opportunity, there still are many possessed in common, and always there are the civic celebrations to be arranged artistically. The small community has, too, some furnishings to take the place of the urban utilities. It is not many months since the club women of a New England state offered a prize for the most artistically designed guide and finger posts for country roads. In the town bulletin board, which is the feature of the village green, and in the bulletin board which is fastened so conspicuously to many a church, there is afforded another chance. The fountain and the bandstand are still more conspicuous. The waste receptacle by its present slipshod construction gives more often an impression of untidiness than of the reverse. The planting, that is properly coming to be considered a form of handicraft, is always of importance, in the private home grounds, since they border the street, as well as in the public places. If there must be billboards, these can be made neater, more attractive, and harmonious than they are; and, in at least the cities and larger towns, the crest or arms of the municipality can be fittingly worked into the design of all the municipal furnishings.

The great merit of all this work, its special advantages and invitation to the craftsman, is that, if the object is to be really a work of art, it must be made to suit the spot for which it is designed. This exact fitting to environment, which means not only the adjustment of proportions and the harmonizing of colors and materials, but also the welding into its construction of the spirit of the place, makes it just the problem that the artist loves, gives to it the possibility of personality, and insures it against the successful competition of the design which, in another town or among other surroundings, has proved to be of value. The arts and crafts workers of every town have their chance.

It often happens, too, that the great art objects of the towns call so loudly for beauty in these smaller objects, in order that their own beauty may be perfected, that the battle of the public spirited craftsman has been half won before he begins to fight. General opinion already sides with him and there is needed only the good design. Take, for example, the case of the Library, which an exhaustless liberality is now making the familiar art object—the one consciously beautiful civic structure—of so many towns and cities. How often the impression which its chaste and snowy beauty ought to give is marred by the ugliness of the trolley poles before it, by the cheap and ill-proportioned street lamps, by the crude wooden bench for waiting or transferring passengers, by the gaunt telegraph pole, the glaring letterbox, or the slovenly waste can or barrel! Would the liberality that gave the lovely building have stopped at the slight additional expense that could have substituted an appropriate and well designed street furnishing for that which now, necessarily in the foreground, detracts so sadly from the effect which the architect desired; or would the
civic pride and public spirit that gave the site and a promise of maintenance—and that perhaps also built the structure—have hesitated to round out and complete its good work at so small an extra cost? Plainly, there was lacking only the timely provision of the correct design; and even now, if only it be furnished, there will be found the means to remedy the errors of the past as well as to secure the better result for the future.

The thought of what a little care in craftsmanship can do at this point, in enhancing the impression made by a whole building, or in changing from half good to wholly good the effect of the town’s most striking scene, is a suggestion of how great is the opportunity of him who, thinking, puts his soul into the work that his hands do for the community. It is a two-fold opportunity. It is personal, in the chance to make a lovely work of art, as Matsys made his well; it is civic, in the effect, far out-reaching the article itself, which his good work may have. The craftsman does something more now than make a clever thing. He adorns the town, the town he loves, as a lover adorns his mistress, and thereafter he forgets the beauty of the jewel he has given to her in the heightened beauty of the whole effect.

In such work, finally, must there not come into the act of labor an exhilaration that gladdens and lightens it? How paltry by comparison seems his former task, of adding something to the beauty of a rich man’s room, of contributing another precious thing to the closed treasury of wealth! Here is work to invite his consecration, to enlist the whole strength of his artistic spirit, the whole might of his zeal. He is doing this not for an individual, but for all the people; he is making a utility beautiful and is making his beautiful object for a public place, where it will be seen by many and not shut away, and where its educational influence will reach out farther than he can guess, among all sorts and conditions of men; and finally, it is to be placed where he himself may enjoy it; it will not be lost to him, but as if he had made it for his own delight he will be a part owner of it.

There enters, too, another factor into the attractiveness of civic work for craftsmen. This is its quality of relative permanency, and constancy of ownership. There is no passing to less appreciative hands, no buying or selling into less favorable surroundings, no fickleness of taste or fortune to endanger its serene existence in the place for which it was designed.

The concern of the handicraft worker with civic beauty is, then, very near. There is much to call him to bear a part in the great movement, now gathering allies from so many sources; and upon him and his interest the movement waits for its completer triumph.

PICTURED POESIES: AN ESSAY ON THE REBUS IN ART. BY EDITH MOORE.

The word “rebus” (hardly to be recognized under the above title) calls to mind the last page of a Boys’ or Girls’ Magazine, where it presides over a series of little pictures and stray syllables which convey a meaning only to the diligent inquirer. Yet it represents a most venerable and distinguished form of amusement. The great orator Cicero was wont to use as his signa-