THE CRAFTSMAN

COMMERCIAL VALUE OF DESIGN

In the initial article of this series the author says: "Shut in, as it were, to serve its owner, private art is but a hearthfire that warms only its builder, and leaves but few or no embers that can ever glow again after the breath of his fortune has ceased to fan it. But public art is a fire built in the market place, from which each citizen borrows live coals for his own home."

No statement can be truer and no statement ever came from a source more authoritative. John DeWitt Warner, an eminent lawyer, has for years devoted time and energy to the advancement of art in this country. To a natural appreciation of form and color, he adds a broad human interest in civic development. He has served in every capacity from the private to the president and leader, and now at the head of the first Art Commission which New York has ever had, he stands not only as an influence for all that is best in aesthetic development, but as a judge before whom must pass the artistic improvements of this great city. He personifies, as does no other one man, the appreciation of the layman for that abstract quality which for a better name we call public art. His comprehensive treatment of the "Importance of Municipal Improvements" encourages the consideration of the present article on the "Commercial Value of Design," which in its very statement challenges criticism and, judging by the action of our legislature and city officials, has never been recognized in this great country. It is hoped that this short article may start a discussion which in the end will lead the great Captains of Industry to a realization that this country, to succeed in the future and hold its rank among the nations of the world, must add to its raw product the value of design. Natural resources, great virility may, for the time being, keep a nation to the front, but no permanent success can be achieved without careful study and thoughtful preparation. This is recognized by the older nations of Europe, which strive not to produce great quantities of raw material, but to make each ton of raw material return as great a value as possible by the added quality of design.

Without, perhaps, a realization of this fundamental principle, barbaric races have in fact made arms and implements which today we cherish, not because of their utility, but because of the rude archaic ornament which was added with such primitive but masterly strokes. The works of the Aztec, of the Navajo and other American Indians are among the choicest treasures in our museums. The more mature efforts of the Assyrians and the Egyptians are well known, and the later work of the Greek, the Oriental and the Asiatic peoples is too well known to need mention.

In pottery the simple utensils of the home, selling, as thy did at the time of their creation, for sums too insignificant to mention, are cherished as precious treasures, because of their ornament and color. The vases of the Egyptians and the still more mature work of the Turks, are now, and for many years to come will be, of inestimable value. In textiles the same is true,—the work of the hand-loom survives, not so much from the fact that it is done by hand, but from the excellence of the design. The simple stuffs of the Orient, the cotton prints
of India, the silks, the velvets, and those wonderful rugs, are regarded as invaluable, not because we have not the same materials and cannot reproduce the same stuffs, but because of those wonderful combinations of tone and color which were undoubtedly the result of long and careful study. Tapestry, that queen of textiles, stands to-day as the most remarkable combination of graphic ability in textile form, and its value is commensurate with the ability displayed. While laces and embroideries have been appreciated and are still appreciated, they will, eventually, have to step aside and leave the place of honor to the tapestry and the rug; for these have those possibilities in design and color which must in the course of things grant them the precedence.

In wood we have a material which, in its natural form, has possibly the lowest value, but which, as a manufactured article, even in its simple forms, demands attention. Given the added quality of design in chair or table and its cost materially increases; add the touch of the craftsman, and the value is still further enhanced; add the quality of the sculptor, and in triptych, reredos, and carved choir stall, it assumes untold value. The unhewn block of stone is of little worth: shape it under the builder’s hand and its worth increases; give it the touch of the chisel and its value is only gauged by the ability of the artist. The Schönen Brunnen, many of the monuments of Europe, the frozen music of the cathedrals, could not have existed but for this material. Their priceless value, however, is not to be gauged by their cubical contents, but by the merit of the design thus held in imperishable form. Marble in slab or column has its minimum value and is often passed unnoticed; when used as inserts in clever combinations, it arrests attention, and when in smaller tesserae it becomes the mosaic, its value is increased a hundred-fold. The marble, which in the mass may be considered crude or uninteresting, is, when deftly combined in small pieces and under the hand of the skilled artisan, a medium which produces results second to none.

The metals when sold by the ton are a commercial quantity, but when, under the stroke of the hammer, they become wrought iron or chiseled brass, when under the touch of the tool they become repoussé, or in the hands of the founder they assume deft and beautiful shapes,—their worth is immeasurably increased.

Glass, perhaps one of the most difficult materials to produce in its crude state, is still naught, until touched by the hand of the Venetian, the Bohemian, or those master workers of the Middle Ages, who from this material have produced windows which, while having the charm of the mosaic, rival the color and the composition of the picture.

It is almost needless to speak of design in decoration or to show how building after building has been beautified by the stroke of the brush. We are not speaking of those great efforts which may be claimed, and justly claimed, as the finer art, but of those simpler combinations of form and flower, which, with accent of shield and escutcheon, make a fitting background to the purposes of the room. We are not claiming for design in decoration the credit which is due to the abstract art creation. The single figure, the portrait, if you will, the easel picture, owes its quality, it is true, to the individual ability of the author, but take even a commonplace figure and repeat it in the
decorative scheme of the room and in this very repetition it gains value. The commonplace portrait, uninteresting perhaps by itself, when placed as one of a series with proper decorative frame work, is a thing of beauty; and the easel picture created to express but one thought, one idea, has no quality as a decoration; but place it as one of a series and in that very repetition it gains an added interest and becomes part of a greater thought than the specific subject which it has been created to express. All these gain an added quality by being used as parts of a greater scheme and this is what is meant by the value of design.

In sculpture the same is true; the monument isolated and apart from architectural surroundings, owes its recognition to the individual ability of its creator; but when the monument becomes the single figure in the niche, and is repeated upon the façade of some great building, its creator may even be unknown, but its value still exists because of the added quality of design. The portrait bust in an isolated garden is of but momentary interest, the portrait bust, if one of a series in some hall of fame or some great public building, assumes an importance difficult to describe in words. The sculptor’s work becomes an integral part of a greater whole and assumes an added value that can be appreciated, but which is difficult to define. The sculptural group embodying some great conception, arrests our attention when seen in gallery, museum or upon isolated pedestal, but how much greater its effect, when it becomes one of a series, as in the Stations of the Cross in some cathedral, how much stronger its effect when it is but one of a series of creations which are to explain some greater train of thought. The sculptured panels of Chartres or Amiens would undoubtedly be beautiful, even if taken from their surroundings, but how much fuller is their wondrous beauty when left side by side in those massive cathedrals, each a page in the history of religion.

To speak of the increased value of architecture by the addition of design would be an anachronism—for no architecture can exist in its higher form without the finest development of design. But in these commercial days, when mere building and construction masquerade under the name of architecture, it may not be amiss to call attention to the fact that even the simplest construction, the most modest building, can gain much by a true appreciation of that valuable quality, design.

And now has this been recognized? Is there any indication in what is occurring day by day that these simple, fundamental truths are not only appreciated but practised? In Europe, yes; in our great country, which prides itself upon its greatness and upon the rapidity of its advancement, most decidedly no. It is needless to speak of a European appreciation of these simple truths in the past and down to the time of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but it may not be amiss to say a word of the latter-day development. The invention and improvement of machinery rendered useless many of the precedents of the past and forced a readjustment of all schools of design. At first, the influence of the machine was, to be frank, detrimental, and the mechanical or commercial article appeared; but with greater knowledge came greater
power, and what has been accomplished in the last decade is but a promise of what will be accomplished in the future. In 1851, England, realizing the superiority of the French craft work, held the great International Exposition and by its comparative collections endeavored to show its manufacturers and craftsmen what might be accomplished with intelligent artistic effort. The school of Morris, Day and Burne-Jones was the result, and English wall papers, textiles, woodwork, metalwork, faïence, glass, marble and mosaic show their influence. The South Kensington Schools and Museum are but the outward symbol of how deep a hold this movement has taken of the people.

What is true of England is true of all European countries, but is particularly so of Germany. The commercial supremacy of Germany is due in no small degree to the appreciation of these principles. Her success may be attributed and has been attributed to many causes, but careful analysis will show that no one has been a greater factor in this success than the realization on her part of the commercial value of design. Germany, after the Franco-Prussian war, had little or no rank among the commercial countries of the world, but since that time, with an energy and perseverance unprecedented, she has developed her resources, until she stands almost second to none. Schools of architecture, painting and sculpture existed as a matter of course, but since 1870 there have been founded in every city, town, and even village, schools of handicraft, schools for painting on glass, schools for the carving of wood and the welding of iron, schools for textiles, schools for instruction in the manipulation of every medium and of every material. Great museums have sprung up which contain, not only representative examples of the craft work of the past, but specimens of what is being done to-day by the craft workers of the world at large, and last but not least, commercial museums and sample museums have been created which contain comparative examples of all that is being produced in the world at large at the present day. Thus not only do the manufacturer and the craftsman receive the best the schools can give them, but they have the advantage of seeing without extensive travel what is being produced throughout the world. Thus, for example, Mr. Ormum, our Consul at Stuttgart, reports that "on one occasion a commission sent by the Germans visited the Orient and collected a great many samples. They were afterward exhibited for several days in the halls and corridors of the Imperial Parliament. They were afterward sent to large industrial and commercial centers and put upon exhibition for the benefit of the workmen and workwomen who could not afford a trip to Berlin. They were afterward divided among the sample museums,—textile centers getting textiles, and iron districts getting iron and steel products. The sample museum is an excellent auxiliary of the Empire's industrial, industrial-art and technical schools. While it would be hard to estimate their value in dollars and cents, the German merchant and manufacturer have come to regard them as a part of the popular system of education."

Thus Germany has pushed to the fore, until her ships are found in every port and Hamburg has become, next to London, Liverpool and New York, the most important commercial place in the world. Not
only do these countries recognize the value of design in erroneously so-called commercial lines, but they recognize it in ways which to us are almost incomprehensible. So great a stress do they lay upon the value of good architecture, that in many countries prizes have been offered to those private owners who erect buildings of sufficient artistic merit to pass the judgment of competent juries, and in some cases they have even gone farther by exempting these buildings from any and all taxes. Prizes without limit have been offered for worthy works of public art, both in painting and sculpture, and it is a common custom for governments to purchase works of distinction for public parks and public buildings, not only to please and benefit the people, but to recognize and to keep active that art quality which is so essential to the higher development of any nation.

But in a more important field than any that has yet been mentioned have the countries of Europe demonstrated the value of design, and this is in the planning of cities. No greater problem has ever faced the world than this rapid growth of modern cities. No problem has ever been of greater importance, not only to the social, but to the commercial development of a country. It is in the intelligent answer to this perplexing question that the countries of the old world have shown their ability to cope with modern conditions. The walls of Paris have been moved four or five times, and at the present writing, it has been decided to level the fortifications and extend the area. Vienna has replaced its walls with its noble Ringstrasse. Antwerp has replanned its waterfront and laid out vast sections for its increased population. Hamburg has spent millions in creating the finest system of wharves and harbors that the world has as yet seen. Berlin has spared no expense to perfect its transit and to improve the outlying section. Prague has re-designed the older portion of the city, even changing its level some six to eight feet. Nürnberg, while retaining the old, is perfecting its newer section. Stuttgart, Leipsic, Dresden, Hanover, Hildersheim and hundreds of other cities are striving to the utmost to make their facilities adequate to the demand. And these are no hap-hazard efforts, but efforts along the lines of carefully matured plans. They represent all that experience and ability, coupled with judicious expenditure, can produce. It would be perhaps going too far to state that every effort has been a success, but it is not too much to say that failure, if there has been failure, has been due to lack of forethought, or to lack of appreciation of the importance of the issue. Such expenditure as has been made will be returned a hundred-fold, and not only Germany, but every country in Europe will reap a commercial benefit therefrom.

Why should our country be so slow in appreciating the commercial value of design? It is true that at the coming Exposition at St. Louis, the arts and crafts are to be shown in the Art Building and have been ranked as of equal value with exhibits that heretofore have been considered the finest art products. It is true that at this same Exposition there is to be a model city, demonstrating what has been done, or what has been projected, in many of our large cities. It is true that Washington has been replanned, that St. Louis is considering radical changes, that in St. Paul and Milwaukee material ad-
vances have been made; but it is also true that this work in the main has been done by private incentive and by private capital. Why is it that our governments, whether national, state or city, do not realize the commercial necessity of these improvements? Why is it that there are no public commercial museums or sample museums? Why is it that the schools throughout the country at large are lacking in classes and appliances to give this most necessary education? Certainly we do not wish to be considered less intelligent or progressive than the older countries; we do not wish to have said that under republican forms of government, less can be accomplished that under monarchical government. We certainly do not wish to feel that Americans can accomplish less than other nationalities. Design is but a word to indicate the practical application of that potent force called art; design is but a word which in a rough and ready way defines the practical application of the appreciation of the beautiful. It is but a medium through which we interpolate into our crafts, our manufactures, that quality of imagination, that appreciation of form and color, that knowledge of symmetry, without which no product can be other than commonplace.

Is it not time that we should awake; have not the long years of preparation passed? Are we not ready for that great movement which is to revolutionize all that has been done before? Our statisticians point with pride to our increased exports, but forget that they are in a great measure due to the natural wealth of the country. They forget that as time passes, these natural resources must be drained and that as the work of other countries improves, so must the balance of trade eventually turn against us. Is it not time for us to appreciate that now must be added to our cottons, our silks, our woven stuffs, our wood, our metal, our stone, that intellectual effort which will make each ounce of raw material return its maximum value? Is it not time to recognize that it is no longer a competition of quantity but of quality, no longer a competition of force, but of skill, and that the country which is to create the finest product possessing the maximum value of design, must have those conditions, social, educational and governmental, which will produce this result.

FREDERICK S. LAMB

STREET FURNISHINGS

THE thought of lighting cities was long postponed through the fact that those who had to see their way at night were individuals, not masses. Nor is it strange, since every lamp required separate care before it could be lighted, that when, at last, their provision in the street could be conceived as a civic duty, lights were still made individual charges.

The public function of the light was slowly appreciated better as their number multiplied. . . . In Brussels—the “little Paris” in so many things,—a prize offered by L’Oeuvre Nationale Belge early in its career, was for an artistic street light, and was awarded to the designer of a single candelabrum to stand on the Place de la Monnaie, where it was subsequently erected.

The terms of this competition, conducted by a national society organized for the furthering of civic art, had invited the municipalities to “designate those public places” which it was desired to light artistically.

Charles Mulford Robinson in “Modern Civic Art.”