THE CRAFTSMAN

THE RELATION OF THE ARTS AND CRAFTS TO PROGRESS. BY ARTHUR SPENCER

A moment’s reflection will show that the distinction between the fine and the useful arts does not go back to the beginnings of civilization. The earliest arts had their origin in necessity, and the aesthetic purpose sprang into existence only when the practice of successive generations had evolved a higher type of skill than that requisite to satisfy the demands of utility. Then, after this higher degree of skill had been attained, beauty was sought not as something apart by itself, but as an adjunct to utility. In this manner architecture, which has been called the mother of the arts, gave birth to sculpture, which at first served simply to adorn the building, and only after a long period grew into something complete in itself. Painting began in ornament, and ornament cannot exist without utility, for ornament applied to useless things would be a self-contradiction. Just as in sculpture and painting the purely aesthetic aim did not at first predominate, and beauty was sought as something subordinate, something incidental, before it became a goal of conscious effort, so in architecture it was only at an advanced stage of development that beautiful forms grew to be striven for, as of no less importance than the adaptability of the building to its purpose. In all the fine arts, the ideals of beauty which they represent may be considered as the culmination of a long series of traditions extending back into the past, of which each has added something to its predecessor through skilled selection and imitation of the beautiful forms evolved, sometimes deliberately, often unconsciously, in the practice of men learned in the secrets of the craft. Thus, the fine arts are not, as some suppose, of an utterly different lineage from the useful arts, but are descended from them.

Without perceiving the relationship between the fine and the useful arts it is hardly possible to comprehend the real meaning of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which assumes at the outset that beauty and utility are to be sought in combination and not in singleness. Granted a common origin to the arts of utility and those of beauty, the question, then, may be raised in what relations they now stand to each other.

Animated by a lofty enthusiasm, the fine arts have become more spiritual, more enlightened, than the arts from which they sprang. Their adoption of beauty as the definite object of their endeavor might seem, at first thought, to have resulted in the separation of that from other objects, and, consequently, in their indifference toward the useful. In architecture it has, of course, been impossible to concentrate attention upon aesthetical, by ignoring practical aims, but in painting and sculpture there would apparently be much reason in saying that the aesthetical purpose has come to prevail to the exclusion of all others. Yet it is difficult to conceive of artistic perfection going hand in hand with absolute uselessness. To the greatest art, though utility is not requisite, it is scarcely going too far to say that a certain quality of practicalism is indispensable. By this is not meant the sort of practicalism commonly associated with money-making, but
rather the sane, matter-of-fact habit of mind found in men who are in close contact with the age and the society in which they live, and are not given to extravagant judgments or to over-sanguine expectations. It is entirely reasonable to say that an exquisite sensibility may exist in the same person whose mind is of marked practical temper, nor will such a combination necessarily result in artistic sterility. An illustration of the necessity of such a blending of practical and idealistic qualities in the greatest art may be found in painting. Command of technique, exquisite taste and skill in composition, might be present in a picture, yet those qualities alone could not make it great, though they might make it beautiful. To be great, the picture not only must possess refinement and beauty, but through its expression and through its subject must evoke sensations such as no degree of exquisiteness of design or delicacy of coloring, unaided, could produce. It is easier to define the requirements of a good, than those of a powerful or great painter. Perhaps, however, the latter should have what for lack of a better phrase may be called a quality of practical idealism. A quality of idealism tempered by common sense may certainly be said to be necessary to the highest excellence in each one of the fine arts. By the highest excellence are meant the power and the vitality which the world acknowledges by the lasting fame accorded great masters. One can readily conceive of an art of truly classic perfection, judged aesthetically, which, though capable of being fully appreciated only by a limited circle of people of culture, might be said to exert an uplifting influence in the world. Such art has perhaps deserved not infrequently to be called great. Yet its greatness is not to be inferred from its perfection, but must depend on certain potential virtues which may be understood only through analysis of it in its human and vital aspects.

Further consideration would perhaps show this requirement of practicalism to rest upon a form of social obligation. It is axiomatic that no man can perform acts affecting the happiness of his fellow men without assuming responsibility for their consequences. It cannot be asserted that an ugly or morbid work of art is of no concern to any one but its owner. Art has ceased to be what it was among the ancients, something exclusively appropriated to a solitary class, and has become the collective property of society. Art can no longer merely adapt itself to private caprices, but must meet the test of public opinion, and public opinion demands of it a sense of responsibility to society.

The weakness of much of our modern art is perhaps not due so much to mediocrity of talent as to excess of talent. We are too eclectic, too versatile, too learned in the traditions of the past to create an art of the present that shall be simple, vital, and straightforward. The truth of this is nowhere more in evidence than in architecture, where preference is shown for the florid forms of the Italian and French Renascence and a sterile academicism is working to bring about a mincing inferiority of design. Academic traditions are properly not a substitute for beauty, but a medium of expression; but the vice of academicism is to confuse the means with the end, and to make of technique something vulgarly conspicuous, rather than
THE CRAFTSMAN

subtly elusive. It is this vice from which modern art is suffering, and which will cease only when workers in the arts shall perceive that their work to be great must be free from anything suggestive of esotericism.

If we compare the history of useful industry with that of the fine arts, we find that they have possessed less in common than one would wish to discover. In the useful arts there has not only been room for beauty, but there has been in a greater or less degree a popular demand for it. The love of fashion, of ostentation, and of luxury has made people willing to put up with many substitutes sometimes known as “comforts of civilization,” but if people have not always known how to distinguish beauty from its counterfeits, they have at least desired to choose the beautiful to the extent of their capacity for enjoying it. Unfortunately, modern trade has developed in such a manner as to quicken aesthetic desires without affording means for their gratification. Modern machinery has stereotyped the forms of beauty so that what was once novel has become commonplace, and so that the worth of creativeness and originality has been displaced by the cheapness of incessant reiteration and imitation. Moreover, the modern distribution of labor has separated the functions of the designer and the workman, and design has not only deteriorated into mechanical drawing, but the craftsman has become an operative or a mechanic.

We are apt to think of mechanical inventions as a powerful instrument of civilization, and they have, beyond question, stimulated certain forms of activity, yet they have not rewarded man with happiness in proportion to the amount of energy which they have consumed. They have created a vast multitude of artificial wants, and they have failed to satisfy natural and noble needs. To say that the world would have been better without machinery is, of course, absurd, but it is by no means unreasonable to hope that machinery may some time become more definitely than now the servant of man’s higher nature, and that it may come to minister to his happiness, without hedging him about with a great number of artificial limitations. For machinery has economized human effort as regards quantity, but not as regards quality. It has multiplied the output of labor indefinitely, and in so far as production in bulk has been work of the sort which could be performed more effectually with its aid than without it, it has been of unmixed benefit to society. On the other hand, where the excellence, rather than the volume, of the product has been the thing to be considered, it has been a crude makeshift, and has exercised an arbitrary rule over men’s habits, the evasion of which has been attended with the greatest difficulty. For the result of machinery has been to make the finer products of human skill, though naturally neither costly nor rare, seem expensive in comparison with the output of machinery. This is not as it should be. Man does not require complicated and artificial habits to make him happy; his happiness depends rather upon the question whether his natural wants are satisfied. In supplying the latter, variety and mediocrity are less effective than simplicity and excellence. If more energy had been lavished upon the task of making modern life sweeter and less upon making it more elaborate,
excellence might be bought more cheaply, and only the superfluous would seem dear.

Let not machinery be banished from modern life—that would be absurd—but let it be made to play the part of a menial, not of a master. This is necessary in the interest of civilization, the degree of advancement of which may be gauged by the refinement or crudity of the agencies ministering to the higher wants of the race. Moreover, the character of these agencies is of great ethical significance, for the reason that in an industrial civilization they possess a more powerful influence in the formation of ideals and beliefs than any others. In our own generation they are evolving types of character which may not be altogether fit to serve as models. In an advanced civilization a premium would be placed upon the highest qualities of excellence, and the men possessing such qualities would be drawn by a kind of natural selection into the positions of greatest influence, greatest wealth, and greatest responsibility. An industrial system so organized as to reward somewhat commonplace types of business ability more liberally than superior practical and moral efficiency might perhaps be said to be imposing a penalty upon progress. Economic conditions should tend to nourish, not to stultify, individual merit. When practical men see that only by struggling to attain excellence they can hope to succeed in their business enterprises, then, and only then, will the world have the right to call itself highly civilized. Such a struggle for excellence would imply that machinery had become a tool in the hands of a skilful and noble master workman, and had ceased to be a mere instrument for money-making, subjecting to economic tyr-
ciliation of beauty and utility, in the belief that the higher happiness of mankind can best be served by refusing to regard aesthetic wants as more exclusive and less vital than other needs and as demanding their own peculiar mode of treatment.

The real meaning of the Arts and Crafts Movement cannot be grasped without conceiving it as something more than a revival of handicraft. Underlying the enthusiasm of its devotees is undoubtedly a conviction that the world does not necessarily prefer ugliness to beauty, and that art should address itself, not to any small fraction of society, but to humanity in general. Such a belief, of course, implies that architecture, painting, and poetry, are to be regarded in much the same light as useful handicrafts, and that the former, not less than the latter, are to be considered as requiring close contact with life. Such a belief, moreover, presupposes as its foundation strong faith in democracy, as signifying equality of opportunity, and, so far as may be consistent with the moral welfare of society, equality of condition for all men.

The Arts and Crafts Movement cannot but tend to make art more democratic, and of the characteristics of a democratic art we may find an illustration in the best work in the municipal and public art of this country, of which there is, unfortunately, however, too little. Possibly the most notable instance of it is to be found in the case of the late Frederick Law Olmsted, whose work in designing public parks was so emancipated from formal and academic traditions that in faithfully reproducing the beauty and freedom of nature it was able to suit the needs of his countrymen as no art possessing the distinctive marks of any cult or school could possibly have satisfied them. It is unfortunately true that in municipal architecture, in spite of the rich materials of the Georgian style—the nearest approach to a distinctive native style that we have—very few analogous examples of similar universality and power have thus far been produced. The recent achievement of landscape architecture may well serve to stimulate architects and workers in related arts to develop a mode of treatment which, while not defying tradition, does not yield it servile obedience, and which, without creating a new school, is perhaps, not to be classed as adhering to any existing school. Such art will perhaps possess, in the hands of a master, the characteristics not so much of a style, as of an individuality. Good municipal art cannot consistently cultivate methods which are not skilfully harmonized with democratic institutions, and for this reason the purposes of such art at its best can be none other than those underlying the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The animating spirit of this movement might perhaps be defined not inaccurately as that quality of practical idealism which has been declared essential to serious accomplishment in the fine arts. The movement must aim at once at the satisfaction of practical wants and of aesthetic cravings, and demands of craftsmen a combination of artistic enthusiasm with knowledge of men as necessary to their attainment of excellence in their several vocations. Without such a combination of enthusiasm with sagacity, the Arts and Crafts Movement would never have been summoned into existence; without men possessing the same qualities to carry on its work, it can never
hope to fulfil its noble function in modern life. Its success certainly demands a broader outlook than either the artist or the artisan of the past can be said to have often possessed. But is not the object to be sought worthy of engrossing the attention of the finest talents evolved by the Titanic forces of our modern complex civilization? The prospect of happiness more generally diffused, of a state of society in which vice is rendered more difficult of attainment than virtue, of the love of excellence cultivated among all sorts and conditions of men, may well quicken the imagination, and should spur on to more earnest endeavor every one who desires to see art become, more definitely than now, a civilizing force in the world.

**MUNICIPAL IMPROVEMENTS IN AMERICA**

It has been recently stated on good authority “that if municipal improvements in America follow too closely upon foreign precedent, it will be indicative of an unfortunate state of affairs—that improvements to be of value, should be of local development and an answer to local demands.”

This statement is undoubtedly true and difficult to combat; if it were possible, it might be better to develop slowly and to let our municipal improvements be the result of local demands. But such, unfortunately, has never been the case; precedent has always played an important part, and to prevent precedent from being too literally followed, a full and exhaustive study has always been necessary.

“Knowledge is power,” and it is only by a full and complete understanding on the part of our authorities of what is being done abroad, that we can place ourselves in a position to secure the best for our country. No city plan can be complete in the fullest sense of the word without a thorough understanding of what is being done in the great cities of the world for the enlargement of cities. No city plan can be effective without a full comprehension of the important part that transit plays in this expansion. No plan can be effective without a full understanding of the economy that is to be obtained by a present provision for future necessity. Much of the confusion that now prevails, many of the difficulties which now confront us, would be eliminated by an intelligent understanding of foreign methods of both surface and underground transportation.

—*Architects and Builders’ Magazine*, May, 1904.