EARNING A LIVING

ON EARNING ONE’S LIVING BY
THE WORK OF ONE’S HANDS. BY
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“To the glory of Christ, I, Johannes Bosscaert,
honestly bound this book.”
(From an old book-binding.)

T
HE so-called arts and crafts movement in America has accumulated sufficient power in its brief course to make it a matter of timely importance that craftsmen here should put one or two somewhat searching questions to themselves as to what they mean by what they are doing. Are we doing our work as well as it can be done—or just well enough to find a market? Have we chosen handicraft solely because of the commercial opportunity it seems to offer for the moment—or because of its deeper artistic and economic claims as well? Is our work honest in the sense that Johannes Bosscaert honestly bound his book hundreds of years ago? And if not, why handicraft?

The advantage of handicraft above various other means of livelihood is mainly that thereby one may accomplish a necessary end by an ennobling means, the reactionary effect of the work upon the worker tending to develop the mind as well as the hand and eye, to bring the faculties generally into united action. Handicraft is a form of self-expression, which expression reacts again upon the mind, producing new impulse. As any live thing will decay if confined, so a vital impulse without some form of expression is worse than useless in the mind. “The thought which leads to no action is no thought.” If this kind of work, then, can be used as one’s business in life, occupying the best of one’s time and strength as one’s business must, how far superior must be its general effect upon the individual to that of work uncongenial in every particular, when, during working hours, instead of exercising one’s highest powers, one rather reserves them until the day’s work is over.

The difficulty lies principally in a peculiar incongruity between the mediaeval nature of the work, and the surrounding present-day conditions of life and thought. Where the fifteenth century workman sat over his work-bench patiently, laboriously, devotedly following his craft, absorbed in doing his work as well as it could be done, his life simple to a degree, his recompense just enough to support that living, his satisfaction lying in the work itself, the modern craftsman finds himself confronted not only by the problem of how to support that living, his satisfaction lying in the work itself, the modern craftsman finds himself confronted not only by the problem of how to support life at all, under the extremely complex social conditions of to-day, but also by the question of how far it is possible to accept the generally prevailing mercenary standards of success, and at the same time to be true, or, at least, not to be untrue, to the claims of his individual work.

Which brings us directly to the vital question of what we mean by success. It is undoubtedly a commercial age. Most of the people about us would uncompromisingly judge our success or failure according to mercenary standards, and expect so to be judged. I have heard it said of those who are cultivating a manner, or, I might better say, spirit of living which seems to have found a fitting name in M. Charles Wagner’s little book, “The Simple Life,” that they are in most cases making a virtue of necessity—so unlikely, it seems, that any such choice can be sincere.
THE CRAFTSMAN

If any craftsman is using the opportunity created by the revival of interest in handicraft purely for commercial advantage, at the sacrifice of the quality of his work, let him consider Johannes Bossecaert’s quaint honesty, and pause! Handicraft is primarily an art, rather than a business, and must be considered as such. “We need the best in art now, or no art.” Better the clean, machine-made product than shiftless hand-work. Neither can substitute for the other—both are necessary. Happily, we believe there are other elements in success as vital as the accumulation of money. The successful life is the life of full and rich development, intellectual, spiritual, physical; and in choosing our work in life—our work by which to support life—it is of the utmost importance that we remember that the value of money is a means to this development, not an end in itself.

The modern craftsman should realize all the historic tradition of the past as well as his personal responsibility to the present, and at least so far honor the achievements of the workmen of the Middle Ages as not to treat lightly the crafts which they endowed with such dignity and seriousness. Space will not allow a digression into the exceedingly fascinating subject of mediaeval craftsmanship, though the mere mention of early European Guilds and Leagues, to say nothing of the genius of the Orient as proven for all time in weavings and manuscripts, marvellous tiles and hand-wrought metals, pottery, inlay, carvings, jewelry, enamels, is endlessly suggestive. Whether we picture the rug weaver of the Orient, or the Italian monk laboring over his illumination in the monastery’s scriptorium the burger-craftsmen of Bruges or Ghent, with their fine public spirit, their perfect citizenship; the meistersinger of old Nurnberg, the leather-workers of Spain, or the enamel and metal workers in their little booths along the streets of Isphahan, we find alike among them all, stronger than aught else, this note of sincerity.

In making our modern application of these mediaeval arts we cannot revive the past altogether, but in our effort to apply what has been good in the past, let us, first of all, emulate Johannes Bossecaert’s honesty of purpose. There are deeper principles involved than the mere binding of a book. First, make your work, whatever it is, an expression of your individual self. Second, let each single piece of work be done as well as you are capable of doing it. Third, remember the lines:

“Who works for glory, misses oft the goal—
Who works for money, coins his very soul.
Work for the work’s sake then, and it may be
All these things will be added unto thee,”

—and be patient!

Excellence is a very safe aim. The craftsman who excels, who has attained at last, may find his craft even a considerable financial success, but it has been gained by artistic fidelity, and it is through artistic fidelity alone that he has won his place among the little group of the master-craftsmen of to-day. Whether he works individually in a small Paris atelier, spending his six or eight hours a day of many months on some one object; or whether he works in the heart of New York, training many craftsmen under him to express themselves, to do each smallest part of their work with their whole might—the spirit is the same. It is wonderfully worth while to have made
something beautiful, and it is vastly stimulating to feel that thereby—by the full expression of one’s best—one may conquer the practical bread and butter problems of life. Thoreau says:

“It is truly actually as it is true really, it is true materially as it is true spiritually, that they who seek honestly and sincerely with all their hearts and lives and strength to earn their bread, do earn it, and it is sure to be very sweet to them. A very little bread—a very few crumbs are enough if it be of the right quality, for it is infinitely nutritious.” The living earned by such effort is the smallest part of its reward.

THE STORY OF THE RUG

The origin of design is surrounded by mystery, but it is generally conceded that the first designs were geometrical, copying, doubtless, the plaiting of rush mats, which preceded carpets in the evolution of floor coverings. Later, as the artistic instincts of these early weavers were developed, they wove into their fabrics the beauty in form as well as color which they saw about them. Walter Crane, in his “Basis of Design,” would make the floral Persian carpet the imitation of the Persian garden, for he says: “The love of the sheltered, walled-in, and natural garden is very evident in their literature, and the influence of their flora upon their designs of all kinds is evident enough. The idea of the Eastern paradise is a garden. We have it in the Bible in the Garden of Eden—an enclosed pleasance or park, full of choice trees and rare flowers, animals of the chase, and birds. This idea recurs constantly in Persian design. The very scheme of the typical carpet seems derived from it—a rich, varicolored field, hedged about with its borders. The field is frequently obviously intended for a field of flowers, and sometimes a wood or an orchard of fruit-trees.”

According to design, Oriental rugs may be classed as of purely Aryan, or floral type, including Persian and East Indian rugs; of Turanian, or geometrical, patterns embracing Turkoman and Caucasian carpets; and of a combination of the two, as represented in Turkish, Kurdish, and Chinese weaves.

The Oriental has imitated Nature or translated her into textiles, sometimes very literally, and again with great freedom. In the sumptuous old Persian carpets, intended for regal homes, full hunting scenes with a great deal of action are wonderfully pictured; hunters on horseback, with their dogs, among the forest-trees, are in pursuit of animals of the chase; and in others, more quiet landscapes, with trees, flowers, and birds, are imitated. One which Mr. Stebbing describes in his book on the Holy Carpet is of this nature: “Various trees of the forest, planted in horizontal lines, are connected on each line by the serpentine course of a stream, forming shallow pools, with a growth of wild flowers on the bank—the mud-flats left by the receding water very carefully indicated in the weaving.”

—Mary Beach Langton in “How to Know Oriental Rugs.”