THE INDIAN WOMAN AS A CRAFTSMAN. BY CONSTANCE GODDARD DU BOIS

SINCE their contact with civilization has deprived the Indians of almost all their native industries by destroying the balance of primitive economics, and robbing them equally of materials and opportunities for work, the introduction of the white man's industrial arts has been tried of late as a means of salvation for the remnants of a perishing race. In some instances it has accomplished its purpose.

The destitute Mission Indians, robbed of their lands, and deprived of all the advantages gained by industrial education in the Spanish Mission communities, now live in desert canyons, or on stony mountain sides, where agriculture is almost forbidden by the nature of the soil; while the white man has seized and occupied all the fertile valleys, once the site of Indian villages, and still acts as a relentless aggressor, turning his cattle and swine to fatten on the pitiful patches of corn, or beans, which, with Chinese-like industry, the Indian coaxes to grow in the most sterile places.

Under these circumstances, the white man's industry, however exotic or inappropriate in theory, becomes a means of salvation both to life and character, and a whole community in the mountains of San Diego County, California, has been uplifted by the introduction of lace-making for the Indian women, by Mrs. Sophie R. Miller, under the auspices of the Episcopal Church Missions.

The fabrics wrought by the bronze workwomen are the marvel of their white-skinned sisters who purchase them, and who never fail to remark: "It is astonishing that Indians should be able to do this sort of work."

This surprise at the fine craftsmanship possessed by primitive workers is only one of many misconceptions concerning their capabilities, held by educated people.

It need surprise no one who realizes that civilization is not an uninterrupted advance upward; but that, on the contrary, we lose much in order to gain more.

The race gains at the expense, to a certain extent, of the individual. Degeneracy, insanity, and crime increase on the one hand; the individual qualities of courage, self-expression, original invention, insight into the visible workings of Nature, sincerity and fidelity to an idea are lost or diminished: all these qualities being found, perhaps, in an ignorant old Indian basket-maker; while the average society woman may possess not one of them.

Thus, it is easier for the hand trained for generations to acts of individual expression to acquire new arts than for the idle fingers of the rich to excel as quickly in similar occupations.

The woman whose every need or whim is satisfied by the products of elaborate machinery set in motion the world over to do her bidding, can not conceive of the condition of the first Indian woman who, to meet the needs of her family, invented baskets and pottery, twine, and woven fabrics; and, not content with bare utility, set to work to adorn her handicraft with decorative forms learned from no school but that of Nature, that supreme teacher of the untaught. All early art forms, being true, please the intelligence. All primitive art
is debased, not elevated, by contact with civilization.

The modern appreciation of good handicraft which is gaining ground among the intelligent few, can not offset the degrading tendencies of a commercialism whose watchword is cheapness; the imperative desire for which is forced upon the many by the conditions of a struggle for existence which includes as necessities a thousand artificial wants.

The lesson of Indian art, however, will not be entirely lost upon this generation. Spasmodic efforts of doubtful efficacy, to introduce craftsmanship into the public schools, sacrificing the three Rs to the rudiments of needlework, basketry, etc., show, at least, a striving towards the lost liberty of the individual as a worker, and the lost ideal of Nature as a guide.

When the patrons of art shall found endowed schools for the cultivation of delicate handicraft to which this public schoolwork may serve as an introduction, and when markets shall be opened for the product, craftsmanship may gain a serious value in modern life. Meantime we must turn to the Indian worker as an instance of what may be done in singleness of purpose, with innate intelligence, and no workshop but the wilderness.

In surroundings destitute of the means of satisfying a single requirement of civilized life, where the white man could see only a tangled thicket or a desert waste, the Indian woman found material for food and clothing, and a dozen artistic developments arising from these primitive necessities of the race.

Two species of milk-weed grew in the Southern California mountains beside the beaten trails, and the keen eye observed that when the stalks became dry, the outer bark hung in thread-like fibres.

Observation, deduction, action made a logical series. The stalks were soaked, beaten, dried; spun by hand upon the bare thigh, or ankle, with a curious twisting motion, first in one direction, then in another; lengthened, by the addition of other fibres, into a cord, white from the white milkweed, or a beautiful shade of old rose from the red-stalked variety; woven and knotted into tasseled fringes for petticoats, nets for the carrying of loads, sacks for storing of grain, and many other useful articles for the home.

A sack of this kind, valued as a rarity in the Washington National Museum, is remarkable not so much for the beauty of its decoration, (although the alternate bands of white and red, softened by age into a neutral tone, are satisfying to the eye), as for the honesty and durability of the workmanship. It has lasted a hundred years, having been in active use the greater part of the time.

Basketry, that universal primitive art, is still practised among the Mission Indians, although it is worthy of note that baskets from the remote Manzanita region show much greater variety and individuality in design than do those specimens of the art made in places nearer civilization, and more under the influence of the white man's ideas.

Turning from primitive to modern artistic industries, we find admirable work among the laces made by Mrs. Miller's class of Indian women at the La Jolla reservation, in the mountains of San Diego County, California. Later on, the class will exhibit and have for sale pillow-lace and
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Venetian cut-work. The latter, curiously enough, will be a revival of one of the industries taught to the Indian women in the early Mission settlements, by the Spanish missionaries, who, with a wisdom far in advance of all other American pioneers, included industrial training, in both mechanics and art, among their other methods for the instruction of their Indian converts.

The women take kindly to the work, the more so since it is almost their only means of livelihood. Unfortunately, in this sort of industry, done under direction, with forms and designs dictated by market demand, the workers are prevented from the free exercise of fancy and invention. Sooner or later, they must fall under the sway of the white man’s commercialism, in which pride and satisfaction in handiwork, the native birth-right of the primitive craftsman, is lost and forgotten.

In vain do our educators anticipate, as a result of the socialistic uplifting of labor, the modern workman’s conscious joy in the digging of a ditch. A man can take only so much satisfaction in his labor as shall correspond to the personal intention which it expresses.

The Pima Indian knew that joy, when years before the coming of the white man, he dug his irrigating ditch, and watched the life-giving water flow from level to level as his inventive skill had decreed.

To stand shoulder to shoulder with other hired laborers digging a trench under the direction of a “boss,” can give a man no possible cause for satisfaction. This condition is a mental result and can not be induced from without.

Let our students of industrial conditions consider the factors of primitive industry, and reproduce them so far as is possible in modern life. Only by an effectual resistance to the leveling tendencies of industrial organization, as at present practised, only by a return to the freedom of individual expression, can we regain that blessing to the craftsman, the lost joy in labor.

THE MORAL VALUE OF HAND WORK

THE worth of work with the hands as an uplifting power in real education was first brought home to me with striking emphasis when I was a student at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, which was at that time under the direction of the late General S. C. Armstrong. But I recall with interest an experience, earlier than my Hampton training, along similar lines of enlightenment, which came to me when I was a child. Soon after I was made free by the proclamation of Abraham Lincoln, there came the new opportunity to attend a public school at my home town in West Virginia. When the teacher said that the chief purpose of education was to enable one to speak and write the English language correctly, the statement found lodgment in my mind and stayed there. While at the time I could not put my thoughts into words clearly enough to express instinctive disagreement with my teacher, this definition did not seem adequate, it grated harshly upon my young ears, and I had reasons for feeling that education ought to do more for a boy than merely to teach him to read and write.

—Booker T. Washington, in “Working with the Hands"

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