THE FOREIGN ASPECT OF MURAL PAINTING. BY WILLIAM LAUREL HARRIS

ALTHOUGH the conditions of mural painting abroad are bad, yet mural painting is not the novelty upon the Continent that it is among ourselves. So we can profitably study the general aspect of modern municipal decoration in foreign countries, tracing conditions back to their causes. In this way we can arrive at conclusions which will aid municipal art in America.

All the great buildings of India, Asia Minor, Egypt and Greece were covered with paintings, both on the interior and upon the exterior. The classic buildings, known as Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, were all painted. And the Etruscan monuments were splendid in the richness of their color. It appears to have been in Imperial Rome that white marble buildings were first erected. But, even in Rome, when plaster was used in the construction, it was always painted.

The nations living in the northern and western portions of Europe have, up to modern times, always employed gold and color with a magnificence which will never be surpassed. Yet mural painting, in spite of its long and interesting history, is, at present, in a very unfortunate state.

Many modern artists rail at the times and at modern conditions. Certainly, all artists would welcome conditions less sordid and standards of success less mercenary. The honorarium for mural painters is both meagre and precarious. I will mention a few notable examples of this among the great artists of Europe. Hippolyte Flandrin produced all his great decorations at a financial loss. Paul Baudry practised the strictest economy, and yet he did not make his expenses, while painting his masterpieces in the Opera at Paris. Puvis de Chavannes said that the returns from his decorations, up to the last years of his life, had never equaled the unavoidable expenses connected with doing good work.

It is well to call attention to these instances of self-sacrifice. It shows how the great artists of Europe are not mercenary, although they are often hampered by the lack of money.

In speaking of the difficulties besetting the career of a young decorator, Gérôme once said to me: “C’est le sacré argent qui empêche tout.”

Living in Paris, or in any other great art center, one sees many men of great distinction making mean little economies and sometimes going without proper food for the sake of art. When these artists embraced art, they embraced poverty. Men who are not firmly wedded to their art can of course, from time to time, sell their talents to business concerns and make money.

I suppose it was reflections like these which once made Whistler exclaim: “Evil days have fallen upon our great mistress, art. She wanders in the market places to be chucked under the chin by the passing
"The antique world" (mural painting in Museum at Breslau, Silesia): Hermann Prell
gallant and to be enticed into the home of the householder.”

Of course, there are artists in Europe who make a certain amount of money, but the money thus made is almost accidental and has little to do with their artistic talent.

I have drawn this dismal and discouraging picture of conditions in Europe, because many people wonder that modern buildings are often so lacking in charm and often are downright ugly. The answer is that no adequate reward is offered to the men who might make our public buildings beautiful. They often live in penury while the builders and politicians grow wealthy.

Many people place the blame on the architects. Others talk about social conditions and popular ideals. But really to understand what is going on in Europe, and

the present state of mural painting, we must study the history of municipal decoration. In the words of Solomon: “The thing that has been is that which shall be, and that which seems new, it hath already been of old time.” So, when people talk of a new movement toward the recognition of decorative art, and talk of a more intimate relation between architecture and painting, our thoughts turn naturally toward antiquity.

The farther we penetrate through the so-called “Dark Ages,” the more clearly do we see the intimate relation that existed between architecture and the allied arts; between art and the people.
During the periods called Romanesque and Gothic, paintings were never separated from architecture. The easel picture, as we know it, did not then exist. The pictures and ornamentation were parts of the building itself.

At the time when our civilization began to establish itself upon the ruins of the Roman Empire, most of the public buildings had a somewhat religious aspect. In Giotto's time and even later, artists were chiefly employed in church decoration, and the best craftsmen lived in the shadow of great monasteries. From time to time, these same men decorated civic buildings. And the long line of craftsmen, artists and artisans, who lived and died in the monasteries of Europe, have left us decorations which are unsurpassed in richness of color and in solemn splendor of design. The achievements of these mural painters are landmarks in the history of art.

Past achievements in municipal art show us the impulses which have guided humanity, and indicate the rise and fall of artistic ideals.

When heroism has fired the people with noble zeal, then artists have arisen who painted upon the walls of public buildings the glories and ideals of their time. The walls, the piers, the very supports of the roof blossomed, as it were, with the inspiration of noble and patriotic thoughts.

The subject of mural painting is far reaching, and its history is bound up with the rise and fall of empires. For while there
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have been periods when mural painters have recorded great deeds and lofty aspirations, there have been other times when they have depicted quite the reverse.

Mural painting has unconsciously acted as a gauge by which we are able to judge the moral and intellectual standards of different periods. There have been periods of bad art, as we all know.

These same periods are known to historians as times when riots and rumors of wars afflicted the state; when there were rebellions on every hand, and when, even in peace, the cities were filled with tumults. To the sociologist these periods of bad art are known as periods when discontent was rife among a miserable people.

Deprived of the moral stimulus of art, the poor people were filled with envy of the vulgar rich. The exact spirit of the time is always reflected by the craftsmanship displayed in painting.

During periods when there was a real nobility of purpose there was apparent also a real devotion to craftsmanship. No exertion was too great when it was made for a worthy object. But in corrupt times, the craftsmanship was also corrupt. And for the most part, pictures painted with unworthy objects perish through defects of workmanship. A good example of this is to be found in stained glass; windows made during the twelfth century are, to-day, in a better state of preservation than windows dating only from the late Renaissance. If space permitted me to do so, I should include in this account of mural painting a few words at least on the stained glass of France and Germany. For in Gothic architecture, the chief decorative features are necessarily in the window spaces.

The noble paintings done in the public buildings of Italy by Giotto, Orcagna, Simone d' Martini and others, find counterparts, as far as artistic merit is concerned, in the stained glass windows by Clément of Chartres, Robert of Chartres, and other artists of France and Germany.

The more carefully we examine the history of art, the better are we able to comprehend the present aspect of painting in Eu-

St. Francis of Assisi before the Sultan: Giotto di Bondone (1276-1337)
tial. When people were overmuch given to mysticism and were inspired by religious aspirations, the buildings rose heavenward until finally they seemed to defy the very laws of gravity.

Then mysticism began to fall into disrepute, its devotees having overstepped safe and trustworthy limits of possibility. At the same moment, the builders found that, in their buildings, they had overstepped the limits of safe construction, and many lofty structures came tumbling down upon the bewildered populace. These disasters covered the builders with shame and marked the decline of Gothic art.

Then came that great revulsion of feeling when everybody fell back on the forms and traditions of pagan antiquity. And thus began the classic revival of the Renascence. But pure classic art was too cold and uninteresting for the opulent days of the late Renascence. Then it was that a sort of classic building appeared, daubed and plastered with meaningless ornamentation. In this way, was created a new style called Rococo. This new style was chiefly remarkable for its singular vulgarity and barefaced sham. It was all a part of the corrupt civilization that flourished gaily, until the common people found out that they were being tricked and deceived. Then revolts and tumults racked the nations of Europe to their very
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foundations. But some time before this final catastrophe, painting and architecture parted company. These two arts which, for centuries, had been almost as one art, became discordant.

Up to the time of the Renascence, the architect and painter were brothers, so to speak, and worked hand in hand. Art schools did not then exist. Each man was trained by painting upon real decorations under the direct supervision of a master painter. So each man was first of all a craftsman.

During the periods called Romanesque and Gothic, and even in the early Renascence, this spirit of craftsmanship was very apparent.

It is well exemplified in the work of artists like Pietro Perugino, Bernardino Pinturicchio and Correggio.

As long as the artists were educated in practical work, it is evident that the matter of craftsmanship could not be overlooked, and all the traditions of mural painting were carefully observed.

But when art schools began to replace the more practical form of education, decorative art decayed. This was the time when students began to draw from Greek and Roman statues, dug up by antiquarians and placed amid conditions quite different from those for which they were originally designed. Michelangelo, we learn, drew from statues in the gardens of the Medici.

This Florentine art school must have been quite like a modern art school, for one of the older pupils broke Michelangelo’s nose just because he did not like him.

All, of course, are familiar with the wonderful paintings by the great artist just mentioned, which exist in the Sistine Chapel. And we see very well what a splendid craftsman this great artist was. But we can also detect the beginning of the end in mural painting. For the successors of Michelangelo were reckless painters like the Carracci. And who were the successors of the Carracci?

In two generations almost all the good traditions of municipal decoration were lost. All that was left in the place of time-honored traditions was a certain academic flourish. The hulking giants and theatrical compositions left us by painters of the late Renascence are now for the most part blistered daubs. From the point of view of craftsmanship, they form a singular contrast to the beautifully executed paintings by pre-Raphaelite artists. Since the time of Raphael, the painters and builders have,
Now and then in Europe, when a single painter has had a building entirely at his disposal, very beautiful results have been obtained. But in general, artists do as they have done in the Hôtel de Ville in Paris. There, instead of the thoughtful and reasonable craftmanship of the early painters, we see a bizarre collection of unbalanced compositions. Often, these compositions continue from one panel to another regardless of architectural forms.

In fact, the painters have considered the walls as canvases spread out for their pleas-

each in his own way, endeavored to dig deeper and deeper the gulf which separates the architect from the artist. And now, if it chance that the builder and the painter try to work together, they find that they no longer understand each other.

I cannot here give a long account of how modern architects design what they call an “architectonic entity.” It is sufficient to say that there is no place left for mural painting. The painters to-day blame the architects for not arranging good places for pictures. The architects, on their side, believe that painters ruin buildings whenever they paint them.
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ure. They have murmured a little at the lighting, etc., as being less satisfactory than the lighting in their own studios. And so, while painting on walls, they have still remained easel-picture painters.

While many of these easel pictures when applied to walls look garish and out of place, there are others which show a serious effort to conquer difficulties. Such paintings often have very solid picture-making qualities and display superb academic training. A good expounder of academic principles is that very eminent instructor and picture painter, Jean Paul Laurens.

But the unfortunate thing is that the academic artist always gains more medals and has more public recognition than that rare person, the trained mural painter. France had such a mural painter in P. V. Galland, but the recognition he received was in no way equal to his artistic talent.

The prevailing conditions are to be regretted, as they tend to discourage young men from devoting themselves to the decorative side of art. And the knowledge and experience necessary properly to decorate municipal buildings, cannot be gained in a short time.

This truth is being emphasized in our own day. In England, for instance, artists like Burne-Jones have marked an epoch by the attention which they have given to craftsmanship. In Burne-Jones we have the type of man who is, by nature, a reformer in art, and who never tried to be any-

thing else. But, in France, that center of academic training, there is often found quite another sort of craftsman. I refer to men who have not only studied in the Academy, but who have excelled in academic work. And then, in the height of success and artistic power, they have decided that the most important side of art has been neglected. At the age of thirty-five or forty, they have turned their attention to craftsmanship and to the formulas of pre-Raphaelite painters.

The unexpected and often eccentric productions of these artists have frequently astonished the artistic world. Many of these artists, like Besnard, are “Prix de Rome” men, although they have now become leaders of this modern revolt against academic art.

All over Europe, this same revolt is going on. Each art center has its group of secessionists, trying for something, although many hardly know what that something is.
The Prophet Isaiah (Sistine Chapel): Michelangelo (1475-1564)
Delphic Sibyl (Sistine Chapel): Michelangelo (1475-1564)
Great literary men, like Tolstoi, try to help matters on by defining what art really is or should be. In the meantime, there is a great deal of talk as to the merits of this or that procédé, and there is an increasing interest in the applied arts.

Many of the most violent "impressionists," such men as Auquentain and others of the extreme revolutionary party in art, are now strong advocates of the ancient traditions of craftsmanship.

Of course, all innovation in, or deflection from, the established methods in the art schools is met with a storm of abuse from professional teachers. And each year, in the Salons, these teachers gather in a sordid band and vote for the work of their faithful pupils, to the exclusion of such work as they consider less orthodox. They speak with the greatest contempt of the prevailing tendency toward new ideas.

All work which is unlike their own they condemn. "Such painting," they say, "is the small-pox and the scarlet fever in art." This is as near as I can come to translating a common and very forcible expression used by the older artists to describe the work of the younger generation.

But modern mural painting in Europe has little to fear from its enemies, strengthened though they may be by government patronage, by subsidized schools, by elaborate systems of medals and rewards, and, in Germany even, by the hand of the Emperor. The real danger to true art lies in the commercial affiliations of the artist. It is impossible to serve art and commerce. On the one hand, the excellence of the painting is the only consideration. On the other,

The Park (cartoon for tapestry): E. Aman-Jean
cheapness of execution is the main idea. The solution of this problem is in the hands of the public. As long as the people are content with a cheap imitation, there is little hope for real art, and there will be few great municipal decorations. The blame own way to produce great works of art. From time to time, these men arrive at great distinction.

If space permitted me, I should like to give an account of the beautiful works of art which have been produced in our own time. And I should like to tell of the personal characteristics of each artist, in order to show more clearly the unselfish struggle which they have made. But I will close this short account of the foreign aspect of painting with one notable example of the danger of commercial affiliations.

I will take for my example that Gothic revival of which Ruskin wrote. There was, in the time when Ruskin began to teach, an awakening interest in craftsmanship and individual talents. It was a revulsion of feeling against perfunctory art and manufactured articles in general. With this interest in craftsmanship came an interest in the period before the Renascence, when Gothic artists worked so wonderfully well, and when their different guilds were powerful. For a while, it seemed that the Gothic revival and the pre-Raphaelite movement might lead to great things. But unfortunately, manufacturers of paintings and interior decorations took the matter up. They found cheap ways of doing things; and, goaded by competition, these men became confused in a profusion of

Decorative panel, "Science": Urbain Bourgeois
Gothic detail. Gathering fragments of paintings from here and there, energetic business men applied them to architecture. They applied all these details haphazard: that which was originally designed to go down low was put up high, and that which was designed for a round surface, was put on a plane, and so on. All this was done at reduced rates for large orders. Of course, the quality of the work began to deteriorate. Finally, the cry went up from the public that the effect of this sort of painting was not beautiful. Then appeared the literary hack who lived on the crumbs which fell from the manufacturers' table. This person demonstrated to the public that the manufacturer had consulted all the authorities on Gothic art.

The public then relapsed into its original belief that the masters of antiquity were barbarians. This was the culmination of our modern Gothic revival. It will be the culmination of any new movement or revival, as long as the public shall accept a cheap imitation for the real thing.

Whenever artists seek to return to the sound traditions of antiquity, business men profit by the interest aroused, and exploit the idea for pecuniary gain. Noble ideas are thus thrown into disrepute. This has happened again and again in Europe, and will continue to happen as long as the public shall allow present conditions to continue.

The lethargy of the public and its inability to distinguish between real and imitation art, is the chief menace seen in the foreign aspect of mural painting. And this lethargy can only be overcome by publicity such as The Craftsman and other art publications can give. Very little can be expected from the regular newspaper and magazines, because, through advertisements, these publications are all subsidized by commercial firms.

THE THEME IN ITS RELATION TO TIME AND PLACE

A prime consideration in estimating a work of art is that of appropriateness to occasion. This applies with particular force to a work of decorative character. An easel picture or a piece of sculpture, created solely with reference to itself,—that is, simply to express the idea that the artist had in mind when he wrought it,—is to be judged solely by itself. Should it not be in keeping with its environment it may be removed to surroundings that agree with it. But a decorative work must take shape with reference to its environment. By its very nature it is a part of that which lies about it and into which it enters as an element. Its function is not only to adorn, but to interpret, to elucidate, and therewith to complete as foliage and efflorescence complete a tree. For this reason decorative art, in its higher aspects, is the greatest form of depictive art. By its unification with its environment it has not alone the individual character conferred by its own attributes. Its own character is amplified and enriched by the nature of that to which it belongs and which correspondingly belongs to it. While it is subordinate in lending itself to the embellishment of something greater than itself, it is likewise exaltative in enhancing the quality of the greater work. The quality of the latter enters into the decorative work, informing it with attributes beyond itself.