COMMENTS UPON MR. SHEAN’S “MURAL PAINTING FROM THE AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW.” & BY IRENE SARGENT

REPETITION and insistence, far from being annoying and tiresome, are often welcome. Sometimes they are necessary to the understanding of a subject, as we may find by reference to music. In works of that art, as, for instance, an orchestral composition, a theme but once presented, would be fragmentary. Its first and principal use must be supplemented by its appearance in another key in which the original proportions and relations are maintained, but new notes are struck. By this means the attention of the listener is retained, and the composition assumes for him an interest which arises from his acquaintance with it. It is thus, with the intention of emphasizing and expanding the argument of Mr. Shean upon “Mural Painting from the American Point of View,” that the following comments are added to certain points which he makes with much truth and vigor.

First of all, the basis of his argument is well-founded by his criticism of the easel picture, which is justified in history. Mural decoration is the art of organic periods when men are, so to speak, cohesive, and strong impulses prevail; when religion, patriotism and citizenship are not mere words with which the preacher and the politician juggle, but rather when they exist in the breasts of the people as vital principles, inexplicable in words, but claiming the obedience of all.

As an indirect consequence of the effort to maintain the unity of Christendom through the foundation of the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the walls of the churches throughout Italy clothed themselves with the story of the Faith. The same tendency manifested itself in the first organic period of society: that is, under the republics of antiquity, when the friezes of the temples presented in sculptured relief, accented by color, the history of civilization as far as it had then progressed.

Mural decoration can, therefore, by these and other examples be proven to be the strongest expression after architecture—of which it is the indispensable adjunct—of democratic art: democratic or popular, because the subjects which it has treated in the past in temple, church, town- and guild-hall, and which it must continue to treat in
future, have a common interest; because, also, this form of decoration, rich, splendid and beautiful, is owned by the people; the expense of accomplishing it having been paid from public funds—from the sweat of the laborer more largely even than from tax levied upon the revenues of the millionaire.

Nor can the objection be urged against mural decoration that its strongest appeal was made in periods of comparative popular ignorance, and before the printing press began its propagation of the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The saying of Saint Augustine that pictures are the books of the people is as true to-day as when it was recorded in the fifth Christian century. Nor has the virtue departed from the façades of the great mediaeval fabrics, like Notre Dame of Paris and Amiens, which Victor Hugo and Ruskin have described as the pictorial bibles of the people, whose access was easy at all times and to read which required the intervention of no learned clerk. Their use has simply been modified with time. It has developed with the people. Instead of being educative, it is now inspirational: precisely the quality needed in an age of material wealth and accomplishment. Obedient to a natural instinct, which development can never but modify to a limited degree, we receive the greater number and the strongest of our impressions through the vision. We read history, and our eye, wearied by the printed page, wanders about our environment and penetrates for its rest and gratification into the street, or the landscape beyond. The labor of the historian, endured for our sake, is rewarded according to the degree of mental concentration which we have acquired by discipline. The mural decorator suffers no such involuntary injustice. His work is concrete. It appeals to the elemental man, as well as to the individual of the highest culture, or rather to the former never ceasing to exist within the latter. The style of the artist may be understood only by the critic, but the story developed upon the wall is plain for all eyes to read, whether the manner of telling it be realistic, like that of Abbey, sympathetic like that of Sargent, or primitive, suggestive, connoting instead of denoting, like that of Puvis de Chavannes, the Robert Browning of painters. The old axiom that seeing is believing, and the story of the doubting apostle Thomas represent truths that can never lose their force. Many can testify from their own experience to the strong moralizing force of the old play, “Everyman,” recently seen in this country, which may equally well be de-
scribed as a sermon in action, or an animated mural painting. Concrete lessons, educative for the children, inspirational for the mature, are demanded from democratic art: that is, from the decoration of those public buildings erected as houses of worship; as seats of government, national, sectional or municipal; as educational or cultural institutions; as places of amusement and of paid hospitality. As the laws of Moses are graven on the walls of the synagogue, and recited in the ritual of the Episcopal Church, in order to keep the divine precepts in the very foreground of memory, so by the most direct means—that is, by mural picture, or relief—ought the persons and events representing the organization and development of nations and communities to be kept constantly before those who are actually, or who may be called to continue the work of their forefathers, as well as those who must constitute the passive jury of the active social and political elements.

With this view, Mr. E. H. Blashfield, the noted decorative artist, was in accord when he wrote in his "Plea for Municipal Art," that few persons can grasp an abstract idea, while a visible, tangible image is easily understood. Finally, the same argument is further fortified by Mr. Shean’s observation that, in an extended sense, mural decoration can never be the toy of a favored class, but is, on the contrary, dependent for existence upon popular support.

The points made by the same writer against the easel picture are equally well taken. This form of painting is, as he truly says, the only one recognized by a large class of persons who make it, one may add, an object of fetish worship. It is essentially an aristocratic form, placed, as to possession and enjoyment, beyond the reach of the many, and for that reason rendered more desirable to certain connoisseurs in whom the appreciation of art has degenerated into the mania to have and to hold, at the expense of the people’s pleasure.

The easel picture, as is almost too well known to permit of comment, was, in its first stage, the altar piece, executed by some noted artist who was remunerated by a rich noble or burgher, anxious to beautify the sanctuary of his favorite church or convent chapel; actuated sometimes by religious zeal, sometimes desirous to expiate a sin, but most often to obtain glory through his act of munificence. He delighted to see his own portrait joined with those of his wife and
children, mingled with the personages of Bible history or Churchly legend. Further, the devout or luxurious layman demanded for his private oratory the exercise of the same talents which enriched church altars far beyond what could be done by the precious metals and jewels. In this way, the easel picture gained an entrance to the private palace and the costly burgher home, and was there welcomed to such a degree that when the mediaeval love of the symbolic merged into the love of beauty and display marking the Renascence, this aristocratic form of painting acted disastrously upon the democratic form, in so far as the public service of the latter was concerned. Then, gradually, mural decoration was withdrawn into the private palace; this movement beginning with Raphael himself and becoming stronger under the assuredly decadent School of Bologna, as is witnessed by the walls and ceilings of such lordly dwellings as the Roman Farnesina and Rospigliosi palaces. As was natural, the artists no longer treated vital themes. They rejected as irrelevant matter the story of man’s redemption, or that of his labors as a builder of society, in order to deal with abstractions and allegories; realizing them in luxuriant, flowing outlines, and clothing them in the colors which most flatter and relax the retina, instead of toning it to efforts of appreciation. The splendor of ultra-marine, crimson and golden yellow appeared on the walls in great spots on which the eye rested, intoxicated in sensuous delight. And here was no orchestration of color like that used by the Venetians in their great public edifices which might modify the demoralizing aesthetic effect. The handwriting on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace was no more significant and prophetic than are these contours and colors. They announce the evils following in the train of luxury and materialism: the two enemies of society who are wont to force art to conceal for a time the corruption and decay which they create. Centuries removed, by thought, experience, development, are these mural decorations from those of Puvis de Chavannes, wherein the austere lines and the color-schemes are a powerful step in advance toward that simplification in art, as well as in life, which a surfeited world now demands.

With the fall of democratic art, the easel picture grew more and more precious to its privileged possessor: one of the most exquisite of Raphael’s Madonnas assuming, some hundred years ago, the name of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, since a bearer of that title so loved it as never to separate himself from it, even in his travels. And thus.
in common with other masterpieces of art, it was excluded from the sight of the populace and the world at large, until the liberty-loving House of Savoy broke the tyranny of the Italian princes.

But yet the easel picture proved its right to existence with the birth of the first masterpiece of Cimabue. The sole restriction to be put upon it is that it shall not absorb both talent and public wealth to the extent of starving democratic art. In a republic, each class of individuals, theoretically at least, has its peculiar rights, and it would be as absurd to wish to deny the rich a legitimate means of culture and pleasure, as it is unjust to deprive the moderately circumstances and the poor of the educative and moralizing effect of historical fact and ethical principle presented to them in all the charm which line and color can lend them on the walls of places of public assembly. The figures of Brittany peasants introduced into the luxurious private gallery, or drawing room, carry with them the odor of the soil, which invigorates the pervading atmosphere of high culture. The millionaire, fixed with all the strength of material chains to his post of responsibility, often values his Corot, not because signed by the powerful hand of the master, but simply because its delicate harmonies of neutral colors, its perfect balance of composition, sing to him a song of Nature. In the broad modern world, especially in our own constantly developing country, there is abundant room for both forms of art—the private and the public—neither of which shall hinder or encroach upon the other. But it is imperative that the democratic spirit be not stifled. There is something yet more important in the furtherance of civic art than the motto adopted by the New York Society: “To make us love our city, we must make our city lovely.” This thing of importance is to keep dramatically before the minds of the citizens the effort, self-sacrifice and unity necessary to the maintenance of a commonwealth or community: a result to be attained only by means of a dignified civic art expressed in the decoration of public buildings. Let us learn a lesson from the city republics of Belgium, whose historical monuments, protected by the enlightened sovereign, are given over into the keeping of the commission of artists known as L’œuvre nationale belge. Thus, every relic of the past centuries, every late occurrence tending to further patriotism is given prominence by the government. The burghers of Bruges, whose silted harbor is now being excavated and cleared by engineers, can learn from the mural paintings of their town-hall that their commercial relations
were once as wide as the world, and that, by the removal of the natural
obstacle, they may again, on honorable terms, enter the markets of all
nations. The citizen of Antwerp may, also, from the walls of his
town-hall gather inspiration and incentive. He learns there of the
recuperative energy of his own city which, in spite of religious and
political persecution, in spite of the tyranny of Spain and the jealousy
of Holland, has gained and regained position and wealth. In studying
both city and citizen, it would appear that the modern spirit of the
town and the decorations of public buildings act and react upon
one another, so that it is impossible to determine which of the two
forces furnishes the stronger impulse to action. But it remains cer-
tain that the story unfolded by the mural paintings of Baron Leys and
his colleagues coincides with the reality of the forest of masts which
rises stately in the broad roadstead of the Scheldt, exciting the fear of
the City merchants of London, lest the old Flemish town win from
the English capital some portion of her colonial trade. To sum up,
it may be urged that the public art of these Belgian cities shows a
relevancy of subject, a perfect preservation of racial and local tradi-
tion, a thoroughness of system which the promotors of the same cause
in our own country can not do better than remember, when advancing
their ideas among the people, and when practically working out their
schemes. Such a course is advocated by Mr. Shean when he takes as
an illustration the Flower Library at Watertown, N. Y.; when he
suggests that the history of banking and exchange be displayed in
simple, directly expressed pictorial form upon the walls of counting-
houses; that railway corporations relieve the restlessness of travelers
by enlivening their waiting rooms with characteristic scenes chosen
from the cities lying along the route to be followed, as has been done
by the Paris, Lyons and Mediterranean Company, at their new Paris
terminal. This last suggestion appears as one of especial timeliness,
as we recall the waiting room of the Grand Central Station, New
York, in which marbles and other rich materials are prominent, and
there exists an absolute poverty of focal points of interest for the eye:
an attempt at a frieze being made by the names of the minor cities of
the State recorded in plain Roman letters. The same poverty of
invention is found in the Station of an important inland city, on a line
of the same railway system: in which case the decoration employed
bears no relation to the place, and the waiting travelers are forced to
confront an aggravating use of the Celtic dragon-knot, repeated ad
COMMENTS ON MURAL PAINTING

nauseam in stained glass, in defiance to the surrounding architecture, which is of debased classic type.

AGAIN it may be said that if Mr. Shean’s theories were to be realized in the United States they would make us possessors of cities and towns far better adapted than they are now for the living of pleasurable, useful, progressive lives, of which good morals, good citizenship and good art should be the vitalizing principles. But yet, after the manner of enthusiasts and the holders of a fixed purpose, our writer perhaps advances a step too far when he judges that “the Congressional Library at Washington, beautiful as it is, and technically excellent as are its paintings, unpleasantly suggests a building given over to a group of talented and learned foreigners who have skilfully shown us how the storehouse for our national collection of books can be made attractive.” And again, when he censures the subjects of the mural decorations of the Boston Public Library as offering no allusion to the brilliant group of nineteenth century writers who made Massachusetts and its capital city famous in literature.

Against these strictures it may be advanced that the commissions of both great libraries in choosing the themes of decoration—one of the most important of their tasks, if moral effect be considered—merged patriotism into cosmopolitanism. Both edifices are repositories of the world’s treasures of thought, and only the highest, the most epoch-making attainments should there receive recognition. The exquisite embodiments of the spirit of English literature at Washington are surely to be accepted by us, since our speech is but a branch of a mighty river, penetrating into a late-discovered continent. Support upon the same basis may be given to the harmonious abstractions of Puvis de Chavannes, to the vigorous syntheses of Sargent in the Boston Library; while no more fitting theme could have been chosen for the decorative scheme of the delivery-room of the same institution than the “Quest of the Holy Grail,” which teaches more clearly than by words—that is, by picture-writing—the course inevitable to the seeker after knowledge: the consecration, the hard toil, the hesitancy, the bitter rebuff, the renunciation, and the Heavenly Vision. All this it would seem is the fulfilment of the promise made at the entrance of the Library by the guardian figures bearing torches and unfurling a scroll on which allusion is made to knowledge as “The Light of all Citizens.”