THE ARTS AND CRAFTS & A DIAGNOSIS BY
DR. DENMAN W. ROSS & From Handicraft for January, 1903

WHAT is the matter with the Arts and Crafts? Why is it that, in spite of a widespread interest, with much talk and much activity, so little really good and satisfactory work is produced? Consider the work of the early and middle ages, of the Renascence, the work of our own colonial days, the work of the far east, of China and Japan. We have many examples in our houses, in our museums,—the masterpieces of earlier times. In comparison with these, the work which we are doing is most unsatisfactory. I am thinking, of course, of the work that is really ours, the work which we do upon the basis of our own thought and effort, the work for which we are wholly responsible. Good things are produced, very good things, but they are reproductions or copies of fine things done long ago. All we do is to adapt them to our purposes, to our needs, with very slight, if any, alterations. The changes we make are rarely improvements, and our copies and reproductions are not so good as they ought to be. Our artists and craftsmen, the ablest of them, have settled down to a systematic imitation of historic examples, and the study of design is called the study of “historic ornament.” It is only the ignorant, we are told, who imagine that they can produce any original work which will be good. The wise have given up the idea altogether.

The work which we do, when we follow our own impulses and disregard precedents, is often useful. It serves its purpose, but it generally fails in design or lacks technical perfection. If, as sometimes happens, our work is good in its general conception or design, it is almost sure to be the work of some amateur or dilettante who has good taste and good judgment but no technical training, no skill. The work is well conceived, but badly done. More often the work is well executed, but wanting in design. In that case it is the work of a man who has technical training, who knows his trade, but has no idea of composition. He has never thought of design, and is, consequently, unable to bring the beauty of order into his work. His work may be useful, but it is not beautiful, so it cannot be regarded as a work of art. We rarely find in original work the combination of good design and good craftsmanship which, together, make art.
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There is, as I have said, a widespread interest in the Arts and Crafts at the present time. There has never been so much talk about them before. Societies are being organized everywhere to look after them,—to encourage producers on the one hand and buyers on the other. The people who join the societies are divided into craftsmen and patrons, and the craftsmen are divided, according to an estimate of training and ability, into masters and apprentices. No end of time and pains are spent in making constitutions and by-laws,—the a priori legislation which never fits and gives no end of trouble afterwards. Then there are meetings, at which people talk,—the people whose business and pleasure it is to talk. As a rule, they have never done any work themselves, but they can tell us all about it, and what ought to be done. The talkers who have never done any work take a few lessons and begin at once to produce things,—hammered bowls, carved brackets, punctured lanterns. Then there is a jury to look at the things,—to decide whether they are fit to be shown or not, and there is an exhibition committee to arrange for the shows. These take place from time to time, and are attended by the patrons and other persons who feel kindly and take an interest,—sometimes to the extent of buying the objects exhibited. A little market is created and a little business is done. So it goes on, and it is hoped, by such means, that the Arts and Crafts may be induced to flourish once more. We expect very soon to have artists, lots of them, and the artistic life everywhere. It is a moment of great expectations and high hopes,—to be followed presently by a disappointment.

Our interest in the Arts and Crafts is altogether too superficial. It is more talk than work. The product is small and insignificant, and our little market is no real market. The fact is, we are playing at Arts and Crafts. It is a pastime, an amusement. The big world of hard work and real work is hardly conscious of our existence. Ask the manufacturers, the shopkeepers, and their employees, what they know about the Arts and Crafts movement, how they feel about it. They will tell you that they know little and feel less. Surely it will take more than our meetings and talk, more than our exhibitions and sales, more than all that, a great deal more than that, to bring the Arts and Crafts to life again.

The real cause of their decadence, the real reason why they do not flourish, lies deep in our habits of life, and in the system of education.
which gives us those habits. It is to be found in the fact that the knowledge of art, which means aesthetic discrimination and judgment, is found, generally, among the people who do no work, people who study works of art, collect them, and talk about them, but produce nothing. It is to be found in the fact that the people who have technical knowledge, training and skill, who are able to work and do work, have, as a rule, no discrimination, no judgment, no standards, no high ideals. In other words, we have all the fine impulses where there is no ability to follow them, and all the ability where there are no fine impulses. To make matters worse, the people of education, of judgment, and the people who have merely technical training and ability form two distinct classes in our community, and these classes have almost nothing in common, have, indeed, very little to do with each other.

There are lots of people who know the fine things that have been done in art, who care for them, who long to see such things done again, people who have good taste, right judgment, high ideals, and the number of these people is increasing constantly. Instead, however, of trying to realize their ideals, working them out in the materials and by the technical methods of the several Arts or Crafts to which they properly belong, they find it easier, because it is more in their habit, to put their ideals into words, and to talk about them. Sometimes they give lectures and write books about art; what it has been and what it ought to be. In this way they express themselves, but always in the terms of language. Language is the only art which they understand technically, the only art which they can practise with any success. Very sharply distinguished from those who discriminate and pass judgment in speech and in writing, are the people who spend their days, all day and every day, in real work,—getting technical knowledge and exercising it. They are masters of their hands, of tools and materials, of methods, ways and means. These people, also, think. Of course they think, but not in the terms of language. They think of forces, attractions, resistances. They discriminate in manual efforts, in tools and in materials. They are good judges in all technical matters connected with the Arts and Crafts. There is nothing these people might not do. They might do the finest things in the world; but they never think of them. They have never studied any fine things. They have no knowledge of art. What they do is simply what they
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are told to do by the people who employ them and pay them wages, and these are not, as a rule, the people of education, who might be expected to superintend and direct. They are the manufacturers and shopkeepers who produce things to supply a demand and gain a profit. Of standards and high ideals the employers know quite as little as the people they employ. Their only motive is found in an "order to be filled." The two classes of people thus distinguished and described have, as I have said, very little in common and very little to do with one another. They rarely meet, and when they do meet they fail to understand one another.

Words mean so little to those who work, and work means so little to those whose ideas exist only in the terms of language. The terms of language are abstract and general, the terms of work are to the last degree specific. The talkers and the workers meet only to misunderstand one another, and they have very little respect for one another. "What is all that talk," says the worker, "that talk about the principles of design? What does he mean by balance, rhythm, harmony? Organic unity,—what in the world is that? Righteousness, truth, beauty,—what are they? How he talks and talks, and quotes from the books! He is always begging us to do those things which he talks about. He cannot do them himself. He says so. He cannot tell us how to do them. He knows nothing about work. He does not know the difference between a nail and a wedge. You ought to hear him talk. It is perfect nonsense. Work is better than talk anyway. Let us go to work." That is what the worker says. From time to time the talker leaves his proper associates, the people who understand talking and talk themselves, and condescends to visit the worker in "his place of business," but he finds there nothing that pleases him. Work in itself he cannot understand or appreciate. What he looks for is the motive of the work, its idea. This he finds unsatisfactory. "It is not enough," he says, "to do your work well, even very well, it must also be worth doing. Your work is without design. It has no balance, no rhythm, no harmony. It lacks organic unity. I see in it no righteousness, no truth, no beauty. It makes me very unhappy." That is what the talker says to the worker, and he goes off, consoling himself with the words of the Lord to Ezekiel (xxxiii, 32): "And, lo thou art unto them as a very lovely song, of one that hath a pleasant
voice and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words but they do them not.”

Idealism, with its love of righteousness, truth and beauty, and technical ability, with its standard of perfection, the two elements which go to make up the artist and the artistic life, are thus widely separated,—so widely separated that they cannot act together, as they should, to produce their proper issue in nature, in life. The case of the Arts and Crafts is, therefore, a case of disjecta membra.

Many efforts have been made to bring the two elements of art, its idealism and its technical ability, together, but the efforts have been futile. The idea has been to bring the workers under the influence of the talkers. One of the objects of the Arts and Crafts Societies is that: to bring the people who work under the influence of the “higher criticism.” The man who works, however, does not care for the “higher criticism.” He does not understand it, and, like most men, he hates what he does not understand. He despises the condescension of those who pretend to know all about it, but cannot do it. The critic and the worker meet, but in vain.

What I have said may seem very discouraging. It may seem to the reader that I have described a hopeless condition of things. The condition of things which I have described is far from satisfactory. That is true. It does not follow, however, that it is going to endure. I am by no means discouraged. I regard the situation with hopefulness, if not with cheerfulness. All the elements of art, of the artistic life, are here. They are separated so that they cannot act together. What we have to do is to bring them together. That is not impossible. It means simply that we must bring the teaching of art, the teaching of design, into connection with technical training. The young men and women who go into Arts and Crafts work must have the knowledge and appreciation of fine things. They must have standards which will enable them to criticise their own work as they do it. They must be critics as well as workers. Then we shall have the two elements of the artist life, its fine impulse and its technical ability, united and acting together. We shall then, at once, see a real life and activity coming into the Arts and Crafts. We shall see work produced, appropriate to its purpose, good in design, and technically perfect. That is exactly what we want.

Various forms of manual training have come into the schools.
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They are coming, also, into the colleges and universities. Manual training has not, however, as yet, come into connection with the teaching of art. By some people it is regarded as an educational discipline, sufficient in itself. By others it is recommended as a preparatory training for mechanics and engineers. As a discipline, it is certainly of great value; as a preparation for certain kinds of professional work it is indispensable, no doubt. Up to this time, however, the teachers of manual training have been mechanics, not artists. They have had no interest in art, no knowledge of its masterpieces. The study of design and its principles has had no place in connection with manual training. The study of works of art, with the idea of discovering and establishing standards has never been introduced into the schools of manual training; but it is going to be introduced there,—for that is exactly the place, where the study of art belongs. Technical training, without the knowledge of design, without artistic standards and ideals, without the artistic impulse, is of little value. On the other hand, the artistic impulse which would lead us to produce good and beautiful work is fruitless, so long as it is divorced from manual and technical training. The two things belong together, and what we have to do is to bring them together, and that is what we are going to do, and we are going to do it at once. The pessimist says: “How dismal it all is, how unsatisfactory.” We are not pessimists. “How fine it will be, what splendid work we are going to do, as soon as we have the requisite knowledge with technical skill.” That is what we say, and that is optimism.

We must have the knowledge of design in its principles, which are the principles of order. Order, system, unity of motive or purpose, beauty of form: that is the meaning of design. Beauty is not definable, but it manifests itself in three principal modes: balance, rhythm and harmony. These are the modes in which beauty is revealed both in Nature and in works of art. By balance we mean equal opposition or antithesis. By rhythm we mean the joint action of two or more attractions or forces to carry the eye and the mind in a motion through the measures of time or of space. By harmony we mean that the constituent elements of a work have something in common which brings them together in unity. We say of a work, that it is in harmony with its idea or purpose, or that the terms are in harmony with one another. Thus we have harmony of tones, of measures, and of forms.
or shapes. The practise of design means bringing terms or ideas into the modes of balance, rhythm and harmony. The only means of coming to a clear understanding of design, and an appreciation of its importance, is found in the practise of design,—in exercises in the composition of terms and ideas,—trying to bring the many into one, the one into many, as Plato puts it. At the same time we must study the art of the past, particularly its masterpieces, the aim being to get a power of visual discrimination, critical insight, and right judgment, and, ultimately, high standards and ideals, and the noble impulse which comes out of them. Examples and illustrations must be brought together; if not original works, then copies or reproductions; if nothing else can be had, photographs will serve the purpose. The best method of study will be found in a technical analysis, by which the component elements and motives of a composition become clearly distinguished and defined. * * * We shall then have art once more, and the artistic life. Again, works of art will be produced. The conditions and circumstances of modern life will give us new problems, and we shall have artists to solve them. Now we have only half an artist here, the other half somewhere else. His head is in one place, his hands in another. The all-around, complete artist, with his knowledge of fine things, his discrimination and judgment, his standards and ideals, his knowledge of tools and materials, of ways, means and methods, his power of eye and skill of hand,—that is the man we want, the man we must have, before we can hope to see the Arts and Crafts alive again, and flourishing.

We must give up the idea that everything can be understood in the terms of language, that the educated man is one who talks and writes, but does no other work. We must give up the idea that all the wisdom of life is to be found in the words, phrases, and sentences of high philosophy. Language is only one among many arts. It serves many purposes, but not all, and among the purposes which it does not serve are those of the Arts and Crafts,—architecture, sculpture, painting, and the many and various minor arts connected with these. The feelings, emotions, thoughts, ideas, ideals, which find their expression in drawing, painting, modeling, carving, construction, of one sort or another, cannot be properly defined and expressed, cannot be properly discussed or understood in the terms of language. Archaeology, history,—that is another matter. The discriminations, which mean right
judgment in regard to works of the Arts and Crafts, are discriminations in the sense and in the terms of vision. These have no real equivalents in the terms of language. The appreciation of such work rests always upon technical considerations. We do not know that a thing is bad unless we know how it was done, how it ought to have been done, what ought to be done to make it better. That means technical experience and technical knowledge, if not technical ability.

To be a real critic, you must have studied the masterpieces in a way which the man of words cannot understand. You must have analyzed the fine things. You must know exactly what they are made of, and how the materials were put together. To make sure of your knowledge you must have put similar materials together in the same way with approximately the same result, bringing the knowledge and understanding gained by analysis to the test of synthetic effort. To be a real critic you must have all the knowledge of the workman. To be a helpful critic you must know more than he knows. You must be able to explain your idea to him in technical terms, and by means of illustrations, doing yourself what he ought to do. The real critic is a workman—potentially, at least. It is always through the practice of an art that we come to a real knowledge of it.

It is plainly the business of our schools, colleges and universities to recognize the existence of many different arts, different modes of thought and expression, to acknowledge that language is only one among these, the most important one perhaps, but not the only one by any means. In order to give our youth a real knowledge of the different arts and their masterpieces, our teaching must be practical as well as theoretical. We must put their knowledge upon the basis of technical analysis and synthetic practise.

This is not at all the view which prevails in our places of teaching and learning. The teacher, the professor, who has never done anything but talk about art, or write about it, is very slow in coming to the idea that he is not doing all that he ought to do. He will tell you that the thought which cannot be formulated in terms of language has no place in the school, or in the university. He protests against all technical exercises and practises. "All that," he says, "belongs to the profession. If you wish to take up art as a profession, you must go to the art school. What we do here is to exchange judgments, and we do that in the terms of language, which are the terms of philosophy."
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The professor cannot understand that the judgments which he offers in the terms of philosophy are no judgments at all. They are certainly not judgments of art. It is the archaeology of art, the history of art, the philosophy of art; it is the abstract, general ideas, suggested by works of art, that he talks about. The technical part of art, which is art itself—that does not interest him. He has no appreciation of design, in a technical sense, and no appreciation of technical perfection, or achievement. It is enough for him, if the work suggests something of righteousness, truth, or beauty. He is satisfied, if the motive is unmistakably good. It is one thing, however, to suggest the ideal. It takes very little art to do that. To achieve the ideal, technically, to bring it forth as a tangible and visible reality is quite another matter. That is what art is, not merely suggesting, but fully realizing the ideal, realizing it to the last point of technical perfection. Of that our professor knows nothing, except as he tries, in his talking and writing, to express himself well in the terms of his own art—the art of language.

Assuming that our object, in education, is merely to induce right judgment on the part of those whom we undertake to educate, the importance of technical training as a means of getting that right judgment, must be evident. If we go further than that and say that the true education is a preparation for life and life’s work, technical training becomes a still more important part of it. What we have to do, in that case, is to give to our pupils technical ability of all kinds, and, with it, the finest possible impulses—the impulses which come from a real, thorough knowledge of the best work that has been done in the world and the best thought that has been put into it. Thucydides says of the Greeks (in the funeral oration of Pericles): that they had “the singular power of thinking before acting, and of acting too.” That is what we want, as the outcome of our teaching, whether it be in the school, in the college, or in the university. We do not want an impotent idealism, but a potent one. We want all that idealism means: discrimination, right judgment, high standards, but more than that, the ability, the power, to achieve our ideals technically. Then we may expect to realize them—when the philosopher goes to work and the working man becomes a philosopher.