THE USE AND ABUSE OF MACHINERY, AND ITS RELATION TO THE ARTS AND CRAFTS

SHORT time ago I received a circular issued by the management of a prominent Arts and Crafts Society of which I am a member, in which the announcement was made that an exhibition of representative handiwork would be held early in the coming year for the purpose of showing the "great strides" recently made in America in the development of artistic craftsmanship. According to the announcement, the exhibits are to be limited strictly to "handiwork of original design, as the exhibition is organized for the one purpose of showing the supremacy of the hand over the machine, in craft work making claim to artistic quality."

This circular seems to me to express so exactly the prevailing idea of what is meant by the word "craftsmanship," that I am impelled to make at least the effort to show how serious are the limitations of this idea, and how far it is from going to the root of the matter and revealing the one essential element of craftsmanship, which is not the mere idea of doing things by hand, but the putting of thought, care and individuality into the task of making honestly and well something that satisfies a real need. In the revolt against the utter lack of vitality or of artistic quality in the great mass of machine-made products that owe their existence solely to the artificial demand created by commercialism, enthusiasts for the revival of the handicrafts have not only allowed themselves to be carried to an extreme in the opposite direction, but have fallen into the selfsame sin against true craftsmanship by encouraging the making of things for which there is no manner of need, and which, not being the outgrowth of a fundamental necessity, have in them no element of living art.

The time is ripe for the birth in this country of a national art—an art that shall express the strongly individual characteristics of the American people, but, like all art, it must spring in the first place from the common needs of the common people. All new growth must start from a return to root needs, or root principles, and unless there is a going back to these to gain a fresh point of departure, all that is done expresses merely the restlessness of a constant search after novelty, not the natural growth of a new and vital form of art. Merely to make things by hand implies no advance in the development of an art that shall live and make its own place in world-history
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as a true record of the thought and life of this age, any more than the making of them after "original designs" implies that these designs are the outgrowth of thought based upon that need which is the root of inspiration to the true craftsman, as well as upon his personal desire for self-expression.

THERE is no question that the Arts and Crafts movement is a step in the right direction. It is one phase of the world-wide desire to get rid of the cumbersome artificialities that clog so much of modern life. But is it making "great strides" in the development of artistic craftsmanship in America? It is interesting, and it sounds well, to speak of "showing the supremacy of the hand over the machine," but can it be put to the test of a generally practical application and can an exhibition held for this sole purpose mark any distinct advance? In England, the original home of the Arts and Crafts movement and where it has attained its greatest development, there is no sign that a new school of art is growing up, for the great majority of the exhibitions are merely exhibitions of individual cleverness at playing with new toys that mean no more than the old. On the continent, the followers of L'Art Nouveau are for the most part committing fantastic extravagances that simply emphasize their desire to revolt from the conventional, without giving the world anything better in its place. There is evidently an honest desire to produce something that shall be simple and strong and beautiful, but only in isolated instances is that desire fulfilled. For the most part, all that is achieved is a jumble of so-called decorative forms that are founded neither upon need nor reason, and so are worse than the forms they seek to replace, and do nothing beyond adding to the world's stock of useless things.

It seems to me that the trouble with it all is the placing of the cart before the horse. The work of the old craftsman, being the outgrowth of direct need, not only was an honest expression of himself, but typified the life and thought of the age. It was founded upon sound principles of construction, because his sole thought was to make something that should serve fully the purpose for which it was intended. If it was ornamented, the decoration was a secondary thing that grew naturally out of the structure of the piece because the worker felt the need of expression for his own idea of beauty. Now,
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the decorative form is the first consideration, and the structure is made to conform to it, an evidence on the face of it that the piece exists to express a decorative idea, not because there is any real need for it. It is play instead of work and it embodies no element sufficiently vital to carry it beyond the realm of the studio. Because of this it evokes no real response from the great body of the people, and so is no true expression of the collective thought of the age.

It is a sense of the vitality that distinguishes the handiwork of former days that has produced the present reaction to handiwork as infinitely superior to any product of the machine. As a matter of fact, given the real need for production and the fundamental desire for honest self-expression, the machine can be put to all its legitimate uses as an aid to, and a preparation for, the work of the hand, and the result be quite as vital and satisfying as the best work of the hand alone. The mere question of hand work as opposed to machine work is largely superficial. The prime object of the industrial arts is to produce articles which satisfy some material or mechanical requirement, and any method of working is allowable which really effects that object in the simplest and most straightforward manner. The modern trouble lies not with the use of machinery, but with the abuse of it, and the hope of reform would seem to be in the direction of a return to the spirit which animated the workers of a more primitive age, and not merely to an imitation of their method of working.

THE invention of modern machinery is in itself a notable achievement of the true spirit of craftsmanship. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the inventor of a machine that is meant to do any particular work, is himself a master of that work and has turned all his ability toward the finding of some means by which it may be more perfectly, as well as more easily, done. When rightly used, that machine is simply a tool in the hands of the skilled worker, and in no way detracts from the quality of his work. Almost anything that can legitimately be done by machinery can be done much more swiftly, accurately and economically than by hand. Also, to use a good machine that runs well and does its work as if by magic affords fully as much pleasure to the worker as the most interesting hand work. It is simply the best means to attain a desired end, and his interest is in the work itself and the result he is trying to produce.
—not in the way he is doing it. Naturally, in making this statement I refer only to purely mechanical labor, where the quickest and most economical way of doing the thing required is just so much gained in time and strength. For instance, to use an illustration that is surely on my own ground, an expert carpenter or cabinet-maker will save much time that can be used to better advantage, and will lose nothing of the artistic quality of his work, if he makes use of the adequate modern machines for sawing, planing, boring, mortising, sandpapering and otherwise preparing his material for use, instead of insisting that all these things be done by hand. It should be the privilege of every worker to take advantage of all the improved methods of working that relieve him from the tedium and fatigue of purely mechanical toil, for by this means he gains leisure for the thought necessary to working out his designs, and for the finer touches that the hand alone can give. So long as he remains master of his machinery it will serve him well, and his power of artistic expression will be freed rather than stifled by turning over to it work it is meant to do.

The trouble is that we have allowed the machine to master us. The possibility of quick, easy and cheap production has so intoxicated us that we have gone on producing in a sort of insane prolificness, and our imaginary needs have grown with it. Originally intended to make simpler and easier the doing of necessary things, the introduction of machinery with its train of attendant evils has so complicated and befuddled our standards of living that we have less and less time for enjoyment and for growth, and nervous prostration is the characteristic disease of the age. The old simile of the sewing machine exactly expresses the state of affairs. Its introduction was to be a boon to overworked woman by relieving her of the tedious hours of stitchery and so giving her more leisure for other things or for rest, but to her the means of doing ten times as much work in an hour as she could do by hand meant simply an opportunity to put ten tucks into a garment instead of one. Instead of adding something to her life, the machine took away more than it brought, for it encouraged the desire for senseless and needless elaboration and so made her work harder and more confining than before. When she ornamented a garment made by hand, the ornamentation was the expression of her own thought of beauty, but with the mechanical ornamentation made pos-
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sible by the machine there grew up in her mind a false idea of mere elaboration for its own sake, and so the machine mastered instead of serving her.

AND one of the chief dangers of machinery lies in this very matter of mechanical ornamentation. True ornament is always the spontaneous expression of the individuality of the worker. The construction of the thing he makes may be more or less arbitrarily determined by the use to which that thing is to be put, but when it comes to decorating it he is his own master and it is his own idea that he must express if his work is to have in it the element of art. If a man makes a chair that is in itself everything a chair should be, he has first of all satisfied a real need for a strong and comfortable seat, and if he chooses to carve it after his own thought of what it needs to make it beautiful, his work, be it fine or crude, is art. But if he makes a chair that is first of all shaped by the mere desire to produce a novelty, and then proceeds to overlay it with a mass of machine-made carving or embossing that is utterly meaningless and has no other purpose than to appeal to false standards of the desirability of elaboration, in order that the chair may find more ready sale, he has merely added to the heterogeneous mass of superfluous and bad stuff with which our homes are too much cumbered as it is. This is a danger of machinery, for it is most easily done in that way, but the same thing applies to meaningless ornamentation done by hand. Handiwork is no better than machinery if the thing produced be needless and without meaning, and the principle to be established appears to me to be, not the supremacy of the hand over the machine, but the supremacy of the thing that is needed over that which is made more or less as a pastime.

The much-talked-of return to simpler and better things and the revival of the old spirit of craftsmanship can come about only through a process of drastic elimination, followed by a return to primitive principles of construction based on primitive needs. It is not a piling-up of new things that is needed, but a new point of departure from which can be developed a genuine national art. When a thing is made because it is needed, that need creates its own limitations of form and decoration, and with that in mind one can not go very far wrong. In spite of all the talk about the revival of handiwork as the one es-
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essential to the development of "artistic craftsmanship," it is impossible to reverse the conditions that have obtained since the introduction of machinery and to return to making everything by hand. Machinery cannot be abolished, nor should it be, but it can be mastered by the growth of truer standards and made to keep in its place and to do its own work. If people would reject all machine-made ornamentation as false to the fundamental principles of decoration and therefore inherently bad, they would go far toward limiting the machine to its legitimate uses, and the best and most vital forms of handicraft would spring up spontaneously and flourish under modern conditions as lustily as they did of old. Also, if the needless things were relentlessly thrown out of the house, there would be a just appreciation of what remained, and the making of the really necessary belongings would once more be a matter sufficiently important to warrant individual care and thought. This once established, there would be no danger in the use of machinery, and no need to give exhibitions for the one purpose of showing the supremacy of hand work, for the real friendliness of machinery to the handicrafts would be shown in the growth of an industrial art as vital and lasting as that of the mediaeval craftsmen toward whose methods of work it is now the fashion to cast such longing eyes.

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