SOME DECORATIVE PANELS BY ALBERT HERTER, WHICH ARE A BITING SATIRE ON MODERN HYPER-LUXURIOUS SOCIETY: BY GILES EDGERTON

The unusual and beautiful room which Albert Herter calls his studio is built with an open court extending from skylight to entrance floor. One side of this court is the hallway with the wall of brick divided off into arches. It was as mural decorations for these arches that Mr. Herter designed the panels shown with this article—panels at once finely decorative from an artist’s point of view, and keenly satirical to the student of modern society.

There are five arches to carry decorative studies of Painting, Architecture, Sculpture, Music and Poetry. Of these only the three here presented are completed and in place. Mr. Herter will not talk of these panels as studies of modern social conditions, he seems interested only in their decorative suitability to the spaces for which they were designed. And, after all, what more is there for him to say? What word or gesture or uplift of brow could more effectually lay bare the selfish, self-centered, blase, degenerate condition of the hyper-luxurious, upper class society of either America or Europe? And egotism: one should not forget the biting incisiveness with which the egotism of the woman dilettante in life is shown: not without charm, not without picturesqueness, never without the quality of physical attraction; but entirely without heart—according to the Anglo-Saxon definition; without soul—as one thinks of spirituality severed from religion; and wholly, tragically, without kindness, in the biggest sense of the word, where it stands for tenderness, sympathy, gentleness.

Not one of the women has the slightest consciousness of any lack whatsoever. Each one is insolently sure of life’s humble attitude toward her—her money, her position, her birth. What else has Life to give a woman, except poverty and misery—these she scorns. Even her interest in the five great arts is subjective. What can they contribute to her pleasure, her beauty? Well? What is art for—what is anything for? And the Frenchwoman in the arch shrugs, and the American looks a shade more coldly imperious.

Indeed, so far has the egotism and insolence of the twentieth century luxurious woman gone, so remote is she from the big tumultuous, vibrating thing known as humanity, that mere beauty, the
DECORATIVE PANEL
BY ALBERT HERTER.
ARCHITECTURE

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From a Photograph by Hollinger & Co.

MR. ALBERT HERTER.
A DECORATIVE SATIRE

beauty that Nature gives, no longer satisfies her. Any one may have this beauty, her maid, the woman who serves her in the shops; and so her life study is not the great lovely radiance of beauty that is in color and line and expression and esprit; she seeks the unusual, the eccentric, the trick that may differentiate her. She cultivates pallor with morbidly red lips. She stains her ears red; or tints her eyelids and upper face a strange yellow that is esoteric and bewildering. Her hair is just a part of the color scheme she desires in her make-up, red or gold or dead black or straw or white.

She calls this strange confusion of nature, her temperament. I have seen in Paris on the Boulevard des Italiens in a single afternoon a dozen women with their faces painted a queer mauve, their lips purple, and all draped in pale red or purple veils. I have not yet found out what phase of mysterious charm it was intended to express. But the Frenchmen at the cafés knew. They peered up over the pale green drink and wagged studio beards appreciatively.

In America the purple complexion has not yet arrived; but among the newly rich insolence has taken possession of the younger generation, and egotism with it, and the morbid desire for a personal picturesque eccentricity, and the need to express a full understanding that the world is largely peopled with “mere masses,”—and above all there is the desire to seem artificial.

Mr. Herter does not, however, say any of these things. He tells you how he found the lovely strange green and peach tints in the brick wall by scraping off an ugly red paint, how half-way down to the brick surface the workmen came upon these delicate mixed hues due to a former painting. And so the wall was left, to the workmen’s horror, a mixture of rarely lovely tints, and glazed. Mr. Herter explains that the color scheme of the panels was worked out to harmonize with the wall tints, and furnished with an accent of black, which culminates in the center arch, to avoid an attenuated delicacy of tone.

The inscriptions under each panel, in dead black with letters of gold, form a part of the general color-scheme, and here and there throughout the panels the gold reappears on cushion or embroidery or furniture, a vivifying sharp accent in the exquisite variations of pale greens and mellow peach bloom. Not for an instant does the palette lose its head, nowhere does the artist forget the wall which is the inspiration—women, children, men and interiors, all are made to conform to the tones of the old painted bricks.
From a decorative point of view the arched panels are an unusual and convincing achievement; they are equally so when studied thoughtfully and regretfully from a sociological viewpoint. They are a searching and pitiless satire on modern luxurious existence, presented in tints of a misty May sunrise,—the cruelest truth told with a brush dipped in the calyx of a peach blossom. And, as Mr. Herter contends, "the decorative effect in relation to the wall is all right."

PRAYER OF THE BRAIN-SPINNERS

GIVE us a work for our hands, O Master of Toil;
Weary are we of the din and shifting strife,
Endlessly waged in the endless fields of the air,
Weary of searching in vain for the clues of life.

Strong is the pull of the rock, the clay and the tool,
Quick in our blood is the yearning to carve us a sign,
Tangible, real, to stand in the eye of the sun,
Shapeless howe'er, yet by joy of creation, divine!

Give and withhold not, O Master of Toil and of Life!
Sweet will the rest be at nightfall, but sweeter to say
Words not, but works I leave, and the work is good,—
Even as God, on the eve of the seventh day!

—HELEN M. BULLIS.