Views of the Greenwich Handicraft School

A WORK ROOM AND OFFICE IN THE GREENWICH HANDICRAFT SCHOOL.
From the Greenwich Handicraft School.

SAMPLES OF THE RUG-WEAVING AND LACE-MAKING TAUGHT AT THE GREENWICH HANDICRAFT SCHOOL.
THE GREENWICH HANDICRAFT SCHOOL:  
BY KATHERINE LORD

Here and there in the world constructive attempts have been made in applying art to industry. An experiment at once industrial and educational is being carried on at Greenwich House, a social settlement in that part of New York known as Greenwich Village. The rapidly changing conditions in this section have brought together unusually diverse elements which give a special character to this problem.

The Greenwich Handicraft School was established to meet the needs of two classes of women: foreigners skilled in some form of hand-work who needed direction in design and choice of material, and girls and women physically unfit to enter the regular industrial field; and to foster and develop a love of the beautiful, and encourage its application to daily life.

Workers among our foreign population are constantly meeting women who have been trained in some of the hand industries of Europe, especially lace making and embroidery, for whose skill there is practically no employment in America. Almost without exception they have only manual skill, though they are often endowed with natural taste capable of development. Without the knowledge of what is good, or even practicable in design, unable to obtain proper materials, these women spend many hours upon articles which are utterly worthless when complete. Many such pieces of lace and embroidery have been brought to residents of Greenwich House, often with a pathetic certainty that the teacher will be able to find a market for them.

One or two examples will show the difficulties of this problem. An Italian woman, of more than average skill and intelligence, was counting upon the sale of a piece of lace, exquisite in workmanship, good in material and design, but of such shape and proportion that the ingenuity of several people has as yet failed to find a use for it. This would be worth one hundred dollars if it were practicable in form, and cost the maker two months of constant labor. Another young woman brought a large collection of beautifully executed laces in which crudely colored mercerized cottons were combined with poor and coarse linen thread. The entire product of the leisure hours of several years was worthless.

And yet many of these women have the talent, originality and instinct for beauty which make ordinary factory work distasteful to them. With proper materials, with instruction and direc-
tion in form and design, they are very soon able to produce laces of the highest grade of excellence. Several such women have been earning steady incomes since their entrance into the school, and their pleasure in their work and the improvement in their general condition shows that the school is filling a real want.

The young girl just attaining the working age, who is physically handicapped, is a familiar figure to the settlement resident. What occupation is open to the deformed or crippled girl, who can neither stand behind a counter nor wait in a restaurant, work a machine nor endure the physical strain of washing and scrubbing? Happily the lack of physical strength is often supplemented by unusual dexterity, and such girls have become proficient workers in a sheltered occupation, which saves them much of the mental suffering incident to their condition.

There is still another class of women whose necessities have been forced upon our attention—the women who wish to work only a part of each day to supplement the family income. For such a woman industrial opportunities are practically only two. She may go out to do cleaning, which often results in her neglect of that work in her own home; or she may take "home work," one of the greatest evils in tenement-house life.

As soon as there are industries where women can secure steady employment for two, three or four hours a day, or for certain days in a week, we shall have advanced a step in our campaign against home work in the tenements. We shall have an answer to the mother who says, "What else can I do? I must get the flowers to make, because I can do it while the children are at school." By offering opportunity for part-time employment and by allowing none of our work to be done at home, we are making a definite attempt to solve one side of this problem.

The Handicraft School was opened in the summer of nineteen hundred and five with classes in lace working, this particular craft being chosen for a beginning because of the number of women in our neighborhood who already understood its technical side. In the autumn of the same year the first sale was held, with very satisfactory results, and since then the school has gone on without interruption, giving to a small number of workers constant employment, and to many training in new forms of work.

At first, the simple laces such as Irish crochet and some of the Italian pillow laces were made. In the second year, filet, Carrickmacross and Limcrick laces, and Italian cutwork were added, while during the present year some of the finer needle laces will be produced. Throughout the existence of the school, each pupil has been instructed in making several kinds of lace, that she may be able to repair and adapt laces of various kinds, and that she may have the change of occupation so necessary where close application is required.

Our first object in making lace was to teach perfection of technical skill, and the ability to copy or adapt historic or generally accepted designs. When this had been satisfactorily acquired, we turned our attention to original design, and some beautiful and interesting original work is now being produced. Filet lace especially offers to the designer wide scope for the expression of individuality, while it necessitates that restraint essential to the best art.

Last winter a large piece of work was undertaken which thoroughly tested the efficiency of the workers. It was a set of three curtains ordered for
the windows of a typical city drawing room. These curtains were made of hand-woven Italian linen, with a design in cutwork of a very difficult type and with inset panels of filet lace.

When the success of the lace making seemed assured, we looked about for another craft, which should meet the requirements of the second and third classes of women—the physically handicapped and the avocational worker, for many of whom lace making requires too long a training. In studying the possibilities of hand weaving it was found that technical excellence was quickly attained even by unskilled workers, that it was an ideal industry for those who had no previous training. Also that it offered a comparatively untried field for experiment in color and design. In handling the question of color, we have been most fortunate in having the assistance of Prof. C. E. Pellew, of the chemistry department of Columbia University, who is a member of the executive committee of the school. Prof. Pellew has given much personal attention to the dyeing of materials used in the weaving, and has made many interesting and valuable experiments, instructing the workers in their results, and developing for our use a series of great beauty and durability.

The problem of dyeing materials for the weaving industry was (to the chemist) somewhat unusual in its character and could not be solved by the use of ordinary trade dyes. It was necessary to have colors—first, which were satisfactory from an artistic standpoint in quality and tone; second, which were absolutely fast to both light and washing; and, third, which could be applied to cotton and linen rapidly, by unskilled workers, and with very simple appliances.

The dyes which Prof. Pellew employs are of two general classes, mineral dyes and so-called artificial dyes, which are coloring matters extracted from coal tar. The mineral dyes are all based upon the deposition of colored metallic hydroxides upon the fibers by soaking the fabrics first in a bath of the metallic salt and then passing them through an alkaline solution. Dyes of this class have been known and used in past centuries, but seem now to be known only to chemists, and their practical application forgotten.

The colors secured by this method are of great beauty, ranging from palest yellow through orange to deep rich brown to the neutral colors of the woods and fields. There is also a lovely blue green, capable of considerable variation. They are absolutely fast and the process of their application is extremely simple. The value of these colors in household decoration need not be pointed out.

The second class of dyes used are the artificial or coal tar dyes. Concerning the use of these dyes Prof. Pellew has said, in a recent report of his work:

“A great deal of what, to the educated chemist, is simply unmitigated nonsense has been said in disparagement and abuse of the modern artificial dye stuffs.

“Without going into details it may be well to remind you: First, that since eighteen hundred and fifty-six there have been discovered, described, manufactured and introduced into the dyeing trade, several thousands of these dye stuffs, covering an enormously wide range of color and shade, fastness to light and washing, ease of application and, finally, expense. It is possible now for a chemist of very moderate skill in dyeing to produce on textile fabrics any desired shade, bright or dull, harsh or soft, ugly or attractive—with several different dye stuffs or combinations of dye
stuffs, of various grades of fastness and quality, varying from very poor to excellent. There is not and never has been any color dyed on cotton, wool or silk by any vegetable dye or mixture of dyes that cannot be reproduced in coal tar colors of the exact shade, and with fastness to light exposure that only one or two vegetable dyes have ever attained. On the other hand, if dyers wish to economize at the expense of beauty or durability, they can use cheap and nasty dyes and get cheap and nasty results.” For our purpose we wished color which would dye cotton in one bath, and so we have used the so-called “direct cotton colors.” There are several kinds of these colors, but the ones best suited to our purpose are the recently discovered class of sulphur colors. In our work we have used the Thiogene dye stuffs, several of which have been kindly furnished us by the firm of H. A. Nutz & Co. through their head chemist, Dr. Clarkson, who has been a very valuable friend to our work.

These dyes also give full soft shades, are fast to light and washing and are easily applied. None of these colors is cheap, as it takes a large amount of the color to give the full shade, and should not be confused with the various cheap dyes of the retail market.

To obtain blues we use the famous old dye stuff indigo, prepared in the East for centuries from the indigo plant, but during the last few years extracted in a most satisfactory form from coal tar.

Natural indigo never contains more than ninety or ninety-two per cent. of the actual coloring matter, while the artificial synthetic indigo is absolutely pure, and is not only faster and more durable, but furnishes lovely shades of blue which rarely can be procured from the natural indigo on account of the impurities it contains. One of our most satisfactory greens is obtained by tapping indigo with an artificial yellow.

The application of pattern to hand weaving has been made the subject of study and experiment. The designs are simple and in keeping with the process, the very limitations of which produce some interesting results. Texture of fabric is also considered an integral part of the completed result, and good effects have been obtained by the use of materials that are inexpensive and easily obtained, but which we have not seen in use elsewhere.

The school now makes for sale and to order cotton rugs, portières and hangings, curtains and table runners of cotton and linen. The colors being fast both to light and washing, these articles are particularly desirable for bedrooms and country houses, and they are designed with such uses in view. The dyeing and weaving of wool is now being developed also.

With the establishment of any industry there arises at once the commercial question. Take first, lace making, since that is the craft with which we began, can it be made to pay, in America? Can our workers compete successfully with the lace makers of Europe?

Along lines we have chosen, we believe it to be possible.

The American market is flooded with imported hand-made laces of inferior materials, poor execution, and of design either originally bad or deteriorated from years of inaccurate copying: Much of this lace is only partly made by hand, a more or less successful imitation being used as a foundation. In America we cannot produce any lace, good or bad, at the prices for which these laces are sold in our department stores. There are, however, laces of excellent workmanship and design, produced in small quanti-
ties in Europe and imported sparingly by our better shops. Work of this sort cannot be sold in America for any less than the product of the American worker, while the latter has the advantage of being in close touch with the market. Artistic hand-work, of whatever sort, must be largely done to order, since originality of design and adaptability to its use plays so large a part in the superior excellence of the hand-wrought article.

To justify lace making in America we must produce work technically perfect, of superior design, either original or intelligently copied from the fine designs of the best periods of lace making. We must be able to repair or alter to fit new uses, laces of every kind without impairing their value, commercial or artistic.

In regard to weaving, the situation is somewhat different. Without departing from the most primitive process of simple weaving common to all countries, and exemplified in our own country by the rag weaving and homespun of New England and the weavings of our western Indians, it is possible to evolve a direct and simple expression of beauty along the lines of structural necessity.

In short, our workers must be complete craftsmen, adding to their technical skill a feeling for beauty. An industry of this nature cannot exist as an industry alone. It must be a school as well, maintaining always the highest artistic standard, managed and controlled by people who have at heart the real welfare of the workers and the perfection and excellence of the articles produced, rather than the accumulation of profit.

To make of the Handicraft School a center of art education as well as an ideal industry is the aim of its founders and supporters. The workers are carefully supervised and are given instruction in design, its principles and their application to each branch of our industry. There are clubs and classes, having for their object the development of an appreciation of the beautiful in all departments of life, and the cultivation of a better taste in household decoration.

Exhibitions, informal talks on art subjects, visits to museums and collections, aid the educational side of the work. Instruction is given in drawing to girls and boys of talent who are too young or otherwise unready for the existing free art classes.

During the past summer classes in the making of pottery have been carried on at Greenwich House and have done good work. We hope the day is not far distant when this and another craft will be added to the industrial department.

The work produced in the industry as well as the work of the classes is on exhibition at Greenwich House, and visitors are always welcome in the studio and workrooms of the Handicraft School.