THE RELATION OF MURAL DECORATION TO THE VITALITY OF A NATIONAL ART:
BY GILES EDGERTON

In many respects architecture is the most intimate of arts—the one which, whether good or bad, represents the most immediate thought of the people; and as mural decoration is so closely allied with architecture, inevitably the painting of walls for purposes of beauty must express very genuinely the feeling of a people toward such decorative art—not necessarily whether the art is good or bad technically (for that in one way or another could easily be a matter of chance), but it is not a matter of chance that a series of mural decorations for an important public building is Greek in idea, Teutonic in expression or in imitation of Boucher or Burne-Jones. Any decoration, no matter how unusual in technique, which is purely imitative, shows a tendency, and whether the art is good or bad, the tendency is not good, for it is away from the national note which every nation should strike from time to time in its decorative expression. It is evading its historical responsibility and becoming impersonal, and so does not make for that help in growth which every nation has a right to expect from its great men.

Perhaps the point in question could be most easily illustrated by an allusion to a series of lectures on art which are at present being delivered in New York by Professor Ernest F. Fenollosa, a man of the widest culture in the art of all lands, ancient and modern. In this series of illustrated talks Professor Fenollosa shows plainly (not to prove any point, but because it is a part of the art history of each country) that the art to which one inevitably returns as the most interesting and significant in each nation is that which springs most closely and vividly from the people, illustrating the life of a particular period of a special land. He does not present Japanese mural decorations with Chinese subjects to show you how well the Japanese of certain ages could imitate or represent the art of another land. Although the Chinese influence on Japan is freely and fully dwelt upon, it is only to show the effect that the interrelation of arts has, not to bring up an argument as to whether or no Japanese art is better when it is presenting Chinese men and landscapes. On the contrary, when the lecturer presents those periods of Japanese history when the finest and most vital art appeared, whether in wall decorations or in sculpture, he proves conclusively that the subjects, the scenery, the manners and customs, the history, the religion, the civ-
ilization presented was purely Japanese, the Japanese in prosperity or in the processes of some change of dynasty, but always the people of the nation appearing in the art of the nation whenever that art is putting forth some consummate expression.

The same fact is absolutely true in relation to Greek art; the flower of its supreme beauty is seen when subject and presentation is wholly Greek; when the history, the beauty, the aspirations, the joy of living, the high courage and the patriotism of that great nation were amalgamated in the art expression.

On the other hand, Roman art did not take heed of Roman ways, nor seemed to find aught of beauty in native surroundings. The life which the Roman artists deemed worthy of living did not somehow appeal to them as worth recording with brush or chisel. And thus Roman art became a flavorless degenerate imitation of Greek ideals and standards, and because of this the days of her expression were numbered. She was but a reservoir of still water instead of a fresh clear brook flowing from a living spring. To be sure, the very fact that Roman art was weak and futile does present the truth of Roman civilization: but not a truth of historical importance; a too negative utterance as a foundation for permanent art.

Instances without limit could be enumerated to bear witness to the virility of art that is cradled on its own soil, and to prove not only its significance to its native land, but to all history in creating a national individuality in an expression of the truth about beauty and the beauty in truth.

Until recently we have not only been denied by all modern civilized nations the right to a serious art impulse of our own, but we have also strenuously denied ourselves the great privilege of making permanent a conception of beauty as it exists for us. We have laughed at our own artists and at the picture dealers among us, prophets that they were, who championed these artists; we have made deep salaam to any man who would bind himself closely to foreign standards of excellence; foreign dealers have flooded our markets with second-class greatness, and we have been very humble and thankful to them.

The first article of any length about the Architectural League, published in The Craftsman just two years ago, took up the question of the mural decorations shown at that exhibit, and dwelt upon the encouraging sign that the subjects were largely drawn from American life, from modern conditions or from his-
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APRIL: LOVE.

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AUGUST: CONQUEST.

TWO PANELS FROM A MURAL DECORATION BY ROBERT V. V. SEWELL.
"THE ATTRIBUTES OF ART:" MURAL DECORATION BY ALBERT HERTER.
MURAL DECORATION OVER MANTEL IN COUNTRY HOUSE: BY EDUARD J. STEICHEN.

 Cartoon for Stained Glass Window for a Mausoleum: By William De L. Dodge.
MURAL DECORATION IN NATIONAL ART

torical scenes, often those which had been enacted in the environment of the public building for which the decoration was designed. This was true from time to time in the work of Elihu Vedder, of Blashfield, of John La Farge, and other men of significance. Younger men also were feeling their way along the same ways, Deming and Couse and Millet. And we seemed justified in the opinion that in our mural decoration we were moving forward into the ranks of nations which have been jealous of the national flavor of their art; we congratulated ourselves that a true conception of the place of art in our country had at last developed among us and that we had opened our eyes to the difference between art for art’s sake and art for the sake of truth as well as beauty.

This point of view we still had in mind on the day of our visit in February last to the Twenty-third Exhibition of the Architectural League of New York. We had heard that the mural decorations were the finest things at the exhibition; especially favorable criticism had been made of men whose work The Craftsman has always greatly respected, of Albert Herter, of Luis Mora, of Robert Sewell. And a careful study of the walls of the League proved it was quite true that these men were showing some of the best canvases at the League; painting which was brilliant in execution, interesting in drawing and particularly vital in color, which considered purely as a phase of universal art would rank this work as among the finest mural decorations we have produced.

But when we reverted to the designs for wall paintings at the exhibition last year and the year before, the failure of this year from an American point of view was quickly apparent, for in no instances were the paintings an expression of American life or conditions, of this or any other period in our history. The work was a finely impersonal delightful presentation of ideas by men of big ability, and the ideas were pleasant subjects of foreign inspiration, or, at least, so it seemed to a thoughtful observer. One design differed from another in technique and in subject, but not in point of view, and all were foreign. Yet each of these men is unquestionably an individualist and not consciously working from an uncreative purpose.

Mr. Mora’s work as a whole ranks him as one of the foremost young American painters. He has the seeing eye and the sure stroke. Few men have ever so completely found out how to drench a picture with sunlight or so inevitably in a few crisp brush strokes how to develop temperament in a portrait or emotion in a genre scene. Mr. Mora knows how to draw well and how to handle his
color, and he is manifestly interested in vivid life and in the simple human side of it; yet the brilliantly beautiful mural painting at the League this year is as remote from modern occidental conditions in subject and line as though Mr. Mora had lived in the Orient and was interested only in the dramatic history of centuries ago. Perhaps this artist would say to us that all wheat is grist for his mill, that to paint brilliantly and to compose well are what he is striving for, and that, furthermore, America does not supply him with the most imposing material for his work. Mr. Mora, of course, has not said this, but many of the best of his impersonal fellow artists have, and have painted as though this were the rule of their artistic career. Consciously or unconsciously, they do not relate their art to their own individuality, and the nation, if not themselves, is bound to be the loser. Their way, they feel, is the greater way, and possibly it may be for the individual, so far as versatility of expression is concerned, but a nation has a right to ask bigger things of her painters, her sculptors, her musicians, than their personal development. Mr. Mora could be a vital factor in the growth of American art history; he has proved this already by what he has achieved along lines of significance to us nationally.

The same statement could be made of the more recent work of Albert Herter, who not only is a painter of exceptional brilliancy, but who has the rare gift of humor, or rather satire, when he chooses to introduce it into his work. His panel, "The Attributes of Art" (exhibited at the recent Architectural League), although it shows him at his best as a colorist, possesses neither humor nor human interest; it is purely classical in conception, composition and treatment, a memory of Italy's great days, a Maurice Hewlett painting of rare skill, but non-existent so far as one is considering the growth of decorative art in America.

Mr. Sewell's decorative work is almost wholly out of the Middle Ages—work so beautiful in composition and execution, so fine a realization of the best a man can do solely from the point of view of a great impersonal artist, irrespective of nation or period, that it is difficult to ask more, to desire that to all this fine presentation he should add that last gift to his country—that his art should represent it, belong to it and its history forever.

Another interesting example of this same foreign spirit in mural decoration at the League is a design by William de L. Dodge, a stained glass window for a mausoleum, the central detail of which is shown in our illustration. In motif and composition it suggests the
work of Elihu Vedder, in effect it is less purely decorative and more emotional. The color is vivid and beautifully balanced, and the whole as absolutely unrelated to any home-grown art expression as could well be evolved.

We have yet to consider the mural work of Eduard J. Steichen. He has sent from Paris to be hung at the League a decorative panel for a chimneypiece of a country house. This panel is more American than the work we have just been speaking of, because it is less definitely foreign in inspiration rather than for any strongly national characteristic. He presents a stretch of canvas, wide and low, covered with the woods of a springtime day, deep woods and fragrant, with mists trailing through slender branches, with pale flowers blossoming under foot—a lyric day rests in the depths of these woods. A poet should have found and strayed through this rare spring morning. And yet it is the forest edge of dreamland—a dreamland that we would not miss, but we would also have Mr. Steichen paint for us as he photographs, conditions of the civilization of our own land and times.

It is not that any or all of these men should not dream back into old centuries and gather there light and color and grace; it is rather that all the mural work of one annual exhibition should not be wholly remote from us, the recollection of legends and fair verses and fairy stories of other lands. Our wish is solely that the greatest among us should not forget to make the art of our own land picture forth the legends and stories which belong to us and our posterity.

A CLOUD ALONG THE TRACKLESS SKY

A CLOUD along the rackless sky,
The shimmering of the trees,
A bird, a bee, a butterfly,
The rippling of the waves,
Speak in glad language to my every part,
And, sense-transfigured, live within my heart.

F. W. Dorn.