THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA: PRIZE ESSAY: BY CHARLES F. BINNNS

IN THE year eighteen hundred and seventy-six was held the first International Exhibition in America. It was a bold step to invite the artists and artisans of Europe to enter the lists against those of the United States. Behind them lay centuries of training. The traditions of Cellini, of Sheraton, of Wedgwood and a host of others were theirs. We had nothing but abundant natural resources and an unfailing courage. The exhibition was educational almost to a fault. America was hopelessly beaten. There was nothing to do but to rear the rampart of a prohibitive tariff around her infant industries and to trust to luck.

A few minds, however, were set to thinking. Of course they were feminine minds. It always needs a feminine mind to do an original thing. Questions were asked. Study was begun, though in a very feeble and indefinite way, and it was presently found that not only was there no industrial art in the country, but that there was no chance of learning. "No light, but rather darkness visible" literally expressed the outlook.

The first attempt at craft work may be traced to this condition. Little as it deserves the name when viewed by recent standards it was the humble art of china-painting that broke out the drifts of apathy and uncertainty which choked the highway. Just why this art was selected cannot now be certainly told. Perhaps it fulfilled some conditions and satisfied some aspirations. It was art with an object. It enabled one, with comparatively small trouble and cost to place one's own art on the table rather than against the wall. It was easy to do if one were easily satisfied; it was difficult enough to excite emulation.

But serious workers soon became dissatisfied with the triviality of china-painting. Some attempted to make pottery and met with fair success; some began to experiment in metal work. A few enthusiasts—mostly women—went to Europe and studied book-binding, jewelry, weaving, block printing and the like; the movement all the while quietly gathering strength and fitting its followers for service. When the World's Fair opened in eighteen hundred and ninety-three, at Chicago, there was found in the Woman's Building a notable collection of works in industrial art which afforded indisputable evidence that the lessons of eighteen hundred and seventy-six had not been wasted. College boys say that a freshman "knows not and knows
not that he knows not, but a sophomore knows not and knows that
he knows not.” The former state was ours in eighteen hundred and
seventy-six; we had reached the latter in eighteen hundred and ninety-
three. Enough had been learned to show what craft work ought to
be. The spirit of the critic had begun to arrive. Much dissatis-
faction was felt but there was no discouragement.

And now opened the era of teachers. Europe poured out upon
us those whom she did not need. Frenchmen and Germans, long
of hair and keen after money, opened studios in every large city.
There was a feverish activity but very little serious work. As Law-
son would say, a take-six-lessons-go-west-and-teach-a-class spirit
was in the air. This state of things was but evidence of the exuber-
ance of callow youth. In time a saner idea prevailed and the crafts
began to assume an orderly array. Many dilettante workers there
were, but, in the main, the belief that there was a bright future in
store for arts and crafts prevailed, and so the twentieth century was
ushered in to be the heir of all the ages.

LET us now inquire into the status of the crafts at the present
moment. First: In many cities are clubs and societies the
members of which are more or less interested in all work to
which the word “art” may be attached. These societies are main-
tained by subscriptions and, frequently, a common studio or club
room is rented. There may be a teacher, but usually not more than
one, who is supposed to understand the technic of several crafts, but
who, as a matter of fact, has rarely received any thorough training.
Most of the active members have spent two, three or four years in
an art school and have acquired the craft notion, not to say habit.
These constitute the working force of the club and they plunge into
the making of baskets, rugs, metal work and even pottery with an
enviable enthusiasm. It is to be feared, however, that these light-
hearted schoolgirls wholly fail to grasp the significance of craft work.
Their idea is to make salable articles at the least possible expendi-
ture of time and labor. Their hands are wholly untrained and if
they can unearth a design from some journal published in the interests
of art and reproduce the same, they are satisfied. But on account
of their inexperience they must spend an extravagant amount of time
upon any object, and for this they expect to receive remuneration in
proportion to the hours they, as beginners, have consumed rather
than upon a scale with which a skilled workman would be satisfied.
Work made in this way is, therefore, both bad and expensive and its
existence under the circumstances related constitutes a serious obstacle to the profitable pursuit of craftsmanship by trained workers. Two things are herein made evident: that the training of an art school is quite inadequate for the pursuit of the crafts, and that, in order to become an expert in any line of work, a thorough drill under a competent instructor is imperative.

Second: There are certain "Arts and Crafts" societies the principal function of which is to afford to individual workers an opportunity of placing their product before the purchasing public. These societies have organized salesrooms which are intended to be self-supporting. That is, the commissions on sales are, for the most part, sufficient to pay rent and the cost of selling and packing. Each of these societies has a membership roll and members are entitled to a reduction in the commission paid for the sale of their work. A standard is set and supervision is exercised in order that the quality of the work may be maintained. The membership dues are used partly in the provision of lectures and partly in the missionary effort which every active organization must put forth. In some cases schools or classes are organized which are supposed to be self-supporting. These societies fill a position of distinct value to the movement. They are a great help to the handycraftsman in providing him with a means for reaching his public. The stores will not handle craft-made wares because the margin of profit is not large enough, and, indeed, from another point of view, it is not desirable that they should. To place hand work in a store, side by side with machine-made wares, is to invite a comparison which, to the superficial shopper, must result in the conclusion that commercial wares are both cheaper and more showy. Let us be thankful that this is so! The craftsman does not wish to compete with the machine, but neither does he desire to emphasize an unfair rivalry. Furthermore, the crafts salesroom helps the worker by placing the seal of its approval upon genuine work. Many purchasers are short-sighted, not to say blind, even yet. When the salesroom says an article is good the word is believed, whereas the worker cannot take such a position when offering his own production. Artists are, usually, poor salesmen and, moreover, they are often suspected of undue preference. It follows then that serious workers should support the salesrooms in every possible way and should select those which conform to the conditions named even though a higher percentage be charged.

Third: In certain places village industries have sprung up and are being successfully maintained. The motive power has been
found, either in the remnants of an ancient craft or in the divine afflatus of some unselfish enthusiast. The places where this work is being done are well known and in this discussion we will not particularize. The field of village industries offers the most promising outlook for the crafts for several reasons. The expense of living in the country is very much lower than in the city; hence the work can be produced upon a less expensive scale. Country life offers an alternative of industries which provide a partial support. Fruit growing, gardening, berry picking and floriculture are among the most obvious. The country is more conducive to the quiet thought and persistent effort upon which craft work must be founded and, finally, there is the possibility of a small guild or community of workers which is in every way stimulative and helpful. In many parts of the country there are looms and the knowledge of their use still lingers among the people. This will not be the case for long, however. The older generation is fast disappearing and with it will vanish the remnants of the craft. The younger people, divorced from the farm, have lost the resource of the crafts and the work of training must be undertaken anew.

An appreciation of these conditions is one of the first necessities. In many cases the occupants of the villages are as sheep without a shepherd. They think themselves at a disadvantage because they cannot live in the city and they have not the knowledge wherewith to revive the life of the village and the farm.

Let us now, for the sake of clearness, divide the problem of the crafts into two parts; the worker in the city and the worker in the country. There are certain crafts which seem to belong to the city—the making of silver work, jewelry, book-binding and wrought metal. This is not an arbitrary choice. There are reasons. The question of raw material is important. For these crafts this can be more readily secured in the city than in the country. The work can best be done in proximity to libraries and museums. Large space is not needed and there is a fair margin of profit.

The principal obstacle to the proper development of these crafts is the fact that many have attempted them and failed. The work is not undertaken seriously enough. It is expected that any one who appears to have the least capacity can take a summer school course and at once proceed to make a living. This is found to be impossible and the result is a general discouragement. The would-be craftsman does not begin to learn early enough in life, consequently, does not acquire the necessary skill. There are thousands of students
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issuing from the art schools; they need money, or they think they do, and expect to earn it by hammering copper into impracticable shapes or by applying hot points to wood or leather.

The matter has been put into a sentence by Professor Halsey C. Ives, of St. Louis, who says that schools “have trained a multitude of eager students to only paint pictures that few men want and fewer buy.” What is needed is not so much more art schools as more art in our common schools. One of the faults in our art educational work is in not beginning its influence early enough in the training of our people.”

If the manipulative processes of the crafts were thus early taught in the schools the time would come when the acquired power would blossom and bear fruit as the reality and power of craft work laid hold upon the worker. The poet does not begin his career by writing verse. He must first learn language, form and rhythm. Thus equipped he can clothe his thoughts in an acceptable manner.

The problems which confront the worker in the country are somewhat different. Here, too, there are appropriate crafts. The raw materials for weaving, dyeing, spinning, potting, basketry and cabinet making are close at hand. There is plenty of room and a larger supply of leisure. The inspiration consists, not in books and museums nor in an admiring crowd of connoisseurs, but in the murmur of the brook and in the breath of the hills at sunrise. Come forth, ye leaders of men! You desire a mission, a vocation. Set up your loom or your wheel in the quiet valley. Gather around you the earnest, simple souls whom the cityward tide has left stranded. Reveal to them the secret chemistry of the woods or the subtle graces of the clay. Bring to bear the arduous training of the schools and the critical atmosphere of the studios. Organize a guild of linen weavers or establish a community of clay workers and of you it shall be said “blessed is the man who has found his work.” Fear not failure, for honest labor does not fail. The words of Emerson are as true now as they ever were: “If a man preach a better sermon, write a better book or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, though he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.”

(Note.—For announcement of other prize winners see page 338)