A GREATER SINCERITY NECESSARY FOR THE TRUE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN ART: BY THE EDITOR

O WHAT extent can society promote art? Not society with a capital, but associated human interest—that combination of civilized intelligence which is most likely to unite into groups for the furtherance of some universal or personal purpose. Nowadays, just as soon as there is popular achievement, there follows the impulse to combine to express approval or to enlarge opportunity. Sooner or later the question is bound to arise as to the advantage of this sort of association, as to the real help a society can be to the individual. As, for instance, take the question of art societies, to what extent does this coördination of interest work for the big advancement of art matters in America? Are we a more developed nation artistically because of our art societies and leagues? Are our significant men in art placed in a better relation to the world and to each other through these associations? Are our students made more capable, more diligent, better craftsmen, more sincere, more useful to a nation needing art? What valuable influence do our societies exert? Are they progressive, moving along lines in harmony with various other channels or national progress?

As a nation we undoubtedly need all the help we can find among ourselves in matters of art. We have been allowed to mature too rapidly, spending too little time in the nursery. We have grown up so swiftly, much of the time self-supporting, that we have had too little leisure for art development in the youthful days, when a nation is poetical, naive, full of simple enthusiasm, unstifiened by many coatings of culture, flexible to impressions from within and without, susceptible to home influences, finding inspiration at the doorstep, living in traditions and singing songs which are legends. We were old before we began to sing or to tell tales in verse or to ornament our daily life because we were intimate with it, and found time for the enrichment of what was best and simple. In other words, America is a city-bred child, without the infancy that roams the woods, dwells with the birds and listens to old folk tale about old hearthstones. We were too busy when we were young, just learning to grow up; we were too anxious, too fretful, striving to manage, just a few of us, the biggest land in the world, to leave our minds at peace for inspiration and open to the influences for beauty that are forever at hand among the primitive people of right leisure.

We had a vast undertaking in taking away a huge country from the art-loving, right-thinking owners, the Indians, and we had this
From the 24th Annual Exhibition of the New York Architectural League.

"THE PROPHETS": DETAIL FROM "THE DIVINE LAW": A FRIEZE FOR THE UNITED STATES CIRCUIT COURT, CHICAGO: BY W. B. VAN INGEN.
From the 24th Annual Exhibition of the New York Architectural League.

MUNICIPAL OFFICE BUILDING: (LOOKING OVER CITY HALL). DESIGNED BY McKIM, MEAD AND WHITE: PRIZE WINNER IN THE CITY'S COMPETITION FOR A PUBLIC BUILDING.
From the 24th Annual Exhibition of the New York Architectural League.

Municipal Office Building: Designed for the New York Competition for a Public Building by Howells and Stokes.
same vast land to protect from others who arbitrarily and wrongfully desired to take it away from us. We were an isolated land and could not ask help from other nations. Other countries were willing to send us rulers, but not to help make it possible for us to rule ourselves. It was up to America in those early days, when most nations begin to establish an art, to give all its time and attention to "watching out," or else be eaten up by many kinds of kingly goblins. And so we grew to be a restless people, nervous, thin-voiced, self-conscious, fearful of criticism, and thus, imitative. Because the impulse to create had atrophied from the manner of our growth, we grew afraid of originality and we turned for art to nations who had grown up in a leisurely way through dozens of centuries, and whose art had found place in all phases of their development. Thus we built foreign houses, bought foreign paintings and sculpture, stole foreign ideas (as absurd for us as a foreign accent) and for years forgot the very purpose of art,—to express for a land the impulse of its own people toward beauty.

And then we roused up a little, some of us a good deal. We said, "We want to do something original; we have grown tired of the Greeks, the French, the English in our art; we will be bold, eccentric, American." In the course of time we progressed beyond the confusion of originality with eccentricity and said, again, "We will hold to good foreign ideals and adapt them to American needs." This for the time seemed better to us than the crude American product. But think what it meant to adapt foreign ideals, which had grown up for centuries out of the desires of the over-civilized, over-cultivated people, to the needs of the practical, hard-working, strenuous American! Still, we did it; we adapted a temple originally designed for Greek worship to the uses of a bank, where the business of a practical nation was carried on. We adapted the palace of an Italian nobleman with Mediaeval interests in hygiene and comfort to the home life of a democratic American family with modern standards of a wholesome rational existence. Yet through it all we still made some progress. And after carrying on our business in Greek temples and living our simple lives in Italian palaces, we moved a step further and began to form ourselves into societies and leagues, and we talked of the advancement of fine arts in America—and at that time we always used a capital F and A. At first, the idea of men and women workers banding themselves together into societies to aid each other in the development of art conditions in America seemed both laudatory and unselfish. "Surely," we said, "this opportunity for advice, criticism, comparison, coöperation
must help us to succeed in elevating the standards of art in our own country." Theoretically the idea was excellent, and in the beginning no doubt much was accomplished by gathering together the work of various artists, to attract public attention, to enable the critic to form a better standard of comparison, to encourage the students and force responsibility upon the older members. All this and more may have been the result of the first banding together of enthusiastic, sincere workers in art. And while the enthusiasm which builds up an organization lasts there is life and valuable achievement; but once a society settles into a groove, with the older members devitalizing mentally as they do physically, the average association becomes little more than a tomb for past successes, and the younger generation must either battle or secede. Thus, one should not grow skeptical of the usefulness of an organized movement for art's sake, but one should forever bear in mind that the value of each society in turn is ephemeral, and that by the time an association becomes old and dignified and famous, its usefulness is usually past, except as it breeds a spirit in the younger generation of branching out into fresh organization and fresh achievement.

And this brings us in America to such large and successful societies as the National Academy and the Architectural League, both organizations of the highest artistic and social standing, admission to which is eagerly sought by the mass of the younger as well as the older men. And yet the outsider, who even if a layman nevertheless thinks about these matters, goes to these exhibits season after season, seeking anxiously for essentially good things from American artists, for an expression of our own understanding of beauty in art and architecture, for paintings and statues and homes and decorations which belong to democratic ideals and sincere ways of living and thinking. In the main one meets disappointment, finding instead of American ideals of simplicity and sincerity much of the former tendency to imitate, to readjust, to flirt with old-world, threadbare, devitalized ideals. We are surrounded with the concrete expression of almost every phase of European frivolity, rather than with the effort to set forth what we are in America by what we do.

It would seem that when a builder builds in this country, as a rule he faces Europe, turning his back squarely on the land he is to build upon and the people he is to house; that when the painter paints he often also seeks to ignore the spirit of his own land, his own temperament and the record his work is to make for his home country, and that instead he strives to secure the French point of view or an English mannerism or a Dutch method. It is not merely that he seeks the subjects for his art abroad, but that he seeks a foreign attitude of
mind toward his art; it is not merely that he usually ignores the beauty of his own land, but that when he comes to it he brings an alien mind.

Yet it is not a separation of the arts of different lands that we crave, for well we know how intimately all the arts of all nations and times are allied, and what a continued story art history is from century to century. There are no breaks, only periods of lesser endeavor. But in recognizing the continuity of art history and the necessity of its complete understanding, the value of the chapter each nation contributes to the general history depends upon its individual honesty, its purpose to be a sincere record of its own times. To make the American chapter of art of significance in such a history we must forget to imitate well and learn to create honestly. Instead of adjusting the thoughts of others to our art expression, we should study to understand completely the fundamental principles of all art; adapting these principles to our own individual expression of beauty rather than to copy the ways in which the artists of other lands have adapted them to their personal expression.

AND thus when we found ourselves (in spite of some very great beauty to be seen at the Twenty-fourth Annual Exhibition of the Architectural League) looking about from wall to wall, in the main dissatisfied, or at least with only occasional flashes of interest, we naturally questioned as to the reason why. What does the exhibit as a whole lack? Why are we more or less indifferent to the well presented work of some three hundred and ninety-one artists, many of them famous? What do we demand in the art expression of America which we do not find on these walls? What element which makes a nation great in art is wanting here? And the more we studied and questioned and thought about it, the more utterly we were convinced that the great lack at this exhibit, as well as at many others in architecture and in painting, was significant originality. The genuine creative spirit seemed to have gone to seed. And reduced to the final analysis, what is this significant creative quality in art beyond sincerity, thinking honestly and expressing the thought you have about the vital conditions which surround you in the most individual way which the technique of your art will permit? In still simpler language, it is just being honest with yourself, with your country, with your art. It is not a question of whether one thinks as a poet or as a realist; it is only essential that the way should be inevitable to yourself. Absolute honesty in art means that you are using every quality which you possess to the utmost advantage,—mind, brain, emotions,—that you are relating all of these
things to the life which you wish to express, that you say only what you think, whether it is greater or smaller than other people’s thought, and that you say it exclusively in your own way.

How much of this sort of truth telling was there at the recent exhibition at the Architectural League? Some, of course. In the mural decorations, “The Divine Law,” by W. B. Van Ingen; in the pediment by Karl Bitter, in the New York municipal building designed by Howells & Stokes, scattered about in the domestic architecture of such men as Grosvenor Atterbury, Hunt & Grey, Wilson Eyre, Stephenson & Wheeler, Albro & Lindeberg, Squires & Wynkoop, Price & King, Reed & Stem, Donn Barber, Cass Gilbert (whose stations for the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railway are a rare expression of architectural achievement for their own land), in the work of such a sculptor as Janet Scudder, and in the craftsmanship of such a man as Albert Herter. Here indeed was the spirit of true art to be found, but perhaps you may have noticed that it was not taking prizes or winning spectacular approval or in any way dominating the exhibition. As a whole, the work was purely imitative. It was born in Greece, or in that ante-chamber to Greece, the Beaux Arts of Paris. It lacked significance, purpose, individuality and any sort of relation to American conditions, and because lacking these essentials it was devoid of honesty, however beautiful or apparently successful. Such an exhibition as a whole means nothing to us in the progress of our art, nothing in the development of our artists, nothing, less than nothing, in establishing a standard for the students who are to build and decorate for us in the years to come. It would have been better, infinitely more significant, if half the wall space could have been given up to the more practical building industries, where art plays a part and sincerity is essential.

WHAT if we could have one room reserved for exhibits in wood finishes, with all our beautiful inexpensive American woods in the various interesting simple finishes of which they are susceptible; finishes which seem to reveal the utmost rich beauty of wood that has been practically ignored up to the present time? Or what about a collection of the many American leathers, stained and treated for the utmost quality of beauty and durability; or a display of wood carving showing in what interesting ways modern wood carving could be related to American houses and interior decoration? Why not have allowed space with good lights for American stained glass exhibits? It is well known that the modern American stained glass is the most interesting and significant of all the work of this description of the present century. Why is it a more commercial

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proposition than the window in which the glass is placed? Or we
might have had a corner given up to metal work or pottery or rugs,—
all adapted to the American homes and ways of living. What a help
such exhibits would be to the house builders, and what more appro-
priate than that the best we are doing in architecture and house
adornment should find place together in our exhibition rooms?

"Commercializing art societies," you say. Not one bit more
than we have already commercialized them, and this without any
idea of relating use to beauty. A well designed copper electric fitting,
a rug of Indian pattern in rich hues, a fireplace in American tiles,
humorous and decorative, pottery out of our own clay and related
to our own woods and color schemes, why are these essentially beau-
tiful and American products any more commercial than designs for
houses or railways or stations or churches? Who has taken upon
himself to decide that a front porch is art and a well designed rug
commercial, that a doorway springs from imagination and a metal
fireplace is a vulgar expression of industrialism? As a matter of
fact, we have become utterly confused in our feeling that there is
need for an arbitrary division of the arts, and our scorn for the word
industrial is just the vulgarity of a nervous, new nation who, we feel
confident, will grow in her capacity to honor work as she grows in
wisdom and strength and courage.

Really, what we need overwhelmingly here in America is to do
away with all this fussing about the place of art and the position of
our societies, and work fearlessly in whatever line we can best make
good to our country; studying the needs of our people, expressing the
life of the people, and expressing it well because we know it well.
Let us be original because we dare to be natural, and natural because
we have learned to be sincere. For, as we have already said, sin-
cerity is what American art has most lacked, and fortunately for us as a
country we are at last waking up to the fact that we cannot build up
for ourselves an art that does not rest on an honest foundation. We
have got to learn to believe in ourselves and express what we believe
in order to paint or build or model a lasting art in America. Some
of our workers have already found this out, and those are the people
whose work we stop to look at as we stroll indifferently past the walls
of our leagues and societies, those are the men who have a spiritual
patriotism, who know their own land, who achieve for it and through
it, and it is such men as these who will give us our permanent architec-
ture, the right decoration for public buildings, who will paint and
model an art that will outlive the conditions they represent. And
best of all, they will win for us as a nation respect and honor for our
achievement.