NATURE AS THE MASTER BUILDER OF CHARACTER

This is the season of the year when, as John Muir says, “Nature seems to be holding a convention.” What indeed could any existence, present or future, hold more serene, yet more intoxicating, than life in the country, where Nature has been adjusted to man’s needs and comforts, and where man has learned that the biggest lessons in life, the greatest opportunity for the development of character, are near the earth; for there honesty is the price of a living and the fakir himself is the sole sufferer from his trickery. Truly from the moment you smell the earth under the plow your compact of honesty with Nature begins. You play fair or Nature revenges herself. For a poor seed she gives you a weaking plant; for soil neglected and unenriched she offers you the just return in straggling crops. If your furrows are choked with weeds your own vegetables have no room to grow and develop, and there is no drink or food for the corn and peas. There is only justice down in the Earth, no sentiment, no caniness, no long-suffering patience, only justice; “as ye sow, so shall ye reap.” You cannot give Nature decoy seeds and fool her into a rich harvest; you cannot withhold the proper nourishment and get the return you are seeking. And again, having received good crops in proportion to honest labor, your sales can be only of the best from your fields. There is no second-rate dealing possible, no market for inferior produce. Your reputation is made by your own fine standards. For your own sake you can’t pretend. All along the line there is a demand for honest dealing. And the man who deals honestly in business is establishing an honest point of view toward life.

Yet we do not wish to be misunderstood as making a plea for country life only, as condemning all metropolitan existence; for our cities have, in our present scheme of civilization, become the market-places of the country, necessary to our growth as a nation, and to our livelihood as individuals. The farmer needs Broadway, just as Broadway needs the farmer. In reality they are links of one chain, and the real tragedy is not in the whirl of Broadway or the sometime isolation of the farm, but that any life other than business should be spent within city walls; especially that all growing life, all youth at least, should not be lived near Nature, knowing her beauty, learning her honesty. For our characters are builded not so much from our intentions as through our environment. We learn from habit rather than precept, and looking at the question fairly, forgetting all the charm and fascination of some phases of metropolitan existence, just what chance is there for the growing boy and girl to understand the big vital fundamental realities of life except through their
own experience lived close to life itself? Where else can they learn of the real relation of existence to toil, of the independence which is found in meeting the whimsical moods of Nature, of the bearing of vicissitudes, of our adjustment to conditions not yet adapted to anaemic civilization? How shall our children grow in physical and moral fiber without a knowledge of the problems Nature offers them, through the resistance and overcoming of which they gain strength and insight? What greater teacher of morality can our youth find than, as has already been said, Nature herself, who meets courage and honesty halfway, and punishes unscrupulous dealings with stern impartiality? What more serene, more adequate standard can a child have to live by than this one which must be met daily in the cultivating of the soil, and what greater reward than the lavishness of Nature when she opens up her heart in response to human sincerity and intelligence?

And as one ponders on these questions one wonders what could be better for us and our children than a return to the land, than a purpose to build our homes out on the hillsides and plant pleasant gardens about them, to build homes adapted to the slope of the land and the trees on the land, and adjusted to the needs and purposes of the lives we intend to live in them. If we need the city in the scheme of our existence we can go to it daily or weekly, but we need not establish our lives in the prison walls of a few rooms without chance to work in our gardens, rest in sight of the sunset, sleep out on our porches in sweet night air and watch the coming of the spring and feel the exhilaration of winter. This much of Nature we feel entitled to, regardless of some of the difficulties to be overcome.

Naturally, we remember the stories of suburban living, with accounts of acres of ugly empty lots, cheap uncomfortable houses, insufficient heat, bad plumbing, inconvenient house arrangement, and all more or less true, and we recall also the wail of the housekeeper on the servant question. And we realize that American suburban life in the past has been sadly marred by the real estate man heedless of beauty, by the builder heedless of comfort, by the housewife heedless of her opportunity to create pleasant original home conditions by which she could overcome the problems of rural living, developing through her achievement and becoming a part of the progress which is inevitable in future country life in America. For wherever there are great problems, there are also great opportunities for growth, whether the problem is learning to adjust oneself to Nature's honest simple ways, learning to create the right sort of home for oneself and family, or learning to interpret Nature, until her ways seem beautiful, wise and instructive.

Whatever we do not understand presents problems to us. We are afraid of strange lands; we are uncertain with alien folk. Over the hills and fields of our own country we walk with confidence. We know her ways and trust her. The land that a lad has known intimately he returns to at any period of his life with joyous confidence, as one seeking a trusty friend. But what of those of us who have been barred when little from knowledge and companionship with all the sweet friendliness of Nature, with what hesitation and nervousness we return; we do not know how to interpret her message, how to get the best good from her health-giving winds, where to find our food, how to build our shelter. Her book is open to us, but we have forgotten or never learned to read her message. But for our own sake, and lest our children should repeat our failures, we cannot go back too soon and study with her and work with her, and discover her bounteousness and become one with her with all possible courage and confidence and haste. Find the right hill slope or meadow land, think about the right way of getting a home that
belongs thereon, build according to your
taste and money, and furnish the home
with due regard to the utmost beauty and
the least possible work. Plan to live there
every possible hour, let your children
begin now to live there, let them help
build the house they are to live in and to
plant the land they are to live from. Let
them all unconsciously study Nature and
grow wise and happy and strong and
honest. And so far as possible you your-
self do what they are doing, win back
Nature’s confidence and become one with
her for your own sake and the sake of the
world’s growth.

NOTES

ALTHOUGH the exhibitions of for-
egn pictures from Spain and Ger-
mnany formed the three most widely
advertised climaxes of the New
York art season, yet, to those who fol-
lowed the galleries closely, the remarkable
execution and originality of the work ex-
hibited by American artists has been the
really significant feature in one of the
most brilliant art seasons that New York
has ever known. It is also a matter of
note that America is slowly warming to
a keener appreciation of art and of the
genius of its native artists.

At present, although we have been slow
in recognizing the fact, we can claim for
our landscape men the leading place in
the world in that branch of art. England
and Italy are doing very little in any line
of painting; Germany is notoriously weak
on landscape work; the French schools
have become riotously impressionistic, and
the landscape work of Spain has been
largely imitative rather than original.
American artists alone seem to have re-
tained a healthy respect for Nature which
enables them to represent all her moods as
they really pass without twisting them into
meanings symbolic of their own emotions.
It will be profitable and encouraging to
run through in brief review what the
leading galleries have been offering this
past season in their exhibitions of Ameri-
can artists.

The Macbeth Gallery opened November
tenth with an exhibition of paintings by
Howard Pyle, one of the strongest and
ablest of American decorative painters.
Many of the subjects were familiar, hav-
ing been reproduced in the magazines of
the preceding year. The originals showed
even more clearly Mr. Pyle’s color sense
and feeling for the dramatic. This exhibit
was followed by the paintings of Charles
Melville Dewey. Mr. Dewey is one of the
most satisfactory interpreters of American
landscape. There is always a luminous,
poetic quality in his work, no matter
whether the scheme of color he uses be the
delicate greens of his “Dawn” or the deep
rich browns of “Romney Marshes.”

The exhibition that followed this was a
revelation to those who had not been fol-
lowing the development of our sculptors.
The bronzes shown were carefully selected
chiefly from the works of the younger ar-
istis. Abastenia Eberle, Janet Scudder,
and Arthur Putnam contributed some of
the most interesting work.

Forty selected paintings by American
artists marked the next important date at
Macbeth’s. Nearly half the work was
from the hands of the newer and less es-
established artists. Through Mr. Macbeth’s
sincere appreciation and insight we were
introduced, some of us for the first time, to
the work of Albert P. Lucas and his unus-
ual abilities as a colorist. Mr. Tack, of
the older artists, had a very successful
figure piece called “The Dance.” The
gallery was next filled with the breezy,
vigorous landscapes of Henry W. Ranger.
The effect of Mr. Ranger’s type of work
and splendid composition at the American
Exhibit in London this summer is much
anticipated by the lovers of art here.

Four seasons ago no one knew much
about Paul Dougherty. He is apparently
one of those who come upon the stage only
to take the center. Such a place this artist