THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA: WORK OR PLAY? BY ERNEST A. BATCHELDER

It is doubtless a matter of common knowledge that the term Arts and Crafts was coined by William Morris and his associates in London some twenty or more years ago for the immediate purpose of defining the nature of an exhibition that differed in one essential point from the conventional art exhibitions offered by the Royal Academy and similar institutions, which for many years had fostered the idea that the practice of art was the exclusive function of painters and sculptors. The unique feature of this exhibition was to be found in the fact that it sought to eliminate distinctions in art and furnish an opportunity for the display of work in wood, leather, glass, metal,—in fact, any material adapted to artistic expression. The term Arts and Crafts as applied to this exhibition stood boldly for three things: It was a protest against the narrow and commonly accepted definition of art; it was a protest against inutilities, the ugliness, the sham and pretense of a great portion of the English industrial product of that day; it was a protest against the deplorable industrial conditions which that product represented. To put the matter into a positive statement,—it sought to demonstrate the value of art combined with honest workmanship when applied to useful service; while it deplored the ugliness of the industrial product, it sought, not to withdraw art from it, but to bring art to it under the belief that an enduring basis for the appreciation of art must be established in the home rather than in the picture gallery; it sought to make manifest the dignity of labor and the individuality of the worker. On the strength of the ideals of which this exhibition was a concrete expression was formed the first society of arts and crafts.

A seed from this parent tree fell upon American soil; it flourished, and has spread into a growth of remarkable proportions. There is scarcely a city or town in the land that is without a society of arts and crafts with more or less clearly defined ideals. The interest and enthusiasm have been widespread; of this there is ample evidence, but does this movement rest upon a secure basis of real worth and true understanding? Is present enthusiasm any gauge to future stability?

The seed fell upon fertile soil, long fallow. We are undergoing a period of reaction along many lines. We have been, and are now, experiencing an awakening of our moral and political conscience. On all sides one hears a persistent demand for civic beauty, for a
more sane, more vital expression in architecture, for furniture that shall be simple and well made. Away with unsightly billboards! Down with the hideous telephone poles! Give us parks and playgrounds! These are all familiar cries. And as another indication of this reaction for better things has come the arts and crafts movement.

To speak of anything as a "movement" naturally leads one to inquire: To what end is it moving? For what purpose are its many units working? We may properly assume for the terms arts and crafts, and, by the same token, for the societies organized under that term, the clearly defined aim adopted by those responsible for the beginning of the movement. In fact, the term is its own definition,—art applied to craft, thoughtful design expressed through good workmanship. With this idea in mind it is pertinent to ask just where many of our societies stand in relation to this movement. To make it lasting it needs a stable market, a just appreciation of standards, an insistent demand for good things that will enable men and women to earn a decent living without surrendering their individual initiative. What are we doing to strengthen the convictions of the consumer, to give incentive to the mind and hand of the producer?

It is undeniable that many busy, thinking men and women in America assert, in words that admit of no misinterpretation, a belief that this movement is a fabric of unrealized expectations, that the term arts and crafts is in danger of becoming a synonym for amateurish incompetence; that few of its workers possess either real ability in design or skill in technique; that the larger portion of our product rests upon a basis of false values, and, to complete this direful toll of pessimism, that the ideals of the movement are out of touch with modern life and thought.

It must be admitted that such criticism as the above is not without provocation. For, lo! these many days we have been casting stones at machinery and machine-made goods, have been decrying the industrial products and methods about us. We have planted over our heads a banner inscribed with a term that would seem to indicate that our wares are not of the common sort. And it may be that we are living in glass houses. It is quite proper that we should be asked to bring our goods out into the open market-place, far from the hypnotism of studio teas, and leave them to demonstrate their own superior merits. It is true that the Arts and Crafts movement was started as a protest against the monotony of machine-made things and the dreary level of mediocrity to be found in the English product.
of a generation past; but protest without remedial action is of little avail. From small beginnings one may find today in England a comprehensive system of industrial art training extending its influence into all the skilled crafts of the land. Moreover, it must be remembered that the work of William Morris, who probably contributed more than any single individual to the stability of the "protest," furnished very tangible evidence of the value of his precepts. The books produced at the Kelmscott Press are displayed in the British Museum close beside the work of the master printers in the palmy days of the craft, and they lose nothing by comparison. The stained glass, tapestries, carpets and chintzes that came from the Merton shops represented splendid achievements in the combination of good design and thorough workmanship. They also stood the test which Morris applied to industrial work; they gave pleasure, solid, enduring pleasure, to those who made them as well as to those who purchased them.

The justice of the criticism that our work is amateurish and our workers incompetent depends largely upon the point of view of the critic. No doubt many of us in America are playing at arts and crafts. We take a few lessons in an art school, and hasten forth to set up shops of our own, produce wares to sell, and teach others the fascinating pastime of "expressing" themselves in hammer-tracked copper, tooled leather or pottery. In the days when the Mediaeval craftsmen plied their trades, seven years of apprenticeship, followed generally by another period as a journeyman worker, were necessary before a man was privileged to call himself a master, hang out a shingle and teach others the details of his craft. But we of a more enlightened age do not hesitate to call ourselves bookbinders, metal craftsmen, potters, jewelers or what not, on the strength of a few simple processes hastily acquired. We hint mysteriously of shop secrets, seek to impress the innocent visitor with our accomplishments and thereby bolster up the price of immature workmanship. In such practice of the arts and crafts the skeptic finds a weak spot in our armor and gleefully prods it.

On the other hand the work of the genuine amateur holds forth much of promise. From the ranks of the amateurs come many who are tempted beyond mere busy work for idle hands, who develop persistence and staying qualities, who come to realize that the study of design is quite as serious and arduous a matter as the study of music or medicine and who learn through their own efforts to appreciate a good thoughtful piece of craftsmanship, and thus acquire a real appreciation of relative values in productive work.
ARTS AND CRAFTS IN AMERICA

That much of the product of the arts and crafts rests upon a market of false values is a just criticism. Quantities of things are being sold or are offered for sale at prices far in excess of any substantial merit represented in the design or execution. To justify a price in excess of commercial work a product must stand unmistakably for two things. It must possess unusual merit in design; it must possess in its execution qualities that stamp it in every way superior in workmanship and finish to similar things that may be purchased in the stores. A piece of work that is truly beautiful and distinctive in design, thoroughly and earnestly made, painstaking to its last detail, is entitled to a higher price than a thoughtless, commonplace, mechanically made article. But the fact that an article is made by hand does not necessarily reflect to its credit. That it should command a higher price for no other reason than that it is hand-made is absurd; it may be that the worker has misspent time in trying to do by hand many things which may be quite as well accomplished through other processes. We have long made a virtue of the “little irregularities,” the “artistic accidents” of hand work. Such things may very readily become an affectation, a convenient excuse for unskilled technique, at the hands of a worker of immature practice and experience. There is neither art nor craft in a battered piece of copper, a lamp shade it may be, picturesquely colored with spots of green from an acid bath. Art demands sincerity of purpose; craft demands skilled workmanship. The irregularities or “accidents” in the work of a master craftsman are of the kind that come unsought, that he cannot help, that he seeks diligently to overcome. The present strength of the arts and crafts movement is to be found in the work of a comparatively few who are earnestly striving day and night through study and practice to improve the standards of their work in design and execution, who see clearly the difficulties ahead, the necessity of putting into their product the qualities that count for true worth. When we talk about this movement as a real, live issue it must be on the basis of the relation which it bears to industrial activity, to the bread and butter problems of life. To discuss it on any other basis is to deny it a serious part in modern life and work and regulate it to the narrow confines of a studio pastime.

TO CRITICIZE the movement as being out of touch with modern thought is to misinterpret its best ideals. It seeks to bring a better standard to industrial work, establish a permanent demand for better things, and furnish an adequate livelihood for those who are competent to give beauty to hand work. It does not necessarily antagonize machinery, nor does it hope to achieve its ends through
a reversion to primitive methods. The glaring inferiority of the present average commercial product when compared with, for example, the work of the Mediæval craftsmen, needs no comment. Any movement which aims to encourage an improvement of this product deserves intelligent support and action. It might be well to devote some of the time and money spent in lobbying for protection against the “pauper labor” of Europe to the training of our own workmen in the skilled crafts that we might make our goods more beautiful, hence more to be desired. Machinery is not in itself an evil; we need more of it. Frankly, we have to believe that if the Mediæval craftsmen could return to the world they would welcome machinery as a means of tiding them over much of the drudgery of their work,—and there is still a vast amount of drudgery in the world for machinery to overcome, innumerable sweatshops for it to clean out and turn men and women back to the land. There are men in the “Black Country” of England still forging nails and cutting files by hand. The evil of machinery is largely a question of whether machinery shall use men or men shall use machinery. There are certain skilled trades such as cabinetmaking, gold and silversmithing, the book trades, etc., which have always in the past offered an opportunity for individual thought and initiative, for a young man to learn a trade, not merely some trivial part of a trade. To the extent that the invasion of machinery into these trades has undermined the independent manhood of the skilled artisan and left him as an unthinking hired “hand” to feed raw material into a hopper, it is indeed an evil, one to be combatted. The dignity of labor is of the mind and heart, not of the hand alone. When a man is robbed of the last vestige of human interest in the work that necessity compels him to do for a living, it is time to scan the credentials of our commercial standards. It is not remarkable that protection is needed for the product of a carpet mill employing two thousand “hands” but not more than a dozen heads, and not a single designer of carpets among them. The mill bids on designs good, bad and indifferent, mostly bad, just as a contractor bids on the construction of a pipe line. And the “hands,” with few exceptions, could be replaced on a month’s notice with others equally efficient.

The surest way to turn an evil stream from its course is to dig another channel for it through educational work. If the shops and factories deny a young man a chance to learn a trade, can furnish him with no standards of excellence in design or workmanship, it would seem to be within the province of our educational institutions to supplement the shops with schools of industrial art training where all that is best in the elements that have contributed to give dignity
and beauty to a trade in the past may be fostered and strengthened. Our art schools as now organized with arts and crafts studios annexed, can do little more than bite pieces from the edges of the real problem. Their traditions have too long been of another sort to enable them to approach the question of industrial training with any sympathetic understanding. They cannot furnish either the practice or the experience that will draw men from the trades to their doors, or that will place the craftswoman of the future squarely on his feet and enable him to meet fairly the competition about him.

Education, to bear fruit, must extend to the consumer as well as to the producer. In our factories is an army of men and women engaged in the production of inutilities, or in filling the demand due to the appalling waste and extravagance of modern life. Many of the things we buy are of an impersonal nature, keyed to some passing fad or fashion. They gave no one pleasure in making; nor does their possession give pleasure to anyone. Things are broken or consigned to the scrap-heap without a pang of regret; there are more at the store. When purchases are made with the thought of permanent possession rather than of temporary convenience,—a few good pieces of furniture, a few rugs, a few thoughtfully chosen ornaments and pictures,—why then the best ideals of the arts and crafts movement will be realized; for such things cannot be fed into a machine by unskilled operatives. Fewer things carefully made will give employment to quite as many workers as a vast quantity of things thoughtlessly and carelessly made.

This question of industrial art education, and the many avenues for discussion which it opens, is a matter of paramount importance. It is one of the few big questions demanding intelligent and concentrated action; it is right next to the bony structure of our industrial life. Our societies of arts and crafts might demonstrate their usefulness, as some have already, by bringing definite influence and action to bear upon this problem.