THE CRAFT WORK ON THE “HILL OF FAIRIES”:
BY HANNA ASTRUP LARSEN

On the border of the New York upland, near a steep crag falling into the Hudson River is an insignificant little frame house that served as the studio of George Inness when he was creating an American school of painting. Scarcely a stone’s throw farther up the road lies one of the youngest artist colonies of the country, Elverhøj, where a group of earnest workers are striving to develop an American school of decorative art.

In Danish fairy lore, Elverhøj is the hill of fairies, where misty shapes dance in the moonlight, luring mortals to the spot beneath which hidden treasures are buried. The name was given the colony by its founders, Mr. A. H. Andersen and Mr. Johannes Morton, two of the citizens of foreign birth who are enriching American life with the best traditions of the land of their origin. The founders believe it to be the duty of every painter and sculptor to give of his artistic power in the service of beautifying the surroundings of everyday life. The problems of line and color that meet the designer of a tapestry or a piece of jewelry are essentially the same, it is claimed, as those that have to be conquered in the execution of a picture or a statue, and the designer therefore needs the same training as the creative artist. On the other hand, the artist, by grappling with these problems in the harder medium, will gain a sense of structure and composition which will give him an added strength when he returns to the more imaginative forms of art. Mr. Andersen and Mr. Morton are both painters, who are also masters of the silversmith’s craft, and they are proud that not only the design but every detail, from the cutting of the silver sheet to the last delicate modelling of the finished article, is the work of their hands.

The motto of the colony is to “live close to nature for inspiration,” “to cultivate the essential faculties for great work in quiet surroundings and in intimate association with the purest sources of inspiration.” Mr. Andersen found the spot that seemed suited to his purpose at Milton-on-the-Hudson in an old colonial mansion said to be a hundred and fifty years old. The veranda looks out upon a terrace, and beyond it is the broad, quiet stream of the Hudson ruffled by the tides that sweep in from the Atlantic. The old-fashioned rooms give a grateful sense of space and quiet, and their possibilities have been developed by the artists themselves, for although their ideal of a simple
life does not demand that every man should be his own carpenter and stonemason, they are proud of being able to exchange the painter's brush and the etcher's needle for the hammer and the trowel if need be.

The colony has acquired thirty acres of land stretching back from the edge of the river slope, and the founders hope that it will be the site, in years to come, of permanent homes for the workers who will be associated with them. House-tents are pitched on the grounds for the pupils in the summer courses, and an old barn has been rebuilt to form a painters' studio with good lighting facilities and with space enough for occasional social gatherings. Near the main building, capping a little knoll, Mr. Ralph Pearson has constructed a picturesque little house where he practises the etcher's art and gives lessons to his classes.

The school of painting, which last year was under the charge of Mr. David Ericson, has several pupils of promise. They portray the characteristic American land-

scape of the region, the gently swelling hills and the glory of the maple and sumac in autumn, or the lights of Poughkeepsie softly glimmering across the expanse of moonlit water, where the river steamers glide like colossal glow-worms. The locality is rich in vegetation, dark, gaunt cedars and white trunks of sycamores mingling with the usual deciduous trees of these latitudes. The traces of human labor in the old houses and roads and the stone fences give that touch of intimate suggestiveness which we find nowhere except in the Atlantic States.

The eight permanent members of the colony are all men and women from the Middle West. Mr. Ralph Pearson is the vice-president of the Chicago Society of Etchers and some of his best work is a glorifying of the labor that has built the western city. Mr. Andersen studied in the Chicago Art Institute and was for a time associated with Mr. Morton in work in Racine, Wisconsin. The two are Danes by
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...den or Gerhard Munthe and Thorolf Holmboe in Norway have drawn designs for tapestries, which are as notable as their paintings. In Denmark the national art of pottery has flowered in the Royal Copenhagen porcelain, to which the best artists of the country furnish the designs.

We have nothing exactly corresponding to this in America; there is no peasant art that can be transplanted in richer forms to the homes of the wealthy. The creation of an American decorative art must therefore be a conscious effort to collect the best that has been produced by other nations and weld them into an organic union.

With this in view, the artists of Elverhøj are developing an individual style in gold and silver work. They have not only studied their art in their native Scandinavia, but have pursued the knowledge of it in the dingy streets of Prague and Vienna, where the old wizards of exquisitely wrought jewelry still are found and their success is attested by the fact that they have won distinction even in Austria and Belgium. Scandinavian traditions are followed in the liberal use of silver, which, it is thought, gives a softer glow than gold and is capable of being more subtly modelled. Where gold is used in order to give a high light or a richer glow it is usually treated to give it a mellow color. The extremely simple, massive ornaments suitable to the tall, full-bosomed women of the North have been modified to suit the less robust beauty of the American woman, but their delicacy has not been carried to that point of over-elaboration which we see in the Orient. Spring flowers of New York have been used for the brooches with leaves of silver and freshwater pearls from the Mississippi for buds. The glowing California tourmaline is given a dignified setting of oak leaves, while the dandelion and golden rod have been conventionalized to form other pretty designs. The abalone shell of the Pacific Coast is the basis of a delicately wrought lavaliere, in which the silver...
frame carries out the suggestive lines of the sea shell. In every case the artist seeks to develop American materials and designs founded on American flora.

In the classes in weaving Norwegian tapestry has been studied. Though less known in this country than the French it has the advantage of being simpler and quicker of execution. Moreover, the fine, firm finish, the subdued richness of coloring obtained through the use of vegetable dyes, and the good, simple patterns combine to give it a high degree of uniform excellence. Bookbinding is another craft practised at the Elverhøj colony, and pottery is sometimes done in connection with the metal work for various household articles.

Among the products of the Elverhøj workers there are none that proclaim their handmade origin merely by lack of finish. There is none of that affectation of crudity which has sometimes followed the reaction against the machine made in household furnishings—when the gold-embroidered onyx table gave place to one of rough-hewn logs even more inappropriate to a modern living-room. We still see the effects of this movement in the metal dishes cast to imitate hammering and in the rectangular furniture guiltless of a single conciliatory line. The newer principles of household decoration take cognizance of the fact that vile construction cannot be hidden by an elaborate finish, but they also realize that a true design deserves a beautiful execution. Harshness is no longer confounded with simplicity nor slovenliness with artistic feeling.

The Elverhøj artists are returning to the spirit of the master craftsmen of olden times, who combined artistic sense with industrial excellence, and who refined their work to the highest point compatible with the retention of the personal touch. While they appreciate the value of the manual training gained by the practise of sloyd in the schools, they believe the time is now ripe for the separation of this more mechanical skill from the finer kinds of handiwork. Their ideal is that of the artist who applies all his genius and all the power gained in years of training to the construction of an ornament or a piece of household furnishing, thereby lifting it to the level of an art.

Thus this colony of men and women are working under ideal conditions. They obtain the stimulating companionship of other art students such as is generally obtained only by trips to France or Italy, and in a region rich in material from which they may make careful studies and gain inspiration for design.

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