MUNICIPAL ART.

IN the midst of conditions which cry aloud for betterment in all that pertains to a city's life, what place can there be for a consideration of art? Very forcibly does this idea present itself to those familiar with the aspects of existence in that portion of a great city where the results of neglect and bad management on the part of the public are most apparent, and the need for improvement most pressing. It would seem, as one of our apostles of art for the people, Miss Starr, of Hull House, suggests, when looking at a related question from the same side, that we "should devote every energy to the 'purification of the nation's heart and the chastisement of its life.'" Yet, in so far as municipal art has to do with that betterment, so imperatively demanded, we must deem it worthy of consideration. And that it has much to do with such betterment no one who knows the history of art can fail to recognize.

Public art is as old as the pyramids; and in any broad survey of the past its varied forms will be seen to take pyramidal proportions. In Egypt they stand boldly forth, revealing more of the inner life of the people than any hieroglyphs have ever done. Turn the gaze toward ancient Babylon, and behold its hanging gardens! In Greece see how this art towers ever above the mount of the gods. Italy has height after height of art production, reaching in real significance far above all work of battle, conquest, and kingly rule. In the cities of northern and western Europe the public works are so great that these cities can never be accused of being "great through largeness only." It is only in our own day and spot of the earth that civic art dwindles to nothingness, and art has become, as someone describes it, "a frivolous art for the gilded classes, without destiny, without aim, subject to the caprice of speculation and fashion, scattered by chance in private salons." All great art, it seems generally agreed, is, or has been, distinctively an art of cities. But, someone will say, this art has been the work of

tyrants, kings, monks, aristocrats—not of the people. Is this the case in any real sense? Whose, let us ask ourselves, was the creative thought that worked out the wonderful design and each marvelous feature of temple and cathedral, mausoleum and monument, statue, arch, and aqueduct? Whose money contributed largely to the making of these? And whose was the greatest pleasure and pride in them? William Morris suggests whose this art in reality was when he says: "History (so-called) has remembered the kings and warriors because they destroyed; art has remembered the people because they created." And Miss Starr shows how art has grown: "If art has reached higher than the common life, it has done so only by rising through it, never by springing up outside and apart from it." The classic story of the making of the statue of Pallas Athene—how, when the people were asked whether it should be of bronze and silver or ivory and gold, they cried with one voice, "Ivory and gold"—shows whose was the art in Athens; and what was so striking a feature of the life there was true to a great degree in many less democratic times and places.

Do we need to have stated in specific terms what such art is good for? What to those who produce it, and what to all who have shared its beauty? Can it be summed up in words what to the peoples of the past has been the embodying and the embodiment, in forms of beauty, of some of their highest hopes, joys, and aspirations? That the expression and the interpretation of such expression of the inner life shown through these art-forms constituted much of the real living of these people, who can doubt? Then what has all of this been to the rest of the world? The mind cannot form a picture of the earth without the beauty, aside from the utility, of these creations of man. The charm of foreign travel, and the general satisfaction and enjoyment of life—can we think how different these would be without such beauty and our varied inheritances from it? Then, besides the delight, how much of what is of value in our knowledge of a people is found in the manifestations of their real life and their ideal conceptions through sculpture, architecture, painting, music, even leaving out poetry and eloquence; and what has been

enduring in these has been an expression of the life of the people. So much a part of our consciousness has this beauty become, this beauty and its revelations, that we cannot in our thought divest the world of it.

Someone has truly said that the question whether we shall have art in education is a question whether we shall be barbarian or civilized. And art in education means more than talks in the schools of things not seen; more than pictures, as essential as books; more than anything connected with day school or art school. It means the appeal of beauty, whether consciously or unconsciously felt, and the expression of beauty, since all true education comes both from the influence of environment and from activity of the self, in the everyday surroundings and work; without as well as within the school; for adult as well as for child. "The school," says George Kriehn, one of our leading workers for municipal art, "is only the beginning of that greater education which begins when school ends"—he would better have said, begins with existence—"and ends only with life itself." It is unquestionably true, as someone says, that "only by re-creation of the sources of art can it be restored as a living force." But how can the sources of art within the mind and soul of man be re-created? We know, certainly, some things which do not tend to such development—filth, disorder, ugliness. Man needs to have restored to him his birthright of beauty, of which he, as an inhabitant of this fine old earth of ours, should never have been dispossessed. "Humanity has a feeling soul," is a truth we should do well not to forget in the matter of education of young and old. Culture involves more than the mere getting of knowledge. Back of this truth is a philosophy which, correcting our worship of the intellect, will make us recognize art as one of the greatest sources accessible to man of the purification of the emotions, and of stimulation and guidance of the will. Art in its message to us, and as expression, holds much of the joy and solace of the elevation and inspiration of life. This surely for art were excuse enough for being and for becoming a necessity of life and education; "unless," to quote Morris again, "the progress

of civilization is to be as causeless as the turning of a wheel that makes nothing." For, what is civilization good for if its end is not character, if it aims not at a destiny for man higher than that to which the satisfaction of his animal desires, or of his mere love of acquisition, whether material or intellectual, will lift him? Art in its broad, its true sense, including all production which involves creative thought and beauty, if a rough-hewn definition may be ventured, should become a positive necessity of life and work. It is not the end of education to make people content with whatever costs the least effort, to cultivate what Lassalle calls "the cursed habit of not wanting anything." It is to make us all want the things really worth having, and to enable us to get them through activity, that is itself life and joy to us; "if we are to live as nature meant us to, that is, unless we are content to be less than men." The second function of art, its influence in education, in life, in civilization, as expression through some part of the everyday work of man, involves a great change in our industrial, as well as our strictly educational, system. This, however, does not do away with the fact that, if beauty be provided *for* the people by the public, it may immeasurably hasten the time when we may have an art *by* the people, ultimately, truly, an art *of* the people.

Art as a factor in education, to the specific end of citizenship, is surely a matter with which the public should be concerned. What may be the effect of a great public work of art is suggested by that often referred to, of Michael Angelo's David, its effect upon every citizen and every citizen-to-be of Florence, representing, as it did, the release of the city from the tyranny of Cesare Borgia, a grandly impressive symbol of the love of, and the struggle for, political freedom. Here in America, particularly needed because of our vast foreign population, how great may be the effect of this symbolic, impressive way of teaching some of the great facts of our land, its institutions, and its men!

With all of this truth before us, of the great value of art as a factor in education of young and old, and of the pleasure of

living, still the question forces itself into our minds how it may, or by any possibility *can*, as a development from existing conditions, be made to take any real hold upon the life of the people in general. With our present squalor and vulgarity in the surroundings of the poor, and luxury and—shall we say with others?—vulgarity in those of many of the rich, any vital growth would seem well-nigh hopeless. Who can conceive of art taking root in the pain and ugliness of the lives of many people in our great cities? They scarcely have a glimmering of what real beauty and harmony are. Then we meet the discouraging fact that, owing to one cause or another, the rampant sway of the so-called practical, of so-called utility, of machine methods of production, *man-machine* and others, so large a number of the better-educated, better-cultured, “lack part of the human senses,” and are “anti-artistic.”

Yet, let us consider, what if some of the lost beauty, or even decency, of the earth be found again? What if we should have a city free from smoke and filth; with well-made streets; with houses at least not ugly and dilapidated; with no hideous posters, and with trees abounding on every hand? Surely these conditions would at least prepare a soil in which conceptions of beauty could grow. Then if, further, public buildings, squares, river banks, bridges, be made genuinely beautiful; and if the works of art be so widely distributed that every inhabitant of a city shall find at least one within his daily range, can anyone doubt that all must be educated to some degree; that higher standards of beauty—in man’s productions, and conduct as well—will become general; that the effect will be seen in the improvement of private dwellings, and their surroundings, and all they contain; and—what is far more important, that of which the first is a means to an end—that with the ugliness will depart much of the pain and the gloom in the lives of the one class, and the selfishness and insipidity in the lives of the others?

There is another argument for civic art—its pecuniary value; and, doubtless, this will prove a stronger one with many than its lofty mission as a source of high ideals and enjoyment and of

general betterment of humanity. At least most writers upon the subject seem to deem it necessary to set forth its advantages in terms of commercialism.¹ It surely is not hard to see that beautiful and picturesque features of a city will raise the value of real estate, make higher rents, and increase business prosperity in general; attracting desirable visitors, and drawing to it and keeping residents who have the means to go where they will. It is said that even such radical changes as the cutting off of corners of houses to make them face upon a circular or octagonal beautified street corner pay well. It should also be easily seen that enduring public works will far outrank in the financial returns they bring any flashy, temporary display in the way of festival or other public entertainment.

Certainly something should arouse American cities to their need in this line. They are, even in their best portions, far too often monotonous stretches of square-cornered, almost treeless streets, with houses crowded together and pushed against the sidewalk; while in their worst portions they are indescribably ugly and miserable—the latter condition pronounced very emphatically, by the National Sculpture Society, as “neither good business nor good politics,” making the lives of these people so wretched, “since,” it argues, “unrest and revolution are born of their unendurable miseries and neglect.” These considerations, however, are not widely taken into account by our politicians and business-men. Yet, as familiarity with the beauty of foreign cities increases with travel, dissatisfaction with the state of things here grows, even among our so-called practical citizens. Very little has yet been done, but there certainly is a great awakening interest. Municipal action has as yet done nothing, aside from the making of parks and boulevards whose primary purpose is not that of beauty, of art. Private enterprise, largely that of organizations, has been back of almost all that has been accomplished. And these organizations have had to contend against great difficulties—opposition of many kinds and legislation in the interest of corporations.

¹ Those who would know facts and figures in regard to this will find ample material in *Municipal Affairs*.

Someone thinks it "a most stinging criticism of free institutions that civic action should have failed, and individual action perforce be appealed to." The cause is surely not hard to find: political bossism and the greed of corporations are the dominant powers in our large cities, and the political machinery is so constructed as to leave without representation, almost without influence, what might otherwise be a "saving remnant" of American society, and, indeed—such is the power of good leadership—might soon become the ruling majority. If these best citizens would study the municipal problem, instead of in the main giving up hopelessly to the present condition of things, or occasionally making an excited dash at some reform legislation in a blind sort of way, and feeling that it is all so bad it cannot be made much worse anyway; if they would work out the municipal problem in the light of the experience and the evolved wisdom of countries older in large municipalities than our own—the countries of Europe, particularly Great Britain, which has institutions much like ours, and which was a little time back where we are now, but in which the problem is now "practically solved"—and then would join forces understandingly, might we not presently have a civic beauty in our public works, and, as well, in far more than our public works?¹

That we are almost at the beginning here has the compensating feature of great possibilities ahead! If we will take hold in time to prevent great expenditures in undoing mistakes, already too late in some instances, that will be an advantage. Almost all of our cities have some preliminary steps to take before they can come, or should come, to art proper: clearing away the filth and smoke, making good streets, disposing of the bill-board nuisance or securing artistic posters, providing playgrounds and small parks, and improving tenement-houses and small lodging-houses in congested districts. This work is fundamentally important. Beyond this there are many inviting possibilities: trees everywhere, streets free from railroads and telegraph and

¹ So says DORMAN B. EATON in his masterly work, *The Government of Municipalities*.

telephone, all finely disposed of underground in a tunnel in such a way as to be easily inspected and repaired; lamp-posts and electric lighting poles, signs and all announcements made so artistic as to add to, instead of detract from, the harmony and beauty of the streets; boulevards extended, or at least good, pleasant routes to the country; beautified river banks and lake front, squares, and enlarged street corners; statuary, artistic seats, flowers, fountains, electric or other; façades in appropriate and telling places, ornamented with historic and other representations; arcades, giving light, air, and moving space, through large buildings and blocks; fine school buildings with playgrounds, plats for landscape gardening, reading-rooms, lecture halls, art galleries, and mural decoration, the people's house indeed; other public buildings, great architecturally, and decorated with mural painting and statuary; and neither last nor least, for it contains wonderful suggestions, the reaching out beyond the cities' present boundaries, as the courts have decided may be done, and while not yet too late enriching themselves and posterity ever afterward with country parks and æsthetically planned residence districts. Most of these things have been actualized in some instance or instances, but as yet in far too limited a way.

Is there not for America one truth to which it should cling very closely: that in all art development it should follow its own laws of growth, and thus come to have a truly national style? And may not this best come about through its use of all the inheritance from other ages and lands which rightly belongs to it, classic models, with modifications to suit the spirit of the time and place? A national style, or a municipal style which should personify "the energy of a municipality," will not conflict with a truly great cosmopolitan spirit; for the more true to itself is the life of a nation, as the life of an individual, the more does it reach out toward and touch the life of other persons and peoples. There is some discouragement in finding an exact reproduction of a Roman triumphal arch as a permanent public work of a land which should belong to freedom and arbitration and universal brotherhood; and particularly when over 2,000 years ago

a people existed which regarded the perpetuation of high ideals through forms of beauty as greater than conquest, attaching a penalty to the use for purposes of war of any money appropriated to the making of their goddess of wisdom. But one feature in the production of the arch is encouraging; as someone has said, it shows what can be done when the people's interest is aroused. And right here is surely a leading for America; for through the people must come any greatness it may attain. It has been "through the appreciation of this divine truth," through a belief in the people, so points out Mr. Frederick S. Lamb, that Belgium has won her great distinction and made herself the "leader of the world at this time in matters æsthetic." Her famous sign contest illustrates her method and its results. Any person could try designing. Her free schools of design became "more attractive to the common people than vaudeville or tumbling show." The work of a large number of designers was utilized; and growing out of this came such a demand for artistic signs that the merchants could not draw trade without them. This is an art of the people; this is the way to develop an art worth having. As Mr. Lamb says: "Art as a charity is not wanted; art as an aristocratic adjunct is not needed; art as an educator will be welcomed on all sides, and no longer regarded with suspicion by the 'lower half;'" and, he might have said, by many of the upper half, for a certain unguineness and valuelessness in much of it now is felt by all.

Shall not America, partly through the people being followed, partly led, by the art-seers, develop an art like that of the past, which, "by the very fact that it must speak to the soul of multitudes in a language prescribed by precise relations," thus having "its technical merits exalted, reached the lofty expression which reveals itself in fragments, the immortal footprints of bygone civilizations"? Shall she not by being true to her traditions and her destiny, her "manifest destiny," a democracy grand and great, develop an art such as the world has not yet seen?

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