

## THE FINANCIAL PROBLEM OF THE ARTIST.

ECONOMISTS tell us that the selling-value or price of any commodity is a function of its scarcity; and we need no telling that artists and authors pay little attention to the economics of their work. They are lazy about it, because the marketing of their wares does not seem an attractive subject. How attractive are its principles, a little reflection will show. Samuel Butler had some interesting things to say on the relation of Art to Art Schools in *Alps and Sanctuaries*, and he suggested elsewhere that part of the education offered in these schools, if they were to be tolerated, should be a course of study in the prices of pictures at recent sales. There is something to be said for his view. Every collector studies sales; and Robert Ross had instructive things to say about the value of attendance in the sale-room. Since, however, the course proposed by Butler, the example set by collectors, is not likely to be generally followed, criticism may seek briefly to define the conditions under which a maker, whether of pictures or of books, has to sell his wares, so that, by understanding these conditions, he may fulfil them to the best advantage.

First, a book or a picture differs from other commodities in that its monetary value increases and does not diminish with consumption. The more the public "enjoys" a book or a picture, the more monetary value it acquires. It is not, like food, destroyed by its consumption. This paradoxical quality of works of art gives a clue to the whole of their economics, and enforces the definition of selling-value, with which we began, by reminding us that the financial problem of a painter or of an author is to create a scarcity-value for his work. He must create this, and become the public's fancy, because, measured in money, a work of

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art has no fixed value at all. It is one of those luxuries which are more important than any necessity, once the necessities of life have been secured. Its value in money depends upon its consumption ; its consumption is a matter of caprice ; it can be sold for a song or a million with equal irrelevancy. This being so, it is better not to sell it for a song. One of the lessons of the War, and of the strikes which were fated to follow, was that other things partake of this queer quality, which is, in its perfection, peculiar to works of art. Munitions become costly in proportion to their consumption ; but, like fish, they perish and can be consumed very quickly ; and, unlike good books, wine or pictures, do not improve in financial value with age. In the last analysis the only wealth is food. That is why agricultural communities suffer less in war and in times of distress than industrial communities. Because they are more secure, they are also less hysterical. Economically, then, food is one extreme of wealth : a work of art is the other.

In order to create a scarcity-value for his work, an artist has two different duties. The first is to intensify his own power of expressing those things which interest him. The second, while he is improving this technique, is to make the public adopt him as its fancy. The man who merely seeks success is content to busy himself with the latter. His advantage, if successful, is a quick financial return. His disadvantage is to suffer from the short term which is the price almost invariably paid for immediate popularity. For, in the long run, Shakespeare's plays have made more money than those of the most successful catch-penny dramatist. The highest art pays best, if sufficient time is given. Shakespeare survives the money test ; and the commercial contrast between high art and popular success is meaningless if the condition of time is not forgotten. For the popularity which is quick to

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come is quick to go ; and it is no less true of reputations than of organisms, that the longest lived are those which, like the elephant, grow the most slowly. Wordsworth says of a certain yew tree that it was

Produced too slowly ever to decay.

So the aspirant for "immortality" has something to learn from the yew tree and the elephant. This condition of longevity is the general rule. But the choice between immediate popularity and posthumous fame is hardly within the personal control of the artist. To gain either of the two requires a special gift, which is not the same gift. For it is rarely that the same man can produce a pot-boiler which is also a masterpiece, or a masterpiece which is also a pot-boiler. He must find his gift, and cultivate it accordingly.

If an artist wishes to learn how to make money by his work, he should study the traditional method of the Jews, the expert money-makers of history. For they resemble artists in that they largely make their money by selling commodities which have a fancy, not a fixed, money value. They begin with old clothes ; they go on to other curiosities. Then they stock antiques ; then works of art ; and finally, with admirable intelligence, they end by selling money, the price of which varies every day. The process is described in one of Mr. Frank Harris's most amusing short stories, a story from which both artists and economists have much to learn. It is because works of art have no fixed value in money that their makers manifest the extremes of poverty and prosperity. At one end is the old clothes' man : at the other is the financier. At the one end was Maris or Chatterton : at the other is (we hope) Mr. Augustus John.

Having examined the economic quality of the ware which the artist brings into the market, we have next to inquire how he should apply himself to create a

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scarcity-value for it. To intensify apprehension, and to acquire the necessary technique by which to express it, must remain each artist's personal concern. But a young artist has the task of accomplishing this technique, while receiving no offers of work except, if he is lucky, those for which, to say the least, he feels no inclination. He wishes to paint landscapes or to write verse. His only offer of employment is probably to etch plates for advertisements, or to sub-edit police news. His temptation is to turn from these offers with loathing : to starve rather than to accept them ; for he is rarely alive to the interest of entering professionally walks of life outside the normal range of his experience. The compromise usually made is to work sporadically for money, and in the intervals to live in impecunious leisure on that which he has been able to save during his period of employment. This necessity to work sporadically for other people's pleasure is not to be regretted if the artist will remember that a valuable means of learning how to please himself is first to learn the disagreeable art of pleasing wholly different people. To do that well enough for them to pay him for so doing, a certain technique is required. Its acquirement can be valuable to him in the work to which he wishes to devote himself. But he must not make the mistake of supposing that he can work entirely for others for a fixed period, and retire at the end of ten years, shall we say, in order to devote himself to masterpieces. If, as the Three Arts Club was told six years ago, he allows as much as a week to pass without putting somewhere his best endeavours to the proof, he will lose the faculty by which masterpieces are made. On the other hand, if he will work at nothing but his own fancies, unless he is the rare bird whose fancies also please the public, he will achieve nothing but starvation. He must learn to serve two masters—himself and his opponents ; and

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though he may love the one and despise the other, the requirements of his opponents can teach him much that will prove valuable in his own behoof. Since there is no fixed price, one might almost say no fair price, for his work, he is entitled to fix for himself his wages of subsistence, and then seek to obtain them. For the fair price represents the money necessary to enable him to live the kind of life which the production of his work requires ; and to obtain from his work the income necessary to "secure" it should be his first object, once each piece of work is done. The tastes of men vary, but, on the whole, they prefer one thousand pounds to one thousand shillings. Once he shall have begun to make money, his temptation will probably be to put his price too high, until he has learnt, if he is capable of learning, that to possess too much money is almost as bad as to have too little. For it is difficult to acquire the art of spending £20,000 a year late in life. We need to be apprenticed to the art of spending money early ; as early as possible in fact.

Once having fixed, in idea, the amount of capital and income which the leisure necessary for the production of his work requires ; once having realized that his work is only worth in money any sum which he can gain for it, he must next study the art of persuading the public to fancy him. There are principles which condition the art of persuasion, but rigid rules cannot be defined, because that which an artist really sells is his personality ; and each personality is, at least potentially, unique. Let us assume, however, that he will not indulge in push and go, as these are understood in commerce, but rather will prefer his work to advertise itself, than to advertise himself, as actresses have to do, for the sake of his profession. If so, he will eschew the arts of crowing ; the temptation of "rational dress" or of plush knee-breeches ; indulgence in self-photography ; the puff of the personal paragraph.

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These may be left to the successful. His work must be his best advertisement, but its advertisement-value can be increased in various legitimate ways. To offer portraits for exhibition with the faces crossed out, as Whistler did, was natural and proper because Whistler wished the public to learn that there are many important elements in a portrait beside that of the face. To call these representations of figures "arrangements in black and brown" was again legitimate; because it represented a theory and was not merely, as stupid people supposed, a trick for exciting comment. But it did excite comment. The theory advertised itself. It was a legitimate advertisement. The same rule applies to the prefaces of exhibition-catalogues. If the exhibition seeks to illustrate a pictorial thesis, a new manner of painting, let it be preceded by an Encyclical, even if, as generally happens, it is the preface (rather than the pictures) which is discussed.

There is a principle also in the cultivation of what are humorously called connections. There is a right way and a wrong way of regarding them. The artist of ability, who wishes to enjoy the leisure necessary for the production of his work, does not climb: he gravitates. He is a centre of attraction: he does not need to seek to attract others. Consequently, he cannot divide the world socially into the useful and the useless. Every one is interesting to him. He has the same manners for every one, and preserves the quality which theologians call detachment. Because he meets every one on simple human terms, he becomes attractive to very different kinds of people. Every one can teach him something, and his primary aim is to learn. The learning that rewards this catholicity of taste makes him unconsciously interesting to others, to many of whom he represents some aspect of life or of thought which they did not previously know. Sometimes he represents the romance, which they have missed, to older

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people. Thus, out of the motley throng of his acquaintances, diverse people come to him for diverse reasons. He is equally at home in many types of society. At length, from one unexpected quarter, the chance for which he has waited, but not directly sought, will come. He gravitates slowly but surely to the place where he is wanted. He is wanted to do some piece of work. Since the improvement of his technique rather than the acquisition of useful acquaintances has been his first object, he will do the work better than those who have made connections, and not an improved technique, their first requirement. Not only will his opportunities seem better than theirs, but he will use them better when they come. Already he begins to stand apart. His scarcity-value has begun to be created. Once begun, there is little check, unless he abandons his humility, his concentration, to allow success or the claims of society (always eager to court success) to encroach on his time or to minister to his vanity. His knowledge that the money-value of any work of art is always accidental becomes a wholesome joke at his own expense. He has learnt to have a sense of humour about money. It is this sense of humour which has assisted him to make it; and this laughing wisdom will be no bad equipment for spending it considerably when once it shall have dropped into his pocket.

But if artists were as simple-minded as this thesis, there would be no financial problem. There would not indeed! The problem exists chiefly because men of genius, as we loosely call them, are usually merely men with a special kind of talent. There is no reason, save their own laziness, why, equipped thus favourably, they should not master the art of living while they are mastering some subsidiary "fine" art. For the mastery of painting or of poetry by such men is simply the reward of single-minded attention. They are humble

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before the work which interests them, so they are rewarded accordingly. They are not humble about the art of living : they are too proud to learn it. Is it to be wondered then that they do not learn it ; and because they have declined to do so, that they take refuge in huff and scorn of the world, which usually means of the luckless friend whom they ask and expect to bear this burden for them ? But the technique of the art of living is more easy to learn than the technique of dabbing canvas with paint or that of spilling ink on paper. Consequently, the financial problem of the artist is partly self-created and unnecessary. In so far as it exists, it can be understood by cultivating that sense of humour about money which has been discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

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