WHAT ARE AMERICANS DOING IN ART?

BY THE VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF DESIGN.

THIS question arises naturally from the one so often asked and more or less satisfactorily answered: "What are we doing for art?" It is not easy to give a definite reply to the first question without considering them both together. We may, without prejudice, date back the present revival of art interest in this country to the Philadelphia Exhibition of 1876. First, the extensive and important collection of representative works of art from all countries had a wonderful influence on the public no less than on the artists; secondly, about that time an unusual number of young painters and sculptors returned home after years of study abroad, and established schools and societies, and initiated a movement in art which has since become widespread and popular. At that period there were but two or three art schools of any importance in the country. Even Boston, large as it was, gave no better advantages to an art student than those afforded by the Lowell Institute, where a model was posed one evening in the week for young artists to draw from without instruction. A course of study abroad was open only to those who had private means of their own, or who could rely on the assistance of friends. Europe was, as it is now, the Mecca of young artists, but in the majority of cases the aspirant for European training was obliged to spend the most impressionable years of his life in earning sufficient money to enable him to pass a certain time in the French or German art schools. We doubtless owe to the difficulties of early training much of the impulse which has urged our artists to persist in the effort to establish art schools, but, on the other hand, who shall number the geniuses whose lamps have flickered and gone out in the atmosphere of what Mr. Howells calls "belated puritanism," hostile to art, hostile to sentiment, hostile to all imaginative production?

In the consideration of the status of our art we must recognize first the popular impression that our best artists are disloyal to American art because they do not draw their inspiration from motives to be found within our political boundaries. There is a species of patriotic glamour which invests the phrase "American art" with an importance and with possibilities which surely do not exist in this cosmopolitan age. It is a favorite theory with those who make art a study without practising it that an American artist should treat American subjects. They forget that the majority of European artists who have made fame and fortune have sought their subjects outside the bounds of their own nationalities. They ignore the fact that the true elements of art which make it characteristic of a people, and therefore a national art, are found, not in the subject, but in the mind of the artist himself. Also, we have to take note of the growing confidence in the powers of our temporarily expatriated artists, and in the belief that, if these same men would pursue their profession at home, their artistic impulses would remain as keen and their enthusiasm continue without a check. The success of our artists in the exhibitions abroad appears to prove that, if we can successfully compete with foreign artists in their own field, we can retransplant these young trees into our own soil and confidently expect them to grow into sturdy oaks and elms. Experience, however, shows us that the contrary is most often the case. It is a discouraging fact that few of those whose names have been prominent among the promising young artists abroad have kept up the high standard of excellence, much less have continued to make progress, after a short season at home. What is the nature of the blight that attacks them, and is there any antidote for this insidious poison that destroys the germs of progress?

To answer these questions we must eliminate from this complex situation all elements of patriotism, and look upon our artists as forming a notable proportion of the great body of men who are to-day wooing the fickle goddess the world over. We may well be gratified with our position in modern art, it is true, but we must confess that we are as yet but in the second stage of artistic growth. It is beyond dispute that individuality marks the highest point of development in art, and is notably present only when there is a high standard of technical excellence. The artist who is so far a master of his materials that, in being able to forget the mechanical operations of execution, he is best prepared to work out his

own individuality, is the result of a succession of steps in art education, a result not accomplished by short methods nor without great personal sacrifice and persistent effort. Primitive art, on the other hand, however much it may be the embodiment of distinctly artistic ideas, is never so free from traditions and limitations of methods that the individual stands out in distinguished preëminence. There is no royal road to good art. The intermediate stages between the crude first attempts and the finished productions are necessarily devoted to the study of means and methods, to the drudgery and mechanics of the profession. These stages are marked, in general terms, by the temporary bewilderment of the artist, and by the apparent annihilation of the highest qualities of the artistic impulse.

This system of growth is true of the community as it is of the individual. When, after the Philadelphia Exhibition, we began to see art schools springing up all over the country, and art museums rising on foundations laid out with regard to the possibilities of the future, we hailed this new spirit, and welcomed this contagious enthusiasm for art as a sure promise of the speedy development of a large and well-equipped body of artists, whose importance in the world of art would be commensurate with our national rank in the world of modern science and commerce. Fifteen years have elapsed, a new generation of artists has sprung up, having had at home facilities for rudimentary education quite as efficient as any to be found abroad. They have sought more advanced instruction in the schools of Europe; they have been recognized there as among the most capable and most promising of pupils; they have taken prizes in the classes, medals in the exhibitions, and have, in general, more than fulfilled all that was expected of them. Many of them have come home again, and are teaching in their turn in the art schools. Of those who have remained abroad many have European reputations.

But the verdict of the world has been often given, and is always the same — namely, that the works by American artists as they are seen in the foreign exhibitions cannot be distinguished from those of their masters and associates; that, indeed, we are still in that stage of artistic development in which the highest acquirement is ability to execute with distinguished skill in the methods of others, and which is still in the leading-reins of school tradition and the glorification of technique.

This characterization is not harsh nor unjust, but rather appreciative and hopeful, and we may as well frankly recognize the truth of the verdict. We have, after all, made more rapid progress in art than any other people in the world's history. Let us curb our impatience, take what satisfaction we can out of this fact, and content ourselves with the absolute certainty that we are on the rapid road to the best development of all the artistic spirit there is in us. If our artists do not at present show extraordinary signs of original impulse and individuality, it is no proof that these qualities do not exist. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that they are dormant or temporarily suppressed by the force of circumstances. Most of the young men who have returned since the Philadelphia Exhibition have, with a rare self-denial and enthusiasm, devoted themselves to teaching. There is a vast difference between teaching the rudiments to beginners and giving advice and assistance to those who are struggling with the higher problems of the profession. In the one case the labor of instructing is compensated by little or no gain to the teacher beyond his salary; in the other the artist finds himself encouraged in his own work, gains new ideas and fresh impulses, experiences constant rejuvenation from the intimate contact with younger men. Many of the prominent French and German artists have for years and without compensation devoted much of their time to the higher instruction of art students. By a complete system of elementary art education the pupils come into the foreign ateliers well grounded in all the rudiments, and depend on the master for suggestion and encouragement only in the direction in which his own knowledge is increased by the endeavor to impart it to others. The price of this constant effort is some loss of time and energy, but the reward to the master is the most precious of all rewards, stimulus to production and encouragement of singleness of purpose.

We cannot give too much praise nor too hearty recognition to those of our artists who have spent many of the best years of their lives in teaching the rudiments of their profession, for it is to them that we owe the present hopeful stage of progress, and it is by their self-sacrifice and devotion to the most intimate interests of art that we are fast approaching the time when we can no longer afford to allow them to dissipate their powers and exhaust their energy over the A B C of art education. When that time arrives, when our elementary schools are, as they should be, in the hands of those who either by nature are fitted for the work, or who may be in their own stage of advancement profited by such experience, then, with all the new and important fields now opening up before the serious artist, with the phenomenal increase of culture in the great West, with the extraordinarily contagious spirit of liberality among rich men, with the practical annihilation of the distance

between the United States and Europe, then and not before shall we find our artists free to put forth the best that is in them, unhampered by the sordid considerations which now beset them, and by the tardiness of recognition which is the most potent and baneful factor of discouragement. Then, surely, shall we see develop one element in our art which is now conspicuously absent—style. This element, the most intangible, the most worthy of encouragement, and, indeed, the most precious, can only exist under conditions similar to those just spoken of. Style without a high degree of skill is like musical taste without ability of execution. Style can be successfully developed only when the methods are mastered, for although it is in a measure superior to technique, it may be cramped and distorted by mechanical effort. The soul of all best art, it can only exist in its most attractive form in healthy and vigorous surroundings.

In the near future, too, we shall see encouraged and nourished the one branch of figure-painting and sculpture for which this country affords quite as good a field of effort as any other community — portraiture. We have a distinct type of feminine beauty, distinguished for symmetry and refinement; we have a strongly accentuated masculine type, full of character and picturesqueness. The first thing that strikes the observant eye of an American who, after a season abroad, returns to this country sensitive to fresh impressions of his native land, is the peculiar, nervous, high-strung, keen type of face, which has in it great elements of beauty, prominent marks of character, and an accentuation of lines which are particularly fascinating to the painter. The immortalization of this type is a task which may well fire the ambition of any painter.

It is natural to be impatient of processes, and it is difficult to wait for the fulfilment of the promise of planting, transplanting, and grafting. We already have a system of art education, which, though by no means so good as it can be and will be,— and perhaps not even justly to be called a system,— sends its students into the foreign schools quite as well founded in the rudiments of the profession as any other beginners; even, as it is often claimed, better prepared for rapid advancement. From California to Maine, from Texas to Wisconsin, there is scarcely a town of note that has not its art school and its art club. Art museums are numbered almost by the score. Private collections of works of art are increasing in numbers and importance with bewildering speed. Bequests to add private acquisitions to public collections are more and more numerous. The United States has now become the most active picture-market in the world.

A decade ago a few young artists in Paris met for the purpose of attempting to raise money enough to establish a European scholarship for American art students. The effort, although an earnest one, met with little success at the time; but the idea took firm hold on the minds of those who were interested in the scheme, and the enthusiasm, while it was somewhat checked by the indifference of the public, was still kept alive. Recently there have been established without any ostentation several such scholarships in different parts of the United States, all of them supported by private generosity, and now any young man who proves that he has sufficient talent and application to entitle him to a period of study abroad may secure one of these prizes.

Within the past few years also there has arisen here a coterie of picture-buyers who make a point of purchasing none but works by American artists, thus stimulating home production, softening the harshness of foreign competition, and gathering together, as is amply proven by occasional exhibitions, most interesting and choice collections of contemporary art which are revelations even to the most hopeful and enthusiastic friends of our artists. In various institutions there have been established funds for the purchase of works of art for permanent public exhibition. The library building of the city of Pittsburgh given to the city by Mr. Andrew Carnegie has, with equally unparalleled generosity, been endowed by him with a fund the annual income of which, fifty thousand dollars, is to be expended in the purchase of works of art for the permanent collection, and at least ninety per cent. of this sum is, by the terms of the endowment, to be spent for the productions of American artists. The extent of this gift is scarcely to be realized at first sight. What a museum of modern art will in a few years be built up by this fifty thousand dollars per annum *in perpetuo!* The income from the fund of the Chantrey bequest in England for the purchase of modern pictures is but twenty thousand dollars a year, and, so far as is known, was, up to the date of Mr. Carnegie's endowment, the largest sum in the hands of any institution for such a purpose. What a stimulus to production this fund in Pittsburgh will become! and what a power in the hands of the committee to urge our artists to turn from the tentative to the genuine accomplishment! The prospect is as encouraging as it is novel, and as bewildering in its possibilities as it is encouraging, for the Carnegie fund is doubtless the precursor of other similar endowments in different cities, and almost before we are aware of it we shall find this new factor one of the most important ones in our artistic development.

Enough has been said to show how widespread the interest in art has become in the past fifteen years, and how this interest has materialized, so to speak. The weakness of the situation lies in a measure in the absence of centralization. Not that a rigid system of centralization in art education is necessary, or even desirable, but some kind of a harmonious relation between the schools of the metropolis and those of other places might easily be brought about, so that the superior advantages of the larger communities might be held out as an inducement to the best pupils all over the country as a primary step in advancement toward the goal of higher artistic education. The difficulties in the way of giving the young artist all the necessary preliminary training are diminishing every year. There is no reason why our schools should not, in a very short time, send the best pupils abroad in much the same way, and with quite as good an equipment, as the students are sent from the foreign ateliers for travel and independent study in the art centers of the Continent. Most of the exterior advantages are now at our command in New York. There are excellent examples of the old masters in our Museum; the best work of modern men is seen here more easily than anywhere else; the photograph supplements these advantages to a degree which it was impossible to prophesy a dozen years ago. The one nourishing condition and the one which is most desired and the most necessary to the artist, the so-called art atmosphere, is beginning to be felt as a gentle, zephyr-like current which, before we are aware of it, will envelop us in its stimulating embrace. Architects have long since recognized this current, and by the thoroughness of their schools and the seriousness of their advanced studies they have raised up a class of men whose taste and skill are leaving enduring monuments in this country which rank with any modern constructions, if they do not surpass them. Remote as it may seem, the suggestion, recently made, that the Government establish a department of art and architecture is an indication of the extent of the influence of this current. With excellent examples constantly before our eyes of tasteful architecture erected by private enterprise, we naturally feel the necessity of some central and responsible, not to say intelligent, control of the public decorations and constructions, so that we shall be more or less sure of protection from the monuments of bad taste and vulgarity which, in the confusion of public business, may be accepted by a political committee. Some national recognition of the profession of fine arts must soon result from the public estimation of the value of this element of civilization, and although we cannot legislate an art atmosphere, legislation may do much toward encouraging its growth. The taxation of works of art has been not the least powerful of the various causes which have retarded the progress of art in this country, and this will undoubtedly soon be removed in deference to the extensive popular sentiment against it, and in recognition of the wishes of a very large majority of American artists. What we have done in art and for art during the past quarter of a century is unparalleled in the history of nations. What we are now doing gives promise of speedy and gratifying results.

F. D. Millet.

THE HUNGER-STRIKE.[1]

FROM other hands let fragrant roses fall
  On victors' paths; *I* look past Volga's flow
  To Hell's true Frozen Circle, realm of snow,
  Where rises Kara's evil prison wall!
There fettered heroes did gaunt Famine call
  To be their Savior, when bent prone below
  The heavy yoke; racked Nature's throb and throe
  Steadfast they bore, till silence folded all.
In the dim light, shoulder to shoulder, lay,
  In awful triumph, the mute, ghastly band,
  And tyrants cowered!— O Strong Spirits! we,
Sons of this New World, glad in Freedom's day,
  Greet you! and with eyes wet, bowed lowly, stand
  Awe-struck before your mighty constancy.

Elizabeth W. Fiske.

[1] See Mr. Kennan's article on the Kara prison in THE CENTURY for September, 1889.