

MURAL DECORATION IN AMERICA.

(FIRST PAPER.)



TO begin by considering mural decoration as a half-sister of architecture is to clear the way for a more accurate comprehension of the younger art. The two are not exactly interdependent. Good architecture can exist without painted embellishment; but mural decoration, by the very nature of its being, is part and parcel of an architectural scheme. The best decorators in the past have recognized this fact. Even in their most pictorial moments they have retained an architectural basis for their work. The great library attached to the cathedral at Siena is adorned with a series of frescos in the liveliest narrative style of the Umbrian painter Pinturicchio, but every panel in the room is composed with reference to the room itself. The field is wide for the citation of similar illustrations from Renaissance art; but the object of this paper is to show wherein American painters have fulfilled the obligations of mural decoration, and how materially they have contributed to the development of that form of art. The word «obligations» is used advisedly. It is futile to talk about the beauty of a decorative picture until you have settled its value as a pictorial decoration; and to get at that value it is necessary clearly to understand what mural decoration is in its best estate. It is part of an architectural scheme. But how large a part? the reader may ask. The answer seems to be required so often that I give it in very nearly rudimentary form.

Mural decoration, or mural painting, to be minutely exact, is that permanent addition of painted color to a wall or other immovable portion of a building which falls into the effect of the whole structure as the lines of an arch fall into it on the purely architectural side of the design. Lay hold of that fundamental conception, and you have a touchstone for all the decoration ever painted. Note that nothing is said about the form which this added color takes. It may be a representation of a historical pageant two hundred feet long. It may be a solid mass of some one tint accented by a few conventional arabesques. No matter what the form may be, pictorial design or solid tint, the decoration must be an integral part of the architectural whole, and

to be this it must be brought into conformity with the general character of its surroundings. Now this seems obvious enough; but ignorance of it, or indifference to it, has done more to disfigure buildings and retard the growth of a noble art than all the incompetency that ever expressed its dreary self through the medium of color. We shall be assisted in our survey of recent American work if we remember the special requirements of the various situations attacked, and look at the decorations purely as such, not as interesting pictures painted on a larger scale than usual, and hoisted into some convenient place without the formality of a frame. The building is more than a frame for a true mural decoration. It is the organism of which the painting is as necessary a part as the staircase running from floor to floor, like the spinal column in a human being.

We have seen above that at the roots of their work the common house-painter and the artist of the rank of Puvis de Chavannes are on the same level. Where the one leaps far beyond the other is not merely in executive power, but in the possession of ideas—expressing his genius in coöperation with that of another, so far as the form goes, but with complete originality and abounding interest so far as the thoughts presented are concerned. I am glad to leave generalizations of this sort for concrete examples close at hand. Whatever ideas we may have about mural decoration are clarified and strengthened by reference to the work which exists already in America. It has not existed long. We have had only one accomplished decorator behind the present generation, and he, the late William Hunt, was not more than a casual and passing factor in the evolution of the art. Its history in this country is embraced by the careers of men still living; some of its most interesting figures are among the youngest of American artists, and the dean of the group is still in his prime. He, Mr. John La Farge, has carried the art of mural decoration to a point so high that he gives me the critic's greatest privilege, the privilege of plunging into the heart of the matter with a consciousness of wholly impeccable data in the painting described. Qualifications, deductions, are avoided. Praise of a fine work of art really

means the interpretation of its elements. State those, and the total impression takes care of itself. To analyze the great «Ascension» of Mr. La Farge is not alone to express delight in its beauty, but to show exactly what a true decoration is in all its relations.

This painting by Mr. La Farge had a picturesque origin. It was first conceived, and sketched out in something roughly like its present outlines, with a view to its execution in stained glass for a memorial chapel. Then, when that plan was abandoned, it narrowly escaped being transformed into a species of relief by an eminent sculptor who, Mr. La Farge thought, could make a brilliant altarpiece out of the design, following the precedent found to-day in some of the churches of Italy and Spain. Ultimately, Mr. La Farge, who had been asked to put some stained glass over the chancel of the Church of the Ascension in New York (where he had advised the plastic decoration), developed his idea into the canvas which exists. It fills half the height of the lofty edifice. Its width is virtually the width of the nave. These dimensions it would be idle to state in feet and inches, but they are important to remember broadly, because the design is scaled to its surroundings, and seems to spring naturally from that end of the church over which it presides. The architectural lines which meet the surface of the painting mark neither a frame nor an aperture in the wall. The richly coffered arch of gold, springing from pilasters as splendidly embellished with conventional ornament, seems rather like some natural boundary narrowing the horizon, concentrating the vision upon one sublime scene. Yet if the eyes travel, you are aware of no conflict between the scene and its encircling architecture; if the transition from one to the other is unconsciously achieved, you must seek the secret of the passage in the painting and not in the arch. Then you begin to grasp the majestic beauty of a perfect wall-painting. You see the harmony between the upright figures on the first plane of the composition and the pilasters on each side. And then, as you are insensibly lifted by the spring of the golden arch, the angels who encircle the risen Christ seem to float in similarly soaring lines. The central figure, as it half pauses in its ascension, is the pivot of the imaginative conception, the pivot of the group of celestial worshippers, and, finally, the pivot of the architectural lines.

Take an even more subtle point in the arrangement of the lines and curves in this painting. As the spectator faces the altar

he is dimly sensible of the forward leap of that arch which is reared above the aisle on each side of the church and nearest the chancel. The line is in contradiction to that of the arch above the painting. One comes toward you, the other is calculated to melt into the distance which is suggested by the receding angle of the golden arch's soffit. Now this contradiction, if left unbalanced, might prove seriously detrimental to the unity of the picture, so we find in the latter a landscape the hills of which are so inclined on each side as to bring the curves of the entire scheme back into repose and symmetry. It is not easy to demonstrate this with mathematical precision, but if the reader will look closely at the painting, and try to imagine the hills at the sides either eliminated or inclined toward the mountain in the middle of the background, he will feel the force of the point at issue. The unity of the thing would be instantly endangered. I lay such stress upon this side of the design, not to reduce its charm to a bald question of lines, but to show how much its beauty depends upon the adjustment of its parts to surrounding conditions. It is the adjustment that leaves you free to approach the work on its imaginative and personal side, on the side of its color and purely sensuous enchantment. Yet even here the atmosphere of organic balance is still enveloping the picture. The subdued light by which its lower portion is suffused is suited not only to the demands of the composition, but to the structure and lighting of the church at that level; and the misty golden radiance of the upper half is keyed to the very note that golden arch and clearstory windows join in producing.

Thus far we have traced the beauty of Mr. La Farge's decorative art to its co-operation with the architectural ideas expressed in the same place. But we have spoken of a mural decorator's own ideas, and we must come back to those, to his inspiration. It is that which crowns his work, and in the present instance it is impossible to give an adequate estimate of Mr. La Farge without reference to the sublimity of his conception as a symbol for a spiritual idea. In the first place, he has been strikingly original. The rough outlines of the composition have been settled in advance for hundreds of painters, and they were settled for him in the same way; yet through the subtleties of grouping he has escaped the faintest suggestion of any of his predecessors. If he recalls them at all, it is in the sincerity with which he has bodied forth his idea. The Christ rises with indescrib-

able dignity above the astonished figures, who gaze in awe upon his flight, and the benignant gesture, familiar as it is, has yet in this new version a vitality for which hitherto we have had to ask the old Italians exclusively. Indeed, there is nothing more interesting about this design than its proof of the strength still living in sacred art when the painter is a man of genius as well as a craftsman. In all that makes religious art religious this is a just modern equivalent for the art of an older faith. We say, in the presence of the sacred pictures of the golden era, «Oh, the illusion! the illusion! We have lost that, and the day for biblical illustration is gone by.» Mr. La Farge gives the best possible answer to this. Nobly designed, saturated in color of the deepest splendor and most exquisite delicacy, imbued with the indefinable spirituality of a high imagination, his painting puts before you, on the heroic scale which it demands, the scene which marks the culmination of our Christian faith. It must be a cold temperament which could find in this uplifting creation less of fervor, less of the power to convince, than we are willing to believe a more naïve century found in more naïve productions.

I have said nothing in regard to Mr. La Farge's subject, and the relation between it, or his treatment of it, and the limitations of mural decoration, because all that needs to be said in this connection is more suggestively set down apropos of Mr. Sargent's work. That brilliant work, dedicated to certain walls of the new Public Library in Boston, is remarkable for the peculiar and dazzling virtuosity characteristic of Mr. Sargent, and for some daring departures from those laws which we have noted as at the foundation of mural painting. The work is divided into two sections. One consists of a frieze, which has thus far been completed in only three divisions, two of them opposite each other and at right angles to the third, which itself fills the end of that vaulted hall in which the entire series of decorations by this artist is to be unfolded. The other portion of the finished work is that which embraces the semi-circular wall-space at the end of the hall, above the frieze, and the first panel of the arched ceiling. The frieze is devoted to a procession of the prophets, which follow each other in stately march. Above them, on one side of the ceiling, is a representation of Moloch, while the corresponding space on the other side of the vault is devoted to Astarte. Other deities are included in these divisions, which are dominated from the center by the signs of the zodiac [see page 114] and by

Neith, the Egyptian goddess in whom there was supposed to dwell the maternal genius of the universe.

The lunette upon which these look down, between them and the frieze, is filled with a composition which represents the confusion of the Israelites on their turning to worship false gods. From the standpoint of erudition Mr. Sargent's designs are easily susceptible of analysis, and they are, indeed, perfectly transparent in their symbolism when scrutinized by the learned. On the other hand, their purely decorative character is somewhat obscure; and it is with reference to this fact that I wish to show the connection between right mural decoration and the subject, or the decorator's treatment of it.

In so far as the subject is complex it is in peril. A symbolism that is too symbolical becomes opaque after the first gloss has disappeared; it becomes a puzzle to the professor and a terror to the illiterate or only moderately educated person. Anecdotic masters like Pinturicchio, like Carpaccio, or like Gozzoli, go very near the precipice which gives on oblivion when their stories become involved. But they save themselves by the great resource: they counterbalance complexity of motive by simplicity of design. Therein lies the whole history of Renaissance decoration, the most important of which we have records. Michelangelo and Raphael themselves provide the most cogent illustrations. It is in his disinclination to emulate altogether their transparency of design that Mr. Sargent has compelled me to preface a cordial valuation of his work at its best with a little homily on his work in a less conciliating phase. From the maze in which he has depicted the tale of Israelitish disgrace there emerge certain figures, like the menacing Assyrian and Egyptian kings, stopped in their wrath by the hands of Jehovah. These have such statuesque character, and are withal so well placed in opposition to each other, that the fresco begins to take on the architectural dignity it requires. Yet somehow even these figures do not quite hold their own against the labyrinthine changes of line which meet the eye. Heroic the motive certainly is, but you miss the directness expected in the heroic mural painting. There are rather hints of the qualities for which you go to an easel picture: the pictorial element predominates, and the decorative style undergoes a material modification. I dwell upon this, however, not to charge Mr. Sargent with a defect, but to fix the reader's attention for a moment upon



PAINTED BY JOHN LA FARGE.

"THE ASCENSION," IN THE CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION, NEW YORK CITY.

the significant development of our inquiry which these frescos illustrate. They show conclusively that an artist may have imagination, color, draftsmanship, even genius, and yet diminish his effect because he does not adhere rigidly to the conditions under which he is working.

Mr. Sargent seems to have held himself with some indifference to his conditions, trying, perhaps, to equalize his effects by modeling some of the details in relief (the lions of Moloch and various other passages are treated in this way); he lapses to some extent, nevertheless, from that standard of clarity which is inseparable from the finest mural decoration. This must surely have been the result of some strange heedlessness or audacity on the part of the ar-

tist, for one has only to look below the ceiling designs and the lunette to see a triumphant demonstration of his decorative faculty. The line of prophets occupying the frieze is little less than magnificent. It is formed of noble figures clad in simple robes; tall types of hieratic power and reserve, which have quite as much to impress the imagination in their austere characters, beautifully individualized, as may be found in any of the mystic abstractions with which Mr. Sargent has peopled the superimposed stages of his scheme. The prophets are ranged along perfectly plain surfaces, broken only by the severest pilasters. They are rendered in bold, simple tones, the light and dark draperies in which they are variously wrapped being set one against the other in effective masses. In

the center of the long division at the end of the hall there stands between Joshua and Elijah a stupendous figure of Moses, winged, mysterious, leaning with might on the carved tables of the law, and looming in his place like the terrible vicegerent before whom even the modern imagination recoils with reverential and yet fearful awe. Here, in this plastic figure, Mr. Sargent seems to me to have achieved his most felicitous touch. He keeps the simplicity of the surrounding

a performance which easily rises superior to those points of modifying significance at which it has been necessary to glance with some care. It is true that he has not maintained throughout the decorative, architectural equilibrium most essential to his art; but he has contrived, in spite of this, to give enormous weight to his exalted conceptions, to make an extraordinary impression. Again and again the mind is grasped with irresistible force, and held by some passage of



PAINTED BY JOHN S. SARGENT.

"THE ZODIAC," FROM THE CEILING ARCH, A PART OF SARGENT'S DECORATIONS IN THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY.¹

prophets, and he exercises also the supernatural spell which is active in the intricacies of his upper designs. The Moses stands like a veritable key-stone. He is pictorial, nay, he is sculptural, but he is also decorative in the very highest meaning of the word.

There is still a great deal to be done by Mr. Sargent in the hall of the library, which has been assigned him. A final judgment upon his work may be suspended. Looking now to the intrinsic value of those fragments which are in place, he has achieved, it may be said,

dramatic inspiration, which falls with exquisite fitness into the massy fullness and grandeur of the whole. In the center of the lunette are the flaming wings of Jehovah, and they seem to pervade the entire scene with sacred and overwhelming fire. On the ceiling the lovely figure of Astarte, wrapped in filmy blue, a sweet and graceful image of

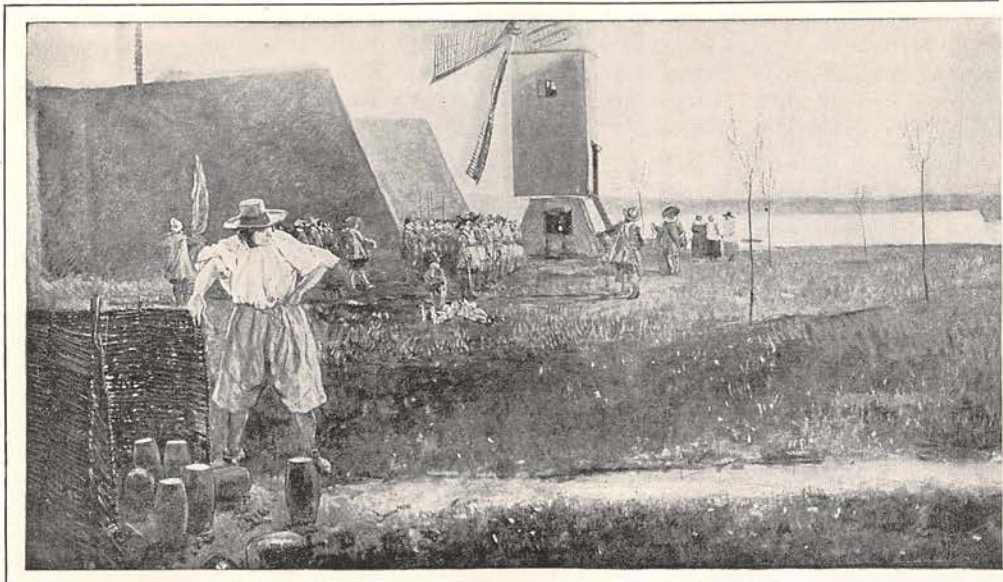
¹ A fuller account of Mr. Sargent's art-work, including a complete set of illustrations of these notable decorations, will appear in an early number of THE CENTURY.—EDITOR.

delicate authority, stands overshadowed by the oppressive mystery of Neith, whose strange and solemn head is separated from the other goddess by the glistening coils of a huge snake. Beyond the zodiac, which is represented at this point, there is raised the baleful and gigantic bulk of Moloch. Around him and his lions, unearthly shapes of dread, the sun's rays play in long, arrowy lines, which terminate in fantastic golden hands. These are thrilling things, made more passionately vivid and poignant by the vigorous style of execution, and the still more forceful strokes of color. From the blazing wrath of Jehovah's omniscient pinions to the dull, sinister shadow of the tawny Moloch there is not one false note. The scheme rings true in the cumulative force of its appeals to the imagination, to the sense of what is great in vivid, palpitating, and spiritualized forms. It fastens the attention very closely upon the quality which we have touched upon above as so precious and inspiring—the quality of intellect, of thought, of imagination. Mr. Sargent could not have painted the frieze of the prophets without decorative genius. He could not have painted either the frieze or the designs above it without unusual brain-power, a fact on which emphasis is laid, because it means all the difference between a vigorous and a trivial school of art. Mural decoration in America is being established every year with greater and greater firmness, because its principal exemplars are men who think as well as paint. It is because they keep the balance intact that we find inspiration in Mr. La Farge, in Mr. Sargent, and in the artist who is now to be considered, the painter of "The Quest of the Holy Grail."

Mr. Abbey's contribution to the adornment of the Boston Library has one element which almost predisposes the spectator in its favor before he has paused to weigh it with critical scales. It is from first to last enchantingly poetic. The most obtuse would yield to the magic of the Arthurian legend. A critic could hardly be blamed who found Mr. Abbey's paintings charming merely on the score of their picturesque atmosphere. But if these decorations belong among the major performances of American mural painting, it is because they are wholly suited to their place, because they are decorative. They tell a story, and that an elaborate one, a legend over which the accretions of centuries have flung themselves like the ivy on an ancient British ruin; but the essentials of the old tale live in Mr. Abbey's frieze with nothing to obscure

their meaning. Some symbolism may be displayed with the introduction of the cup, the Grail itself, but for the rest the pageant moves on with the compactness and celerity of a historical sequence, and the merest title—if even that—is sufficient for the enlightenment of the public. The first of the five designs completed at this time represents the appearance of an angel bearing the Grail to the infant Galahad uplifted in the arms of a nun in a convent cell. The next represents the untried and spotless knight kneeling in the dawn at the end of his vigil, while Lancelot and Bors affix his spurs, and a group of nuns wait behind them with lighted candles. In the third picture Galahad is shown entering the hall of Arthur to take possession of the Seat Perilous, which has been destined for him at the Round Table. Following this comes the scene in Arthur's church, where Galahad and the other knights embarking upon the quest come for the benediction. The fifth picture, which terminates the series now in place in Boston, is devoted to the visit of Galahad to the petrified court of Amfortas, with the burden of a great opportunity upon him, and the greater weight of an indecision which he cannot conquer. He stands beside the stony couch of the unhappy king, heedless of the life-in-death on every side, heedless of the procession of figures headed by the crowned bearer of the Grail. We leave him in his doubt for Mr. Abbey's further illustration of the legend. What I wish to point out now is the extraordinary skill with which the painter has set forth his narrative, not simply as a matter of poetic compression, but in the strictly decorative relations of the work.

All through the succession of pictures there are effects of form, of line, adapted subtly and brilliantly to the exigencies of mural decoration. In the scene of Galahad's vigil there are the vertical lines in the draperies of the nuns and in the candles of the latter on one side of the design, and on the other you find the kneeling knight repeating the upright motive, and carrying it on to the pillars of the altar at which his watch has been kept. Between the two portions of the design Bors and his companion introduce varying contours, and add the necessary contrast to the main lines employed. Mr. Abbey knows the value of line. He uses it admirably in the richly ornamented wall of the nun's chamber depicted in the initial decoration; and he produces a beautiful effect with it in the erect staves of those banners which are borne by the kneeling warriors at the moment of the benediction. In the last mystical episode of the sleeping



PAINTED BY EDWIN A. ABBEY.

"BOWLING GREEN," IN THE HOTEL.

court, wherein he had to accommodate his design to a break in the lower level of the space on the wall, he has solved his problem by the use of an expedient altogether fascinating. The top of a heavy door-frame rises into the center of the canvas. Mr. Abbey adheres to the massive character imposed upon him at this point, and places there the great marble sarcophagus on which Amfortas reclines, wrapped in a mass of furs. To the right and left of this center the other personages of the scene are placed, their forms mingling with the slender lines of those pillars which uphold the roof. The result of this sagacious arrangement is that you apprehend the design in so many strictly balanced masses, and get from it, vaguely but surely, that feeling of smooth rhythm which architecture itself possesses in rivalry to music. This is the one sensation to which it is not only a pleasure, but a necessity, to return in the consideration of Mr. Abbey's work.

I began by pointing out the special character of mural decoration; and the highest praise to be expended upon a series of pictures like those in illustration of the Arthurian story is to say that they seem to grow out of the spaces in which they have been placed. That they should do this has been a delightful surprise to all those who have followed closely Mr. Abbey's work. The only mural piece by him which was known prior to the appearance of his Grail designs is that charming bit of colonial genre, as it might be called, in which

he represented a game of bowls as played in New York during the Dutch occupation. This is a delightful picture—one of the quaintest Mr. Abbey has done. At the same time it is very much the picture and not so much the decoration, for all its effectiveness on the hotel wall which it adorns. Remembering that Mr. Abbey's fame had been won as a black-and-white illustrator, it was easy to assume that the Grail decorations would not be what they should be. The artist was accustomed to work in too minute a vein, with too delicate a touch, with too little color in his daily experience. What he lacked, and would prove himself to lack, was breadth. Well, we know now just what Mr. Abbey lacks as a mural decorator. He lacks space, time, opportunity; for even when he has completed his work in the library we will not have had half enough of his decorative charm. He has this last because he has those other things it was feared he might lack—richness and range of color, breadth and vigor of style. Both qualities are controlled in him by the feeling for structure, which is his most precious virtue; but in every relation of his art he moves with freedom, and the last impression he leaves is one of fine artistic pomp, of precisely that decorative bravura which means impressiveness without effort, splendor with serenity, brilliancy held in check by the decorative idea.

The endeavor has been made to present the various paintings thus far approached in the particular light shed from a true conception



IMPERIAL, NEW YORK CITY.

of what mural decoration means. It must be clear enough that what it does not mean is a picture placed without reference to its surroundings. But I wish to avoid the danger which lies in too conventional and too rigid an interpretation of this idea. The most impressive decorations are those in which the various motives employed have been really built up into a whole, composed in a very architectural sense. But it does not follow that because this building up is most tremendous in effect when the subject is in itself tremendous, as in Mr. La Farge's «Ascension,» only a heroic ideal is permitted to the decorator of a wall; that he must always be, as it were, epical, dramatic. Mural decoration, like every other form of painting, has, if I may continue to borrow from poetic terminology, its lyric moments, and it is of these that I now desire to speak. Were I to hark back to earlier epochs, I should be inclined to go to the eighteenth century, and find an illustration in Tiepolo. It is more gratifying to discover the type in an American painter vastly superior to Tiepolo in everything that means delicacy of temperament and distinction of tone. I mean Mr. Dewing. He does not figure very often as a mural painter. When he has appeared in that character it has been at rare intervals in certain private houses which have kept his work hidden. But in one of the rooms of a New York hotel—in the Imperial, at the corner of Broadway and Thirty-second street—there

is a ceiling painted by Mr. Dewing which is all that is needed to affirm his full title to a place among the first of decorative painters. It is a circular panel showing three allegorical figures, Night, Dawn, and Aurora, the three poised together in the sky, with a pale, thin, crescent moon separating Aurora from her sisters. Dawn half lies in the lap of Night, and holds in one outstretched hand the morning star. All three are draped in soft robes of subtle blues and pinks, which blend imperceptibly into the turquoise blue and cirrus white of the sky and its clouds. The three make no sign; there is no dramatic gesture, there is no elaboration of symbolism. The group hangs in a sweet insouciance, graceful, pliant, the very incarnation of a lyric inspiration. In its blithe freedom from all hint of academic formalism, wherein, it may be asked, does its mural character survive? In its subtle and absolutely successful maintenance of a kind of aerial balance, it may be replied, the figures floating in the sky like some fixed stars, irregular, if you like, in their disposition, but with an undercurrent of something that tells you their relations have been perfectly adjusted.

It is this peculiar symmetry which belongs primarily to a ceiling, particularly to a ceiling of circular outline. Such a space needs a light, vivacious motive; it wants some fragile forms flung with the ease of heedlessness upon the waiting surface, and at the same time welded together in a composition which ac-

ords in spirit with the solidity of the walls that bound it. Remember all that is implied in a problem of this description, and it will be seen that Mr. Dewing exerts an uncommon power in mural decoration; that he possesses in unusual measure the faculty of seeing his composition as a whole, apprehending its relations, and determining with profound intention the flow of every contour, the illuminative office of every stroke of the brush, whether it be to flood with light or to whelm in shadow. In short, while his work seems far removed from such strictly constructive design as that exemplified by Mr. La Farge's «Ascension,» it is architectural, decorative, to the very rim of the canvas. It is Mr. Dewing's privilege, however, to project into his decorative work, with no diminution of its special character, an exceptional proportion of the charm which belongs to his art in any form. The ceiling to which I have referred is not an easel picture, but it has added to its mural point all the beauties of the artist in his smallest and subtlest achievements. The magnified scale of the work has done nothing to modify Mr. Dewing's accustomed elegance and daintiness of style. The design has the same fine outlines, the same exquisite modulations of line and surface, which belong to paintings like «The Hermit Thrush.» In this ceiling he has changed the conditions of his art without surrendering any of his characteristics of style; he has abandoned the mere limitations

in space of the «conversation piece» for the spacious lines of monumental art; but he has remained himself, he has kept the beauty, the originality, which make him distinguished. To do this is perhaps the greatest triumph of the decorator, and I know of nothing more delightful in those works which we have traversed than the strong individualism which they illustrate. In the case of Mr. La Farge, for example, we have found ourselves in the presence of a man who had established himself as a painter of easel pictures before he had taken to decoration; yet the transition has been marked by an increase of authority, by an expansion of the artist's style, without any loss of that temperamental quality which made him interesting in the first place.

This point is distinctly worth noting as indicative of a particularly healthy tendency in the new American school. Nowhere is it so easy to become dryly academic as in mural decoration. The strongest individuality may find itself staggered by the vastness of the scale on which it is suddenly asked to manifest itself; and even in his moments of wildest liberty the artist will paint so cautiously that his native touch grows thin, his style undergoes a change. Our own men have stood firm even in their experimental stages. The decorations at the Chicago Fair demonstrated this. They were lamentably crude in more than one instance, but in the long run every one of the painters contrived to make the



KEY TO THE DECORATIONS BY EDWARD SIMMONS.



PAINTED AND COPYRIGHT BY EDWARD SIMMONS, 1895.

“JUSTICE.”

IN THE COURT OF OYER AND TERMINER IN THE CRIMINAL COURTS BUILDING, NEW YORK CITY.



PAINTED BY THOMAS W. BERING. "NIGHT, DAWN, AND AURORA," IN THE HOTEL IMPERIAL, NEW YORK CITY.

observer feel that the work was genuine, that it had a strong force behind it. That force was compelled to start, of course, from the natures of the various painters who began three or four years ago to look upon wall-painting as a substantial form of art and one worth practising. But it has had to look for nourishment, also, at the hands of connoisseurs and public officers, and at this point we draw near to one of the most interesting phases of our sketch. What chance has mural decoration in America, what encouragement, what opportunity, what stimulus for the men whose abilities are only waiting to be employed in this lofty sphere of artistic activity? Private enterprise has done much, and is doing more. Public and semi-public efforts have also been made, and are still efficient. Mr. La Farge's great church decoration offers one proof, and his experience offers many more to which reference might be made, did the scope of the present paper permit. Mr. Sargent and Mr. Abbey have done their work in one of the public monuments of Massachusetts. Mr. Dewing owed the commission for his beautiful ceiling to the enlightened policy which has begun to regard hotels as legitimate objects of artistic labor.

Mr. Edward Simmons has been working for some time on three panels for the Court of Oyer and Terminer in the new Criminal Courts Building of New York City. The opportunity was given to him by the Municipal Art Society, which arranged the competition which he entered, and will provide the funds for the completion of the work. But when that work is in place it will stand in an official spot, and though privately inspired, as it were, it will place us on record as having employed the services of an artist in a building public to a degree, and in an official, national sense, that even the library at Boston is not. In this we have an occasion for rejoicing, for the beginning is, after all, the thing, and having begun by decorating the walls of one of our municipal buildings, the road is short to similar undertakings. The enthusiasm is already spreading: the new Congressional Library at Washington, for example, is to contain several important decorations. A further assurance of the normal development of the art is presented in the case of Mr. Simmons's decorations. They are in a good place, and they are good themselves. In fact, there has been nothing more decorative produced here in all the brief history of the art. The wall given to Mr. Simmons is that before which the judge's bench is placed. It is marked

in the center by a recess of some few inches, crowned by an arch. In this central panel Mr. Simmons has portrayed a stately and majestic ideal of Justice, showing her erect in severe white robes, with the flag flung so deftly over her left shoulder, and falling so gracefully down her side, that it becomes part of her drapery in a very subtle artistic way. She holds aloft the scales, and in her other hand poises the crystal globe surmounted by a cross which symbolizes the Christian world. Above her, small cherubs bear the arms of the city and the State. At her feet two childish figures carry the sword of condemnation, and the dove in which Mr. Simmons hints the gentleness of acquittal. These figures stand below a flight of two or three stone steps, which end in the platform on which Justice rears her queenly lines. Behind her is a simple iron door, flanked by columns. On the wall to the right of this panel an oblong division is filled with a representation of the Three Fates, seated on a marble bench, with the fragment of a pillar at the end nearest the Justice. To the left, a group of three figures disposed in a similar composition are emblematic of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The side-pieces are nicely balanced with each other, the same gradation in the heights of the figures being kept in both pictures. The latter stand, moreover, as exactly the wings needed for the tall canvas in the center. Taken as a whole, regarded as a design, the work is brilliant in its adherence to the rules imposed by its surroundings. It is finely held together, each figure falling into its place with naturalness, and at the same time with that special dignity and poise essential in mural decoration. The principal figure, Justice, is extraordinarily imposing; an abstraction, if it must be called one, but brimming over with character; a figure so vitalized that it looms imperious in its place, touches the imagination, and stirs the emotions, as is seldom the case with the *Justitia* of pictorial or decorative art.

With this suggestive decoration I close for the present this survey of recent mural painting in America. All the men here mentioned are destined to exert a good influence upon the growth of their art. In another paper we may return to other men. It is certain that we have in America more than one master of mural decoration; that the country is appreciative of their gifts; and that the movement which has been begun through that appreciation and the exercise of those gifts is gaining in impetus.

Royal Cortissoz.