

TOPICS OF THE TIME.

The Future of the Metropolitan Museum.

WHILE we do not purpose to discuss the recent protracted libel suit of *Feuardent vs. Cesnola* (proceedings in which are indeed still pending in the courts), nor the collateral issues involved therein, we desire to "improve the occasion" by some general suggestions based upon the experience of the past, and having regard solely to the future well-being of an institution whose objects command the deepest sympathy of every intelligent member of the community.

Suppose the gentlemen composing the Board of Trustees had to establish in this country a branch of manufacture new to us, but which had been carried on successfully elsewhere, would not their first step be to procure the best-trained ability that money could buy in that special branch? Could they afford to take any other course under penalty of certain failure? So here it would seem that the thing of first importance would be to find the men who know best, and in a strictly professional and practical way, what the Museum should be, what the objects to be accomplished are, what classes of exhibits are of the first importance, how they can be procured, what they should cost, and especially what relative importance should be given to the departments of which a museum must be made up. In a word, every man of business is aware that the first essential in any enterprise is a person who actually knows how to do the thing, and that for practical purposes amateur knowledge is worse than no knowledge.

To carry on a Museum of Art is, indeed, a very complicated business. First, as to its uses and objects,—above all, the educational (in the highest sense), which in this country is the first object. It is to teach something, the importance of which is felt, and the knowledge of which does not exist among us except in the vaguest sense. There is no greater or more common fallacy than the idea that this knowledge is of easy attainment. Every one who goes to an art gallery feels the right to pronounce as to the value of the works before him, when, in fact, in nine cases out of ten, his judgment shows nothing at all except his own stage of culture. The man who has a gallery of fashionable pictures never doubts that he sees in his Meissoniers or Milletts or Boughtons all there is in them, just as he knows the qualities of the horses in his stables. In fact, the commonest error among the uneducated in art is that the difference in pictures is in the degree of skill with which nature is photographed; while the real value, the new aspect of the world, or of nature, or of thought which they unfold, is unsuspected and invisible to the untaught eye.

The true value of art consists in this, that it is a language embodying those high ideas of the finest races, which could be expressed and recorded in no other way. Apply this definition, for instance, to the music of the Germans, which is their art. Suppose that we knew about them all that we now know except their

music; and then consider what a new light on German character would be thrown by its revelation, and what a treasury of new thought and feeling for us would be opened. Now Greek sculpture not only reveals the Greek spirit to us as nothing else could, but has been a legacy out of which all subsequent ideas of the human form as a type of ideal beauty are derived; so that now no picture is painted, no statue molded, which does not trace back to it. For, though all original artistic nations—the Egyptians, the Indians, the Chinese, the Japanese—have represented the human form under various aspects, hieratic, characteristic, or grotesque, the Greeks first presented it as pure beauty and ideal humanity.

So of Greek architecture, and so of Italian painting. All these great arts are languages which are speaking to us all the time. They are languages *we* have barely begun to speak, hardly begun to understand; not understanding them, we cannot rightly understand modern art, which has its root in the ancient; nor those numerous subordinate arts growing out of them, and appropriated by the different nations to express their national spirit or ideals of grace. In this country it is only through great museums that these monuments of art can be brought before us. Individuals may be trusted to ornament their houses with (and lend or give to museums) specimens of the smaller and simply decorative arts, with blue china, and Capo-di-Monte and Limoges enamel, all of which have their great but subordinate value; but no American millionaire is going to compete with the museums of Europe for the rare and fragmentary specimens of Greek art that come to light. Even Italian pictures are so far beyond the common appreciation, that if a single specimen of acknowledged first-rate Italian work exists in this, one of the very richest countries in the world, the public does not know of it.

It would seem natural that the first attention of a great American museum should be directed to such things as these; that one of the first acquisitions should be a collection of casts of all the great Greek sculptures. Sculpture has the immense advantage that it can be more adequately represented by copies than any other art. An ample Architectural Museum or Department would be of first-rate importance in a country and city where more bad architecture has been perpetrated in the last thirty years than was perhaps ever accomplished elsewhere. Some masterpieces of Italian painting might still be procured. A full Art Library for students would be of inestimable value; and, above all, a trained corps of genuine experts.

Few know how far from easy it is to acquire a "knowledge of art," as it is called, and to have an authoritative judgment; and, on the other hand, how superficial amateur proficiency mostly is. Mrs. Mitchell (a writer well known to our readers, who has just published her "History of Ancient Sculpture") might tell us something about it. Prob-

ably she would say that to be a good expert one should have seen in their originals most of the extant specimens of pure Greek art, all the good Roman reproductions, all the important collections of Greek vases; should know Greek architecture, mythology, poetry; and that only by degrees would its wonderful lesson be learned, and its perfection revealed; that to know Greek sculpture is an education in itself. What is true of Greek sculpture is true of every great branch of art. This is what it is to be an expert, this along with rare natural aptitude, and this is what "expert" means in the great European museums. This is what we shall have a class of young men growing up to be, to take charge of our museums, when once we have the right man to show us the way. But let us not be misunderstood. There have always been men of special acquirements and scholarly and artistic tastes connected with the Museum, and devoted to its interests. But these very men have been hampered for lack of experience of a practical kind close at hand and always available.

We refer to the Cesnola collection merely by way of illustration. Gathered not only without sufficient means but without sufficient scientific knowledge; bought, as should never be forgotten, in the most generous and commendable spirit, but hurriedly; prepared for exhibition by men without museum experience,—the controversy and annoyance it has occasioned have been largely owing to a lack of expert knowledge in every stage of its history. And yet the very controversy that has been waged over the manner in which it should be exhibited may be taken as an evidence of the unique value of the collection. This value, which is mainly historical, so far from desiring to underrate, we wish rather to insist upon. We wish, in fact, to see the collection so carefully studied and sifted and scientifically guaranteed, that this value will be everywhere acknowledged; while the collection itself will be made to take its proportionate place in the work of public information and instruction. If, in this sifting process, however, a part of the collection should be either set aside as *artistically* so much incumbrance, or sold to, or exchanged with, other museums, we should not be surprised; for it will be admitted that a large part of it is fatally lacking in artistic value, and that owing to its very magnitude and repetition there is danger lest it should be actually misleading in a museum whose main object is to *educate the public in art*, that is, in the best and truest artistic expression.

There is a homely maxim that "hindsight is better than foresight." What has been said is to hint at the future that is open to the Museum rather than to criticise the past. Those who are old enough to remember the greatness of the impulse given to the study of natural science when Agassiz was brought to this country, can appreciate the force of the argument. The Museum needs, and should have, a munificent endowment; then, with the constant presence and advice of experts of the character described,—men of acknowledged authority in the realm of art, commanding the confidence of the entire public,—its present collections would form a valuable nucleus for the systematic building up of a truly educational museum.

The Metropolitan Museum conducted in this spirit would itself be an unrivaled center of artistic influence; but the time, we trust, is coming when its

treasures and resources will be reduplicated in value by an intimate connection with other of our large educational institutions; which institutions will perhaps yet be a part, more or less formal and official, of the great Metropolitan University of the future.

Mob or Magistrate.

DURING the year which has just closed, the telegraph has reported fifteen hundred and seventeen murders in the United States. This record is not supposed to be complete, but it is nearly so. The cases of capital crime are few which the enterprising reporter does not drag to light and publish to the world. The reader of any daily journal connected with the Associated Press is speedily informed of nearly all the desperate deeds that are done in the dark or by daylight upon this continent. The fullness with which crime is reported gives an impression of the increase of crime stronger than the facts will warrant; yet the facts are bad enough. During the year 1882 twelve hundred and sixty-six murders were reported. A comparison of two years is not conclusive, for there is considerable fluctuation in the number of crimes; it is only from comparison of periods of five or ten years that any trustworthy inferences can be drawn. But there is no dispute concerning the rapid increase of capital crime, and the fact is ominous.

Over against the fifteen hundred murders of the last year, we have the report of barely ninety-three legal executions. Many of these must have been cases in which the crime had been committed during 1882, while many of the criminals of 1883 had not yet been brought to trial. It is not, however, far from the truth to say that, while thirteen or fourteen hundred murders are committed in this country every year, fewer than a hundred of the murderers suffer the extreme penalty of the law. When the willful slayer knows that he has thirteen chances out of fourteen of escaping the full penalty of the law, the deterrent influence of punishment cannot be said to be very powerful.

What the law could not do, or has not done, lawlessness has undertaken to accomplish. The failure of judge and jury has let loose the private avenger and the mob. Quite a number of these fifteen hundred murders, as every reader of the newspapers will easily remember, were committed in obedience to the *lex talionis*, to expiate some previous crime. The Oriental avenger and the frontier lyncher join hands in this mad dance of anarchy. The same year that witnessed ninety-three legal executions witnessed one hundred and eighteen lynchings. The lawless executions outnumber the lawful ones by twenty-five per cent.

No very profound philosophy is required to explain the relation of these facts. The inefficiency of the machinery of justice has led to the introduction of these barbarous methods. In some of the States adultery is regarded by the law not even as a misdemeanor. What wonder that private vengeance sometimes rushes in to redress a mortal injury of which the law refuses to take cognizance. But it is not so much defective legislation as inefficient administration that produces lawlessness. The laws against murder are strong enough; but when the people know that not one in a dozen of the willful murderers receives the just recompense of his deeds, and that technicalities and quibbles are constantly allowed to shelter the