

THE BRYANT VASE.

A VERY good history of mankind might be made from the study of vases, since these vessels, perhaps more than any other works of art, show the utilities, tastes, and fancies of the various ages of the human race. In their simplest and rudest forms they seem to have been the first lisplings of the art spirit among men, and while the hollowed hand, the egg-shell, the nut, and the gourd may have suggested the form, the plastic clay, which unbidden takes the shape of the foot and hardens in the sunshine, furnished the material of the primitive pottery which is found among the remains of aboriginal tribes. The great nations that have won such name and left such monuments in sculpture and architecture have not despised these less pretending forms of art, and the vases of Egypt, Greece, Etruria, Rome, and Italy seem to have been a kind of compend of all artistic work, and to have abridged into a microcosm the talents and the lessons that were presented on a grander scale in statues and temples, bass-reliefs and paintings. The household life of nations is illustrated with especial fullness and minuteness by vases, and as they are seen to best effect by a near view, so they express well the near aspects of society, and perpetuate family traditions, habits, and affections. In fact, the familiar pitcher belongs to the order of vases, and in losing one of its handles it has not lost its birthright.

It is very easy to see how it was that they began in the most obvious uses and rose into beautiful art. Eating and drinking are surely very ancient usages, and it is not easy to eat or drink without some vessel to hold the food and bever-

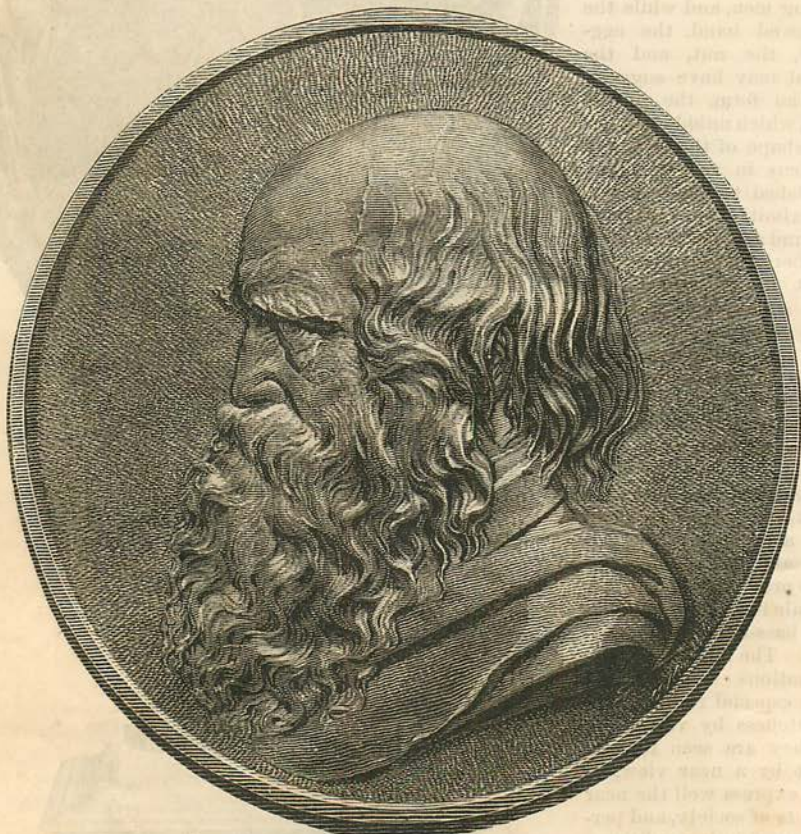


DESIGN OF THE BRYANT VASE.

age, even if they are the simplest pottage and milk. The rudest bowl, jar, or pitcher is virtually a vase, and suggests some record or ornamentation upon its surface. In fact, whenever a man eats or drinks he tends to talk, and to wish to make the vessels that he uses speak their purpose and record his remembrance or his mind. It is an instinct of our being to express ourselves, and when penmanship was unknown and printing was inconceivable, the sympathetic clay invited confidence, received confessions, embodied fancies; and pottery that began in prose

of ability, the masterpieces of ancient skill are now reproduced and circulated as never before on earth. The Wedgwoods, Minton, Copeland, Spode, and other masters of pottery have been art educators of the age, especially of the English-speaking race, and there are few regions in the backwoods of America or Australia that have not been visited, cheered, and instructed by their beautiful works.

There is good reason to believe that as soon as men learned how to work in metals their choice skill was used in making vases,



MEDALLION—PORTRAIT BUST OF BRYANT.

soon became the poetry which, in graceful forms and ornaments, inscriptions and imagery, spoke of faith and love, memory and hope, from heart to heart and from age to age. Household affections, public spirit, social festivity, patriotism and religion—these are all expressed in vases; and without laying much stress upon the present prospects of reviving the custom of cremation and cinerary urns, it is clear to us that vases are now having new importance in our social usages as well as in our taste; and while new designs are constantly made by artists

especially in bronze and gold and silver; and the explanation of our having comparatively so few specimens of ancient vases in the precious metals is to be found, not so much in their never having been made, as in their too great attractiveness to the robber and the conqueror, and in the temptation to melt them up into money. It was not only the rude hands of Goths and Vandals that did this work of destruction, but the great name of Benvenuto Cellini has part in the shameful record. In some respects he was a good deal of a pagan, and

while reverent toward the old classic art, he had no love for the traditions and monuments of Christian art, which so abounded in costly and exquisite works of gold and silver and jewels. It is a strange fact that by his hand the precious treasures of old church plate, which had been gathered by the popes for centuries, and upon which the old masters of the craft had bestowed their labors with entire devotion, and for which the faithful had paid countless sums as pious oblations, were all relentlessly consigned to the melting-pot to relieve the temporary

Benvenuto Cellini among the masters of that kind of work, and in England, where such recent specimens of silver-work as the Milton shield, the Abyssinian trophy, and Helicon vase have won for the silversmith the lost honors which he shared with painters and sculptors and architects in the days of Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, and Donatello. Our business is with the piece of silver-work now before us, to tell its story, describe its construction, and illustrate its lessons.

It was thought by the friends of William Cullen Bryant in this city that some tribute



MEDALLION—POETRY CONTEMPLATING NATURE.

distress of the pontiff, Clement VII. The result was a mass of gold weighing 200 pounds. But what exquisite vessels and rich settings of gems were sacrificed in order to yield that heap of vulgar spending-money!

It is not well for us now to follow the ready temptation to sketch the progress of the revival of gold and silver work in the Italian Renaissance, and in the recent awakening of the art spirit in metal-work, especially in France, where the name of Veichte is spoken in the same breath with that of

of respect was due to him when he reached eighty years of age, and the suggestion was made by one among them that a commemorative vase, of appropriate original design and choice workmanship, would be the best form of the intended tribute, especially since Mr. Bryant did not need any material aid, and, moreover, the sculptor and painter and engraver and publisher had already conspicuously paid their respects to him. Our leading artists and men of taste were consulted, and the plan of a commemorative vase was approved and acted upon. A committee of



MEDALLION—THE JOURNALIST.

twenty-five gentlemen of New York and Brooklyn took the matter into their charge, and associated with them prominent citizens of other parts of the country, from Boston to San Francisco. The committee waited upon Mr. Bryant at his home in this city upon the eightieth anniversary of his birthday, November 3, 1874, and after an address by Mr. Jonathan Sturges, who represented so well the best type of old New York citizenship, the written testimonial of respect with its large list of signers was presented, and Mr. Bryant made an appropriate and memorable reply. We need not publish these documents again, as the address and the reply were soon after given in the "Easy Chair" of this Magazine. The occasion was remarkable from the representative character of the company that met together, and from the interest of the interview. The leading elements in our business, culture, government, and religion were well represented, and Mr. Bryant and his guests had good reason to be happy in each other.

As the vase required much time for its completion, no effort was made to have it ready for presen-

tation then, but immediately afterward effective measures were taken to carry out the assurance contained in the address by completing the subscription of five thousand dollars, and securing the best design. The field of competition was thrown open to the whole craft of silversmiths, and while the first attempts showed crudeness and inexperience, and not a few persons declared it to be impossible for our designers and workmen to make a first-class work of ideal and historical art such as would be fit for presentation to the patriarch of American letters, the final result removed all these misgivings, and the fine designs that were offered at the closing competition in February, 1875, put all fears at rest, and proved that our silversmiths were up to the best standard of their guild, and that, with full preparation and fair notice, they can do as good work in their way as is done any where in the world. All the designs were creditable to their authors, and the specimens of modeling in wax and of casting and chasing in metal-work were interesting and encouraging. The

design of Mr. Whitehouse, of the house of Tiffany and Co., was accepted unanimously,

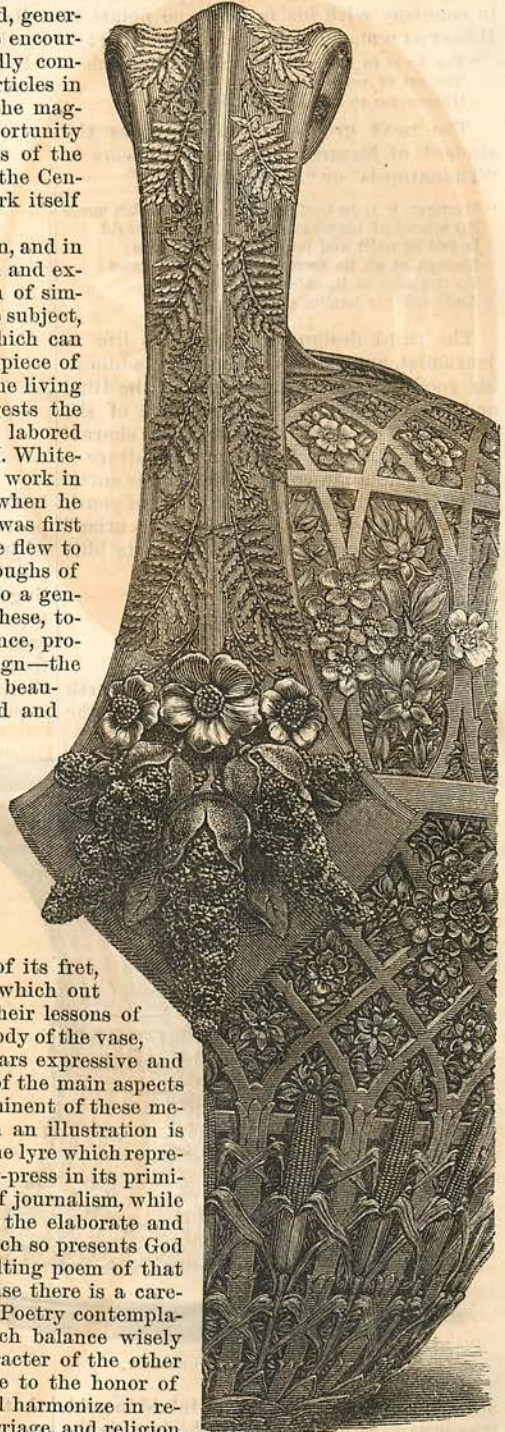


MEDALLION—TRANSLATOR OF HOMER.

alike from its beauty and its fitness, while the other designs were carefully examined, generously appreciated, and the public were encouraged to study their merits by friendly comments from the committee, and by articles in the newspapers and illustrations in the magazines. Our readers have now an opportunity to judge for themselves of the merits of the successful design, and the visitors at the Centennial Exposition are seeing the work itself with their own eyes.

It is not a very ambitious production, and in its severity of form and in its careful and exquisite details there is a combination of simplicity and beauty which belongs to the subject, and which ventures upon no point which can not be thoroughly worked out. This piece of silver means William Cullen Bryant, the living father of our literature, and it suggests the America in which he has lived and labored and sung. The artist, Mr. James H. Whitehouse, well expressed the spirit of his work in his remarks before the committee, when he said: "When the Bryant testimonial was first mentioned to me, my thoughts at once flew to the country—to the crossing of the boughs of trees, to the plants and flowers, and to a general contemplation of Nature; and these, together with a certain Homeric influence, produced in my mind the germ of the design—the form of a Greek vase, with the most beautiful American flowers growing round and entwining themselves gracefully about it, each breathing its own particular story as it grew."

Thus it is that the vase is entirely covered with a fretwork formed of apple branches and their blossoms, or a delicate basket-work from the apple-tree, which so well expresses Mr. Bryant's poetry in its fragrant bloom and its wholesome fruit. Beneath this fretwork, and forming the finer lines of its fret, are the primrose and the amaranth, which out of the lips of their loveliness speak their lessons of inspiration and of immortality. The body of the vase, which is thus formed and enriched, bears expressive and elaborate medallions of the poet, and of the main aspects of his life and works. The most prominent of these medallions is the portrait bust, of which an illustration is given on page 246. Above his head is the lyre which represents his art, and below is the printing-press in its primitive form, which suggests his career of journalism, while more prominent still, farther below, is the elaborate and beautiful design of the water-fowl, which so presents God over Nature in the charming and exalting poem of that name. On the opposite side of the vase there is a carefully designed and executed study of Poetry contemplating Nature—two female figures, which balance wisely the somewhat severely masculine character of the other designs, and give their womanly grace to the honor of the poet whose life and works so well harmonize in respect for woman, and for the home, marriage, and religion that give her the best defense and power. Between these two principal medallions there are on each side two groups illustrating scenes in the poet's life, making four



HANDLE, SHOWING PART OF THE BODY OF THE VASE.

groups in all. The first group presents him in company with his father, who points to Homer as a model in poetic composition:

"For he is in his grave who taught my youth
The art of verse, and in the bud of life
Offered me to the Muses."

The next group presents him as the student of Nature, such as he appears in "Thanatopsis" or "A Forest Hymn":

"Stranger, if thou hast learned a truth which needs
No school of long experience, that the world
Is full of guilt and misery, and hast seen
Enough of all its sorrows, crimes, and cares
To tire thee of it, enter this wild wood
And view the haunts of Nature."

The third design illustrates his life as journalist, and the fourth represents him in his good old age as translator of the Iliad and the Odyssey. The lower part of the bowl bears ornamentation from the characteristic products of American agriculture—cotton and Indian corn. The neck is encircled with primrose and ivy in token of youth and old age, while the "fringed gentian" suggests the grave thought from its blue petals:

"I would that thus, when I shall see
The hour of death draw near to me,
Hope, blossoming within my heart,
May look to heaven as I depart."

The famous line, "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again," is also given here in the

while the bobolink represents the whole tribe of his fellow-singers, and does honor to the poet and to his humorous verse on "Robert of Lincoln" from his perch. The base bears the lyre, the crossed pens, and



THE WATER-FOWL.

broken shackles, which so represent the poet as patriot and emancipator. The idea of justice as the animating motive of his public career is given in the vigorous handling of the Rudbeckia flower, which is the type of that virtue, and this idea gains power from the book without a name, and which from its prominent place can be none other than the Book of books.

Such are the form and features of this memorial vase, and, as in a graceful and spirited man, they make one whole, and the various parts indicate the dominating spirit. The robe of flower-work, with its cincture of medallions, the golden fillet emblazoned with the name of Truth, the arms that hold the emblems of the nation's wealth, the corn and water-lilies at the foot, the solid base with the lyre and broken chain, the bird, the two typical flowers, the printing-press, and the Bible—all these details gather around the life which they express, and make this piece of silver a work of ideal and historical art. As a whole, the work has a look of simplicity, and seems easy of execution, yet the process was very laborious and costly; and a careful examination of its various stages and methods, with the help of the best judges and books, justifies the opinion



NECK OF THE VASE.

form of an ornamental border inlaid in gold. The ornament at the foot of the bowl is the water-lily, the emblem of fluency and eloquence. The handles are richly decorated with the fern, the cotton, and Indian corn,

that industrial art in America has taken some steps forward by this tribute, and that success in this instance is likely to tell upon the whole future of the silversmith's craft among us.

An effect quite as showy to the careless eye could have been produced at far less cost of time and money. The surface of the bowl could have been engraved in florid style with striking contrasts of light and shade, silver and gold, and the medallions could have been cast from the wax in which they were modeled. But this would not be the high art which comes to us from the silversmiths of Greece, and which Cellini and his associates have made classic in the New Ages. Art is high and true in proportion as it rises above material mechanism, and uses the living power of the human thought and touch; and this vase is thoroughly and intensely human in this sense. The flat solid plate of silver was all that the workman had to begin with; and this plate, first with wooden mallets and then upon the arm of an anvil with hammers, was beaten into the form of the bowl, not without great care and long labor. Then began the nicest and most difficult part of the task—working out from the surface by the *repoussé* process the flowers and projecting portions of the design according to the model in wax which had already been made of the whole. Taking our own ignorance as some measure of the general knowledge of readers as to this subject, we may venture upon a little account of this *repoussé* work. What are called the formative processes in all metal-working may be classed under five heads—casting, beating hot, beating cold, electrotyping, and cutting away by erasive tools. All these methods to a certain extent have been employed in this vase; but the chief method has been that of beating cold, or the *repoussé* system, of which Cellini was such a master, and which the greatest metal sculptor of the present day, Morel Ladeuil, has reproduced with such effect as to make it the part alike of wisdom and of modesty for



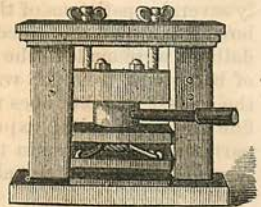
RUDBECKIA.



MEDALLION—FATHER AND SON.

other artists to follow it, as the makers of this vase have done.*

The *repoussé* style begins its task by working the surface from within outward by means of snarling-irons, which have two horns very much like those of an anvil, and, like an anvil, they rest upon a block. One of these horns is made to touch the proper point on the inner surface of the vase, and the blow is given not directly upon this horn, but upon that opposite, which, when struck with skill, sends its vibrations to the other horn, which is in contact with the metal. By these vibrations the surface is raised to the due elevation so gradually and yet so vigorously as to secure the result without breaking or weakening the metal. When the bowl is thus shaped from within to the requisite form for the intended projections, it is filled with a composition of



PRINTING-PRESS.

* The greatest piece of silver-work—the Helicon vase—which has been produced in our day is from this artist's hand, and the art labor upon the work cost some thirty thousand dollars. The time spent upon it was six years. The sculptor of the medallions of the Bryant vase was once a fellow-artist with Ladeuil.



THE STUDENT OF NATURE.

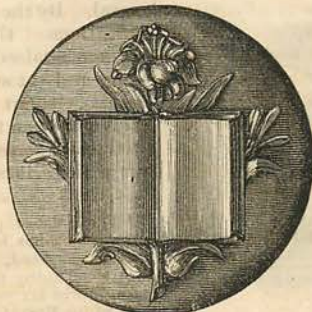
pitch and other ingredients; and then the workman changes his course, and begins his more difficult task of working the projecting surface into due form from the outside. In this way all this exquisite flower-work was produced, and every blossom and leaf, every ear of corn, lily, and primrose, was wrought by the eye and hand of the artist, and each thing bears the mark of his mind and his touch. The work requires generally several repetitions of the process, and the bowl is emptied and filled again. The medallions were made in the same way, instead of being cast from the wax, which is much the easiest way, but does not leave the same fine lines and vital expression. In some parts of the work, as in the handles, whose form and figures did not allow *repoussé* work,

casting was resorted to, the designs being modeled in wax from studies of natural objects.

To a novice in these matters, like the writer, the progress of this vase has been a continual surprise. He knew nothing at all of the details and various processes of the work, and in his simplicity he supposed that the chief value of silver plate was in the metal itself, and that it would be a generous division to allow as much for the work as for the material. But the truth is that the material is of very little cost in comparison with the labor bestowed upon first-class silver-work—of less cost relatively than the sculptor's marble or the cabinet-maker's wood. Cellini could work an ounce of silver into such exquisite form as to make golden ducats contemptible in comparison; and our own best silver-workers show specimens of exquisite workmanship, in which the metal bears to the work very much the relation that the canvas bears to the painter's masterpiece. It is safe to say that the cost of this vase, which is far beyond what the makers receive for it, is some forty or

fifty times the price of the silver of which it is made, so much is there of mind and so little of matter in its composition. There is a full year's work of the best workmen, with the help of the artist who designed and of the master who superintended the work. This surely is a gift which the American people need not be ashamed to offer, and which our venerable poet can receive with a just pride in the years and the country which it commemorates, and in the grateful sentiment and exquisite workmanship which it embodies in a form that makes the silver and gold from our mines combine Greek culture with Christian faith, and lifts this tribute to a man into a monument of the life of the age and of the mind of the nation.

SAMUEL OSGOOD.



LILY AND BIBLE.