



A LIBRARY EFFECT, BY COLMAN.

A TRIAL BALANCE OF DECORATION.

CONTRARY to the prediction of many sober-minded citizens, the "decorative art craze," as they were pleased to call it, has not died out, though it has passed through many phases in a few years, and may now be seriously considered as a revival, and as an organized attempt to extend and develop the achievements of art till beautiful things, and the beauty that is the result of harmony in our surroundings, become the rule and not the exception.

The process of distillation that has been going on ever since the Universal Expositions and the importations of Oriental goods began to make the artist's pot boil seems likely to result in such assimilation and adaptation of foreign ideas as to warrant the expectation of some distinctly national achievement. There are few stronger indications of the popular progress of any science or calling than the es-

timation in which its professors are generally held, and an American must be very young who can not remember the almost universal indifference to hideous interiors as coeval with the prevalent belief that an artist is a poor devil whose precarious existence is the natural outcome of irregular habits encouraged by fanatical and fantastic ideas.

It is only a few years since the name of an American artist has become commercially valuable. Your paper-hanger or carpet-dealer no longer urges that this is the most fashionable pattern, but expects your bewildered mind to find relief from responsibility in the name of Tiffany or of Colman.

The commercial element that is so often complained of by modern artists has proved a powerful assistant in the development of art industries. The investors of capital find small returns in dilettant experi-

ments, and the competition of traders has created a demand for the best talent and the most thorough experts. It is becoming generally understood that, to achieve satisfactory results, trained specialists must co-operate, and in methods at least we are approaching more nearly the conditions of the best periods of art.

Much effort is necessarily as yet misdirected; the relative importance of the various branches of art is not yet properly determined; but as we become less fervently enthusiastic, and learn to consider fine art less as a new and delightful pastime, and more as a natural constituent part of material and intellectual life, we shall do things more soberly and advisedly. We shall, it is to be hoped, outgrow the present haste to enjoy that demands the conception and execution of an ambitious scheme in a twelvemonth, at the sacrifice of excellence, and therefore to the exclusion of progressive development. It is in this respect that the commercial spirit is often at fault; it recognizes the necessity of catering to the prevalent taste, but does not foresee that only real excellence can long command popular approval.

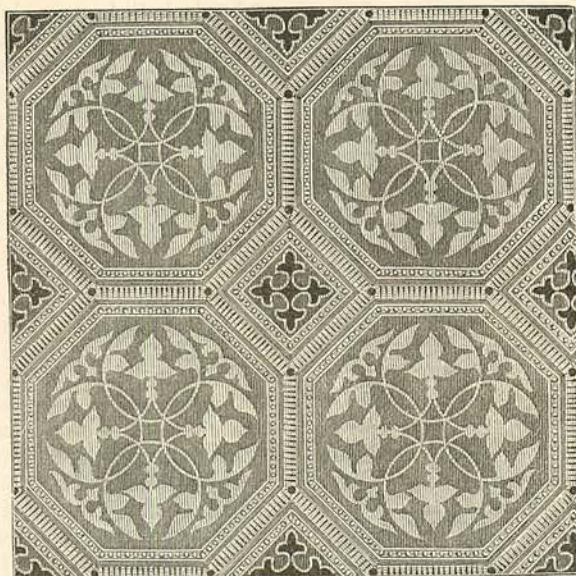
What can properly be called the "decorative art craze" is dying out. The absurdity of making our parlors museums of heterogeneous knickknacks, including the æsthetic bulrush standing in a besmeared drain-pipe, is becoming more and more apparent. We are beginning to appreciate that our Japanese collection never appears to such advantage as when collected, that our buhl table is no assistance to our Smyrna rug, and that, in short, style is—style.

The impossibility of reviving conditions that form and develop distinct style—that is, the impossibility of shutting out all foreign influence—makes assimilation and adaptation inevitable; but these terms are synonyms for originality, which in America is not hampered by local tradition, and for this reason should be more strongly asserted here than in older countries.

What has already been accomplished is of course only an indication of what may be achieved when the public becomes

more discriminating as the artists become better trained. The conditions of our daily life must in time establish limitations that will be tacitly admitted, determining a kind of natural selection of the fittest of the incrustations of all ages.

Now that our commercial millionaires have begun to vie with each other as liberal patrons of art, we find the most ambitious undertakings in New York city; and though five years hence the most elaborate efforts of to-day will seem comparatively mere experiments in luxurious splendor, it is hardly five years since a description



BIT OF CEILING IN UNION LEAGUE CLUB HOUSE, BY LA FARGE.

of them would have sounded, to American ears at least, like fabulous extravagance. Not that the humbler tastes of the æsthetic poor are receiving less attention; on the contrary, our most famous decorators take especial pride in such small triumphs over economical restrictions as the accompanying illustration of a small library effect, by Mr. Samuel Colman, in which a delicate sense of proportion and of color is made to supply the place of expensive materials and workmanship. The effect is in no sense a compromise; the surfaces would not be improved by enrichments that economy precluded, and the simplicity it enforced is beauty in Mr. Colman's hands, especially as the shelves were designed to receive the bric-à-brac that so greatly enhances the effect.

It is not by any means in the most importantly large and public undertakings that we find the best examples of our decorators' work, but few better things have been done in flat decoration than the small ceilings in the dining-room of the new Union League Club house, by Mr. John La Farge. Our wood-cut robs the design of its color, which, being its greatest charm, must, if possible, be imagined with the aid of such words as we can find. The ground is a pale and varying tone of brass-colored gold, thinly applied, realizing the tone that is the peculiar mark of time. Upon this ground the pattern appears in pale but *vif* greens and reds, both being apparently more dragged on than painted, and the fine interlacing lines are pencilled in a changeable maroon or dragon's-blood. Here and there a centre within a green or red leaf is emphasized with the least flake of a higher tone of gold. Altogether we do not remember any conventional treatment that by simple means conveys an impression of so much richness, delicacy, and mellowness.

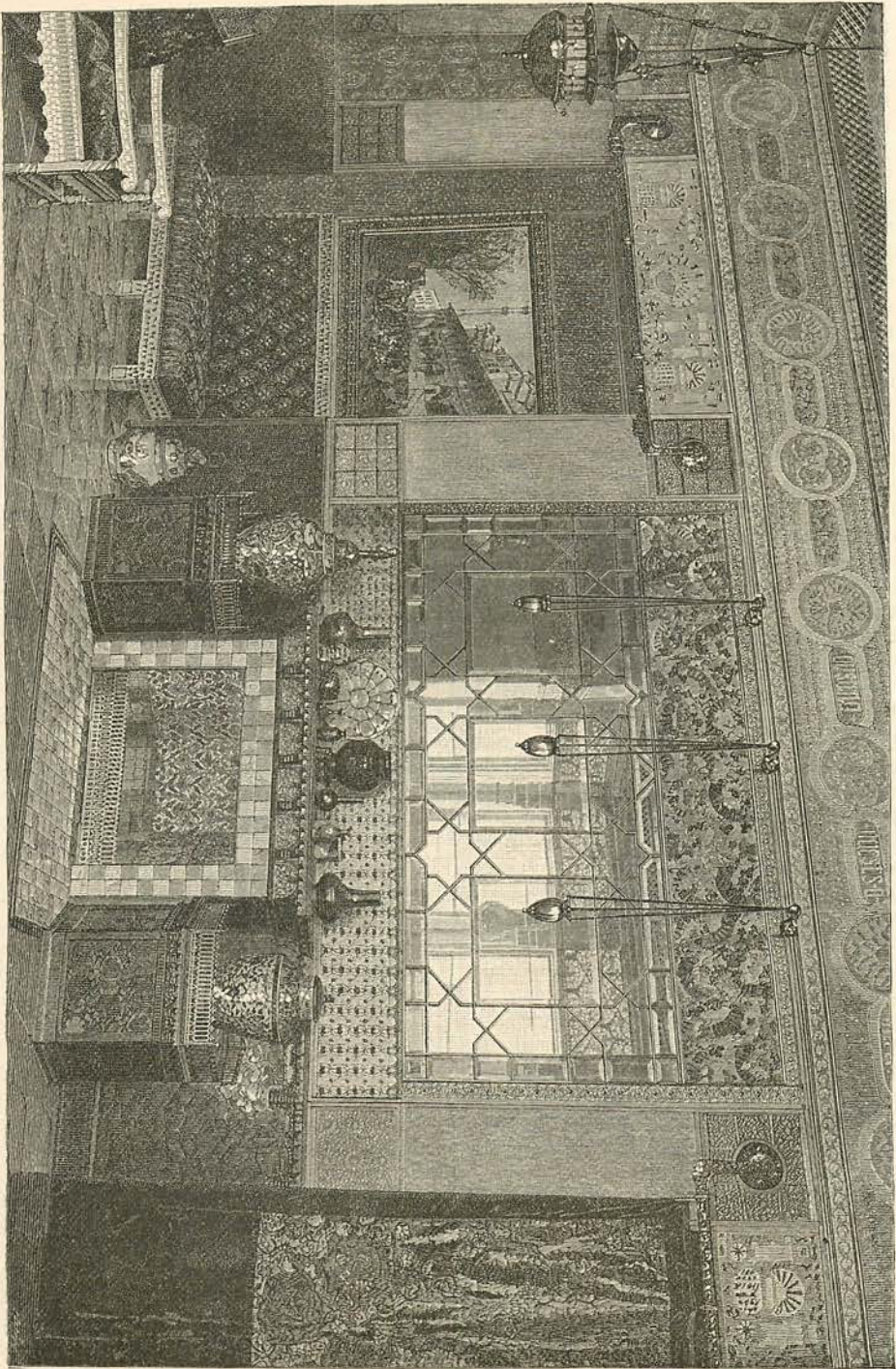
Mr. Frank Lathrop has also accomplished a most effective invention in mural decoration as part of a scheme that adorns our most recently completed private houses, but it would be futile to attempt in black and white to convey any idea of the beautiful gradations of buffs and olives judiciously heightened with various tones of gold upon which the effect entirely depends. We mention it, however, as something which, though on a small scale, is an important contribution to American decoration.

There is no lack of expensive examples of mural and all other internal decoration, but as yet there are few that can be cited as consistent and valuable contributions to the art, and which must always retain an important place in our estimation. We have already referred to the decorations of the Union League Club house in speaking of Mr. John La Farge's dining-room ceilings, and there are other details of his treatment of the same apartment which are more or less interesting, but as a whole we do not feel that the scheme of enrichment, as he has executed it, commands attention either as original design or happy adaptation. In this room the curtains and the portières are examples by Messrs. Louis C. Tiffany and Co., and though they are marvels of technical skill, are strangely at variance with both the

architectural treatment and the decorations, being slavishly Japanese in design and execution. The halls throughout the building have been decorated by Messrs. Louis C. Tiffany and Co., even to the carpets on the stairs and on the third and fourth floors, and while we can appreciate the difficulties of the situation, arising largely from architectural inconsistencies and imperfections, we can not find much encouragement for the cause of decorative art in these walls and in these windows, especially when considered as a whole scheme. There are here and there, as in Mr. La Farge's work, effective panels, agreeable tones of color, even brilliant effects realized by simple means, but these do not save the whole from the imputation of experimentalism.

The Veterans' Room in the Seventh Regiment Armory, lately completed by the same firm or association of artists, invites criticism as a particularly bold departure from such theories as have hitherto found favor, and though we can here find many beautiful details, and must admire the scheme of color, especially the subtlety with which it is realized, these virtues do not atone for the affectation of rudeness, the multiplicity of unimportant detail, that destroys repose, and gives the whole a theatrical expression. In short, we can not help feeling that with such ample proportions a revival of some fine old mediæval guard-room would have been more to the purpose, unless a distinctly modern treatment could have been adopted, and this does not seem to us an unpromising task from the decorative stand-point. Such an undertaking could not have failed to be instructive, at least, in Mr. Tiffany's hands, and this his Veterans' Room certainly is not.

Mr. Tiffany and Mr. La Farge have devoted their efforts to the development of stained glass manufacture, and it is hardly too much to say that these gentlemen have sent out from their respective studios windows that are in many instances equal to anything ever accomplished in this branch of art. Both Mr. La Farge and Mr. Tiffany are eminent colorists, and it is no matter for surprise that they should forsake their palettes for the translucent qualities attainable in their opal and iridescent glass. We can not, however, believe that they will long continue to include stained glass and polychromatic mural decoration in the same scheme, be-



PARLOR DECORATION, BY LOUIS C. TIFFANY AND CO.

cause it will be generally admitted that the glass is more effective when opposed, as in the old cathedrals, to walls, ceilings, and floors of monotone, in which all rich effect is attained by carving and moulding. A strong instance of the objection to combining stained glass and mural decoration is furnished by the position of Mr. La Farge's pictures in the chancel of St. Thomas's Church, where it is impossible to see the pictures with clearness, owing to the windows above, for which Mr. La Farge is not responsible, except in so far as he did not stipulate for their removal.

In domestic interiors one of the most important lately completed is the drawing-room we illustrate, as far as it is possible to do so without color. In this room Messrs. Louis C. Tiffany and Co. have made an elaborate attempt to assimilate the moresque idea to modern requirements, and no expense has been spared to attain the most perfect result in every respect, even the grand piano being made to assume a moresque garb. A superb picture of the grand mosque and market-place at Cairo, by Passini, occupies the recess on the left of the fire-place, and the doorway on the right is hung with the richest embroidery. The fire-place is lined with old Persian tile in blue, blue-greens, and dark purplish-red on a white ground, making a valuable sensation in the surrounding opal tile, of which the hearth is also composed. These opal tiles are clouded, sometimes wholly opaque, sometimes nearly transparent, and generally diaphanous, and they are backed with gold, a glint of which is perceived here and there. The dado and the floor would not be described by the word "parquet," being much more than this term implies—an intricate system of inlaid-work of all manner of native and foreign woods, highly polished, and forming gradations and contrasts of browns, buffs, yellows, reds, and black. All the wood-work above is executed in white holly, the panels in which are filled with various incrustations of stucco in delicatemoresque patterns re-enforced with pale tints, gold, and silver. Such portions of the walls as are not otherwise occupied are covered with stamped cut and uncut velvet on a satin ground, in tones of pale buff, red, and blue, receiving the light in various ways, so that no two portions appear the same from any stand-point.

The frieze between the bands of silver and red mosaic and moulded lines of tur-

quoise blue is brought out in bold disks at varying intervals on a buff ground, filled in with an infinite detail of silver, gold, pale purple, and white. The cornice is formed by a procession of carved silver corbels appearing against a brilliant chrome background, and on these rests the ceiling of galvano-frosted iron overlaid with geometric tracery in relief, forming hundreds of small panels of various forms, in which enrichments of gold and silver appear against the frosted background.

The panels of the bevelled mirrors above the mantel serve to reflect the white enamelled shafts in the large bay-window opposite, and the mother-of-pearl effects of the double stained glass windows draped in rich folds of olive and gold embroideries.

The furniture is all of white holly, carved, turned, and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, making rich effects with the olive plush coverings embroidered in cream and gold-colored floss.

The room is lighted by five lanterns, not including the three small ones over the mantel, which, though dimly lighted, are only intended to complete the decoration in brass and turquoise. The five useful lanterns are of different patterns of filigree brass-work, suspended by curious chains, and the whole effect is certainly moresque, certainly beautiful, and unquestionably expensive. Whether an assemblage of black coats and trousers seems consistent with this Oriental magnificence is a question which hardly concerns us.

The only fault we think it fair to find is one for which the decorator is only indirectly responsible: the room is too small for such a treatment, and refuses in other ways to lend itself absolutely to the scheme. However, the result is a fair example of consistency throughout, as far as it is possible to be consistent in transplanting an exotic to a Northern clime, and it is to this faithful preservation of style, as well as the delicate distribution of color, that the apartment owes most of its charm.

Among the many contracts for elaborate furnishing undertaken by the importing and manufacturing firm of Herter Brothers is a drawing-room in a Fifth Avenue mansion, for which Mr. Walter Shirlaw painted the frieze we illustrate; and though Mr. Shirlaw is not our greatest colorist, he has displayed much pleasing fancy in this design, and has preserved a nice balance with the rest of the scheme,



A FRIEZE, BY WALTER SHIRLAW.

which is as handsome and costly as rich materials and more or less faithful following of cinque-cento models can make it.

It seems to us that it is a due appreciation of the causes of cinque-centoism that is to give form and consistency to our desires, and direction to our efforts. There are numerous instances in each of the several styles, but we have mentioned only those that seem to possess some marked peculiarity indicating the direction of the present activity, and there can be little doubt as to the growing influence of Oriental styles in all conventional design. Neither Greek nor mediæval decoration seems to take as firm a hold on our susceptibilities as the various forms of Japanese, Persian, and moresque, especially the Per-

wrought in the manufacture of all materials; the revival of old colors and patterns, the invention of new, until our dry-goods shops present as brilliant spectacles as Oriental bazars, though there is no lack of the palest and softest tones in wonderfully delicate gradations and curiously effective textures.

Among other distinctly American art industries we may mention the tiles that are now manufactured at Chelsea, Massachusetts, by the Messrs. Low. These gentlemen have succeeded in giving an entirely new value to tiles, especially in regard to color and what we may call texture. By their processes tiles are not only modelled in relief, but are most beautifully graded in color, a blush of a certain tone



A CHELSEA TILE, BY THE MESSRS. LOW.

sian, for in this we find a constant reminder of the Greek, with all the freedom of the Japanese. It would be tedious to enumerate the changes that have been

seeming to spread and deepen over the surface, and while a certain grade of color is adhered to in a number of tiles, no two are alike in the distribution of values, and

the surface is apparently a thin glaze overlying a mellow molten depth. To this description of tiles has lately been added another still more effective, in which various colors are used in the same piece, and in which are seen curious crystalline formations of great brilliancy under the transparent surface. The beauties and novelties of these tiles are as impossible to convey in black-and-white illustration as are those of the opalescent glass now so deservedly admired, and which has added a new charm and larger range to the effect of our stained glass.

There is something encouraging in the instinctive adoption of Oriental conventionality while we adhere in realism to the Greek and Italian ideal, at least so far as the portrayal of humanity is concerned. The reciprocal influence of all the arts of design must result in a general tone of performance peculiar to our conditions, if not illustrative of them, as they become more settled. The decorative idea creeps into nine pictures out of ten, whether intentionally or not, and independently of

the subject, or object of the picture, or the whim of the artist. In the accompanying drawing by Thomas W. Dewing, he evidently could not resist the introduction of the flowing lines which bind the heads together, and are repeated in the row of hands below, so that what without these accessories would be simply a picture of more or less interest from a realistic and poetic point of view, becomes a decorative panel suggesting a scheme of recurrence. We select this example as a particularly strong instance of the tendency we speak of, to obliterate the line between fine art and decorative art, and in so doing to preserve our preferences or sympathies for distinctly different things. It remains to be shown whether we shall go floundering on with spasmodic devotion now to the Persian style, again to the East Indian or the European mediæval, or whether we shall assimilate what serves our purpose in all that floats to our shore, until a sense of style pervades which shall be as much ours as the Renaissance was the feeling of cinque-cento artists.



DECORATIVE PANEL, BY THOMAS W. DEWING.