

## A Paper Read by Julius Karpen before the Congress of the Central Art Association, held at Chicago,

May 3, 4 and 5, 1897.

It is rather unfortunate that the first paper to be read at this congress should deal with the abuse of art. Perhaps it would have been more fitting to treat first of its great importance in almost every walk of life, because there is no occupation one can enter, no field of life in which to work, where art does not play a significant part. One glance through the program outlining the discussions of the ten sessions of this congress is enough to convince the most skeptical of this fact.

Therefore I may be pardoned if I say a few words about art from a manufacturer's point of view. I cannot hope, in the short space allotted to this paper to make an exhaustive effort, and I will confine my remarks to those lines of manufacture with which I am most familiar; the manufacture of home furnishings, and especially the furniture of the home.

The aim of the manufacturer is to produce an article which will be generally acceptable to the trade which he endeavors to supply. He recognizes the fact that he must make use of ornamentation, and whether or not he will make a correct use of it, depends in each case upon the resources at his command, his capacity as a good judge of art and his desire to make honest goods.

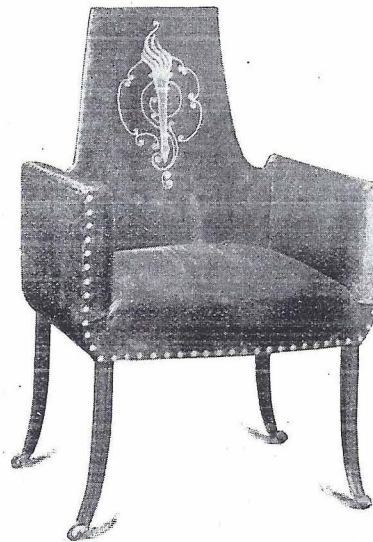
There is this difference between the fine and decorative arts. The artist before his canvas may create as he pleases, and may soar to any height to which his imagination may carry him. Not so with the decorator. His bounds are determined by many attending facts, changing with each case. He must, above all, make use of his reasoning faculties. The designer at work upon a new chair is obliged to keep continually before him not only the thought of producing something of beauty, but also its cost and utility. Utility is the first and highest object to be attained in manufacture, and ornamentation is not artistic if it destroys the usefulness of the article decorated. Usefulness is in itself a source of beauty which outweighs all other considerations in furnishing a home.

A manufacturer can err on the side of too much ornament as well as that of too little. The ornament must be sufficient and of the right kind to overcome the "simplicity and ungainliness" of form made indispensable by the use for which the object was intended. "It is not the quantity of ornament that tells, but ornament in the right place." "The defect of the thing to be ornamented is the starting point of the decorator." How few of our manufacturers make even an attempt to follow out this fundamental rule? I may safely say that by far the greater portion of furniture manufactured to-day is made, not to satisfy love of the beautiful and artistic, but to meet the demand for something showy and gaudy; articles to attract the attention of the vulgar and inartistic mind. We can agree with William Morris when he says: "This stupidity goes through all classes of society. The silk curtains in my lord's drawing room are no more a matter of art to him, than the powder in his footman's hair; the kitchen in the country farm house is most commonly a pleasant and homelike place, the parlor dreary and useless."

It is no doubt true that the manufacturer has many obstacles to overcome, and the carelessness and wantonness shown in an utter disregard for artistic ornamentation is for this reason to some extent excusable. The legitimate manufacturer who is honest in his desire to produce goods of merit, employs designers and artists to bring forth new and beautiful ideas, and his outlay in this respect is one of his heaviest items of expense. The designer may produce something particularly artistic and submit his efforts to the manufacturer, but he, alas, must judge it by other standards,

must view it as a matter of dollars and cents. "No doubt it is beautiful," says the manufacturer, "but it costs too much and I cannot find a market for it. You must change it here and there to make it saleable." So what was once an ideal in the eyes of the artist becomes a commercial article, not the creation of an artistic mind.

Throughout the subject of the applied arts are these two ideas opposed to each other. Beauty appealing to the imagination and the senses, while reason judges whether or not we can afford the beautiful or make a proper use of it for the purpose in hand. Too often, with the manufacturer the latter is the stronger and his only and primary object is to sell his goods, no matter in what condition or of what kind. His desire is to make money, and be his goods artistic or inartistic, the sole standard by which they are to be judged is the amount of sales. Not one manufacturer in one hundred recognizes the fact that he owes society the duty to do his best toward furthering the advancement of art and civilization. There is more at stake than a few paltry dollars, and the desire of money should not be the sole incentive of the manufacturer. His endeavors should be to make the homes of the people beautiful and artistic. For "upon properly appointed and becoming dwellings depends more than anything else the improvement of mankind, such dwellings are the nurseries of all domestic virtues."



But the legitimate manufacturer is harassed and handicapped in many ways, and most of all by those who make no attempt whatever to produce designs of their own but copy those of their competitors, and, by cheapening their productions drive honest competition from the field. They are the modern pirates and exist everywhere. They deserve only the scorn and condemnation of every lover of fair play and equity.

The eagerness on the part of manufacturers to increase their sales is cheapening their products and having a demoralizing effect upon the people. We are fast becoming a nation of bargain hunters, and are forgetting that such a thing as decorative art ever existed. There is an ever widening gulf between the great mass of the people and art. With the average man, art is a thing too far above him to talk about. He knows and feels that it exists, and that many are devoting their lives to its study, but for the most part it does not concern him, and he believes that art is confined to the houses of the rich and the museums.

This separation of the people from a proper appreciation of art has been accompanied by a corresponding separation of the decorative arts from the fine arts. The ordinary manufacturer of

to-day pays little or no attention to the fine arts, and consequently their influence upon the decorative arts is growing less and less. For this same reason have the arts become unpopular and have lost the hold which they once had upon the people. With how much loss to both the lesser and the greater arts this has taken place is not for me to discuss. They are interdependent and both have suffered and have been retarded in their development because each has lost the support of the other.

We can easily see then, the important position which the manufacturer holds as regards the people. He can appeal to them through the common things of every day use. He decides whether or not objects with which the people are continually in touch shall appeal to their love of the beautiful and artistic. In almost every case he judges the productions of designers and artists, and decides whether or no they shall go forth among the people. It is a great responsibility and one which but few recognize.

As we know that the history of nations is bound up with the history and development of contemporaneous arts, so we know that to-day both the fine and decorative arts are, to a great extent, shaping the history and development of our own country and of our own times. One single example of this: "The great office of decoration is to give people pleasure in the things they must perform make." Labor groans under the burden which through necessity it must carry. The laborer, yes the craftsman, is becoming more and more a mere machine. His work is becoming less and less interesting; it is but endurance and each year the complaints against the 'curse of labor' are growing louder and louder."

I will not lay the entire blame upon the manufacturer, but the facts confront us and the economic problems involved are grave ones. There is no quicker or surer way to solve them, than to make labor interesting. Let it feel the influence of the arts. Make the workman proud of his production and he will cease to complain of the labor undergone in its construction.

Art has never been looked to by modern labor agitators for a solution of the labor question, but it has a great weight and the questions raised are well worth consideration. Modern manufacturers have been careless; they have not viewed the question of decorative art in its proper light.

I congratulate the Central Art Association on the important work it has done toward the art education of the people. Its value cannot be over-estimated, and it deserves the hearty co-operation of every person who has the welfare of the country at heart. It should be the work of such an organization as this to aid manufacturers to study what kind of beauty appeals most and best to the people. To learn their needs and their wants; in short, to shape, form and develop arts suited to the times, and to ward off the destruction of all appreciation of the beautiful by what some are pleased to call, "the advance of commerce."