

BEAUTY IN AMERICA

A Collect for the Despairing

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THE conventional and reiterated complaint that America has wholly failed to create beauty meets at last with an adequately emphatic rejoinder. To the critic who would have us do reverence only to the arts and handicrafts of the Old World, Mr. Watts bids defiance. At jeremiads against mass production he merely scoffs. Good design remains good design, he reminds us, no matter how often it is reproduced — if the reproduction is adequate. Failure to recognize this is merely a reproach to our critics.

THEY had just met after the usual summer outing — two average Americans. One had toured New York State, eastern Pennsylvania, and New England; the other had been attending meetings in various cities in the West and in the Mississippi Valley — St. Louis, Des Moines, Kansas City, and, of course, Chicago. They had seen the cities at close range, the countryside from a car window. What was it that moved these two gentlemen to enthusiasm in relating their experiences? Above all, it was the discovery of America's quest for beauty, her love for it, and the revelation it had given them. Beauty in the personal attire and adornment of her people, beauty in the interiors and settings of homes, in public buildings and private business structures. They had been impressed, too, by the beauty of the famous preparatory schools, colleges, and universities — and above all by the beauty of public school buildings whether in large or small communities.

True, in the East and the West, the pilgrims had noticed such variations as economic and industrial exigencies demanded and the lay of the land involved; but each had something to say about the delight to the eye and about the inspiration which these monuments contributed. This realization is not a new revelation but a development of an old American love of beauty. If there were the crude days of early frontier achievements, even these efforts have now been glossed over by a certain curious glamour of the romantic which takes the form of a concern for old things, old times — colonial, revolutionary, or even centennial. Its concern does not disdain the kitchen of the Puritan any more than the mansion of the Cavalier; nor the earthenware crocks, woven coverlets, and cider jugs of the Pennsylvania Dutch. It takes roadside antiques, secondhand shops, hot dog stands, and tea

houses in a general grand mêlée, with a saving sense of humor.

Checking up on antiques is no longer a privilege for the dealer alone. The American people have recourse to their museums, and Henry Ford is planning a new kind, not only at the Wayside Inn in South Sudbury, Massachusetts, but in Detroit as well. Philadelphia is exhibiting in its parks dozens of colonial and revolutionary houses as "open air American Wings." This has a deep significance, as has the fact that at the International Conference of Museum Directors in France, a short time ago, American museums were awarded the palm for carrying beauty to the people and especially to the children in public schools. Toledo proved to be a banner city in this respect. Not a single foreigner who attended this conference raised a protest or spoke condescendingly of America's lack of concern for beauty. This was left to expatriated "professional" Americans who were present — for there are dissenting voices, raucous outcries. But of these one may say as Whistler once wrote, "In the moment of my triumph don't let me forget the ambulance."

The curious situation is that in the face of a million proofs of our possession of beautiful things and our enjoyment of them, we find, as the hierophants of despair, Lewis Mumford, Glenn Frank, H. L. Mencken, Thorstein Veblen, and Hendrick Willem van Loon, who go about weeping and wailing over America's lack of beauty and the spiritual crisis that consequently confronts her. They ignore the real achievements of our architecture, modern American as well as early American, and are blind to its development since the seventeenth century — a development by accommodation to climate and environment and still capable of meeting every practical demand made upon it. They ignore the equipment of the home and the desire for beauty in its surroundings — a desire so strong that the American garden, like the gardens of the Hesperides, is something to dream of. These dervishes cry out against these beauties because we find them duplicated from coast to coast and because certain necessities of life are machine-made. They refuse to acknowledge that they are machine-made by the genius behind a necessary and unparalleled national production — the Aladdin's lamp of America — which, because of this very method of manufacture, can be easily and inexpensively carried to the far flung hamlets, to the humblest of homes, urban and suburban. So these dissenters gnash their teeth and cry out, "At this feast of fat things, let us not forget the death head."

These critics are particularly frenzied over mass production. It is their bugaboo, made up for the most part of scarecrow remnants of abandoned and disproved æsthetics. Whether conservative or socialistic in their tendencies, they have invented a new kind of pessimism. Whether Sinclair, Upton, or Lewis be Christian name or surname, each overlooks much that has been said by their own veiled prophets. They forget that one of them has written: "A thing is not less beautiful because there are millions of other things exactly like it in the world. That is just a snobbish notion and William Morris should have learned the lesson from any field of daisies."

Our average Americans, returning from their summer travels, having touched perhaps the highways and byways of the Chautauqua circuits, have seen what this concern for beauty has brought about. And in realizing it they have wondered why it is that the criticism which has come from these despairers of American taste should have so little to do with the real facts. They must have wondered, too, what untilled and ungardened sands these philosophic ostriches have chosen in which to hide their heads. It is always elsewhere that one finds perfection, and generally they claim to have found it in their idealized Europe, the Europe of the sweet girl graduate who calls it "simply perfect."

As a matter of fact, it is very far from the truth to say that every village and every part of Europe is beautiful and that every individual in Europe has an instinct for beauty, including, to quote Glenn Frank, "the poverty-stricken peasant." It is likewise far from the truth when one says that machine-made things are ugly and have invariably been so, or that it is impossible to have mass production of machine-made articles without violating the canons of beauty — canons which, if we would believe these jeremiads, have always been revealed to the most primitive and depraved savages but denied to Americans. America, backed by competent men on the staffs of her museums dealing with applied and industrial art, challenges this criticism. Rather to be questioned is the belief that all handicraft output in domestic, applied, or decorative art is always beautiful. Some of the crudest and most hideous things yet produced in the world have been the products of the individual craftsman who has often worked oblivious of the technical perfection achieved elsewhere and ignorant of the real elements of beauty. Those who are avid these

days to exalt for modern usage the products of primitive man, including not only the Negroes of Central Africa but our own Indians in their Stone Age, forget that ethnologists express the greatest interest in the arts of primitive peoples not necessarily because the products are beautiful but because they are ethnological records. The value of many primitive objects lies not in their æsthetic quality but in the part they may have played in the development of the civilization of a particular country.

Not the least absurdity in this effort to indict the typical American's taste for the beautiful is the assumption that standardized American production being admittedly ugly, our only beauty in color or form or design has come within the past thirty years from the recent immigration — Latin, Slavic, and Semitic — which, presumably, has given us the benefit of its peasant arts and its alleged innate artistry, no matter how squalid the ghetto or how benighted the mysterious no man's land from which these contributions have supposedly come. With all this we have sensed an almost humorous insinuation that this immigration has been composed of culture bearing Michelangelos, Goyas, or possibly Spinozas, made hewers of wood and drawers of water to our own shame. This is an insincere and sophisticated effort to present the masses of this new immigration as abused helots. In some cases the grotesque insinuation made is that from these groups have developed superhelots who are our masters in literature, music, and the fine arts, and that the criticism which America is receiving in certain quarters is the justified disdain of these superhelots who serve us artistically only to despise us. Then, too, it may not be amiss to remind our critics of Whistler's remark that there never has been an artistic age nor a thoroughly artistic people. Of course, in an effort to disparage our own age in America, it is easy for our Mumfords and Sinclairs and Lewises to rummage in the alleged exquisite uniformity of the Middle Ages — which were not by any means uniform save in squalor and ugliness — overlooking the darkness of the Dark Ages to whose art one might well apply Franklin's dictum: "All cats are gray in the dark."

In the effort to make happy, prosperous America ever-conscious of the corpse at the banquet table, the fact is overlooked that all this railing at mechanistic American life is but a thin veneer of Rousseau's exploded theory of the æstheticism and idyllic romanticism inherent in people "in a state of nature." Indeed, as one of

the directors of a leading American museum has said: "A new conception of art in industry has been born in this country of unparalleled mechanical progress. Up to date mass production has suffered the reproach that it lacks quality. But theory in this case, as in others, stands to be confounded by practice. For industrial leaders who have seen production brought to the point where it is tremendously efficient as to quantity are giving attention to quality and are proving that this can be added to mechanical output. Machinery is capable of reproducing fine workmanship and multiplying it tremendously at the same time." Opposed to this view is that of the chief of all prophets of despair, Lewis Mumford: "Most of the objects of art that defile the common American household are machine-made. In considering the state of the useful arts in America it is quite beside the point to dwell upon the little oasis of archaic handicraft in whose shade many well-to-do people now take refuge: the very fact that this oasis is archaic is enough to account for the spindly and theatrical character of its arts and decorations. The question that most seriously concerns the lively critic is what sort of art the ordinary man can afford in the ordinary home: what have Trenton and Grand Rapids and Schenectady done in the matter of furniture, lighting fixtures, walls, and floors? Have any sound æsthetic ideas begun to irrigate the Sahara of machinery?"

Willful blindness of this kind will without doubt be its own undoing, but let us recall the visit to America of the leading British expert in the manufacture of furniture, Herbert Cescinsky. He came to give a series of lectures in the United States and he told New York reporters that one of his reasons for coming was to go to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to study the manufacture of furniture because the most beautiful furniture of our day was being made there and in other American workshops. As to the productions of Trenton and Schenectady, Perth Amboy or the Ohio pottery towns, the answer is not only found in every department store, but in general advertisements which give one an idea of the equipment of the American home. This equipment, in its artistic appeal, surpasses any like production in all of Europe.

At its best the American home is something far above the squalid oasis of the Latin Quarter or Greenwich Village type where the *décor* (to use one of their tenants' favorite words) is often dirt, or, useless and distorted, is frequently supposed to

represent individuality. Let these people wallow in their slough with their beer-bottle candlesticks. But if one wants a real thrill, one has only to ride about through any American city, especially in the semiurban and suburban districts at the magic hour of twilight, the dusk of the winter time. One will notice then the entrancing aspect of light and color which these homes present, many of them only two stories in height and others that will never get above the lowly level of the one-storied bungalows. Everywhere the glassed-in porch, an American standardized invention, shows the cheerful evening lamps set about amid convenient, picturesque furniture. There are all possible variations of electric light standards, brackets, and fixtures, and an even greater variation in colored shades. There is likewise a great variation in the color of hangings, coverings, and pictures, which may be framed lithographs in color, magazine covers, or, for that matter, even advertisements. Mass production gives the home every possibility of choice, and one must not forget what a large part in this the weekly or monthly magazine plays. Though the pictures may be printed on a whirling press sending out millions of copies, reproduction of products of the fine arts, whether shown in illustration or advertisement, makes possible the enrichment of the home. All these things are at the command of the simplest of households. When one thinks for a moment of what these little homes reveal, one then realizes what is possible for establishments run on a larger scale. Remembering that never before has such a riot of color prevailed in the furnishings of the American home as there is to-day, one sees how truly uniform and "hopelessly commercial" effects have been avoided and to what extent beauty has triumphed. But this enthusiasm over what even the humblest man on the street may find and possess is anathema to those who disparage the American home and who, like Mr. Mumford, would reduce its furnishings to plain floors without carpets or rugs with, perhaps, a stiff, standardized blacksmith-made iron lampstand to enhance its charm; or to those who are enamored of the whimsical Veblen theory that people buy furniture in America, not because it is beautiful, "but because it costs something and is a wasteful object." All this at a time when others are screaming out that we are being overwhelmed by our concern for utilities, for the practical, for the latest invention, and that the mechanical perfection of kitchen, cellar, bathroom, or bedroom is something that is searing our very souls in spite of the fact that it seems to

have an excellent effect on the body and mind of the housekeeper and business man, formerly completely tired out.

Let us consider the achievement of beauty in architecture. Our prophets of despair would have us keep the ambulance around the corner in order to carry off the corpse of its alleged empty pretensions and colossal failures. It is true that a few of Mr. Mumford's "Continental architects," to whom he goes for opinion, have within the last decade been lavish in their praise of the really great achievements of American architecture — private, public, and business structures. "Your great cathedrals, which you call office buildings," as Lord Balfour expressed it. (It goes without saying, of course, that Mr. Mumford's "Continental architects" are European since this continent is too insignificant in both civilization and area to get a capital "C" from the intelligentsia). But even this praise of our fine achievements, when admitted by the Mumfords, is contrasted with "the mediocrity of the scene," as they phrase it. They ignore what every schoolboy knows, that aside from the Acropolis and a few architecturally created centres, the Athens of Pericles was a town of such ugly, adobe-like houses set in such dirty alleys that one wonders how the philosophers who lived there could endure it for another day. But America's compensation is in her glorious buildings, civic centres, and practical parkways (which are said to have redeemed Athens) *plus* the advantages of mass production apparently overlooked by our supercritics. They seem to have disregarded the necessity of the large production of objects of the lesser arts and the necessary duplication of an article so charming that it must accommodate a populace of some hundred and twenty millions. They ignore the insistent genius which serves commerce and serves in such a fashion that beauty has not been sacrificed even in the five and ten cent stores.

Mr. Watts's article continues his earlier defense of American culture in previous issues. The subject will be carried further in later numbers of THE FORUM

FOOTPATH AND HIGHWAY

BY THE PEDESTRIAN

STAR DUST



IF William Lyon Phelps ever writes that book on golf, *Thirty Years of Looking Up*, as he threatens to do, I claim an inalienable right to pose for the frontispiece. He would probably wish to label the picture with a line from his beloved Browning —

Look thou not down but up! *

More definite is the advice of Lady Macbeth —

Only look up *clear*.

In either case any progress of the golf ball is a fortuitous by-product of the gesture. The golfer who looks steadfastly down peers in vain for a saxpence under the ball ("man, suppose it *had* been there an' ye hadna seen it!") but the golfer whose neck has a permanent wave, who has learned to look up clear, finds not a mere hypothetical saxpence, but the heavens "inlaid with patines of bright gold." You don't play golf at night? You might as well, if you look up clear!

Seeing "the hosts of heaven rise" assumes, of course, that the watcher is outside Scotland or the city of New York. No one can possibly look up clear through Edinburgh murk or the glare of Broadway. In fact, it has long seemed to me that country mice, in their perennial altercation with city mice, neglect their one telling argument. They prate of fresh milk and eggs, but every one knows that fresh things are shipped to the city and that what is left over is returned, in its old age, to the country market. They chatter ecstatically of "wild life," yet they know in their hearts that they mean flies and mosquitoes. When the New Yorker asserts calmly that you can find everything under the sun "right in lil' ole New York," his country cousin has to admit it; for a man must have an exotic taste who cannot find in New York pretty nearly every product, raw or refined, of the earth on which he lives; and indeed everything *under* the earth too, for in New York he may well say, as did Raleigh after the sack of Cadiz, "Whoever had a desire to see Hell itself most lively figured, it was there." But

* Browning undoubtedly had golf in mind, perhaps the nineteenth hole. See the next lines —

To uses of a cup,
The festal board, etc.