

L'ART NOUVEAU.

A new movement in art is worth looking at with respect in the first instance. It is usually a reaction from some artificial state that wants reformation, and the new movement may be regarded as a protest. L'Art Nouveau seems to be a phase of this kind.

As far as can be made out from occasional illustrations, there is one "feeling" running through it all, and this may be roughly described as a feeling for freedom. Always supposing that art is possible at all under conditions of freedom, what is it they want to be free from? The worst examples appear to want to be free from everything, and would probably be brought by its authors under the sentiment of "art for art's sake," which has a noble sound, but about as much sense as "a stick with one end." It makes one's brain crack to try to think of Art existing by itself and for its own sake. It is impossible to conceive of Art except as concerned in the making of something; and Art consists in making it properly. Over what makes proper making the battle may rage, but it has got to be all

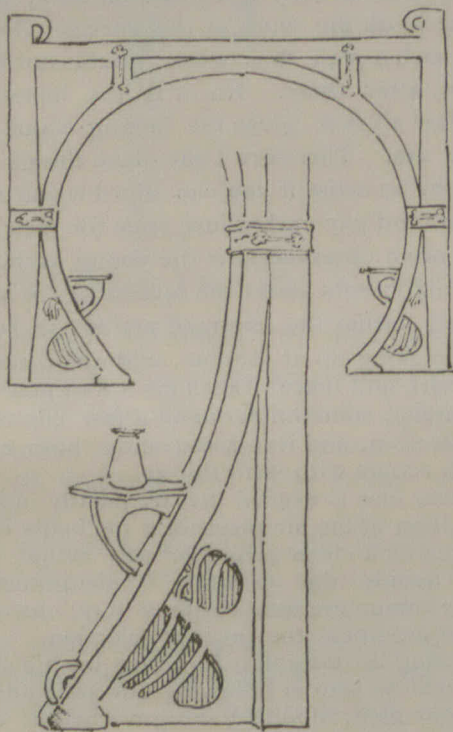


FIG. 1.—ARCHWAY BETWEEN ROOMS.

about making; that is to say an artist's work must represent the purpose for which it was made as exactly as a machinist's; and therefore that part of the new art, that aims first at being unrestrained is not likely to go far towards any purpose the New Art movement is serving in the history of art.

The essential peculiarity seems to be form without reason. The designer in all probability thinks that beauty of form is an abstract quality. Is there not a "Line of Beauty" over which Hogarth took a lot of trouble? There is; but it does not appear anywhere in a Greek temple. There are evidently circumstances which modify the application of abstract curvature to building. It does not require much reasoning to know that the worst manifestations of the New Art are wrong; the eye is sufficient. A room abandoned to its utmost effort (many such are shown in the German journals) is perhaps the most unquiet thing ever yet produced in the way of architectural finish; the whole room is writhing; it is like nothing so much as being at the bottom of the sea amid the sinuous seaweed. Examined in detail the trouble appears to lie in shaped

wood—not square stuff but boards. This is always an unpleasant kind of work; enjoying the distinction of being both heavy and trifling, even when it serves a recognizable construction function; so that it is anything but pleasing to find it done for its own sake, unreasonably. An evidence of the unreasonable charac-



FIG. 2.

ter of German Art Nouveau curves is the prevalence of the horse-shoe, the type of the fantastic in architecture; a form which is sure to give a character of superfluity, even when the opening arched in this way is of brick or stone and the greater part of the form is constructive: when it is shaped out of boards and makes an arched opening between two rooms, as frequently appears in German drawings, the force of Art for Art's sake, can hardly, one would think, go much further. If there is no other reason against it, imagine the danger to which a gentleman would be subjected when,

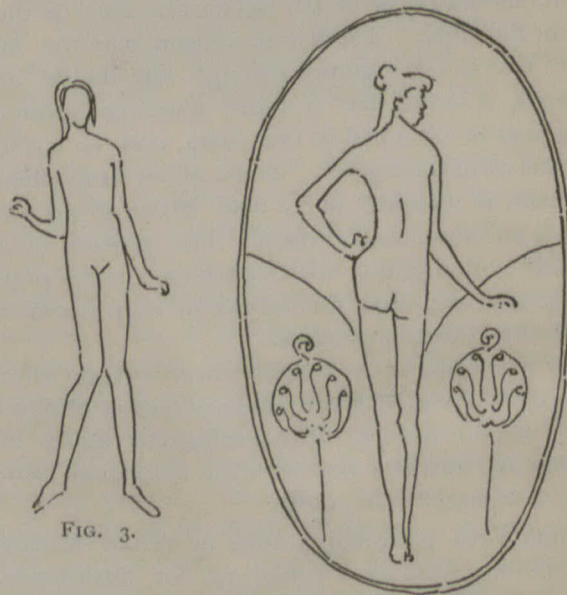


FIG. 3.

FIG. 4.

giddy with the writhings of the trimming, furniture, and wall decoration of one room, he attempted to pass into the next, through an archway which is 6 feet wide at the level of his eye but only 4 feet 6 inches on the floor.

The door of the cabinet in Fig. 2, is a good illustration of the result of letting the wayward fancy roam. This is an extreme case perhaps, but there is nothing like an extreme case to show the way things are tending, and it is rather interesting that the same volume gives a couple of pieces of wall decoration, which seem to show that the influence of freedom and the