

a moment when his brain was in a very disordered and disturbed state, still preserved some sense enough to see his visionary dagger with

"The handle towards my hand";

but then Macbeth was not æsthetic.

Even supposing, however, that the prevalent taste in furniture were logical and real in itself, there is a more serious question suggested by the importance attached to this class of work in comparison with what used to be considered the more intellectual forms of art. As was observed just now, it is almost a commonplace at present to urge that art is not confined to sculpture and painting, but should be shown in all the objects collected in a room, and that we should aim at totality of effect. "If this meant that we were to bring furniture and decoration up to the level of the phonetic arts, in intellectual interest, there could be nothing to be said against it, except that it is hardly possible to do so. But the theory seems practically to result in an attempt to bring down painting to the level of furniture. A painting is no longer, according to this school of critics, to be a separate creation of the imagination, having its own interest and embodying its own idea, but it is to be a means of filling a panel as part of a scheme of decoration. It is probably to this theory that we owe the existence of a peculiar school of painting which has arisen lately, in which the object seems to be to eliminate all distinctive idea or intellectual meaning from a picture, and all direct reference to Nature, and to make the whole a mere matter of decorative colouring. The most common development of this form of art is familiar to most of us in the shape of those long-limbed female figures of neo-Greek type, clad in semi-diaphanous drapery, whose handsome faces have all the same placid vacuity of expression, and by whose side always stands an "art-flowerpot," out of which grows a decorative plant. Very graceful are many of them (for, indeed, some of our finest draughtsmen have lent their talent to this style of painting); and very tired we get of their grace and their meaningless poses. Their faces are all alike; but their lack of distinctive character is compensated for by writing their names beside them, always remembering to jumble the letters about so as to make the reading of it as much of a puzzle as possible. They may be either the Months, or the Virtues, or anything else you like, they will do equally well for either and the same figure may represent either "Chastity" or "November." But if we are inclined to feel bored at this repetition of a type, we are offered as a compensation any amount of old china. A lady who professes to be artistic is not happy till she has given her drawing-room the aspect of a crockery-shop. You feel afraid of moving about for fear of knocking over or shaking down something which you will be assured no money can replace. You go to the theatre to see a domestic comedy, and the actors seem scarcely able to find their way amid the collection of Japanese jars and screens, and blue china, with which the stage is crowded, and, to add insult to injury, if you do not like all this you are called a Philistine.

The nameless opprobrium conveyed in that phrase might seem more applicable to a man who follows a multitude to hunt *bric-à-brac* than to those who fail to find this a sufficient motive for living. But without calling names, and admitting that every one has a right to his own hobby, I protest against the assumption that this worship of furniture and china is an indication of an advanced perception in regard to art. As with furniture itself, so with art in its widest sense, the ultimate value to us is in proportion to the thought that is in it; and it is idle to pretend that the most piquant piece of china, the most artistically-designed cabinet or wall-paper, can by possibility have the same intellectual meaning and interest as the productions of an art which, like painting, can translate the poetry of Nature, can speak to us the language of the deepest human passion and emotion. To say that such an art as this is no more to us than a part of the furniture of our rooms; that upon some pretext of unity of effect our pictures are to be merely objects subordinate to a general scheme of decoration, is not to exalt art, but to degrade it, and is a view which could only be seriously held by those who have allowed their mental sympathies and perceptions to be narrowed and cramped to suit a conventional standard. One figure in which the passion or the hope, the joy or the grief, of the human soul is visibly symbolised, one landscape instinct with the light and air and the sentiment of Nature, does more to give interest and beauty to a room than all the sweepings of Wardour street that can be collected in it. A picture that is worth anything is not a piece of decoration, but a separate poem in itself; and it is better to have such works even in company with bad furniture, than to have a room filled with decorative furniture and piquant knick-knacks, but bare of anything

that can appeal to our highest sympathies and aspirations as intellectual beings.

Yet this is what is actually set before us now as the theory of an artistic dwelling, and what it is actually becoming more and more the fashion to put in practice. And the fact has an important significance in relation to social science, so far as that concerns the moral and intellectual aspect of our national life. It is a sign of something very unsound in the artistic taste and sentiment of the day that we should be exhorted systematically and on principle to rank the lower and more material forms of art as equal to or even above those which appeal to our highest consciousness and perceptions. It seems a very false economical principle, so far as regards the encouragement of art, that people should be ready to give for an old jar, which may be ornamental, but which may as likely as not be ugly and grotesque in design, as much as would procure them a dozen drawings or etchings representing a far higher intellectual effort applied to a far higher end. But what is most serious is the moral aspect of the subject,—the falsity and pretentiousness of feeling which this artificial taste indicates. What was observed in regard to the art of the theatre is only a type of what we see in society. The act is so tame and unreal that it hardly deceives any one; but the play is admirably mounted, and the decorations got up regardless of expense. Only unfortunately the decorations themselves are a sham. We need by no means be indifferent to furniture; on the contrary, I would like, if it were possible, to see everything in a dwelling designed with a direct relation to its purpose, its position, the style of its accompaniments, and the special fancy of the inmates. But this is hardly attempted, for this would cost thought, and people wish to be artistic without thought, and at the cost of money only. What is really done is to fix upon a particular fashion of a past generation or of another country, to brand that as artistic, and to purchase as much of it as you can afford. The phenomenon is not new. There have been other periods in the history of our own and other societies when this imitation fashion has prevailed, and they have always been periods of pretence and hollowiness, of an indifference to the highest and most serious ends of life. When people are much in earnest they do not care about tricking themselves out in borrowed decorations; it is an amusement for an idle hour; and the corollary to be drawn from the characteristics of the prevalent artistic taste of contemporary society is not a satisfactory one. It was the complaint of Wordsworth, at an early period of this century, that,—

"Plain living and high thinking are no more."

He would hardly have considered that matters were much improved in this respect at present, when Art, which should be the expression of the highest thought and aspiration of a people, is coming to mean a mere arbitrarily chosen form of costly luxury, having no connection with the serious thoughts and problems of life; when, as it has been remarked, you may break any moral law, but you must admire blue china; when English ladies can so far forget their traditions of true dignity, so far mistake the accidentals for the essentials of refinement, as to masquerade in modern-antique costumes which draw every eye, not, indeed to the wearer, but to the costume. All this, done in the name of art, is evidence not of true artistic feeling, but of a show and pretence at variance with what is best and noblest in art, which, if it were a reality, should lead us, to quote again the words of Mill, to idealise not only every work we do, "but most of all our own characters and lives." This is hardly to be achieved by dressing out our life in a costume of borrowed finery, and dignifying it by the name of "art."—*Builder*

SPONTANEOUS IGNITION OF HYDROGEN.—Attention has recently been called to some peculiar cases of spontaneous ignition of hydrogen in air, the phenomenon having been noticed, it seems, in factories where quantities of zinc were being dissolved in hydrochloric acid for the preparation of zinc chloride. Violent explosions took place when no flame was near, and it was eventually ascertained that the gas took fire spontaneously. It is thought to be caused by fragments of very porous zinc, which, when lifted above the surface of the liquid, during the violent evolution of the gas, and so brought into contact with hydrogen and air, act just as spongy platinum would do under the same circumstances. The performance of such operations in the open air is recommended. The ignition can be shown, according to M. Hoffman, by treating a few kilograms of finely divided zinc with acid; the zinc dust, he says, may be ignited by contact with water.