

EXHIBITION OF THE SOCIETY OF APPLIED ARTS.

The second Exhibition of this Society held in Toronto from Dec. 9th. to the 23rd., is in many respects interesting and in some respects excellent, but it is not on the whole—what it ought to be—inspiring.

What is applied art? It appears, from the pamphlet sent out by the Society in giving notice of this Exhibition, that the application they have been aiming at is not very wide. They give a list of the classes of work to be represented in the Exhibition. These are:—Decorative designs; Mural decoration; Stencilling; Illumination; Stained glass, including glass blowing and glass mosaic; Work in metal, including jewelry; Enamelling on metal; Photography; Pottery, including decorated china; Wood carving; Furniture; Leather; work; Book binding; Needlework; Textiles; Basket work; Inlaid work; Bead work.

Here we recognize a general sketch of the field of what is known as Art. With a few exceptions, the objects that are associated in our minds with these classes of art are objects that are made and set before us chiefly to be looked at as objects of beauty; and the exceptions—furniture, textiles, book binding, basket work—are not exceptions in this exhibition. The furniture is of the ornamental kind; the basket work, (though of a most useful and durable kind), has been made with a dilettante handlelessness that seems to place it outside of the working class; the textiles even—good Canadian homespun—are all woven and worked in the form of portières, lambrequins, etc., about which some restive architects may raise the question whether they are applied art or misapplied art, but which at any rate are mainly intended to be looked at; and the book binding is of that soft glove-leather kind that has no back, and not backbone enough to get up off the drawingroom table.

Here is a programme of work that it is difficult to separate in function from Art—all alone without any qualifying prefix. It looks as if Applied Art is, to the Society, everything that is not Graphic Art, but serves principally the same purpose—to please the eye. Whereas the present writer went to the Exhibition expecting to see objects which, serving some other principal purpose, are, by the application of the principles of art, also made pleasing to the eye. This was what William Morris aimed at doing and did do; and the Society of Applied Art claims William Morris for its father.

It is not going far, indeed not going at all, in the direction William Morris led, to get together a little separatist band who will produce decorative articles made by hand, to enable people to get back, in the decoration of their houses, to another and a better age. There is no better age for us than our own age. That is what we are born to, and our art, if it is to be art at all, must be of our own age. If these ladies and gentlemen want to apply art in the twentieth century as it was applied in the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth or any other century, when it was applied properly, it is of no avail for them to do what the craftsmen did in those centuries; they must do *as* they did, which is quite a different matter. The glory of those days was not the simplicity of their work, as the modern "craftsman" seems to think, but the simplicity of their purpose. They made things that were ugly enough and coarse enough often, but the vulgarity of being one thing and trying to look like another is, as an aim in art, post-

renaissance; and the result of the elevation of the machinist to the post of art producer is that this is his only aim; he cannot design for himself. His work is imitative; it is made to look like something else. In one word his work is not simple.

It is this want of simplicity in purpose in our art, not the means of its production that a society like the society of applied art should work against. To go back to hand production is not the way to do anything. This is an age of machinery, and if they mean to reform our household art they must use the ordinary methods of our day. That is what the craftsman did in the earlier centuries; and we may be quite sure that they despised nothing, in the way of mechanical assistance, to help them along in the mechanical parts of their work. As a matter of fact the most determined modern "craftsman" does not insist upon sawing up his own timber, or sizing it, or even rough-planing it. He does use machinery to prepare his rough material; why not let machinery prepare it a little further? There is nothing particularly noble in digging out a mortise by hand, or in wittling tenons. A machine can do this just as well; then let a machine do it. Then as to shaping his wood: why drive a saw through wood, for a distance that mounts up to miles in a day, when a band saw will run more miles and more smoothly? The mere action of the saw is mechanical and a machine had better do it. It is necessary to direct the course of the saw by directing the line of application of the wood against it. But this only requires a strong hand; and stronger hands than his are ready (and anxious) to work at it. They can do all the mechanical operations as well as he, or better. Where then does the craftsman-designer come in? He does not come in at all; he goes out. The craftsman-designer is extinguished and in his place is the designer pure and simple.

There is plenty of work for the designer to do; and, if he *is* pure and *is* simple, there is no reason why he should not do as good work as ever was done by designers who worked with their own hands at the material execution of their designs. But he must respect the machine, which is indeed quite respectable. Neither in design nor in construction should the defects of modern work be laid to its charge. They are all the work of the designer and of a public whose vulgarity is reflected in the untruth of the articles supplied to them for daily use. Things for use appear to be things for ornament; things for ornament appear to be things for use; hollow things appear to be solid; poor things try to appear rich, (one cannot say they ever appear so); new things imitate the appearance of age; every thing is so shaped in insincerity that the true designer finds little in a house to which his heart really warms except the kitchen table.

It is this feeling that has animated the Arts & Crafts people; only they have made the mistake of assuming, (in practice at any rate), that, because they find rude art true, therefore true art must be rude. And they have separated themselves from the world to wear homespuns and flannel shirts, to hew out their furniture by hand, to leave out nearly everything in a picture and call it decoration, to make built up pottery and set it up for worship; (they ought to eat their food out of it, but they draw the line at that); to live in an atmosphere of what is called art, partly from re-