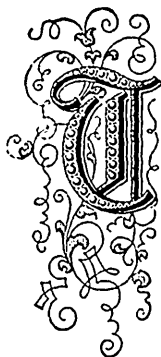


INFLUENCE OF THE ILIAD ON ART.



O an enquiring mind no task can be more congenial than that of tracing back to its primary sources the development of Grecian art. For, since modern art is but the feeble echo of this great original, by so doing, a thorough acquaintance would be obtained with those deep fountains of inspiration from which has sprung the *ensemble* of æsthetic beauty known under the generic term of Art, that never-failing spring which has through all ages supplied civilized nations with the nectar of highest intellectual enjoyment. And even, were the investigations to be of the most superficial nature, it would be found that of all these sources, that which has been the most abundant and most continuous in its discharge, is the Iliad of Homer. With justice, indeed, has it been said that it was Homer who gave laws to the artist. The influence of his unrivalled poem upon Grecian art was twofold; indirect, inasmuch as it stamped Grecian action and Grecian history with its own impress; direct, inasmuch as it laid down the principles and furnished the grand conceptions upon which most of after-art has been formed.

To any nation, during the various stages of its development, the possession of an epic such as the Iliad, in which the heroic characters of its early history are painted in all their grandeur and nobility, is of prime importance, since it infuses into the people an enthusiastic determination to rival the renown of their great ancestors, and, cost what it may, to maintain untarnished their glorious national escutcheon. Of the Greeks, in particular, than whom a nation more susceptible to all that is grand and noble has never existed, was this especially true. In the Iliad they beheld mirrored forth in the most striking and attractive way what Greeks had been and what Greeks should be. This produced in them a certain mental exaltation, an

inward striving to attain a grand ideal which engendered an atmosphere wherein art in its most perfect form could not be other than spontaneous. We are told that "there are two kinds of artists in this world—those that work because the spirit is in them, and they cannot keep silent if they would—and those that speak from a conscientious desire to make apparent to others the beauty that has awakened their own admiration." To the first class, undoubtedly, belonged Homer, and by that subtle bond of sympathy which so especially distinguished the Greeks from all other nations, he perpetuated his own irrepressible spirit amongst his countrymen for centuries after he himself had passed into that "stirless rest—that change which never changes."

Not upon art alone was his influence of a lasting character; were it not for him, many a page of Grecian history would in all probability have another reading. We know that his poems, although in existence for some time before, were first collected into their present form and committed to writing during the reign of Pisistratus—that is, a few years before the commencement of the famous Persian wars. Most of the Greek states, indeed, seem to have been unaware of the danger-cloud arising in the clear sky of Grecian freedom now that the Persian empire had absorbed all the lesser states of Asia. Pisistratus, however, whose watchful eye was ever scanning the political horizon, was quick to perceive it, and took every means to ensure the safety of the ship of state during the terrible hurricane which he saw was about to burst upon her. And possessed as he was of a keen insight into human nature, he fully understood that, in such a crisis, the only hope lay in stirring up in the whole body of the Greeks a spirit of heroic patriotism, such as would make them consider death itself a desirable boon if therefrom would accrue any benefit to their fatherland. This being so, his collection and publication of the Iliad was beyond doubt an act of far-seeing policy. What could better fire the