

Art After the War

EVEN while the guns were demolishing villages and churning the land, men within the very sound of those guns were at work building. The whole countryside might be stricken as if with pestilence, but wherever military necessity demanded there ran through that worse than desert roads which men built under shell fire and then kept in repair. One of the inevitable results of war, visible even while war rages and inescapable as soon as war subsides, is this process of reconstruction.

After such a war as this, which is not yet technically at an end, the need of reconstruction extends beyond the region that shell fire could reach. In an interesting discussion of "Art After the War," a writer in the editorial pages of the "Outlook" states that those roads of France were symbols of men's minds. No one can read the literature produced in the trenches without realizing that just as men were busy reconstructing the highways across the devastated land, so men were busy building in their minds new paths for their thoughts to take the place of paths that had been obliterated by their war experiences. And just as the end of the war has released energy for the reconstruction of material things destroyed or displaced, so the end of the war has offered a new opportunity for the reconstruction of men's minds.

This which seems commonplace enough, and so obvious as scarcely to bear the saying of it, is, like many other obvious things, likely to be overlooked by those who are nearest to it and ought to see it most clearly. The age of reconstruction is distinctively the age of the artist. Primarily the artist is a builder, a creator. Whether the material he handles be pigment or clay or brick or imponderable sound, what he builds is ideas.

Indeed, there is nothing to-day so essential to the world as its art. Even the prophet and teacher of religion cannot avail unless he either has in him the creative power of the artist or can enlist that creative power in the service of the ideas he promulgates. The educator must be an artist, otherwise he will be simply a hearer of lessons or the keeper of a place of detention. The political leader must exercise the function of the artist if he would create new forms of law or of political action to meet the new situation. Whoever, in fact, is to have any creative part in reconstructing what the war has injured or replacing with something better what the war has destroyed, will succeed only to the degree to which he follows the laws and principles which it is the business of the artist to discover and in his product to reveal.

There still lurks in the minds of many, un-

doubtedly, the idea that an artist is a sort of super-entertainer, and that art is a form of restful amusement. Pictures, from this point of view, exist to provide relaxation for the tired business man who has the money to buy them; music is a counter-irritant to the cares and worries of the day or a soporific for soothing overstimulated nerves. According to this view, there is no important distinction between good and bad art. If it amuses, relaxes, stimulates, or otherwise entertains and refreshes people, it is sufficiently good for its purpose.

There lurks, too, in the minds of many people who regard themselves as artists the idea that art is primarily for the self-satisfaction of the artist; that it is good to the degree that it expresses the emotion which the artist wants to express. Pictures, from this point of view, are but projections of whatever is in the soul or mind or nerves of the person who paints them. Music is the audible cry of the composer's spirit, whatever it may be. This idea of art ignores the interests of the tired business man, just as the business man's idea of art ignores the yearnings of the artist; but the two ideas have this in common—that the good or bad in art is a matter of comparative indifference. From neither point of view has the artist any need of a conscience or a standard.

In either of these senses art is a trivial thing. It is equally a silly luxury for the seeker of entertainment and for the person who imagines himself an artist because his emotions are too much for him. In a nation engaged in the serious business of finding order in the chaos that war has created and setting to rights the things that war has set askew, men with a sense of responsibility are rightly impatient with those who talk about art at such a time, if art is nothing more than a means of entertainment or a sort of emotional safety valve.

Art, however, is not a luxury; it is a necessity. It supplies to men the satisfaction of a craving as great as hunger or thirst. From time immemorial men have faced a world of chaos as we are facing it to-day. They have tried to think their way through the tangle, and those who have thought the most clearly they have hailed as their philosophers. They have groped their way to faith in an order underneath all this disorder, and those who have brought them the clearest light of faith they have hailed as their prophets. But men have not been satisfied, they never will be satisfied, with merely hearing about this order and beauty which they are convinced exists somewhere. They want that order and beauty made real to them. They

(Concluded on page 134.)