

ART IN 2030 A.D.

To what will Art come in another hundred years? This is a question to which it is difficult to give any satisfying answer because no one can really forecast what will be the national, political and social conditions under which the main bulk of the human race will be living a century hence. That Art will in^{the} future, as it has in the past, reflect the spirit of the time to which it belongs, that it will express the mental attitude of the people among whom it is produced and that it will continue to take its character from its surroundings, it is fairly safe to assume, but what these surroundings will be, and in what way the mind of mankind will have evolved, who can say? Surprises and new departures are more than possible, and as the contact between nations, once so sharply divided, becomes more close an unexpected movement in some comparatively remote part of the world may have the power to change in a moment the whole outlook of humanity and to create an entirely fresh type of artistic aims and intentions. The position in years to come will differ so markedly from that in which we find ourselves to-day that we can only speculate about what is to be and hope for the best.

However, if we base our speculations about the

future on the analogy of the past a sort of conditional prophecy can be attempted. History has a way of repeating itself, and in the history of Art, extending over some thousands of years, there have been many happenings and developments which have recurred and may recur again. Important schools of practice have arisen, flourished and decayed, and their place has been taken by others which carried on the same principles with only minor modifications in details of expression. Great master has succeeded to great master, each one of them a leader in the art of his time and each by his dominant individuality adding something significant to the sum total of artistic knowledge. Periods of productive activity have followed one another in a regular sequence, revitalising art when its energies showed signs of flagging and refitting it to play its part as one of the chief influences in civilised life. With all this to look back upon is there not some justification for a prediction that the repetitions of history will continue and that the principles which have been maintained for centuries will be still in force when yet another hundred years have been added to the record?

But there is, it must be admitted, another aspect of the question to be considered, one that makes such a prediction a little unsafe and that brings an element of uncer-

tainty into the speculation. Can we accept the Art of the present as truly a link between the past and the future and as keeping intact for the benefit of our successors the inheritance which has come down to us through the ages, or must we view it as a departure from precedent and as pointing the path which a later evolution is to follow? Is the Art which certain groups of artists and certain writers on Art subjects claim to be modern merely an affair of the moment, a temporary manifestation of some passing fashion peculiar to the time, or is there implied in it a change in manner and method which is to be permanent and to create a new conception of artistic responsibility? For, it cannot be denied that there are tendencies evident to-day which are scarcely in accordance with tradition and which suggest certain possibilities of an upheaval in the hitherto established order of things.

It must not be forgotten that, in European Art at all events, tradition has been continuous and consistently upheld and that this tradition has been one of serious and devout effort and sterling achievement. In all schools and in all periods those men have been accepted as masters who reached the highest standard of craftsmanship and who were able by their absolute control over the mechanism of Art to

express convincingly what they mentally conceived. The place they hold in the popular estimation has been accorded them in recognition of the earnestness with which they strove to perfect their methods of practice and to bring hand and mind into intimate agreement, and in full appreciation of the conscientious purpose which is evidenced in their work.. To their example is due the fact that the tradition in which they believed, and to which they gave the fullest measure of support, has remained, so far, the directing influence in all serious artistic undertakings and has been kept alive by all sincere workers.

In recent years, however, there has come into existence a sort of revolutionary movement, which is sufficiently wide spread and of which the aim is professedly to break the continuity of tradition and to subvert the authority of the masters. For the products of this movement it is pretended that they faithfully reflect the spirit of the modern world and that they satisfy a modern demand for the abandonment of what, it is argued, are worn-out conventions and for the replacement of obsolete practices by methods more progressive and up to date. This proposition is worth examination for various reasons. One is that it is definitely a challenge to those artists who still believe in the value of tradition and respect its prescriptions; another is that some enquiry is

necessary into the nature of that modern spirit which this so-called "advanced" art pretends to express; and yet another is that it is well to determine the direction in which is tending what we are bidden to regard as progress.

What exactly is this modern spirit to which Art is expected to conform? Is it the attitude of mind which is to become productive in the future, leading to high intellectual developments, or is it the decadent mentality which afflicts exhausted civilisations in their later stages of degeneration? Judging by the Art that is put forward as modern the inspiration is decadence, not progress towards better things, for its appeal is solely to that section of the community which has a degenerate appetite for the unusual at all costs. That this class of people exists and that it makes its existence noisily apparent in a comparatively sane world there can be no question. It is a restless horde, full of purposeless activity, craving for excitement and sensation, superficial in ideas and contemptuous of everything which requires serious thought and sustained application. It is as ready to adopt new fashions as to discard them when something more extravagant and ridiculous is offered and the members of it vie with one another to find surprising ways of gratifying their unwholesome tastes.

There is small cause for wonder that the artists who

pander to such a public should repudiate the restrictions which tradition imposes. They dare not be sane because sanity would stamp them as unenterprising; they are afraid to work along normal lines because the most blatant kind of abnormality is required of them; they cannot be sincere because posing and affectation are necessary if they are ever to come into fashion. Their mission is that of the court fool who had always to be inventing fresh inanities so that he might avoid the whipping which awaited him if he were so forgetful as to lapse into seriousness. So, when sensations are demanded they supply them and make them as gross and grotesque as they can; if it is superficiality that is wanted they give in full measure the emptiness in matter and manner that suffices for clients with empty minds, and if a pretence of simplicity chances to be the vogue they affect an innocence that is as vacuous as the imbecility of the half-wit. And from all this comes a type of modern art which is as bare of ideas as it is lacking in technical accomplishment and in which every principle that guided the great achievement of the past is prostituted and perverted.

Is this to be the Art of the future? There is the unfortunate possibility that our older civilisations have done their appointed work in the development of the human race and

that they are now in a state of decay which cannot be arrested. If that is so, we must look upon the vagaries of "advanced" art as symptoms, of a disease which must run its course and as the outward signs of an inward rottenness for which there is no cure. But even if we have to accept the inevitable it does not follow that we cannot delay the end and by judicious treatment and appropriate remedies maintain the patient in a reasonable condition of health for another century. It would be far better to go down fighting to the last against growing disabilities than to surrender now to the complaint and to sink into immediate senility, and we should deserve much more the approval of posterity if we could show to them that with full knowledge of our fate we did our best with the life that remained. At least we could feel that the heritage which we would hand on to them, if not all that we could have wished it to be, would have in it something that would represent us worthily and do us sufficient credit.

But there is another and more hopeful alternative - that the present day eccentricities which are bringing Art into contempt are not the painful evidences of an unavoidable decay but merely the results of a passing craze. It may well be that the artists who have been infected with the germ of restlessness and superficiality have mistaken the

clamourings of the silly and senseless few for the true voice of the people of to-day and have accepted as the genuine modern spirit a perversion in ideas which is the exception and not the rule. If this is the case, it is on the artists themselves that lies the responsibility for checking the excesses of the sensation seekers and for relieving Art of the parasites which have attached themselves to it. Happily, there are still artists and art lovers in plenty who have retained their sanity of outlook and their wholesomeness of taste and who still believe that to maintain a high standard of craftsmanship is the duty of every serious worker in art. To some extent, perhaps, they are to be blamed for their lack of self-assertion; they might have been more energetic in their effort to prove that they, and not the decadent mob, are in touch with the genuine modern spirit, and they might have recognised more quickly that it is by them that the way must be found to stop the spread of a nasty disease to which the less virile members of their profession are becoming victims.

Still, though they have been, so far, too slack and too slow to move, things have not got so bad that there is no longer any hope of recovery. There is a real chance that what happened nearly a century ago may be brought about again. When early-Victorian art had sunk ~~to~~ to a

condition of feebleness and artificiality and had by its uninspired dependence upon stupid conventions lost touch with realities it was given a fresh start by the adherents to the Pre-Raphaelite movement who set an example of healthy effort and re-established the authority of nature as the one essential source of artistic inspiration and who made solid and well-directed craftsmanship a vital article in their creed. A similar up-rising is possible to-day. There may be, and there should be, a counter-revolution of sanity against the decadent and degenerate fallacies of so-called modern art and a vigorously practical protest against the slovenliness and incompetence of the "advanced" artists of to-day is likely enough when the serious workers and lovers of art awake to the need for concerted action. The time is well ripe for such a counter-revolution; it has already been too long delayed.

Here, then, is the alternative on which the conditional prophecy as to the future must be based. If racial and national decadence is an established fact, if the older civilisations are incurably degenerate and beyond all hope of revival, the art of the future, whatever struggles we make to arrest its decay, will continue on its downward progress until art, as we understand it, will have ceased to exist - and another hundred years may see its inglorious

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end. But if the perversions and absurdities of to-day are nothing worse than the extravagances of a few incapables who in a period of pervading mediocrity are striving to attract the attention of the unthinkingly rampant sensationalism, then we can look with confidence to a recovery which will make the art of the future better and stronger and more rightly in touch with the spirit of its time than the futilities which we have tolerated so unwisely. For this, at all events, let us hope.
