Fine Arts.

CONCERNING OUR PUBLIC WORKS OF SCULPTURE.

II.

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IT would be a curiously interesting story that could be constructed from the personal experiences and observations of an American sculptor of the present day—say a sculptor of middle age, who began with nothing and has had to fight his way by sheer and abundant desert. He would relate, undoubtedly, that he has participated in dozens of competitions, of which nearly every one has been conducted absolutely without judgment and been decided without regard for merit. He would show how numerous commissions have been bestowed by favoritism, or by trivial sentiment, prejudice or prepossession, without the slightest concern for any of the standards of selection that ought to be applied. He would tell us how many an award made by the Government, or in the Government's behalf, has been so unsatisfactory that it would have discredited taste and public spirit if for the Government a bricklayers' union had been substituted as the awarding agent.

The relation of the Government to art is a subject that needs to be most seriously and practically thought about. It is truly humiliating to look at the statues in Washington, at the historical paintings in the Capitol, and at the post offices and other Federal buildings throughout the country, and reflect that these are the formal representatives and enduring contributions of our progressive Government to the fine arts. There is nothing to justify expectation that the Government will gradually do better of itself, without special urgings or pressure from the outside. Recent instances show that its perceptions are not improving at all. The coins competition is an illustrative case. The Director of the Mint was authorized by Congress to substitute new designs for the ridiculous old ones on the fractional silver coins. The bright thought occurred to the Director that good results might be brought about by opening a competition. But that thought was like the inspiration to write the great American Novel; it did not go far enough. The Director's competition was an amusing affair. He sent out a general invitation to artists to compete. Nothing was said about pay except that the winner of the competition would receive a prize of $500. The distinguished sculptors—the only known persons qualified to make such designs—were expected to eagerly jump in and fight for that prize and the great glory of it, on an equal footing with the workers in the young ladies' modeling schools, with the butter sculptors of the West, and with the backwoods bedquilt designers. These sculptors did take an interest in the proposed alterations in the coins; they took an interest as artists, as men of cultivation, wishing that the artistic character of our coinage might be creditable to the country. A representative committee of them (including men like St. Gaudens, French and Niehaus) accordingly sent certain suggestions to the Director with a view to necessary changes in the terms of the competition. The Director ignored their recommendations. The result was that of the scores of competitive designs sent in not one was deemed worthy of acceptance; and however the competition was managed the decision was beyond criticism, for it was rendered by Mr. St. Gaudens. The competition having failed, the Director cut the Gordian knot by turning the work over to a Government designer employed on a salary in one of the departments. It was, perhaps, unnecessary to relate this story at such length; it is stamped on the new coins themselves.

The history of the international copyright crusade should close the mouths of the pessimists who are ready to exclaim that it is really no use striving for better things. Against international copyright powerful selfish interests were arrayed, but no such organized interests would stand in the way of measures for improving the quality of Government art. Such measures would be opposed only by indifference; there would be no active resistance to them, except possibly by a few poor fools. What is needed is legislation—an act of a very comprehensive kind, which will provide suitable conditions for the awarding, execution

and acceptance of all artistic work done in the Government's name. Probably no legislation would be generally effective without instituting a concentration of final jurisdiction and authority. It is not likely that mere regulations, however carefully drawn, will be satisfactory in practice so long as they are administered by the separate departments, each at its own instance and within its own sphere. A permanent Fine Arts Bureau or Commission should be established, vested with complete authority for all Government contracts for statues, monuments, memorials, paintings, permanent designs of every description and architecture, and with full responsibility for the acceptance of works of art offered to the Government by the States, by associations and by individuals. It might be objected that the arbitrary powers of such a bureau or commission would interfere with the privilege and responsibility of the departments; but that objection could hardly have much weight in view of the decided general advantages to be gained. The details of the legislation would arrange themselves satisfactorily under the discussion that would be excited among those interested.

The value of such a step would not end with the realization of its immediate aims. It would have excellent moral effect throughout the country. The Bureau would become in an important sense a bureau of information and instruction for committees everywhere. Most committees are anxious to do what is best, but fail because they have everything to learn, with no generally accepted methods to guide them. Let the Government set up a conspicuous bureau, conducted conscientiously and in a way approved by the artists of the country, and the committees that have work to do will begin to learn how to do it. In awarding any work of sculpture the most necessary thing is to avoid ill judgment in arranging and deciding the competition. Good competition management on the part of the Government would be promptly imitated.

The American people owe it to themselves to build worthily in art. They owe the debt of fairness to those of their fellow-citizens who are doing worthy work for art. In too many cases merit in sculpture wins only by a species of accident. There is a vast waste of superior competitive effort. This does not affect the few well-known sculptors, who, by virtue of their reputations, get all the commissions they can execute. But it means long defeat, and weary struggling, and the sacrifice of the best years of life, to many a talented young man—for young sculptors must depend almost exclusively upon success in competition. In a certain competition a given design may be the only one worth considering; but the worst design of all is just as likely to secure the award. Indeed, the chances generally favor the acceptance of bad designs; for there are numerous monument firms, and various enterprising commercial sculptors, that systematically engage in competitions, relying on business and social and other influences to more than make up for deficiencies in merit. These injustices and hardships are as needless as they are lamentable; as hurtful as they are disgraceful to the communities responsible for them. We have a most interesting body of young sculptors growing up in our country. They stand ready to honor and dignify us by excellence. Certainly it is one of our serious public questions whether we cannot begin to find ways to minimize the ignorant neutralization and rejection of their creditable endeavors.

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