The Ways of Nature and Art

IN Nature the general absence of sensationalism, the quietness of her beauty, make a firmer impression upon the mind than her occasional violent effects. Even though the vivid colors, the flashing wings and gorgeous flowers, the azure skies and dazzling sands of the tropics fascinate the eye by their brilliancy, there is a great mass of quiet color which keeps the whole in harmony.

And, after all, though we speak of the "blue" sea, the "green" grass, etc., none of the colors in Nature are simple, crude tones such as the pigments in our color-boxes.

Examine a scarlet geranium or any other intensely vivid flower and you will find it to be composed of a number of quite sober shades of red, some delicate grays and only a moderate amount of pure vermilion. Then the "blue" sky or sea is still more varied in color, a multitude of delicate gradations of purples, greens and grays unite to produce what we call blue. At the times when Nature seems to throw prudence to the winds, and launch forth recklessly, as in the glory of some gorgeous sunset, if we look carefully we shall see that her richest effects are produced mainly by subtle contrasts of color. Hide the glowing rosy or golden blaze in the sky with the hand, and immediately the distant hill or cloud which seemed, by contrast, to be a pure purple, resolves into an almost neutral gray.

Look at a butterfly's wing, and we are compelled to admire the marvelous reserve of Nature's designer. Some butterflies, such as the *fritillaries*, are remarkable for possessing lustrous, metallic spots on the wings, and the way in which these rarer features are made precious by subtle gradations and contrasts is a revelation in design. It seems as if an intelligent mind were at work.

The highest art, in music, painting, architecture and the rest, is one with nature in this: it avoids sensationalism, though it is able to focus its whole intensity of color or interest with extreme force when required. Good art never shrinks. It never wastes its superlatives, nor brings out its ultimate resources, its reserve forces, unless absolutely necessary.

One of the loveliest dreams of color and mystery of flashing gold and jewels is St. Mark's Duomo, Venice. Who that has seen this priceless heirloom from the remote Middle Ages can ever forget the quiet, rich dignity of the coloring of the facade with its immense mosaics and shafts of precious marbles! And the interior! somber, yet not gloomy, opulent with ruby and pearl and gold, every tone placed as lovingly as Nature arranges the colors of the butterfly. And amid all the richness and glow there is nothing startling, nothing abrupt or extravagant.

In great pictures we find the same quality. You feel that there is a great force in reserve, that all the goods are not in the window, to use a homely illustration. Through the ages we find the decadence of art almost invariably shown by an increase in sensational ostentation.

The history of the Gothic style of architecture, the early purity of which degenerated into a voluptuous, over-ornate, *flamboyant* style, is a good example of what appears to be an universal tendency.

In our own day the passion for personal advertisement has reached such a pitch that sensationalism in art is found everywhere. All who have visited Genoa will remember the remarkable sculptures in the Campo Santo, concrete examples of modern want of reserve. The carvings on the tombs are marvelously skillful *tours de force* and the sculptors have strained all their resources in their efforts to make the spectator gasp with astonishment at their dexterity and audacity.

To quote from an over-enthusiastic article just published:

> No description could ever render a tithe of justice to the magnificence of the statues which abound. . . . The statues are photographs in marble—life-size and life-like—and so intensely realistic that it would scarcely surprise one if they turned round and commenced to speak. Every detail is considered, down to the pattern of the lace upon a woman's shawl, the style of a man's hat, and the folds of his overcoat as it rests over his arm.

How different from the broad and stately method of the Greeks and of the great sculptors of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries, who subordinated all superfluous detail to the main impression.

Most people feed their artistic perceptions upon the pictures in the illustrated periodicals and the advertisements in the streets, for these are always with us, and constantly exert their hypnotic power, while a visit to a fine-art gallery is a rare event. As the ephemeral art of the journals is so largely sensational, the public has become used to such work and will inevitably demand it in more permanent creations. We must get back to Nature's methods, and strive to encourage the art which will not cater to the appetite for sensationalism but which will grow into our affection by its quiet power, seriousness and genuine inspiration.

Great art has the same foundation as has strong character among men and women—it is a manifestation of the soul; and its influence is similar; how much great work has been done by the steady, calm persistence of firm, devoted souls who moved "without haste, without rest." As we purify our lives and strengthen our natures we shall prepare the way for and become ready to understand the higher Art of the future.

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