THE DEGRADATION OF ART.

"THERE lies before me," says an acute writer in a recent English periodical, "an old Persian rug, all out of shape and twisted in the weaving, but full of subtle quantities in color, perfect in the proportions of its vivid brilliancy, and a grand new Axminster carpet alongside, of faultless construction, with a design as hideous as its colors are harsh.

It is not only so with productions destined for the English market, but the degradation of art is beginning to spread all over the world—the standards of 'instructed' European taste are vitiating the very well-springs of beautiful old work. The 'mantilla' of the Seville and the 'tovaglia' of the Roman peasant are supplanted by frightful bonnets; the striking old costumes are disappearing alike in Brittany and in Algiers; in Athens and in Turkey they are giving way to the abominations of Parisian toilettes for the women, while the chimney-pot hat is taking the place of the turban and the kalpac for the men.

What may be the reason why architecture, sculpture, painting, and even poetry—the combination of stone, brick, marble, metal, colors, and, lastly, of metrical forms of words—should all suffer by the advance of our (so-called) civilization and education, is still a mystery; but few will be found to doubt the fact in detail, though they may deny the general formula.

Perhaps our self-consciousness as to our great virtues, our 'progress,' our knowledge, the learning of the reason of our work, the introversion of our present modes of thought, check the development of an idea, even if we may be fortunate enough to get hold of one. Self-consciousness is fatal to art; there is a certain spontaneity of utterance—singing, as the birds sing, because they cannot help it—'composing' almost as the mountains and clouds 'compose,' by reason of their existence itself, not because they want to make a picture—which produces natural work grown out of the man, and the requirements of his nature, to which it seems, with very rare exceptions, that we cannot now attain.

In sculpture, a modern artist has acquired ten times as much anatomy as Phidias; dissection was unknown, and not permitted, by the Greeks. Chemistry has produced for the painter colors which Raphael (luckily for us) never dreamed of. Yet one cannot help wondering at the strange daring which permits the honorable society of Burlington House to hang yearly the works of the ancient masters of the craft on the same walls where their own productions are to figure a few weeks later, as if to inform the world most impressively and depressingly from how far we have fallen in pictorial art; to string up our taste, as it were, to concert pitch—to give the key-note of true excellence, in order to mark the depth to which we have sunk.

We now teach drawing diligently, and are surprised that we get no Michael Angelos. Did Masaccio go to a school of design, or Giotto learn 'free-hand' manipulation? Education, as it is generally defined—meaning thereby a knowledge of the accumulation of facts discovered by other people—is good for the general public, for ordinary humanity, but not for original minds, except so far as it saves them time and trouble by preventing them from reinventing what has already been done by others. True, there can be but few 'inventors' (in the old Italian sense of creators) in the world at any one moment, and training must, it will be said, be carried on for the use of the many; but one might still plead for a certain elasticity in our teaching, a margin left for free-will among the few who will ever be able to use it. And, meantime, it is allowable to lament over the number of arts we have lost, or are in danger of losing, which can only be practised by the few—whose number seems ever to be diminishing, under our generalizing processes of turning out as many minds of the same pattern as if we wanted nail-heads or patent screws by the million.

This is not education in its true and highest sense—i.e., the bringing forth the best that is in man; not simply putting knowledge into him, but using the variety of gifts, which even the poorest in endowment possess, to the best possible end. And this seems more and more difficult, as the stereotyped pattern is more and more enforced in board schools, endowed schools, public schools, universities; and each bit of plastic material, while young, is forced as much as possible into the same shape, the only contention being who shall have the construction of the die which all alike are eager to apply to every individual of the nation.

Of all races which have yet existed there can be no doubt that the Greek was the one most highly endowed with artistic powers of all kinds; yet the Greek was certainly not, in our sense of the term, an educated man at all; his powers of every kind, however, were cultivated indirectly by the very atmosphere he lived in. His sensitive artistic nature found food in the forms and colors of the mountains and the islands, the sea and the sky, by which he was surrounded; by the human nature about him in its most perfect development; by every building—his temples, his tombs, his theatres—every pot and pan he used, every seat he sat upon; whereas no man's eye can be other than degraded by the unspeakable ugliness of an English manufacturing town, or, what is almost worse, by the sham art where decoration of any kind is invented or attempted by the richer middle class.

The theory that soil and climate and food produce instincts of beauty, as well as varieties of beasts and plants, is, however, evidently at fault in these questions; for if this were the case at one time in the world's history, why not at another? and the present inhabitants of Greece are as inapt as their neighbors in sculpture, painting, and architecture. Nothing, even out of the workshops of Birmingham, can exceed the ugliness of their present productions.

There seems now a headlong competition in every country after bad art. If we ask for lace and embroidery in the Greek islands, or silver filigree in Norway—if we inquire for wood-carving from Burmah, or the old shawls and pottery from Persia and the East—the answer is always the same; we are told that there is 'none such made at present.' It is only what remains of the old hand-made work that is to be obtained; the present inhabitants 'care for none of these things.' Sham jewelry from the 'Palais Royal,' Manchester goods, stamped leather, and the like, are what the natives are seeking for themselves, while they get rid of 'all those ugly old things' to the first possible buyer for any price which they can fetch.

Manufacturing an article (whatever be the real derivation of the word, but) meaning the use of machinery for the multiplication of the greatest number of articles at the least cost, however admirable for the comfort of the million, is evidently fatal to art. When each bit of iron-work, every hinge, every lock scutcheon was hammered out with care and consideration by the individual blacksmith, even if he were but an indifferent performer, it bore the stamp of the thought of a man's mind directing his hand; now there is only the stamp of a machine running the metal into a mould. When every bit of decorative wood-work was 'all made out of the carver's brain'—when the embroidery of the holiday shirt of a boatman of "Chios' rocky isle" took half a lifetime to devise and stitch, and was intended to last for generations of wearers, art found a way, however humble, through nimble fingers interpreting the fancies of the individual brain. 'Fancy work,' as an old Hampshire woman called her stitching of the fronts and backs of the old-fashioned smock-frocks, each one differing from the one she made before, as her 'fancy' led, was always interesting, and almost always beautiful."