

**OUR AMERICAN
ARTISTS, PP. 1-65**

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Our American Artists, pp. 1-65 by S. G. W. Benjamin

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S. G. W. BENJAMIN

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BY

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MR. LAFARGE'S PORTRAIT OF HIMSELF, AT TWENTY.

JOHN LAFARGE.

IN considering the works of the artist who heads this paper, we enter upon what is called the field of decorative art. It is true that Mr. Lafarge has done much excellent work in other branches of art, but it is in pictorial decoration that his abilities have found their best expression.

In order to find the origin of decorative painting, we must go back several thousand years; when we explore the tombs of Egypt in the vast caves of the Nile, we see wall painting there that was done in some cases five thousand years ago. The rich blues, greens

and reds that were put on so long before Christ are as bright to-day as they were then. It is surprising also that the color was so true, for of course it had to be laid on by torch-light, as the light of day has never yet penetrated those tombs.

When Mr. Layard excavated the ruined palaces of Nineveh thirty years ago he found on those walls the remains of decorative paintings that were blackened by fire and covered with the earth of ages.

If we pass from Asia to Europe and study the art of former times in Greece, we learn from the ~~the~~

rians that most of the paintings of ancient Greece were decorative. Pausanias tells us of some very



STAINED GLASS WINDOW, HARVARD MEMORIAL HALL.

fine paintings on the walls of the celebrated temple of Delphi, which represented scenes from the legend of

Troy. He says that the names of the persons of the pictures were written over their heads, which would look curious in a modern picture.

You may ask, what is decorative art, and why one painting is decorative and another not? Well, it is that form of art which is intended to aid other branches of art, especially architecture, while a painting that is not decorative stands entirely on its own merits, and is done for itself alone. Decorative art must therefore be made to harmonize with the buildings or the objects which it is to adorn, and is broad and general in outline and detail, and often allegorical. It was much more common in former ages than at the present day, but it is coming more into use in the present age.

When we pass from Greece to Italy, we find that many splendid remains of decorative art have come down to our time; you will be surprised to learn that this is owing largely to a volcano. It was by an eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were covered with lava and sand, and destroyed. Many thousands were killed by this calamity, and for eighteen centuries these cities were buried out of sight.

But when the spade of the modern explorer broke through this crust of lava, and cleared the streets and houses where the Romans of old revelled and banqueted, what memorials of beauty were revealed to our gaze!

These two cities had been forgotten for ages, when a man who was digging a well near his house in Naples suddenly struck the roof of a temple far under ground. He immediately informed the government of the discovery he had made. Upon further investigation it was found that this was Herculaneum; but as this city lies under Naples itself it was difficult to continue the discoveries there, and the search was therefore confined to the opening of the temple and theatre, and the excavations were then directed to Pompeii, which is beyond the city limits. The result of this search was to bring to light a beautiful city, much in the condition in which it was left by the Romans two thousand years ago.

As we walk through the streets of this old town, and visit the halls of its deserted mansions, we are able to see how they lived in those days. We find that the most prominent ideas suggested by these ruins is that the Romans had an intense love of beauty, to such a degree that it led them to desire to surround themselves with pleasing objects in the

houses in which they dwell. And thus we discover on their walls some of the finest specimens of decorative art the world has seen. We find that the sides of the better mansions were plastered with a stucco on which fresco painting could be laid with great effect, and thus present us with exquisite compositions representing dancing girls, or scenes from Mythology, surrounded by attractive imaginative designs of flowers, of hunting scenes and the like, the colors of which have been admirably preserved. The floors of the various apartments, the vestibules, halls, and public bathing rooms, are decorated with the most exquisite mosaics. Nor was the decorative art discovered at Pompeii confined to pictorial designs. Works of metal also were excavated there of such various and beautiful patterns that they serve in our day for examples to our decorative artists.

One of the most diverting pictures found at Pompeii was a sign painted over the door of a school-house; it represents a boy mounted on the back of another, and in that position receiving a severe drubbing from his teacher.

The decorative art of the Middle Ages was notable, especially for carvings of wonderful richness, and frescoes on the walls of churches, and still more particularly for the stained glass of its cathedral windows, which has never been surpassed for beauty of color and design. The artists of the present century, especially of Germany, have endeavored, sometimes quite successfully, to imitate the fresco art of those times. The church of St. Boniface, at Munich, has been beautifully decorated in this way.

Much effort has also been employed of late years to imitate the stained glass of the Middle Ages, but generally with very little success, as we can see when we compare the glass of the two periods in the churches of Europe. With the artists of those times the production of stained glass was an inspiration, it was part of their religion; to a wonderful eye for color they added enthusiasm, and the splendor of their painted windows has never been equalled in the whole history of art; but with most of our artists to-day who work in stained glass it is simply an imitation and therefore a failure.

But since the great world exhibition at London in 1852 the decorative art of Europe has made great progress, far more, indeed, than any other art. Much of this is due to Owen Jones, the superintendent of the Kensington Fine Art Museum. The impulse towards this form of art has also reached America at last; we

are beginning to see that our houses may be made beautiful as well as useful, that our furniture may be



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handsome as well as comfortable, and that it is not necessary to worship God in a church that looks like