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The Lay Figure: On Modern Architecture And Decorative Design.

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The Lay Figure

THE LAY FIGURE: ON MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND DECORATIVE DESIGN.

"DON'T make much ado about nothing," said the Critic to the Architect. "You lose your temper merely because a few writers in the newspapers have a disinclination, natural enough in old-fashioned minds, to welcome any note of modernness in architecture and the decorative arts."

"But they write such twaddle," persisted the Architect. "Their one aim is to bring about a reaction against every kind of decorative effort which complies with the present-day conditions of taste and thought. Note, too, the manner in which they try to make this aim real. Their appeal is made, not to the well-informed, but to the rate-paying public, so that popular dissatisfaction may be stirred up against the improved methods of teaching in the Government art-schools."

"Nor is that all," remarked the Designer. "The public is easily influenced by striking phrases, and the writers in question are trying to take advantage of this fact. Thus we are told, for instance, that the modern style of decoration imparts to all natural objects the convolutions of flames and entrails."

The Philosopher laughed. "As an old man," said he, "I cannot but be delighted with the irrepressible child in the aesthetic temperament. How amusingly childish it is, to imagine that the inevitable growth of vigorous new styles out of vigorous old forms of art can be stayed by the clamour of a few conservative old fogies!"

"If anything can impair the vitality of the new styles," said the Art Historian, "it is the habit most of us have of chattering, always with self-conscious enthusiasm, about our modernness, as if we feel secretly surprised that we are not children of a century long gone by."

"And it is worth noting," remarked the Man with a Clay Pipe, "that most art students, long before they can draw well, become wondrously anxious about their 'originality.' Well, I would sooner eat crab apples with champagne than suffer from this morbid desire to be original."

"However that may be," said the Philosopher, "you call attention to a species of mental trouble which, I feel sure, is very harmful to the cause of art. To be self-conscious is to be weak, and you may be sure that no artist who is truly modern and original—who, so to speak, has a style in his blood

—wastes his time and weakens his genius by striving to be unlike other artists."

"It is your opinion, then," said the Critic, "that the real enemy to the development of type in both design and architecture is the self-consciousness produced by a fretful anxiety to be modern and original."

"Yes, I believe that, because the new in art has ever come unbidden. It has always been a very singular personal charm showing through and modifying the influence of tradition, culture, and contemporary thoughts and needs on sensitive temperaments and creative minds."

"True," said the Critic. "But you forget, I think, that whenever a few men of genius have broken away from a slavish obedience to tradition, many weak minds have become possessed by an intense desire to be original at any price. For instance, a large number of second- and third-rate painters were thus affected in the early days of the Impressionist movement; but this did not prevent the great leaders of the movement from doing a great deal of good. Indeed, some of their qualities became a part of the aestheticism of painting, and are now so familiar to us all that their origin is rarely mentioned."

"And you believe," asked the Philosopher, "that the same thing will happen in the case of the developments which are taking place to-day in design and in architecture?"

"That is my point," the Critic replied. "These developments, acting on certain minds, certainly give rise to some wild excesses of eccentricity; but I see no reason why we should be surprised. Speaking figuratively, if we wish to have jam we must expect the scum to boil briskly."

"Granted," said the Philosopher. "Let me say, however, that I complain, not because the scum boils briskly, but because it boils over. This annoys me."

"Oh! I'm too selfish to be annoyed," cried the Critic. "To give way to annoyance, I find, is an unpleasant way of wasting energy. I prefer to be tolerant and patient."

"But I am told," said the Journalist, "that your tolerance is discreditable to your artistic judgment, since nothing but ornament, ornament, ornament, is to be found in the houses built and decorated by the men whom you most admire."

"I like such abuse," answered the Critic. "It is honest, and it does no harm. Besides, most people now recognise that simplicity, not ornament, is the keynote of the new styles."

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