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THE AIMS AND CONDITIONS
OF THE MODERN DECORATOR — 1895

Eleven years ago, when beginning to turn my attention to designing wall papers and fabrics, I felt that the decorators were my natural enemies—that their tastes and interests were diametrically opposed to my own as a designer.

Ignorance and ambition led me to the belief that the public could be coerced into buying what the designer thought best, and that it was the duty of the decorator and designer to lead the public, and *not* their duty quietly to supply the market to suit any debased taste that might happen to be in vogue.

Time has revealed that the greatest consideration and sympathy are due to the decorator, when one remembers his liabilities, and the number of hungry mouths dependent upon him, and last, but not least, the universal commercial instinct of the general public, who assume that they have a right to do what they like with their own money, and that, if they pay for anything, that fact gives them the right to determine exactly what that thing shall be.

Thus the labours of the decorator and designer are reduced to a commercial commodity, like so much butter or cheese, the flavour of which is to be regulated to suit the palate of the purchaser.

Hence we have acres of pattern designed by experts and applied by decorators to suit the taste of persons the bulk of whom never designed a pattern nor gave a moment's thought to the laws of decoration and fitness—a public swayed to and fro by fashion, and demoralised by excessive luxury and excitement in a world almost dead to the sense of dignity and repose. Must we decorators and designers for ever follow such a public?

In the fact of your kind indulgence and courtesy in inviting me to address you to-night, I feel great hope and encouragement.

I rejoice to think the decorators are ready to hold out the right hand of friendship to the designers, and unite with them in a mighty endeavour to lead the public for Art's sake, and cease to be content only to follow them for commercial ends.

When once we make up our minds that the demand shall not

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always and for ever govern the supply, we may be sure the supply will in time govern the demand.

To bring about this state of things, some of us must be prepared to make sacrifices, for nothing worth having is to be had without some pain or loss.

The task of trying to influence public taste must be a very hard and arduous one, attended with much anxiety and heartache, as many of you know from your own experiences. Still it is not generally recognised as a duty. For countless lives are wasted in trying to find a *via media*, in endeavouring to sneak up to a leading position without suffering for it.

No doubt it will be retorted, that he can preach courage who stands alone, and, therefore, suffers alone; but for men who have many workers dependent upon them the case is different. For they rightly refuse to bring suffering on others for the sake of an idea not too obviously a duty. And so the question is one which must be left to each individual to decide as his own conscience prompts him. For my own part I would say, that *that* man serves his fellows best who is most courageous in the pursuit of the highest and best impulses within him.

Taking it for granted, then, that the highest position the decorator and designer can take up is that of a leader of public taste, what does this position involve? And how can it be upheld?

First we must purify our motives, and seek to discover true principles as far as it is possible. Of course it is clear that if the decorator is to have motives higher than the mere making of money, he must needs devote much time and thought to the study of colour, form, and texture, and be in close communion with the designer, who in his turn should help the decorator on artistic lines. And most important is it to avoid at all times the lazy and contemptible practice of relying upon precedent for justification of what is done.

The revivalism of the present century, which is so analogous to this reliance on precedent, has done more to stamp out men's artistic common sense and understanding than any movement I know. The unintelligent, unappreciative use of the works of the past, which is the rule, has surrounded us at every turn with deadly dulness, that is dumb alike to the producer and the public.

This imitative, revivalistic temper has brought into our midst foreign styles of decoration totally out of harmony with our national character and climate. Also the cultivation of mechanical

accuracy, by close attention to imitation, has so warped the mind and feelings until invention to many is well-nigh impossible. Technically, excellent imitations are still unduly applauded, to the exclusion or forgetfulness of the nobler powers of thought and feeling. The decorator must be freed from the mechanism of dull imitation, and be allowed to exercise his God-given faculties; at the same time reverently respecting and gaining inspiration and help from all faithful workers who have gone before him. Not for the sake of being original should men so work, but to fulfil the universal law in the exercise of their best and noblest faculties. Free men from the bondage of imitation, and they *must* at once express living emotions. Turn a man on to any ordinary house to colour the wood and the walls without regard to tradition, and he will inevitably express, by his work and choice of colour, either unhealthiness or healthiness, sadness or joy. Some expression of thought and feeling there is sure to be, and thus may be imparted that human element which adds such immeasurable charm to all noble works of art.

Emerson says: "In the sculptures of the Greeks, in the masonry of the Romans, and in the pictures of the Tuscan and Venetian masters, the highest charm is the universal language they speak. A confession of moral nature, of purity, love, and hope breathes from them all. That which we carry to them, the same we bring back more fairly illustrated in the memory. The traveller who visits the Vatican, and passes from chamber to chamber through galleries of statues, vases, sarcophagi, and candelabra, through all forms of beauty, cut in the richest materials, is in danger of forgetting the simplicity of the principle out of which they all sprang, and that they had their origin from thoughts and laws in his own breast. He studies the technical rules on these wonderful remains, but forgets that these works were not always thus constellated; that they are the contributions of many ages and many countries; that each came out of the solitary workshop of one artist, who toiled, perhaps, in ignorance of the existence of other sculpture, created his work without other model save life, household life, and the sweet and smart of personal relations, of beating hearts and meeting eyes, of poverty and necessity, and hope and fear. These were his inspirations, and these are the effects he carries home to your heart and mind. In proportion to his force, the artist will find in his work an outlet for his proper character. . . . Art has not yet come to its maturity, if it do not put itself abreast with the most

potent influences of the world; if it do not stand in connection with the conscience; if it do not make the poor and uncultivated feel that it addresses them with a voice of lofty cheer."

In this passage Emerson shows clearly that there is a spiritual as well as a physical aspect of Art. A fact which we shall do well to remember in this materialistic age. For likeness to physical nature is the almost universal gauge of artistic worth.

Once remove the strait-jacket of convention, and place beauty of thought and feeling above beauty of expression, and the hands of men will soon find the cunning with which to represent their thoughts; and, once again, Art will be a living power amongst us. To what extent the decorator and designer can reason with, and persuade, and sometimes learn from and lead the public, it is impossible to say. A kind readiness to reason, rather than a gluttonous civility, which aims only at securing orders, will do much to clear the air of prejudice. Surely, in some such way might be broken down the unreasonable, unhealthy, and insane opposition to the conventional application of *animal* life to decoration.

The realistic treatment of birds has very properly been denounced as a painful spectacle when plastered round angles, or cut in half by cornices. But can it not be justly argued that when conventionally treated the bird is merely a flat symbol, and if repeated quickly, the mutilation is scarcely felt? And, again, what reason can be assigned for grieving over a bisected symbol of a bird, more than over a bisected symbol of a flower? No doubt strong popular prejudices generally have some foundation in fact, and it may be, there is some justification for the cruel boycotting of the sweetest, most suggestive, interesting, and telling forms of decoration. Perhaps, when the public have given up telegraphing the rise and fall of railway shares, there will be left a little more sympathy for the poetic and imaginative sense, and our playful delight in bird life and strong joyful colour will not meet with so much indifference and disdain. At present it is idle to look among the many for the appreciation of pleasures enjoyed only by the few.

The multitude associate bird-life with the shooting season and bread sauce. But what real delight in bird-life—what belief in individual existence of bird spirits is there? Surely, it is most uncommon to find among men and women any signs of keen interest in animal life; for do not their own pleasures depend less and less on simple Nature, and more and more on Eiffel Towers, Infant Prodigious, and Mahatmas? In countless ways the decorator is

hemmed in and hampered by the *Vox populi*.

We seldom hear now of the client sending for his decorator and instructing him to decorate his house or a portion thereof, limiting him only as to cost, but otherwise leaving him free to work to the best of his ability and for his own credit; but if this practice were revived, the decorator would be put upon his mettle, he would take a deeper interest in his work, and would carry it out with a unity of idea which might render harmony possible—a good result meaning for him the foundation of a wide and honourable reputation; but now too often the decorator becomes a kind of head-foreman, whose opinion is not always asked, and indeed is often scornfully rejected. He is expected to carry out the ideas of others, although he has probably spent his life in the study and practice of his craft. His client—often the lady of the house—does not consider this, but will rather turn (fresh from the mysteries of millinery, and with a head full of notions begotten of Paris fashion-books) to her daughters for counsel and suggestion. And the decorator, with his years of experience, has to stand patiently by and listen to verbose feminine dogmatism upon a matter to which in many cases his client brings neither knowledge nor aptitude, but often, what is worse, will quote canting little catechisms and hand-books in defence of the views put forward.

Again, think of the hardships the decorator has to endure, who is at the mercy of the present generation of upholsterers and furniture makers. Does not the presence in nine thousand out of every ten thousand houses of bastard French, German, Italian, English furniture of the Renaissance persuasion, foredoom the decorator's labours? Can it be possible to produce grace, dignity, repose, or cheerfulness in the presence of such vulgar, ostentatious lumber? or when surrounded with the museum of useless and often gimcrack ornaments and nick-nacks?

We must not forget that only a few years ago Art was believed to belong exclusively to the picture and the statue; till at last the traveller returning home conceived the vain delight of displaying objects as witnesses of his extended culture and experience. Vulgar boastfulness and pride began the domestic museum; and there are to be found to this day often most exquisite examples of lovely design and workmanship in company with the very worst and most debased furniture and fittings about the house. These good people, who will often spend their hundreds on curios, will go to any universal provider and purchase the typical, hideous, carved

coal-box, or a three-legged standard lamp with tiers upon tiers of silk petticoat and the like monstrosities. Will these people be induced by their decorators to put away some of their museums, and show their taste in the selection of their furniture and fittings? Truly under modern conditions the decorator's life is a very hard one. It is, as I said before, partly brought on by himself; by his immoral readiness to supply anything, do anything, and, in fact, be pulled by the nose by the public, for the sake of the pounds, shillings, and pence he can get out of them.

One of the difficulties we have to meet, and unfortunately a very common one, is to be required to produce an effect, or series of effects, present in the mind of another, and emblazoned by countless associations. Association plays such an important part in controlling and governing our taste that it is often very difficult to justify effects by reason; and the result of giving up reason and following the lead of association will often make us parties to unruly outrage against the fundamental principles of artistic fitness. As, for instance, happy memories, associated with crude and ugly form and colour, will quite blind our eyes and warp our judgment, and our affection at once goes out to those wicked forms that accompanied those happy moments.

Events in history, political, religious, and social bias, all affect our taste to an extraordinary degree; but are, in fact, a most unsound foundation for it. Hence the never-ceasing importance of continual cross-questionings. Why do I like that? Why is this right, and that wrong?

If each will scrutinise his own taste in this way, the handbooks and articles on decoration will do less harm, and we shall all feel the danger of binding up our minds in old-world traditions or new-world theories.

The habit of presenting a scheme on paper accompanied by an estimate, and the ridiculous notion that any but an expert can judge of its ultimate effect before it is carried out, is all a natural outcome of the revivalism of this century. We hear too much about styles and the fashions which live and grow fat on them—as if decoration were capable of being dispensed like drugs from hieroglyphic prescriptions. A most admirable condition of things if men were automatic machines, without a semblance of emotional feeling or personal characteristic. But they are *not*; there is a depth of interest in every human creature natural and peculiar to him. And this individualism, I contend, should be made the foundation

of all Art. Each man's productions will then depend largely on his personal character, and in that way possess a quality entirely his own, which no man can either give or take away. When this principle is recognised, the patrons of Art will generously give a fair field to the craftsman, and take pleasure in placing confidence in his pride and enthusiasm.

If the painter needs freedom to express the best in him, why not the decorator? Admit this, and the decorator is forced, for the sake of his reputation, to study the artistic side of his craft, and to add the fulness of his nature to his life work; and in that way live a real life.

What a contrast such a state would be to the common treadmill struggle for money, which is robbing us of all healthy pleasure and pride in work, and is making beasts of men. If the craft of the decorator is raised from the position of a commercial enterprise to that of an art, it will cease to be necessary for men to strain every nerve and fibre to advertise themselves. The modern system of advertising is degrading and pestilential, and the leading professions recognise this by obedience to the unwritten law against self-advertisement. And why? Simply because the reputation of a professional man depends so largely upon his personal character. It is this same quality of individualism which raises them from being mere vendors of materials to creators of human thought and feeling. Sculptors, painters, decorators, designers, and architects must join hands one with the other over a common object, not to make money out of each other, but to further artistic knowledge and feeling. For, surely, you gentlemen could do much to utilise the skill and artistic powers of the picture painters and sculptors. Could not such a society as yours undertake among yourself to demand from the manufacturers metal-work designed by known sculptors of experience? For why should our door-furniture, furniture fittings, bell-pulls, letter-plates, and chimney-pieces be so deadly dull, vulgar, and degraded?

The arts of picture painting and sculpture are in a sorry plight, the reasons for which we need not here investigate. The fact remains the same, and so the sculptor must come down off his pedestal and learn architecture enough to co-operate with the architect in producing front doorways and fireplaces; and the painter must light his fire with his easel, and study from the same book as the decorator, and *vice versa*. Surely, men trained to appreciate fine line, colour, texture, light and shade, and composi-

tion, should be able to turn their faculties to good account in house painting and decorating, in fittings and furniture! Are not these the very qualities all decorators acknowledge they *most need*?

Often, when picture painters have tried their skill at decoration, the result has been appalling and hopeless. Still, I venture to say that their failure is due to a pre-conceived notion that they must follow some precedent—reproduce some decoration already tried. They fall back upon precedent and association, not having experience or practice in applying the rules of fitness and laws of beauty to anything outside a gold frame. Still, I cannot but believe that these crafts might be united with your own, to the common benefit of all, and that there are painters who might be induced to join hands with you in producing charming combinations of poetry, colour, and form in wall papers and tapestries, or in furniture daintily ornamented with colour.

There must be unity among you, and determination to use only the best you can get, rather than that upon which you get the most money profit; and I cannot but think that the true art-worker will not measure your commissions by the price you pay, nor demand the extravagant prices paid for pictures. In return for this you gentlemen must modify your commercialism, for it must be a loving sacrifice on all sides; or the reverse, which is selfish greed, will reign supreme, to the utter destruction of all true and lasting art.

I hope I am not expected to suggest a number of different plans and methods of decoration, and give you my opinion on them, in the manner of the handbooks on art, for in that way much mischief may be done. Theories are so satisfying and yet so unsatisfactory in practice; and I am more and more impressed by the difficulty, nay, the sin of trying to dogmatise about matters of Art. While I feel convinced in my own mind that it is right for me to do certain things, and not to do others, I feel it might be quite the reverse in many cases with other individuals. As each man's moral sense varies in detail and degree, so does our artistic sense vary, and, moreover, we are none of us in the possession of the whole truth. But in spite of this prefatory caution, there are some leading ideas which, if expressed, may result in very useful discussion, and so clear our reason and shed new light on the subject. Therefore, let us take a few ideas as they occur.

Say, the walls of ordinary living-rooms should be treated as backgrounds, subservient to pictures, furniture, and people,

which, if admitted, inevitably leads to the conclusion that the utmost flatness is essential. This proposition at once puts out of court all those realistic flowery papers, in which there is a display of light, and shade, and perspective of a naturalistic character.

These papers, we all know, sell better than any others, because their villainy harmonises with the brutality of the furniture and architecture which they accompany. By the same argument, friezes may be treated with less flatness, because they seldom, if ever, appear in the position of backgrounds, and are so separated from pictures and furniture as to call for specially interesting treatment.

Likewise the ceiling is in no sense a background, and should therefore not be treated with any flat decoration suitable for a wall. And unless the room is very lofty and large, no decoration of an interesting and engaging character should be put there at all; or, let us say, unless the ceiling can be easily seen obliquely without straining the neck, no interesting ornament should be placed on it. This, of course, is mainly a matter of personal feeling, although I remember many fine old painted and plaster ceilings, to be seen in this country, the beauty of which, by-the-way, is due to their treatment and execution rather than to their position.

An additional reason for aiming at flatness in wall-coverings is to be found in the fact that any attempt at realism provokes comparison with nature, which is distressing in proportion to the beholder's appreciation of the subtle beauties of real life; whereas, in conventional ornament, the life of the designer is brought in, and should form a very living and additional attraction.

Nature has decreed that it is absolutely impossible to copy her in her completeness, and in this way has ruled that human work shall be creative in so far as it is a selection of some truths, some characteristics in the light of human thought and feeling. There are many subtle forms of imitation, and efforts to delude and deceive, against which we must earnestly struggle. In this category must be placed marble papers and graining, which in their origin were undoubtedly immoral; but it is questionable how far the use of such can be justified by the plea that the deception no longer exists.

Too little attention is paid to architectural proportion in these days, and the possibility of improving the proportions of rooms is often lost sight of. It is painfully common to find in an ordinary room, 18 feet by 21 feet or thereabouts, 12 feet high, a miserable

border 10½ inches wide at the top of the wall, as it were creating a precipice. This room is as bad in proportion as it can well be; yet the chance of improving it by putting a picture rail and deep frieze is missed.

It is, I hope, becoming more and more common to find doors, shutters, and panelling treated in one colour, and not picked out with contrasting colours or varying shades, or gold, to the utter destruction of breadth. The use of one colour, as you all know, produces a simplicity and a breadth which are an immense relief to the motley collection of forms and colours with which most rooms are crowded. Moreover, the common door and window shutter are not pleasantly divided up into panels. Like a long-bodied man with very short legs, the long panels are at the top, producing an effect the very reverse of that of dignity, so that to emphasize the fact by picking out the uninteresting machine-made mouldings, is an aggravation of one's sorrows.

Lastly, let us do our utmost to raise the colour sense from morbid sickly despondency to bright hopeful cheeriness. Crudity, if you will, rather than mud and mourning.

It is amazing that for outside painting, in large towns, people still paint their houses, as they would have them be, instead of several tones higher and brighter, to allow for dirt and age. Consequently, our streets are deadly melancholy.

Experience has led me to the conclusion that light, bright, cheery colours, for outside work, wear better and *please longer* than more sombre hues.

Surely there is enough misery and depression in the world without adding to it by gloomy drabs and chocolate or dirty black greens.

One appeal must be made for the sense of repose. Let us not ignore the immense value of horizontal bands and lines, and the simple reposeful effects so produced. In this noisy world of angularity and turmoil we need all the peace and repose we can get in our homes. Simplicity in decoration is one of the most essential qualities without which no true richness is possible. To know where to stop and what not to do is a long way on the road to being a great decorator.

It is well to pay particular attention to this quality of simplicity. For it is more often than not scoffed at. We hear it on the lips in tones of disparagement, and many are afraid of it. For well they may be, as its presence lays bare the true qualities of things. Sim-

plicity requires perfection in all its details, while elaboration is easy in comparison with it. Take what art you will, and you will find only the greatest masters can be simple, or dare to be simple.

As a matter of education we ought constantly to strive for simplicity in all we do, and encourage it among our clients; and I am sure, if we do, there will grow up an appreciation of *quality* rather than *quantity*.

Let the several crafts unite in sympathy with and devotion to the one great aim of slaying the arrogant demon Commercialism, and then may we encourage each other to cultivate that self-reliance and self-sacrifice which will stimulate our efforts to pursue the noblest artistic ideals, regardless of ridicule and loss.

I can picture the vision produced in many minds by the contemplation of the individualism herein advocated. The multitude of egotistic mannerists, the eccentricities, insanities, and vices of each individual having been let loose to romp and rave on the housetops and under the very nostrils of sober-minded modest people. What a ghastly pantomime it presents! But picture what abuses you will, the principle of encouraging the cultivation of all the faculties is a right principle, and one impossible to practise while Revivalism and Commercialism reign supreme.