

. Self-expression in Art

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Although reading the newspapers as little as possible, I am yet impressed by the frequency with which we meet the statement that "An artist must express himself." Everytime it irritates, because so mixed are the meanings attaching to such a message. The writers who mean by it to emphasize the importance of absolute sincerity, are of course right : but to the young mind it may mean egotism, which is the most poisonous perversion of individuality. The very wish to express oneself is corrupting to the soul and intoxicating to personal vanity. "For he that would save his soul must lose it." The true and healthy sense in which the message "express thyself" may be wholesome and beneficial, is when it is the outcome of our true love and admiration for fundamental ideas and principles. If in our work we express a love of truth, by avoiding shams and showing frankness and sincerity, we are not expressing ourselves, strictly speaking, but the ideas and sentiments common to all good men. The same may be said of other qualities like dignity, grace, restraint, simplicity or—magnificence and generous plenty. All these are proper objects of thought common to mankind, and the fit subjects of architectural expression : and to the properly tuned mind, of infinitely greater importance than any personal tastes or predilections.

Personal tastes and preferences should not be allowed to obtrude themselves when we are striving to build for another. Let us coax and persuade a client if we can, win his affections for that which is noble and of good report, but do not let us spend his money on our own personal fads. Such sinking of ourselves need not mean any sacrifice of self-respect. It is not doing anything of which we can possibly feel ashamed ; it is the recognition of our position as servants.

If, however, we are asked to produce anything which conscience pronounces to be wrong. If we are asked for something we think ugly, or in any way harmful, then in very faithfulness to fundamental general principles we must refuse emphatically and be prepared to suffer for such refusal, if need be. Such individual faithfulness for conscience sake is not egotism. A little clear thinking will show us how full all architectural expression is of the general thought and feeling of the country and time of its production, and how all great periods show fundamental and leading principles in thoughts and feelings ; while many personal eccentricities and private tastes and fancies spring up like fungi and die in a day, proving how little value there is in that which is purely our own, and that only noble thoughts, ideas, and feelings, to which we all can aspire are of lasting value. It is a sad pity that March Phillips is not more often read and taught in the schools. For he elaborately shows, what I have been trying, but feebly, to express.