

Chapter 1

Introduction



Among the prints engraved after the inimitable Hogarth, there is one which represents the inhabitants of the moon; and a rather terrible monstrosity it is. It was intended, no doubt, as a satire to illustrate the horrid catastrophes which may overtake those who propose to be designers on an entirely original basis; that is to say, guided solely by their own untrained imagination. If such a satire was needful in Hogarth's age, there is assuredly twenty-fold the want of it today.

Just when our leading men of science have demonstrated the absolute truth of Evolution, our artists (or would-be artists) are trying to force us to ignore it.

No one who approaches the subject with a becoming humility can question that Evolution is the secret and key-note of Art, no less than of Nature. In the greatest and most difficult of the Arts, where, fortunately for us, the stages of Evolution are most distinctly exhibited, namely, in Architecture, even the boy-student may perceive the steps by which the Greek Temple grew into the Roman Temple, and that into the Byzantine Church, and that into the Gothic Cathedral; all the stages of evolution are here preserved to us in imperishable stone and marble.

The very same development has taken place in every other branch of Art; and it has been reserved for the Nineteenth Century to endeavour to ignore this inevitable process, and show how young men and women can originate things as horrible, because as false (to Nature), as are Hogarth's "Inhabitants of the Moon."

The idiosyncrasies of artists and designers have not unfrequently led them into strange vagaries, but here there is no question of a mere eccentricity. We are confronted by a definite intention to introduce entire novelty, not only ignoring the design of the past, but, as far as may be, in defiance of it.

It is easy to see how designers might have been irritated ten or twenty years ago by the bad examples of every class of design which they saw around them, and our first impression may be that their attitude may have been a mere reaction based on an erroneous supposition that the past had grown so wholly debased that it must be entirely deserted, and fresh beginnings made on fresh lines. However mistaken such an assumption may be, it is clearly within the range of possibility that to certain minds, in certain conditions, such an argument might seem warrantable.

Another suggestion is less tenable, namely, that the strong impetus, which evidently leads many people now, merely to be conspicuous, whether from the mere desire for prominence as in itself an end, or from the commercial idea of attaining to pecuniary access by a new and shorter road, may have led to the deplorable results of the day. Half-a-dozen ending practitioners in such a movement are enough, at the present time, with our quick intercommunication of ideas, to lead scores of beginners to follow them; and just now it seems as though it was "in the air" for all young draughtsmen to try to become designers of ornament on absolutely original grounds. If this book should induce a few of these to accept tradition rather than moonstruck fancy as their guide, it may not have been written in vain.

The essay on "Taste" was written many years ago, but as I have seen no reason for altering my general views upon that subject, it is now printed almost exactly as written.

The essay on "Beauty in Form and Colour" was prepared at the request of the Architectural Institute of London, and was afterwards read to similar Institutes in Liverpool and Leeds some ten years ago.

The "Decoration of the House" essay was written three or four years ago at the request of the Liverpool Architectural Association.

That on "Fabrics" is more recent, and met a request from the Architectural Institute of London; with it is incorporated a paper on the same subject, written for the Architectural Association of London.

The article on "Furniture and Decoration," & c., is the preface to a large illustrated work on "Furniture and Decoration in the Eighteenth Century," written for Messrs. J. & E. Bumpus, by whose kind permission it is included in this volume.

Chapter 2

Taste



“Genius is scarce, but taste is scarcer”

It may safely be affirmed that there is no subject closely affecting our daily lives and habits, about which we are all so ready to confess our ignorance as that form of Art which should be our guide in the choice of dress and furniture and ornaments of all kinds; and yet there is none where a general ignorance produces a failure so disastrous in its consequences. An absolute lack of acquaintance with astronomy or geology, for instance, results only in inability to converse on those subjects, together with a loss of the pleasures to be derived from a study of nature in those directions—no, even a total ignorance of high art may commonly be met by an avoidance of the subject; or if a picture or two *must* be had to decorate the dining-room, a judicious application to Agnew or Dowdswell may completely annihilate the difficulty, and leave the owner safe in the company of knowing diletanti, and secure of their applause.

But a personal necessity for the exercise of choice, for the most part unassisted, in matters involving form and colour, is laid upon each of us almost hourly, and all through life. A man cannot buy a scarf for himself, or a dress for his wife, a chimney-piece ornament, a pair of curtains, a workbox, a fan, or any little birthday present, not to mention such important matters as building a house or serving on a committee to build a church, without being perforce obliged to exercise such judgment and choice as he possesses.

And when discussion happens to arise upon questions of "good taste," nine people out of every ten instantly volunteer the announcement that they "know nothing at all about that sort of thing" (which is probably quite true), and profess to refer matters to the taste of a so-called "authority." Unfortunately, the same people are equally ready to remark, "Of course, I know what pleases me;" and unless trammelled by the presence of the "authority," who is supposed to have "taste," will instantly proceed to exhibit their confessed ignorance in a practical and concrete form, to the last limit of pitiable, recurring, and irrevocable mishap.

But this readiness to admit a complete ignorance about the laws of "taste," coupled with an apparently complete confidence in pronouncing judgment whenever occasion serves, is not quite so paradoxical as it might at first appear, at least in the mind or intention of the actors. For two serious misapprehensions underlie the situation. No one would object to admit inability to speak Fiji, or play the banjo; he might, indeed, entertain a silent conviction that there is little to learn, and nothing to gain by learning that little. And the same conviction holds good with many respecting that form of Art we are discussing. But this is surely a grave blunder.

Let me take an analogous case. We all know that the ear may be pleasantly tickled and the emotions excited by music, and that considerable enjoyment may be extracted even from an indifferent performance heard for the first time by persons utterly uncultivated in that direction; yet we know not less surely, firstly, that it is possible, even probable, that the ear may be permanently spoilt by listening only to the performance of bad or low-class music; and, secondly, that it is not from the higher efforts of musical genius alone that the highest order of pleasurable sensations are obtained, but that study, and patience, and many repetitions of the same composition are requisite to the listener before the full beauties of fine music can be thoroughly appreciated. And yet the ear may well be supposed to be as quick to

convey impressions of beauty in sound, as the eye of form or colour. What right have we to take it for granted that the uncultivated eye and brain can at a glance comprehend the beauty of God's works? I believe they ordinarily do take in an *extremely small* proportion of the impressions to be obtained after careful study; and that the infinite paucity and triviality of the sensations of beauty enjoyed by people who have never given any time or study to nature, are responsible for the general satisfaction in a life which takes only passing glances at the shores and boundaries of things—as children gather flowers from a vague and momentary interest, and drop them listlessly at the next gate—and that the great unfathomable ocean of the beauty of God's creation remains to all such people a sealed book.

And the other mistake is even of greater importance, in its general result, at all events. The very people who in one breath express themselves as ignorant — ignorant of any laws of beauty or standards of excellence—are quite as ready with an opinion when occasion demands, not from mere conceit or inanity, but from a vague and popular supposition that there is no such thing as an abstract standard of beauty, and that the "taste" (meaning really caprice or fancy) of each individual is a sufficient guide for him or her, though not necessarily for anyone else. I don't mean to say that this has been formulated and definitely offered as an axiom for acceptance—far from it. Had anyone attempted to do so, an opposite result must have been obtained. But in a matter where general education is extremely deficient, vagueness steps in and endorses ignorance and private whim, relying on the absence of any canons which might trip up the hasty judgment. And so one hears constantly the phrase, "It is a matter of taste," implying that in all questions which are not matters of absolute and ascertained fact, one opinion is pretty nearly as good as another, and, at all events for the holder of the opinion, quite as good. In which proposition there are clearly some very loose screws indeed.

In order to avoid the rather unpleasant German-Greek phrase

“aesthetics,” I will use the common and much-abused word “taste”; but, as it is most frequently used in a loose and slovenly fashion, let me define. To all sons and daughters of man, I imagine there is given by nature some bent or bias of preponderating force,—in exceedingly varying degree no doubt, but something to each; and where this innate bias receives from education, or felicitous circumstances, or both, its utmost development, we have the “genius,” or the man of talent, or the ready learner, according to the degree in which the bias has been given, or the vigour of the organism in which it has been placed. If a child has the gift of perception of beauty in form and colour developed up to the point we term “genius,” and has the gift well-cultivated, it becomes an artist; if it has the same gift in a lesser degree, and the circumstances of life and education are not uncongenial, we get the man or woman of “taste” or “good taste.”

The phrase “bad taste” is misleading, because it seems to allow that taste is a question merely of degree, and that all the degrees are more or less admissible from something short of bad up to something actually good. If we find a mistake in a matter involving the use of decorative art, the word “false” will best express the blunder. The word “taste,” therefore, should be used to express a natural aptitude and an acquired facility for seeing what is beautiful in form and colour, and promptly separating it from what is coarse and degrading. “Taste” is the faculty of discriminating, and where no discrimination is made, no taste exists. Of course taste may enter into more matters than decorative art, but it is not now our purpose to follow it further.

Unquestionably there is a large number of people originally possessing this innate sense of beauty in form and colour; but among those born with such a bias, many never have the natural gift cultivated, and it becomes obscured; while a still larger number, through want of personal force and individuality of character, cease to exercise the gift, and drop helplessly into grooves marked out by the chariot-wheels of the great goddess Fashion.

And how wide is the list of subjects upon which people, confessedly ignorant, have daily to exercise their judgment—with a correspondent widely disastrous result, of course!

Let me enumerate: and first, on account of the all but daily necessity for the purchase of some article, and its enormous cost if added up for a lifetime, must be placed Women's dress. "*They ordered the silks and they ordered the flowers, And the bill it kept rolling up gown upon gown.*"

And next, not to be ungallant, *Men's dress*—for a man may make a terrible fool of himself by a ridiculous garment, and not know it.

3rd. Trifles for ornament, for presents, and little "nothings" generally, in which, through constant, daily, hourly transactions, the annual expenditure must be enormous, and in which false taste very commonly makes its appearance.

4th. Jewellery for both sexes, and plate,—costing as much as the maintenance of armies.

5th. Ladies' fancy work, daily before our eyes, generally entirely useless and exceedingly costly.

6th. Wall papers and carpets, working havoc in the rooms we have to inhabit for most of our waking hours. Draperies, which form an absolutely necessary item in every room where comfort, not to say luxury, is desired. Furniture for the house, the office, the public building, the school, the place of worship.

7th. Glass, china, and table ornaments generally, for domestic use, always being broken, and so requiring constant renewal. Decorative china, clocks, bronzes, staircase "stained-glass" windows, &c., &c.—generally not decorative. Mirrors and chimney-pieces, involving great displays of real and sham marble, carving and gilding.

8th. Pictures, engravings, and illustrated books and their bindings, forming a cumbrous and useless incubus on the drawing-room and library tables.

9th. Gardening, including the inevitable summer-house.

10th. Church embroidery, decoration, and stained-glass, where false taste is a public horror.

And lastly, above and beyond the range of the subjects we are discussing in their relation to good taste, but unfortunately, as a matter of practice, quite within the range of the ordinary transactions of ordinary mortals, and for the most part quite unguarded by any selection of men for their special fitness, comes No. 11, *choice of architectural design*, including the house, the place of business, the public building, the church, where false taste and blunders are a *national* disaster.

Here is an appalling list of eleven tolerably distinct subjects, upon all of which many of us, and upon many of which all of us, have constantly to exercise our unassisted judgment as well as we can; involving the spending of a large portion of our time, and a still larger proportion of our annual incomes; and to fit us for which not one in a hundred has received any education whatever.

Perhaps some of my readers may reply, "Well, but in nine out of eleven of your subjects a mistake does not necessarily affect anyone but the individuals who are parties to it, and perhaps not even them, for they may never find it out." But, setting aside for the moment the fact that no individual mistake can be anything but a common loss—for is not the nation made up of individuals?—I answer that there are at least three distinct ways in which the exercise of false taste is individually as well as generally harmful:

For, first, the error *perpetuates itself* by encouraging trade in the precise direction of the blunder, and by imprinting itself on the minds of children and others incapable of exercising unbiassed judgment.

2nd. It leaves an heirloom of false rubbish to be dealt with by posterity, which, out of regard for the opinion of the past, is likely to be hampered and blinded in exercising a true judgment.

3rd. It deprives the buyer of a great part of the value of what he purchases. He ought to reap definite gratification ("sweetness and light")

from the form, design, colour, or fitness of what he has acquired; but if he has asked for a fish, and knows so little of the nature of fishes that he can be put off with a stone, he is cheated.

Moreover, an inability to exercise “taste” robs us of enjoyment in two directions. It hampers and deadens our enjoyment of God’s art (Nature), and it bars the road altogether to the poetic region of man’s art—the great world of poetry in architecture, painting, and sculpture. Those to whom beauty of form and colour is a dead letter, only see half the loveliness—perhaps not half—of flower and mountain, opal and sunset. If we are rightly to read the beautiful page of Nature, we must at least have learned our alphabet, and the primer is a patient, careful, and humble study of leaf and flower, bud and berry, pebble and crag, searching for the beauty of the Maker in each. If we would truly comprehend the beauty of the other Creation “Man added to Nature,” we must patiently and reverently study the footprints by which Phidias and Durer, Tintoretto and Turner, approached the Temple of Art to add courses to her masonry.

And finally, mistakes under the last head are without doubt *national disasters*. Men, confessing their ignorance, but having no just knowledge of the results of such ignorance, fearlessly approach the most difficult work man has to put his hand to — architecture; advertise for plans, and, to relieve themselves from the intricate work of constant consultations with an architect, “consider” (!) the competing designs with redhot haste, or with a foregone conclusion in favour of a cousin or a neighbour, and vote huge sums of money for the erection of buildings, which in nineteen cases out of twenty never afford a ray of pleasure or satisfaction to any—not even to the builders; which people of quick perceptions instantly pronounce to be altogether inferior to the mediaeval remains among us, and which cannot fail to be an incubus and an eyesore to our posterity, if not indeed to ourselves also. If the same individuals were asked to sit in judgment upon an oratorio or a chemical analysis, they would instantly shrink