USING ART TO SELL BEAUTY

AS Mr. Hannen Swaffer said some time ago, they are using Art to sell Beauty. The remark was made, I believe, on the subject of the enlightened and progressive window-dressing of the shops in Regent Street, but it applies to quite a large number of things. In the first place, the capital 'A' recalls the unfortunate incident described by Anatole France, where the man who had learnt all the Art in the world was suffocated in his own catalogue.

The problem which is called, very impressively, the Adjustment of Art and Life, and which, in theory, has been solved over and over again, is, in practice, the subject of the most discouraging caricature. In spite of intelligent window dressing, of fine buildings and bridges, the ultimate comment, it seems, should be ' they are using Art to sell Beauty.'

Mr. Gill, with his classical and impersonal precision, again gives us light on the subject.[1]

His twenty-one pages are a plea for saner and more normal conditions. What he has repeatedly said regarding artists in general he now applies to a particular sort of artist: to those who use a living model. He has a very important section describing how the training of an artist is not entirely, even not essentially, the training of the hands to paint or carve, or of the eyes to harmonise and adjust, but, more deeply, a training of the artist to live. And this is twofold: he must learn to seek inspiration from actual life; and to give back to actual life what he makes, to make things for ' use.'

That artists are being used at last, are being asked to decorate buildings, hoardings and box lids, that they no longer solely concern themselves with painting pots of flowers for the picture gallery, or carving statuary that no one asked for and no one wishes to buy, is in itself an admirable thing. Mr. Gill puts the matter concisely: —

' Things are made for the life of the world—they are made to see. They are sold because people want them enough to buy

[1] *Sculpture and the Living Model.* By Eric Gill. (Sheed & Ward, 2/6; 500 copies printed by Hague & Gill.)

them. People who sell sculpture get bread and butter in exchange and justice demands an exact equivalent. If we take bread and butter from those who make it, we must give in exchange what those who make bread and butter want.'

In other words we can rejoice with Mr. Bernard Shaw that the mural paintings for the Manchester Town Hall were contracted for at so much a square yard.

There can be no quarrel because artists are stepping down from a pedestal they should never have mounted—or been forced to mount. The roots of the matter go far deeper than that.

For which reason this little book of Mr. Gill's has a special interest. It is in fact a plea for specialisation. All that Mr. Gill has written can be called a plea for specialisation in the sense that any true workman must be a specialist. But here he approaches the position from a new point of view. Sculpture from the living model, he points out, is all very well, but it must not be confused with art. It is a special art and must have its own laws and its own uses. Specialisation, however, or the careful work of a careful and thorough craftsman, is not dear to the business mind, which is making of art a vested interest. But Mr. Gill insists—that drawings from life, which a standardised outlook treats as the business of art in general (artistic! exclaims the gentleman in *Rome Express,* by way of excuse) are in reality the business of special artists.

There are many reasons why such a specialised branch of picture-making might fail to thrive or even grow rank (Mr. Gill points out that the public is willing), but its ultimate downfall would be the antagonism to it inherent in industrialised production. Specialisation in any measurable quantity has ceased to exist. That is to say, specialisation, or good craftsmanship, in its fullness. A comparatively minor and industrially unimportant occupation like the making of picture-postcards would stand a better chance of survival, would be less overwhelmed, and freer to develop on its own lines as a thoroughgoing and complete craft. But it is not crafts like the making of picture postcards that set the official pace. And it is in the more important and significant crafts that true workmanship has been vitiated. It still exists, but in a futile way and as a sort of caricature of itself. Highly trained boot-

makers are far more numerous—but they are not skilled in making boots. In other words the boot is no longer of interest to the maker, and no one man is responsible for making good boots. The statement has all the inevitable exaggeration of a simplification, but in general it illustrates the change that has come about and lights up the deep antagonism that must arise between the true craftsman and industrial production.

Naturally that antagonism is not merely a matter of theory; it bears actual fruit in practice. We are accustomed to associate with beauty a sort of timelessness. Not indeed that such a quality is inherent in material beauty. The notion seems to be founded on human requirements. Beauty is in some sense maturity. A beautiful thing may appear like a burst of flame, but somewhere it had to smoulder and grow hot. Its origins are deep down in human life, and once having reached achievement it should stand as a monument to all the labour of its making. Thus Gothic architecture, a Persian miniature, each for us is a vital commentary on a great human achievement.

In our own age things are made and destroyed—buildings and bridges and ships. And it is not merely, or not at all, a sentimental tragedy. Apart from any clash of principles, it is ultimately discouraging. With the present rate of development and change, there is nothing we can point to as perennial, as the medieval builders could point to their cathedrals, nothing with which we can solace ourselves.

Mr. Gill himself is despairing: 'I dare say there is now no remedy; and in any case the supply of remedies is not now my business.' To use his own terms, it is impossible for an artist to live in the world, as a social unit, and acquire the two-fold training—the training of the mind by living, letting experience be the ruling factor; and the training to make things 'for the life of the world.' For in order for this to be possible it is not only the artist who must be allowed to live, but art itself. And so as a last resort, provided we admit that Rome is burning, the only reasonable thing is to fiddle.

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