HINTS

ON

HOUSEHOLD TASTE.

Introduction.

IT is unfortunate for the interests of Art at the present time that in civilized countries it has come to be regarded as the result of theories utterly remote from the question of general taste, totally distinct from those principles which influence manufacture and structural science, and independent of any standard of excellence, which we might expect to be derived from common sense. Let us suppose, for instance, a man of good education, accustomed to associate with well-bred people from his youth, but who had never chanced to reckon a painter among his intimate friends, and had acquired no more knowledge of pictures than what it is possible to gather from books and newspapers, taken for the first time in his life to a second-rate modern exhibition, and after-

wards to the collection of old masters which now forms our National Gallery. Can anyone doubt for a moment that he would prefer the garish realisms of the first to the ideal and frequently conventional treatment of the classic schools? He would see little or no merit in the glowing colours of Titian, the flowing draperies of Veronese, the broad handling of Velasquez, the careful detail of Van Eyck. But the cheapest form of sentiment embodied on a modern canvas, so long as it seemed to realise scenes, incidents, and action which he was accustomed to see about him, would at once appeal to his imagination and interest his eye. This vitiated taste is not confined to pictorial art. If we are to believe those who have given their attention to the subject of technical design, it pervades and infects the judgment by which we are accustomed to select and approve the objects of every-day life which we see around us. It crosses our path in the Brussels carpet of our drawing-rooms; it is about our bed in the shape of gaudy chintz; it compels us to rest on chairs and to sit at tables which are designed in accordance with the worst principles of construction and invested with shapes confessedly unpicturesque. It sends us metal work from Birmingham which is as vulgar in form as it is flimsy in execution. It decorates the finest possible porcelain with the most objectionable character of ornament. It lines our walls with silly representations of vegetable life or with a mass of uninteresting diaper. It

bids us, in short, furnish our houses after the same fashion as we dress ourselves, and that is with no more sense of real beauty than if art were a dead letter. It is hardly necessary to say that this is not the opinion of the general public. In the eyes of Materfamilias, there is no upholstery which could possibly surpass that which the most fashionable upholsterer supplies. She believes in the elegance of window-curtains, of which so many dozen yards were sent to the Duchess of ——, and concludes that the dinner-service must be perfect, which is described as 'quite a novelty.' When did people first adopt the monstrous notion that the 'last pattern out' must be the best? Is good taste so rapidly progressive that every mug which leaves the potter's hands surpasses in shape the last which he moulded? At that rate, how infinitely superior our crockery would be to that of the Middle Ages, and Mediæval majolica to the vases of ancient Greece! But it is to be feared that, instead of progressing, we have gone hopelessly backward in the arts of manufacture. And this is true not only with respect to the character of design, but often in regard to the actual quality of material employed. It is generally admitted by every housewife who has attained a matronly age that linen, silk, and other articles of textile fabric, though less expensive, are far inferior now to what was made in the days of our grandfathers. Metal workers tell us that it is almost impossible to procure for the purpose

of their trade, brass such as appears to have been in common use half a century ago. Joinery is neither so sound nor so artistic as it was in the early Georgian era. A cheap and easy method of workmanship—an endeavour to produce a show of finish with the least possible labour, and, above all, an unhealthy spirit of competition in regard to price such as was unknown to previous generations—have combined to deteriorate the value of our ordinary mechanics' work.

Now although in the field of art as well as in the researches of science, it is not always easy for the uninitiated to determine of two collateral phenomena, which may be referred to cause and which to effect, it must be evident to all who have thought earnestly on the subject, that there is an intimate connection between this falling off in the excellence of our manufactures and the tame, vapid character which distinguished even our best painters' work in the early part of the present Victorian age. Doubtless in this particular epoch there have been individual instances of men who, like Turner, developed a new era in some special branch of their profession—just as Wedgwood distinguished himself by his strenuous efforts to throw new life and vigour into the system of ceramic design; but these are solitary cases, and can be hardly quoted as indicative of a generally advancing taste. National art is not a thing which we may inclose in a gilt frame and hang upon our walls, or which can be locked up in the cabinet of a virtuoso. To be

genuine and permanent, it ought to animate with the same spirit the blacksmith's forge and the sculptor's *atelier*, the painter's studio and the haberdasher's shop. In the great ages of art it was so. Francia, a carpenter's son, was brought up as a *niello* engraver. He became a great painter, but he was not for that reason ashamed to work at decorating jewellery. He loved to sign his pictures 'Aurifex,' and on his trinkets he inscribed the word 'Pictor.' The most liberal salary which Messrs. Hunt and Roskell might be prepared to pay would not secure such assistance now. Modern jewellers, as a rule, know nothing of pictorial art; painters, it is to be feared, have but little taste in jewellery. Every branch of manufacture is inclosed within its own limits—has its own particular style. Our china, which once imitated Oriental ware, not long ago promised to assume, through Minton's influence, a quasi-mediæval character. The goldsmiths who once produced nothing but Rococo ornaments now do their best to imitate Etruscan necklaces and armlets. We have French mirrors and Persian rugs, Greek vases and Gothic candlesticks—designs of every age and country but our own, or if by some chance we can point to any special instance of a genuine English design it is generally mean and uninteresting.

As this is especially the case with those articles of household use on which the eye has constantly to rest, we can scarcely be surprised that there is so little popular sympathy

with works of high aim in pictorial art. People get into a way of calling things 'quaint' and 'peculiar' which happen to differ from the conventional ugliness of the modern drawing-room. When crinoline, for instance, was in the height of its fashion, any young lady who had the courage to appear without it would have been called 'a fright' in regard to her toilet, without reference to the patent fact that the folds of her dress thus fell much more gracefully than when stretched over the steel hoop which, we are rejoiced to see, is once more to be trundled into oblivion. Now, if we reflect on the baneful influence which this wretched invention must have had for the last ten years on the tastes of the rising generation; how children must have grown up in the belief that it actually lent a sort of charm to the skirts of their mothers' dresses, we shall begin to feel by how much the less than ourselves little misses who are still in their teens will be capable of appreciating the Venus of Milo or the drapery of any other antique statue. In the same way, if we contemplate with satisfaction—nay, if we even tolerate the extravagant and graceless appointments of the modern boudoir, let us not be surprised that we find it mirrored on the modern canvas. The most natural instinct of the painter's mind is, after all, to depict life as he finds it; and in all the best ages of art this was practically done, even by those whose aim tended towards the ideal. Phidias, Raphael, and, if we may place their names

together, Hogarth, here met on common ground. We can hardly hope, then, in our own time, to sustain anything like a real and national interest in art while we tamely submit to the ugliness of modern manufacture. We cannot consistently have one taste for the drawing-room and another for the studio; but, perhaps, the best discipline which could be devised for the latter would be initiated by a thorough reform of the first.

The faculty of distinguishing good from bad design in the familiar objects of domestic life is a faculty which most educated people—and women especially—conceive that they possess. How it has been acquired, few would be able to explain. The general impression seems to be that it is the peculiar inheritance of gentle blood, and independent of all training; that while a young lady is devoting at school, or under a governess, so many hours a day to music, so many to languages, and so many to general science, she is all this time unconsciously forming that sense of the beautiful, which we call taste—that this sense, once developed, will enable her, unassisted by special study or experience, not only to appreciate the charms of nature in every aspect, but to form a correct estimate of the merits of art manufacture. That this impression has gained ground so far as to amount to positive conviction, may be inferred from the fact that there is no single point on which well-bred women are more jealous of disparage-

ment than this. We may condemn a lady's opinion on politics—criticize her handwriting—correct her pronunciation of Latin, and run down her favourite author with a chance of escaping displeasure. But if we venture to question her taste—in the most ordinary sense of the word, we are sure to offend. It is, however, a lamentable fact that this very quality is commonly deficient, not only among the generally ignorant, but also among the most educated classes in this country. How should it be otherwise? Even the simplest and most elementary principles of decorative art form no part of early instruction, and the majority of the public, being left completely uninformed of them, is content to be guided by a few people who are themselves not only uninformed but misinformed on the subject. It is scarcely too much to say that ninety-nine out of every hundred English gentlewomen who have the credit of dressing well depend entirely upon their milliners for advice as to what they may, and what they may not, wear. The latest novelty from Paris is recommended—not because it has any special merit on the score of artistic beauty, but simply because it is a novelty. Of course, it would be useless to urge, in answer to this, that a certain form of dress, once accepted as good, must always be good, or to deny that a particular combination of colours, recognised as harmonious, can become discordant, simply because it does not appear in the pages of *Le Follet*. Unfortunately

the world of fashion is so constituted that people who move in it are obliged to conform more or less to its rules; and as no lady likes to make herself conspicuous by her attire, she may reasonably abstain from wearing what has been long out of date. But there is a limit to all things; and the capricious tyranny which insists on a monthly change of dress ought to be firmly resisted by women who are too sensible to give up their whole time and attention to their toilet. Of course it is the interest of milliners to multiply these changes as frequently as possible, and the waste of money thus incurred (to say nothing of higher considerations) has been a just cause of complaint with many a husband and father. Leaving the moral aspect of the matter, however, out of the question, it must be confessed that to hear a young shopman defining to his fair customers across the counter what is 'genteel' or 'ladylike,' sounds very ludicrous, and even impertinent. Yet in this sort of advice is absolutely contained the only guiding principle of their selection. They choose not what they like best, but what is 'very much worn,' or what their obsequious adviser recommends them as suitable.

Counsel of such a kind, and the easy confidence in its worth, are, unfortunately, not confined to the haberdasher's shop. They seem inseparable from the purchase of every article which, from the nature of its design or manufacture, can claim to be of an ornamental character. When Mater-

familias enters an upholsterer's warehouse, how can she possibly decide on the pattern of her new carpet, when bale after bale of Brussels is unrolled by the indefatigable youth who is equal in his praises of every piece in turn? Shall it be the 'House of Lords' diaper, of a yellow spot upon a blue ground, or the 'imitation Turkey,' with its multifarious colours; or the beautiful new *moiré* design, or yonder exquisite notion of green fern leaves tied up with knots of white satin ribbon?* The shopman remarks of one piece of goods, that it is 'elegant,' of another, that it is 'striking;' of a third, that it is 'unique;' and so forth. The good lady looks from one carpet to another until her eyes are fairly dazzled by their hues. She is utterly unable to explain why she should, or why she should not like any of them. Perhaps a friend is appealed to who, being a strong-minded person (with the additional incentive of a wish to bring the matter to an issue as speedily as possible), at once selects the very pattern which Materfamilias pronounced to be 'a fright' only two minutes ago. In this dilemma the gentleman with the yard-wand again comes to the rescue, imparts his firm conviction as to which is most 'fashionable,' and this at once carries the day. The carpet is made up, sent home, and takes its chance of domestic

* This preposterous pattern has not only been employed for carpets, but is evidently very popular, and may be noted as an instance of the degradation to which the arts of design can descend.