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The Significance of Applied Art

Wherein lies the significance of modern applied art? How does this small and specialized field, of which until recently the wider public knew nothing, come to be a subject of academic teaching? The aim of my lectures during the present semester will be to discuss the importance and the wider relevance of this topic. An outline of the genesis and evolution of the applied art idea will serve as a logical framework for an account of the significance of applied art, both for the present and, no doubt in increased measure, for the future. However, in this introductory lecture, it may be worthwhile playing a spotlight, as it were, across the subject as it presently confronts us, in order to identify the most important points in advance and to understand their significance. Our detailed arguments will thus have a better-defined end in view, and our conclusions will emerge with greater clarity.

The significance of modern applied art is, at one and the same time, artistic, cultural, and economic. I mention its artistic significance first, both because it is more or less self-explanatory and because, until very recently, this exhausted the significance of the whole movement. The cultural significance of applied art is not yet so clearly visible; the forces involved are only now beginning to operate. As for its economic significance, this lies almost exclusively in the future. Even so, it may be possible to rest our hopes on historic parallels.

In Germany, the artistic significance of applied art became evident to all through a documentary event of the first importance that occurred last summer. The Third German Applied Art Exhibition, which recently closed its doors in Dresden, set out for all to see the present state of the applied arts in Germany.¹ It may therefore be in order to outline that present state in a few brief words.

Every visitor to the Dresden exhibition must first have been struck by the fact that all the work on show, from a small piece of embroidery to a fully decorated and furnished room, spoke a distinctive artistic language. This language has nothing in common with that of the old applied art, which was in its heyday in the 1880s and 1890s. A fundamental change of aim has taken place. The use of external decorations of historic styles is no longer on the agenda; there is an effort to speak a new, autonomous, artistic language. That is the most evi-

dent feature of the products of modern applied art. To have escaped from the rut in which the last century was stuck, with its constant filtering and re-filtering of historic art, represents a major achievement. Only a youthful and enthusiastic age could have taken such a step.

Centuries had passed since there had last been a fresh start in the realm of style. When the Renaissance abandoned the principles of the Gothic, there was the same enthusiasm for innovation that we have seen in the modern applied art movement; at that time, however, the only aim in view was to appropriate the newly rediscovered forms of antiquity. People were not looking forward but backward. Of course, during the Renaissance and since, much that is new has evolved from those antique forms. Whether by exploring byways or by introducing elements from outside, Arab (German Renaissance ornament), Chinese (Rococo art), or other, every successive trend has created a formal language so specific to its own time that we can now date it almost within a decade. But everything still represented a variation on a theme that had been defined once and for all by the antique. The most autonomous of these variations was the Rococo, a sudden outburst of idiosyncrasy that remains the closest parallel to the revolutionary tendencies of modern applied art, with its abandonment of all that has gone before. Modern applied art does not, however, allow any admixture of material from historic or exotic sources: its leit-motiv is the principle of autonomous design.

Whatever one may think of the tangible results of this effort to eschew historical allusions, one thing is certain: the attempt to create works of convincing artistic effect on the basis of an absolutely autonomous design has been successful. Friend and foe alike must confess as much; and none of the movement's foes has ever dared deny that this is a major national achievement, and one that must not be underrated.

Evident though this outward aspect of the phenomenon may be, the motivating power behind the modern applied art movement does not consist exclusively, or even mainly, in the adoption of new forms unknown to historic art. It lies, rather, in an idea of applied art utterly different from that of the 1880s and 1890s. Then, designers worked in a state of infatuation with the art of the past. Such was their infatuation that they longed to produce works exactly like those of their historic forerunners. And yet their "exactly like" applied only to the outward form. They forgot that outward form could only be an expression of the inner influences that prevailed when the objects were first made; that objects from the past were perfect solely because they constituted a cogent formal expression of the intellectual, material, and social circumstances of their time. No one thought to reflect that the intellectual, material, and social circumstances of our time were totally different—and that to imitate the outward ap-

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pearance of bygone artifacts was to put fakes into circulation. In itself, the rapid turnover of styles in the latter half of the nineteenth century only goes to show how little relation there was between the outward form of these brand-new objects and the spirit of the age in which they were made. They wore a stylistic garb that might be likened to those masquerade costumes that we wear for one evening and change at will.

The impulse to break free of fancy dress and face up to the circumstances of our own time is the prime motivating power of the new movement in applied art. The circumstances of the time are reflected, first of all, in the necessary demand for practicality. The practical demands for which old furnishings and utensils were made differ in many ways from those of modern use. The shape of a chair relates to domestic and social customs, as well as to fashions in dress. Table manners now are very different from those of the past; a far greater concern with cleanliness has led to the invention of new utensils; our sense of hygiene is not so much improved as entirely new. As a result, domestic arrangements have changed. The old stock of utensils has been augmented by a quantity of new ones; others have changed their basic shapes; and a fair number of old items have fallen out of use. Our habits of life are in the midst of a total transformation.

To respond to the conditions of the age in which we live, we must first do justice to the specific factors that govern the individual object. At the very outset, the sum and substance of modern applied art was this: first to clarify the function of the object, and then to evolve the form from that function. However, as soon as the designer's mind was diverted from the superficial imitation of older art—as soon as he faced reality—other necessary demands added themselves. Every material imposes conditions of its own. Stone and wood require different dimensions and forms; so do wood and metal; and, among metals, so do wrought iron and silver. Design based on function thus came together with design based on the character of the material; and with respect for material went respect for the form of construction appropriate to that material. Function, material, and construction are the only imperatives that the modern artist-craftsman observes.

In actuality, the form of the object is not always exclusively determined by these three fundamental principles of design. For human feeling intervenes between the mind and the hand. And it intervenes with particular force in those works that are designed to please. The engineer may be able to exclude emotion—though even this is doubtful; at all events, it would be totally absurd to expect an artist-designer to suppress emotion, and with it imagination, in order to develop forms through a mathematical and logical train of thought. There is an emotional element in modern applied art—perhaps more so than

in the past. But an emotion that is channeled into the effort to achieve the outward appearance of historic art is very different from an emotion that is free of historical reminiscences. In any case, the strict principle of design by function, material, and construction provides a bulwark against any relapse into historical sentiment, and thus into irrationality.

Design based on historical reminiscences almost inevitably entailed a violation of these three principles. This is all too apparent from the applied art of the age of imitation (mainly the second half of the nineteenth century). It was an age of rapidly changing fashions in style; and it was also the age that witnessed the worst excesses of irrational ornament and counterfeit material. Substitutes and simulations were everywhere. Wood was simulated in fireproof pasteboard, stone in stucco or even in galvanized iron, bronze in pewter. Even the most basic sense of propriety had been lost. And why? Mostly because the prevalence of historical sentimentality had left people infatuated with outward form. The adherents of modern applied art have outgrown the attitudes of that period; but the general public and the common craft trades are still utterly mired in them. As witness the German painter and decorator, who regards it as the summit of his art to make papier-mâché look like walnut wood, or a galvanized bathtub like marble.

The new applied art despises all these simulations and substitutes. No simulation of any kind: let every object appear to be what it is; let every material appear in its own character. And so, one of the most significant principles of craft design emerges: that of inner truthfulness. With it comes its corollary, the principle of sound workmanship. For sound workmanship is none other than the outward and visible sign of an inward truth. As a matter of simple logic, there has thus emerged a principle that was almost entirely lost from view in the industrial production of the nineteenth century. True enough, other factors, economic and social, played their parts in its loss; but it was the emergence of a vigorous applied art movement that established the primacy of sound workmanship. Here may well lie the movement's most fruitful achievement, and its most far-reaching consequences.

However, it is also here that the struggle against the status quo is the most difficult. To apply the principles of truthfulness and sound workmanship to anything, even in the field of handicrafts, is to impugn the attitudes of a whole generation. No one looks for sound workmanship until his own character has undergone the necessary evolution. The applied arts in the nineteenth century lost touch with the idea of sound workmanship because the consumer classes attached no importance to it. Social pretensions were a direct result of the power struggle between classes. The emergent bourgeoisie had a need for ostentation and display, but no means of satisfying it, except superficial and inex-

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pensive ones. On these it depended in its efforts to rival, if not outdo, those classes that had traditionally been its betters. This was an entirely unprecedented situation for any member of the middle class. The nineteenth-century bourgeois norm was the ambition—not to say the pathological craving—to seem more than one was.

We now take this so much for granted that we are barely aware of it. But we can illustrate its reality by mentally comparing a room in the house of a prosperous present-day bourgeois with one belonging to a person of equivalent status in Chodowiecki's day; or by comparing the décor favored by a stage celebrity of the present, as shown in *Die Woche*, with the rooms in Goethe's house in Weimar.² I need not describe the details: anyone can call them to mind. On one side ostentation, on the other unassuming modesty; here a room crammed with specious pomp, and there the utmost decency and restraint; here a second-hand, gimcrack version of aristocratic art, and there the unvarnished bourgeois spirit.

To this very day, alas, interior decoration in Germany is exclusively founded on social pretensions; and its needs are supplied by an art industry that works with simulations and substitutes. For the modern applied art movement, this is the sticking point. Here, mountains must be scaled and strongholds stormed. Will the war be won? It is still hard to say. But one thing is clear; applied art now faces a daunting educative task. And in this it has already progressed far beyond any popularly accepted definition of its role. It is becoming something more than applied art: it is becoming a means of cultural education. Applied art now has the goal of reeducating all classes of present-day society in the virtues of sound workmanship, truthfulness, and bourgeois simplicity. If it succeeds, it will profoundly alter our culture, and the consequences will be far-reaching. Not only will it transform the rooms and buildings in which people live: it will directly influence the character of a generation. To teach people how to arrange their rooms decently is to educate their character, by doing away with the parvenu pretentiousness that gives rise to current fashions in décor.

By observing the true principles of the new movement in applied art, we thus expand the importance of applied art to society. But, even in purely artistic terms, we can already see how the once-narrow limits of applied art are being overstepped. Starting from the basic idea of giving a tasteful form to craft products, applied art has already become a force that transforms the look of our homes themselves. As a consequence, before long we shall have a new culture of domesticity. Such is the goal toward which applied art now aspires.

It is only a step from the décor of a room to the design of a dwelling house. It can already be observed how architecture, beginning with that of small country

houses, is coming under the influence of the applied arts. The new movement in domestic architecture may be broadly defined as follows: the ornate villa, with its load of historical paraphernalia, is replaced by a simple house that conforms to rural, vernacular patterns and is built in accordance with logical and practical principles. This revolution in architectural thinking is the same that has led from the old applied art, with its use of historical forms, to the new applied art, based on practical principles. The applied art influence here is evident, even if unconscious. And the simple logic of applied art is about to extend still further into the realm of architecture. The new trend in country-house building is only the beginning of a move toward simplicity in architecture as a whole. Given the enormous importance of architecture within the culture of any age, it may be said that the true mission of the applied art movement will be accomplished only when its principles are extended to the whole field of private and public architecture.

The movement that has made such a vigorous start in the applied arts has its parallels in the arts of painting and sculpture. I can do no more than allude to these here. In recent painting, there is an effort to compose in the rigorous spirit of the mural painting of the past. This marked characteristic of our own time is evident in poster design, in the graphic arts, and in illustration, as well as in some departments of painting. Sculpture, too, shows a welcome tendency toward a taut stylization, a lapidary quality, that leaves behind it the genre tendencies and theatrical affectations of recent times. Perhaps the most gratifying sign of this is the new Bismarck Memorial in Hamburg.

Since it first appeared within applied art, the new movement has spread through all the arts, so that it can already be described as a universal artistic movement. At the same time, it must be admitted that it has remained an almost exclusively intellectual movement, with little or no impact on the economic life of our time. Born and nurtured in intellectual circles, it has hitherto spread from mind to mind. In a field of activity that is a business as well as an art, the new movement has to find its feet in economic terms. Which is where the difficulties begin. These might well seem to have been exacerbated, just recently, when those with vested interests in applied art, the manufacturers and dealers, denounced the new movement and its exponents, the Applied Art Exhibition in Dresden, and the schools of arts and crafts. As is well known, a petition with hundreds of signatures was handed to the state governments of the Reich. This might appear to constitute a serious threat to the applied art movement: it might seem that an adversary has arisen, armed with sufficient economic power to destroy all the artistic initiatives that have taken place in the world of handicraft.

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To put all such fears in their true perspective, we have only to reflect that the applied art movement is a spontaneous product of the intellectual life of the age. It springs from an inner necessity, whereas the objections to it are purely pecuniary in nature. The protests represent nothing more than the signatories' dismay at the constant advance of new ideas, year after year, which has disturbed—not to say overturned—customary ways of doing business in the applied art industry. Hence the protests. Fundamentally, these are no more than a welcome sign that a movement hitherto confined to a small group of intellectuals is now hammering on the gates of the art industry, and undermining its foundations where they are weakest. The protesters are those who stood to gain most from the status quo—in which the manufacturer professed to be guided by public taste, while in fact the public meekly accepted the stylistic idiosyncrasies foisted upon it by the manufacturer. Suddenly, the customers are starting to think for themselves; they are startled and excited by the things that artists are producing; they have seen exhibitions and glimpsed wondrous, harmonious interior designs created by artists. They are beginning to doubt the advice that they get from manufacturers and dealers. It is only natural and human for the manufacturer and the dealer to resist such inconvenient developments. It is equally clear that all their protests and attacks are destined to fall silent in the face of a massive groundswell within the culture of the age.

What is more, it is already becoming clear that it is by no means an act of commercial suicide to give one's allegiance to the modern movement. A number of producers of applied art who have logically and consistently followed this path have achieved a notable commercial success. I need only mention the Dresden Art Handicraft Workshops [Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst], which in eight years have evolved from modest beginnings into a concern that employs cabinetmakers by the hundreds and measures its turnover in millions.³ One thing is necessary: the manufacturer must be committed to the new movement, not only as a matter of financial self-interest but with his whole heart. Then, success is ensured. In fact, we may say that the future is not on the side of those who denounce the new movement but of those who join it. For they are swept forward by the intellectual tide of the age, against which the others vainly attempt to make headway.

At all events, the most urgent issue of the day is that of the economics of the new applied art. It is no solution to have the artisans and the factories simply make things in a so-called new style instead of in historical styles. This has already been tried, with the *Jugendstil* or Secession style, which industry presented as its latest stylistic offering, only to see it rapidly superseded in its turn by Empire and Biedermeier revivals.⁴ The ideas behind the new applied art are too serious to be caught up in this frivolous game of stylistic fashion. The ap-

plied art movement is not about any such thing as a "modern style." To proclaim anything of the sort would be hasty and facile. A new style does not emerge overnight, and cannot be invented. It arises from the earnest aspirations of a whole age; it is the visible manifestation of the inner, spiritual impulses of the time. If those impulses are authentic, then an authentic—i.e., original and enduring—style will emerge; but if they are facile and superficial, then the result will be something like the rapid succession of stylistic imitations that we have seen over the past fifty years. It is impossible to predict, at present, what style will emerge from the serious efforts that are currently being made within modern applied art. The answer can only be guessed at. It is not for us to compel the age to furnish us with a style; our business is to be creative, with total commitment and sincerity, and in ways that we can answer for with a clear conscience. Style cannot be anticipated: it is the sum of the honest aspirations of an age. It will be for posterity to define the style of our time: that is, to determine what common features are to be discerned in the most substantial and most serious efforts of the best people now working.

Such is the aspiration that impels our present leaders in the applied art movement; we may therefore expect that, without any deliberate intention on their part, they will evolve the style of our time, simply by pressing forward and following their own inner impulse. As for industry, the best it can do is to espouse this aspiration. To do so, however, would require a fundamental reappraisal of its position. For the manufacturer has hitherto made a point of declining to mix ethics or morality with his business, which he professes to conduct strictly in accordance with the supposed wishes of the public. As a result, things have been made to look dear and sell cheap. The public, in every social class, has snapped them up in vast quantities. This way of doing business, and the acquiescence of the public, has ended by demoralizing producers and consumers alike. For what manufacturer can derive satisfaction from producing trash all his life? And what customer can take enduring pleasure in worthless articles? It is time for a complete change of heart, and this has to begin with the producer. He need only transfer to his business the decent and upright principles that govern his private life. As a private man, he does not act reprehensibly; and so, as a man of business, he must not produce reprehensibly. That is to say, he must not produce objects that are simulations and substitutes: things that pretend to be something more than they are.

It is perfectly possible, as anyone knows who is familiar with English life and attitudes, for such principles to become the common property of a whole nation. The English manufacturer, almost without exception, takes the line of following his own best conviction and producing none but workmanlike objects. However much advantage German craftsmanship may have derived of late

from its celebrated adaptability, in areas connected with applied art and art manufactures this adaptability has in many cases proved to be a curse.

Fortunately, the taste for sound workmanship that is an accepted part of the English way of life has recently become more widespread in Germany also—a fact not unrelated to increased affluence. Here, once more, a wider historical tendency chimes with the basic principles of the applied art movement. No simulation of any kind: let every object appear to be what it is! It would be an enormous step forward, if manufacturing industry were to follow the example of applied art in this respect. For it stands to reason that when articles are not soundly made, however much labor is put into them, the best use is not made of the raw material. And so on the one hand a colossal sum of national wealth is squandered on that raw material; and on the other a futile piece of work is done. In the last resort, cheap things are dearer in every way than expensive ones.

The new applied art, which in Germany has already overstepped its own boundaries and become a universal art movement—and is indeed on the point of becoming a universal cultural movement—must, as it grows further, draw its economic consequences. And it is mainly from this viewpoint that it will be my task, in the lectures that follow, to give an account of its evolution to date.

NOTES

1. The Third German Applied Art Exhibition in Dresden was held in 1906–07.
2. Muthesius is here referring to the German-Polish painter and engraver Daniel Nikolaus Chodowiecki (1726–1801), known for recording the life and manners of the German middle class; the comparison is between the relative simplicity of Goethe's house in Weimar, where he died in 1832, and the overfilled interiors of turn of the century German houses.
3. The Dresden Workshops, founded in the spirit of craft revival, were associated with the *Jugendstil* (see note 4).
4. The *Jugendstil* was the German version of the French Art Nouveau style, based on sinuous organic forms, though more favorable to industrial design than the French version; the name comes from one of the earliest German art and crafts journals, *Jugend*, based in Munich. The German Biedermeier style is the name given to German architecture and decorative arts from c. 1820 to 1860; its name is derived from a fictional character, Gottlieb Biedermeier, in the journal, *Fliegende Blätter*, caricaturing middle-class vulgarity and philistinism.