

The Lay Figure

THE LAY FIGURE: ON THE
VALUE OF ELIMINATION.

"Has it ever struck you that there is a tendency towards fussiness in modern decoration?" asked the Art Critic. "It seems to me that the designer nowadays is in some danger of forgetting the value of simplicity and is inclined to overdo his detail."

"I do not think there is quite so much of that sort of thing now as there was a few years ago," returned the Decorator. "When the Morris influence was at its height it called into existence a great crowd of imitators and the tendency of which you complain was very apparent, but surely it is less evident now."

"No doubt there has been some improvement latterly," agreed the Critic; "but there is still a great deal of work being done which defeats its decorative purpose by its restlessness and redundancy. I take it that reticence is a virtue in all design and that an excess of ornament or an exaggeration of pattern must be more or less objectionable."

"Are you craving for the cold formality of the classic style?" laughed the Man with the Red Tie. "I am afraid you will not get modern people to go back to that. It does not provide the sort of atmosphere that is at all likely to suit the twentieth century."

"Quite so, it does not," said the Critic; "and for that reason I do not advocate a classic revival. But I think we might find a style which would be as well related to our conditions of life as that of the Greeks was to their national and domestic existence."

"Well, we live in fidgety and hurrying times," returned the Man with the Red Tie; "so is it not reasonable enough that our decorations should show their agreement with the prevailing spirit of the moment by being themselves fidgety and restless?"

"No, that is a fallacy!" cried the Decorator. "Art comes into our lives as a reviving and recuperating agent, to calm nerves that have been set on edge by the rush and turmoil of our daily occupations. If it irritates us and keeps us in a state of excitement it is not fulfilling its purpose. It is doing harm, not good."

"That is right. It is itself giving way to the bad influences by which we are surrounded," declared the Critic. "It is in danger of degeneration and of losing its spirit."

"How are you going to alter it?" asked the

Man with the Red Tie. "I suppose that the art we get is the art we want. It is the result of existing conditions and is produced in response to the popular demand."

"Not necessarily," broke in the Decorator. "The designers themselves may be and, as I think, often are affected by the world in which they live. They fall under influences that are not artistic, and these influences cause them to forget the duty they owe to their art. They work not as artists but as members of a demoralised and sensation-seeking public."

"What shall I do to be saved?" quoted the Man with the Red Tie. "How are they to guard themselves from these evil influences and in what way can they escape from the turmoil of the world?"

"By imposing upon themselves self-restraint," answered the Decorator. "By getting their own nerves under proper control and by appreciating that though they must be in the world they need not be of it."

"Yes, and by applying the same principles to their art that they do to their lives," assented the Critic. "As they eliminate the rush and restlessness from their habits of existence so they must take out of their work its want of repose. The quiet moments they set aside for reflection must be paralleled by omissions in their designs. There must be blank spaces in their work as there should be in their lives."

"Interpreting your parable, you mean, I presume, that there is no more necessity or justification for excess of detail in a design than there is in the daily habits of the designer," commented the Decorator.

"Precisely. The restless man will always give you restless art," declared the Critic. "I am pleading for the decorative value of the blank space and for its importance in any well ordered scheme of design. Look at that wonderful nation of decorators, the Japanese, and see in their work how the blank space counts. How admirably they realise the value of elimination! How cleverly they avoid the danger of over-ornamentation! We need not copy the details of their art, but we would do well to study its principles."

"By all means," agreed the Man with the Red Tie. "I am no advocate for excess, I quite admit that you can have too much even of a good thing and that it is never too late to mend. In fact I could, if you would have the patience to listen, quote quite a lot of musty old proverbs to back up your arguments."

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