

### *The Lay Figure*

#### THE LAY FIGURE: THE MIS- USE OF THE WORD ARTISTIC.

“WHAT is the meaning of the word ‘artistic’?” asked the Journalist. “The dictionaries don’t help me in the least. They say that it applies to a person or to a thing characterised by art, and this brings one face to face with the interminable question, ‘What is art?’ The only persons who seem to attach a definite meaning to the word that troubles me are the shopkeepers and the manufacturers, whose ‘artistic’ wares are invariably showy and meretricious. Any article for daily use that looks better than it is, or that is not well fitted for its purpose, is deemed sufficiently artistic to mislead the public. The word has become a commercial lie, and hence, perhaps, its popularity.”

“You give one view of the matter,” said the Critic, “but you must not forget that the misuse of the adjective in question is not confined to shopkeepers and manufacturers. We cannot set on foot a studio for wood-carving, or a school for needlework and embroidery, without being vain-glorious and absurd. It must be a studio for ‘Art’ wood-carving, a school for ‘Art’ needlework and embroidery. If little girls worked samplers to-day, they would be certain to use ‘art’ wools and ‘art’ stitches, ‘art’ designs and ‘art’ needles. A joiner in my neighbourhood makes ‘art’ wheelbarrows for the suburban gardens, and has read a paper on his work before a debating society in the next parish.”

“You seem surprised,” the Reviewer said, laughing, “yet the whole matter is simple enough to explain. The modern world has become morbidly self-conscious in everything that appertains to art. Not only does it talk a great deal too much about art, but it thinks vastly too little about the subject of its endless chatter. Even in serious criticism there is a tendency to separate art from the general influences of life, as though the working of the æsthetic gifts of man were carried on in some remote dreamland under the guidance of a Special Providence. And there is another tendency not less foolish and not less mischievous—I mean the tendency to believe that the arts cannot thrive in an age of commercial enterprise. We have been told so by scores of writers; and yet there can be no doubt that commerce has ever been a nurse to the genius of artists. Study the times of the Old Masters, and note how the progress of their work went hand-in-hand with the advance of their countries in com-

mercial prosperity. When simple truths like this one are forgotten, and when art is misunderstood even by those who write about it as teachers, we cannot be surprised that the same subject should be ill treated by the general public.”

“But for all that,” said the Critic, “let me relate a recent experience of my own. The other day, being in need of a suite of furniture, I passed some time in a great warehouse, and was directed in my search by the owner of the business, a man of much energy and with a fixed idea. ‘Sir,’ said he, ‘one learns much in fifty years of careful study, and my long experience has taught me that artistic furniture is always uncomfortable. You may take that as an axiom. In furniture, beyond doubt, comfort and art do not go together.’ What do you say to that?”

“I understand what the man meant to say,” answered the Reviewer. “Most of the furniture now described as artistic would certainly be a discomfort in any home.”

“I suggested as much,” said the Critic, “but the manufacturer repeated his axiom, and showed in all his remarks that he did not understand the first principle of good craftsmanship, *i.e.*, that an object must be perfectly suited to the purpose which it has to serve. Furniture is intended to make us comfortable in our houses; hence furniture that produces discomfort is bad, bad in design and uncrafterly in structure. The ornamentation may be good if looked at as a thing apart, as a separate and detached piece of workmanship, but ornamentation does not give artistic value to a thing wrongly designed and constructed. This is what very few manufacturers understand. Their faith in ornamentation is so great that they expect it to reconcile us to all kinds of structural blunders.”

“You’ve hit the mark,” said the Man with the Briar Pipe. “The use of ornament in design is like the use of adjectives in writing—a thing to be done sparingly and with great judgment. The ornament that ‘the trade’ delights in is nothing if not overdone; it reminds me always of that squandering of adjectives which the newspapers display on their screaming placards every afternoon. It is a form of blatant advertisement. But, happily, bad things cannot be advertised too much. The better they are known the more likely are they to become unpopular.”

“Meantime,” the Critic said, “we have a hundred-and-one ‘artistic’ things that make life miserable—things ranging from ‘artistic’ fireirons that hurt the hands, to ‘artistic’ lamps that draught might overset.” THE LAY FIGURE