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Quality and Form in Swiss Industry

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by Theodore Brogle. Director of the Swiss Fair at Basle

The form of machines and apparatuses is, in the majority of cases, satisfactory, but bad taste is often evident in consumers' goods, owing to the necessity of meeting the customers' demands. Swiss production, however is relatively free from this defect. True quality in a product necessarily implies good form. The fact that there is no quality worthy of the name without formal perfection is of foremost economic importance, for only a quality product that is at the same time satisfactory in its form is capable of procuring for Swiss Industry all the necessary prestige in the international field.

Social Teaching in Industrial Art

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by Gregor Paulsson

The problem of the teaching of industrial art today is far from being simple. Modern society with its incentive of increased profits insists on quantity in production, consequently the producer determines the product and also its form. No wonder that this state of things should result not only in an aesthetic void but also threatens us with aesthetic prostitution. Material goods are produced uniquely for their exchange value, for their consumption value, and so their quality forcibly suffers under industrial competition and the consequent lowering of prices. The form and beauty of a product is important relative to its sales value, and the first schools of applied art came into existence in these conditions. They aimed at producing designers of models. The social activity of this teaching as conceived by the South Kensington movement in the 1850's was limited to this. Another reason for the failure of the first industrial art schools is to be found in a fundamentally erroneous aesthetic theory inspired by the idealistic aesthetics of G. Sempner. Objectivism, whose roots go back to Winckelmann, insists on the cultivation of taste, but here culture ceases to be a collection of the faculties and becomes a kind of "thing", and this at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. After the appearance of the powerful nouveaux riches with this new development, the function of the "thing" called beauty was reduced to overburdened ornamentation. Today the so-called industrial art schools are still mainly training artists for preindustrial production. In spite of the valorous efforts of the "Arts and Crafts" movement (Ruskin) subsequent to South Kensington, and later William Morris, the teaching spirit instituted by these great men was none the less foreign to modern society. It needed the 3rd reform movement instigated by H. van de Velde, whose "Triple insult to Beauty" dates from 1918, to replace the retrospection of his predecessors by the imperative of reason. This appeal did not fail to attract the attention of a Le Corbusier, a Marcel Breuer, an Alvar Aalto. Today, however, we view with scepticism an ethical imperative whether in the name of dignity or of reason. We think that we should bear in mind the existing social situation, a certain modification of which is the only means of solving the problem. And since the evil from which we suffer arises from the dictatorship de facto of the producer, we must do our utmost to build up a consumers' market. This is above all a question of education. We must awaken the feeling for good form from the elementary school on, and on the other hand we must take the study of consumption as a whole as a basis for teaching in applied art, proceeding to methodic investigation carried out in and after school under

the guidance of expert teachers. In this way the school for industrial art can work in permanent contact with the consumers for whom the pupil must create. Only then will a true formal beauty spring spontaneously and not mechanically from an adequate conception of the product.

Beauty resulting from Function and as Function

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by Max Bill

For some hundreds of years we have relied upon the creators' sense of their social responsibility to create products whose form harmonizes with the spirit of the epoch; but the true starting point is rather responsibility towards form as such. In "Werkbund" circles, beauty is generally spoken of as a reward for the artist's consideration for his material. For practically no material, however, is only one form possible, and what we understand by consideration for the material foundation is more precisely an attempt to achieve the maximum efficiency with the minimum of material. The most brilliant example is the Eiffel Tower, a synthesis of the engineer's rationalism and of constructive beauty which corresponds well to the ideal of a "rational beauty" defined by Henry van de Velde. If, however, the functional aspect is one of the elements in beauty, we must also state that the form of machines and apparatuses, for example, is not modified in virtue of their function alone but equally from aesthetic considerations, and, at the same time testifies to a beauty that is itself functional. Utilitarian efficiency is easily definable, not so beauty, the pursuit of which presupposes tasks to be accomplished and, in addition, the training of those whose role it is to create forms. There is still much to be done, even though progress in this direction is but slight for reasons related to the Swiss economic structure, and also because we of the Werkbund have not tried sufficiently hard to influence the producers by exhibitions, for instance, organised in the same way as the Swiss Fair, like that at Leipzig in former times. As to the qualifying of the creators of forms, the appearance in Anglo-Saxon countries of "industrial designers" is not without the risk of creating a purely superficial pseudo-modern style (the risk is less great in England thanks to the "Council of Industrial Design"). From now on our "Werkbund" should prepare its postulates in readiness for the day when "industrial designers" appear in our midst too. That is essentially an educational problem. At the moment there exists no school capable of training such designers. Our schools for applied art could not take on the task except on the condition of their submitting to a fundamental reform. If they are to cease being (practically useless) complements to professional apprenticeship they should 1. have classes with fewer pupils 2. only accept pupils who have already completed their craftsman's or technical apprenticeship 3. provide a general culture not only in all the domains of form but also in the fundamental notions of statics, mechanics and physics. They should therefore be a mixture of an academic and a technical college, an ideal aspired to by the Bauhaus, but with this difference, that more importance should be ascribed to the personality and in particular the students should be assured that their applied art is in no way inferior to pure art. This does not at all mean the denial of the latter which remains as indispensable for application as does pure science for technique. Only the existence of schools conceived in the way outlined above justifies the hope that the "cultural age" of our industrial civilization will one day be born.