

Commercialism—The Curse of Art

By Sonia H. Greene

Throughout the ages the sincere artist has been the victim of a cruel struggle, not only to gain recognition but to preserve existence itself. Ever modest, he cannot be aggressive; and many of his kind would starve had they not private means of support. Designing his work for himself alone, the artist gives it to the world only incidentally; for fame if he be rich, and for fame and bread if he be poor. But the quantity is always small, because it is not guided by the demands of trade, so that the impoverished artist seldom finds his genius the key to fortune.

The real artist, poet, or philosopher creates only as the nightingale sings, because he must. It is purely instinctive with him, and he moulds his thoughts and images mostly in the solitude of his own life, sharing them on rare occasions with some close friend who loves, understands, appreciates, and applauds. This he deems almost a sufficient reward for his pleasurable task, and it is well that he does; for had he labored with mercenary intent he could not have attained that aesthetic purity which only spontaneousness can give. Commercialism would have urged him on beyond his will and creative mood; altering his subject-matter and method, and cheapening the whole atmosphere

of his products. While he might have evolved a good piece of mechanism, it would not have been fraught with the beauty of his soul. But though the artist cannot express himself perfunctorily for pay, it does not follow that he should be denied all tangible recognition for his more valuable creations. After he has successfully put his whole spirit into a work of art, he surely deserves proper remuneration.

Yet instead of reward and encouragement, the artist generally receives from society only a series of rebuffs and impediments ruinous to his peace and productiveness. Commerce and religion, both of which ought to assist him, have never ceased to place a stupid check upon his free expression; and have cramped and retarded art in every form. The artist thus has, besides the burden of creation, the additional burden of eliminating two serious obstacles, and of becoming an unhampered pagan and dreamer in defiance of those around him. In other words, he is forced to struggle for the simple right of being himself; for he can never give forth the best that is in him if dominated either by a material power or a religious spectre.

In the days of Raphael and Michaelangelo, both prayer and religion

played a great part in bringing art to the fore. America has no royalty, and its remnants of religion are hostile rather than favorable; so native art is neither stimulated nor subsidized, but goes begging while the imported product, secured for its reputation rather than understandingly, furnishes what culture there is. To the artist the commercially artistic plutocrat says: "Go and make good elsewhere first. Get your apprenticeship abroad; come back with a reputation and then I will pay you well." In other words, he proclaims his lack of confidence in native and spontaneous art, and bids his slaves break their spirit and exchange their originality for fashionable foreign accomplishments before he will harbor them as his or take pride in them. Truly, the commercial America has no taste for art—she appreciates it only as a salable commodity with a definite market value. Supply the mob and you will be well paid for it, whether your product be sculpture, painting, music, literature, drama, or mousetraps.

Inartistic America further says: "My own opinion of your art is worthless, so I dare not pit it against public ignorance. Though I know the aesthetic minority is generally right, I dare not admit this truth upon my own authority. I am a 'connoisseur',

and mould my artistic opinion in terms of selling prices; so for the sake of sound business must gain the sanction of other 'connoisseurs' in whom the public believes.

"I must, moreover, be able to advertise your art according to the best principles of modern salesmanship—schemingly, cunningly, seductively, subtly. I must play the auctioneer, that pompous competing buyers may force the price up. To make your art a good selling proposition I must be able to tell interesting press-agent stories about it—about how the artist has languished in some Greenwich Village garret, or starved in the slums and ghettos of New York or London, or perhaps in the Paris Quartier Latin. My stories must have zest—they must tell how the genius was discovered by accident after years of hunger and misery and freezing; how the marvellously strange and weird picture, poem, or novel took shape beneath the leaking attic roof as the rats scrambled loathesomely about. Or perhaps a more splendid fiction will be better for some purchasers—of how the artist is the seventh son of the old Earl of Hoboleigh, disinherited for his elopement with the beautiful daughter of a linen-draper who drops his 'h's', and forced to seek fame and fortune in the sordid city. If this story alone is not enough, the charming and "cultured" lady will do the rest; and opulent dilettanti will flock to the studio of the Hon. Percival Paintbrush to inspect his wares, twirl their waxed moustaches, and ogle the comely daughter of the lower middle classes." Thus is art pitifully degraded and commercialized by invented settings and ingenious bait, all typical of the cheap and salesmanlike spirit of the age and place.

The product of real genius seems to find no haven in the mart of commerce unless it has been previously besmirched with the false glamour of puerile and mendacious advertising. Neglected, the artist who scorns shrewd exploitation must fare as best he may, usually suffering the intolerable grating of some hack work just enough like his real work to make it an endless and agonizing mockery. It is suicidal—but alternatives are not easy to find. Nothing is more pathetic and censurable than that the soul must be destroyed for the sake of feeding the body, yet the superb originality of the unique mind becomes clogged and sometimes annihilated by that most sordid of necessities—"making a living." Truly, the genius without means must drink gall and wormwood before his art is recognized; with always the graver peril that the art itself will succumb during the ordeal.

Would that some system of patronage or pensioning might be evolved, whereby worthy but impecunious artists could receive substantial assistance in their struggle to enhance the world's beauty. Why must many who are truly great be forced to starve and weep, and often to go down into oblivion "unhonored and unsung", when with but a little material appreciation from those whom they benefit, they might easily attain life's highest and most lasting joys as the just reward of their travails and achievements? Who can say how much priceless art we may have lost through our callousness. But for Liszt, who introduced him to the King and to the world, we might today be destitute of the colossal art of Richard Wagner.

The highly and unevenly organized mind of the true artist is largely in-

capable of dividing itself between the ecstasy of aesthetic creation and the prosaic necessity of earning a living. Perhaps the living will come ultimately through his art, but that is only after recognition, and does not help during the most terrible and most important period of his creative life. How often does our indifference, aloofness, parsimony, or preoccupation condemn some rare mind to suffering, loneliness, and oblivion, when with a little warm-hearted aid at the right time we might place him on the high-road to greatness, happiness, and splendor! By such acts of omission we deny full life to the artist, and new beauty to ourselves, crushing genius before it can reap its first reward or shed its first beams.

We can best serve ourselves by encouraging art and genius; for what, after all, is the measure of any civilization save the height of aesthetic and intellectual greatness which it has attained? Was it not the fostering of art and philosophy which made Greece the sole source of our existing culture and the unsurpassed summit of human development. To emulate such development we must care for our artists and philosophers, and see that their shining thoughts and images are brought successfully to birth.

As for them—so often the delicate creator who gives us our greatest treasures dies before he can enjoy the fruits of his toil! Perhaps it is Nature's decree that the great one shall be gently relieved of the burdens of life after he has given what he had to give. More often he falls asleep less gently and maturely—that is the tragedy. A starved and emaciated body is hardly the temple for a vast and flaming soul.