

The Future of Handcraft in Canada

By NORA E. VAUGHAN

THE story of handcraft is woven into the earliest records of the history of Canada. The Indians were fine craftsmen in weaving, basketry and leather work. Their work with birch bark and porcupine quills was an excellent example of the development of local materials; their geometric designs, conventionalized from natural forms, were fine illustrations of beautiful decoration. With the arrival of the French, the scene was further enriched. As early as 1639, the Ursulines were teaching needlework, music, painting, drawing and architecture. Young men were learning masonry, carpentry, lock making, painting and wood carving at the Seminary of Foreign Missions founded by Mgr. de Laval, first Bishop of Quebec. In 1744 the census of Quebec City listed eight silversmiths and we know the names of five who were in Montreal. A shortage of imported materials was helped considerably when Madame de Repentigny organized a school of handcraft in Quebec in 1706 where men were taught to make looms and women to weave. Similar home crafts of weaving and rug making were established in the eastern provinces with the British settlements of Halifax and Cape Breton about the middle of the eighteenth century. This promising development was unfortunately retarded by the growth of industry in Europe and its economic relations with Canada. During the nineteenth century, readily available supplies of grain, lumber, fish, etc., were exported in exchange for quantities of manufactured articles of indifferent design but at seemingly reasonable prices. The value of sound craftsmanship was little appreciated and its product threatened with extinction. But in 1896 a small committee of ladies in Montreal became actively interested in

the idea of "reviving and making profitable all such crafts as could be carried on in cottage or castle, in town or in the remotest part of the country." Their aims and aspirations enabled them to feel confident that if such an effort were successful, the country would become "happier, healthier, and wealthier, and that hundreds of homes would be lifted into a different sphere through the contacts that would result."¹ This modest beginning of the "Canadian Handcrafts Guild" has developed into an across-Canada organization with branches in most provinces, and shops to bring the results to the attention of the public. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company added its support with "New Canadian Handcraft Festivals" throughout the West. Then extension branches of Universities such as Mount Allison in Sackville, Mount St. Bernard College and St. Francis-Xavier of Antigonish and within the last five years, the University of British Columbia, Alberta (Banff School of Fine Arts) Saskatchewan, Manitoba and McGill (at Macdonald College) have established handcrafts in their summer schools, extension departments or adult education services. Various common, high, technical and vocational schools in our different provinces list craft in their curricula.

With this picture of the sound foundation and revived and increasing interest in Handcraft let us try to realize what the place of Handcraft might be in the future of Canada with the help of a sympathetic and planned development guided and financed by a unifying national policy. Such a programme, if adequate, would make a definite contribution in moulding the character of the Canadian people and the benefits would be threefold—Social, Economic and Cultural.

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(1) *Handcraft Activities in Canada* by Deane H. Russell. in *Craft Horizons*, 1942. Handcraft Co-operative League of America, Inc.

Social

The home is an important unit in our democratic society. Pride and interest in it can be greatly enhanced, more especially in rural areas, by the practice and enjoyment of some Homecraft or Folkart. At present housing has an important part in all social reconstruction programmes. Through the development of widespread interest in homecraft as applied to local materials, homes may be improved *at small cost* and articles of everyday use made to afford greater pleasure. Wool produced on our farms may be sold for as little as 12c per pound but converted into serviceable tweed the value immediately becomes about \$1.80 and the producer has garments of serviceable and attractive materials. Similar comparisons could be made for curtains, rugs and furniture on the average farm or in rural communities where raw materials are easily available. Mr. Deane Russell has stressed the importance of this point by recording that 35% of Canadian wage and salary earners must depend upon less than \$500 per year and 64% receive less than \$1,000 per year. As a leisure time medium of self-expression, handicrafts have been found by experience to create emotional stability which is a valuable asset to people in the throes of readjustment following a period of war. In the larger field of the community, life may be enriched through the enjoyment of these activities when shared. Such enrichment helps to stem the regrettable flow of young people from rural communities to towns. In the Provinces of Manitoba and Alberta the Searle Grain Company has established an extensive programme of weaving instruction and are delighted with the results as homes become more interesting and beautiful, and families are clothed in attractive and durable materials. Dr. Crowell tells of the value as child sits beside grandparent, French beside English, carpenter beside professor in the craft shop at Macdonald College. Such a shared experience, whether in town or rural community, the use of a

common workshop, kiln or group of looms, helps to break down barriers of age, race or economic station. Where the community bears strongly the stamp of its European origin, the maintenance and encouragement of the Arts and Crafts is a recognized means of fresh contribution and mutual exchange. Our national culture would be greatly enriched if the products of such techniques and finer traditional designs were adjusted to harmonize with modern living. In Winnipeg Mrs. Francis Lount has been most successful with linens and the result is known across Canada. The same careful encouragement and adjustment would bring the products of the Indian and the Eskimo back into the high esteem which the skill of their techniques and the beauty of their designs should warrant. (Canadian ivory is fine-grained and beautiful in colour and should well merit development.)

The therapeutic value of craft has been recognized since the last war—it helps to heal the mind as well as the body. The University of Toronto gives a three-year course in this important field of craft work, but so great is the demand for this type of diversional activity for convalescing patients in military hospitals that the Canadian Red Cross have established a ten-week course at Macdonald College.

Economic

The planned use of leisure time may be made profitable and a small income may be supplemented by the sale of any surplus of goods made. Seasonal occupations such as farming and fishing leave a margin of leisure time during which a secondary occupation may be pursued. In fact the earning power of an entire community may be augmented by the use of a local raw material and the development of a specialized craft. The Catalogne carpets of Quebec villages, Star-of-the-Sea industries in Nova Scotia, Charlotte County Cottage Craft in New Brunswick, organized fine hooking of rugs in Cape Breton, are well-known examples. Last year the Indians of

Parry Island, Ontario, were encouraged to make one type of basket for which there was thought to be a demand and 150 were sold. War has raised trade barriers that again give us the opportunity to develop the idea of Madame de Re-pentigny in 1706. The shops and departments in stores selling handcrafts across Canada could be increased with advantage to the country, and would be glad to co-operate if adequate supplies of such goods were assured. All articles shown in these shops should be of recognized standard of quality and should be marked with a registered seal of merit. Such an effort could be built into a very large business which would mean hundreds of thousands of dollars to Canadian incomes. In 1940 it was estimated that the value of handcraft sold in Canada was approximately \$750,000 and that this would represent not more than 10% of the value of articles made—the balance being used by the craftsmen themselves. When the war ends the enormous output of war industries must be adjusted to peace-time requirements. Through advance experimental production by specially trained craftsmen many new industries may be established, using much of the industrial equipment made necessary by war-time needs. For instance domestic linens, fine tweeds, crystal, metal and clay products could be produced immediately. Our great natural resources can be developed through the technical skills of our people, and, under the direction of good designers, can be made into objects for everyday use. With the utilization of modern technical equipment, production may be stepped up to create and supply markets at home and abroad with goods in accord with the trend of the time and of the future. Industries so developed have attained great dimensions in instances such as Textiles and Orrefors Glass in Sweden, potteries and Jensen silver in Denmark, Rodier fabrics and Lalique glass in France. These products, both of the folk arts and of art industries, are recognized as one of the strongest tourist attractions any country can have. Excel-

lent examples must first be available within the country and when production makes it possible, an export business of sound quality can be established. Employment and source of income is created for gifted young people who otherwise would go to the United States and be lost to Canada. When the Arts and Crafts of a country gain recognition that country not only takes a new position in the respect of the world but promotes intercultural understanding, both national and international.

Cultural

Rebecca West in her book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* sees hope for this distracted world in the fact that the Slavic inhabitants of the Balkans were helped to endure generations of appalling misrule and misery by keeping alive traditions of art and craftsmanship inherited from the Byzantine Empire. "If human beings," she writes, "were to continue to be what they are, to act as they have acted in the phases of history covered by this book, then it would be good for us all to die. But there is hope that man may change, for two factors work on him that might disinfect him. One is art . . . Art gives us hope that history may change its spots and man become honourable."²

Everywhere the advent of the industrial era has been accompanied by a general debasement in taste. Realizing the intangible values of spirit and culture which permeate deeply into the life of a people and which are developed only through association with artistically sound objects, we believe there to be a great and definite value in the promotion of good taste. Properly directed handcraft gives a feeling for material and form that leads to sound design and sensitive appreciation. In industry this would mean the employment of recognized artists and designers to produce in quantity aesthetically sound articles for use in everyday life. Instead of being natural enemies,

(2) From an editorial published in *The Globe and Mail* during the Handcraft Exhibition held in Toronto, May, 1942.

the two forms of production—Craft and Machine — have discovered that they mutually complement each other. Also the taste of the general public must be educated so that the demand for these articles may parallel the supply. This can be accomplished through a never-ceasing propaganda which will include publications, courses and lectures; educational movies directed by the National Film Board, exhibitions to create enthusiasm and appreciation at home, and to carry our National Culture abroad.

“There have been few countries in recent years which have achieved what Sweden has in making the public at large, and the various government agencies in particular, conscious of good design. Architecture, furniture, housing and household ware—in fact, design in all its ramifications as it affects the people—have been forced towards certain high aesthetic levels or they will suffer public inattention as a consequence. This rather enviable situation has not come about overnight, nor been accomplished by a clapping of hands or waving of banners. It has been achieved—and it is still progressing, for such a policy can never end—by an intelligent, far-sighted, educational programme, which a group of patriotic citizens, the City of Stockholm and the Swedish Crown, have undertaken, to make every day Swedish articles attractive from a design point of view. This propaganda is inculcated by the schools, the press, radio and various exhibitions. It has borne such fruit that to-day Sweden has produced so many articles of merit that they are often grouped under the one generic term of “Swedish Modern” which seemingly applies as much to furniture as it does to table-ware and houses.”³

Before any comprehensive plan for rural or community life can be undertaken, adequate teachers are a necessity. Not merely people skilled in the technique of some one craft but people with a complete training in the real properties and

possibilities of the material with which they work as well as excellent training in the fundamentals of sound design and the facility to record their ideas with good draughtsmanship. In order to bring this about there is need of a National College of Applied Art, and linked with it could be a College of Industrial Design. Such an establishment would contribute to the artistic and industrial development of Canada and would integrate the aims of education and industry. We can never support an increased population by exporting our raw materials, but only by developing the use of them in industries; we cannot hope to build up export business unless we can compete with other countries who are already re-organizing and preparing to meet post-war needs and demands in the design and use of native and new materials. This is not a new idea for Canada. In 1879 The Marquis of Lorne, Governor-General of Canada, supported the formation of The National Gallery of Canada and the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts. Both were founded at the same time with basically the same idea behind them: “the encouragement of design as applied to painting, sculpture, architecture, engraving and the industrial arts, and the promotion and support of education leading to the production of beautiful and excellent work in manufactures.”⁴ These institutions have found other spheres (and most worthy ones) which needed their effort but we feel the original idea should merit like attention and a beginning could be made in a proper school of high standard.

During a four-year course the major subjects of the first two years would be design (both the basic philosophy and the practical facility) and the Science of Materials including the technique of each craft. Specialization in a medium would occur in the last two years and should be accompanied by actual experience for four months per year in an industrial plant for those students who wished to

(4) Graham McInnes. *A Short History of Canadian Art.*—Ch. VI. MacMillan Co of Canada 1939.

(5) Roger Fry. *Vision and Design.* Quoted by McInnes. *Idem.*

G. E. Kidder-Smith.

(3) *The Architectural Review*, September, 1943.

design for industry. The youth of this country so easily think in terms of the machine that they could readily design *with* the machine not *for* the machine. These students would, therefore, upon graduation have some industrial connection and industry would gain trained designers with a practical knowledge of methods and materials. Equally knowledgeable about design other graduates would provide adequate teachers for the teaching of crafts in schools, for home industry developments in rural communities, for youth training projects. At the present time most students who seek such adequate training leave Canada for schools elsewhere and very often fail

to return. The result is a constant loss of talented young men and women whose desire to learn takes them abroad and whose capacities are frequently more appreciated elsewhere. The teaching of art and of art appreciation would reflect this honest approach and be applied to simple things in daily use.

Socially, economically and culturally the lives of the citizens of Canada would be deepened and enriched and it could no longer be said that, "The artist must be content to look on while sums are given for dead beauty, the tenth part of which, properly directed, would irrigate whole nations and stimulate once more the production of vital artistic expression."

Social Security in Australia

By T. H. KEWLEY

THE Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, like other Governments of the United Nations, has declared social security to be one of its major objectives in the post-war period. The first step towards the realization of that objective was taken in July, 1941, when a Parliamentary Committee was appointed to enquire into the problems of social security. This Committee has worked quietly and well, and has, up to the present, submitted six interim reports covering a wide range of subjects. Many of its recommendations, as to both social legislation and administrative machinery, have been adopted by Parliament and are substantial elements in the social security framework of which it is proposed here to give an account in outline.

Commonwealth and State Functions

The Commonwealth Constitution followed the lines of the American in granting specific powers to the Federal Government and in leaving the residue to the States. As a result of these limitations, the social services in general have remained a function of the States², which provide, in varying degrees, for education³, unemployment relief, public health and child welfare services.

The Commonwealth has provided old age pensions since 1909, invalid pensions since 1910, and maternity allowances since 1912. More recently, under the influence of the world-wide movement to provide social security, it has introduced systems of child endowment (1941), widows' pensions (1942), additional

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1. (a) First Interim Report, (September, 1941).
- (b) Unemployment and the War Emergency, (March, 1942).
- (c) Consolidation of Social Legislation and Post-War Unemployment, (March, 1942).
- (d) Housing in Australia, (May, 1942).
- (e) Reconstruction Planning, (October, 1942).
- (f) National Health Services, (July, 1943).

2. The functions of Local Governments are extremely limited and, in practice, unimportant in the field of social services.

3. Voluntary organizations, such as private schools, play an important part in providing many of the social services. In 1938, out of a total of 1,116,323 school children, 249,497 were enrolled in private schools. Most of these schools have a religious, and some of them also a class basis. About 80% of private school children were enrolled in Roman Catholic schools.