

ART AS A CASH CROP

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IT was my happy fate to be born on a farm; an old farm, with much natural beauty and a background of tradition. We had lived there for generations.

When I left school, my family decided to send me away to an art school, thinking me divinely gifted because I liked to draw pictures as a child. I was therefore sent to New York, where I entered the Women's Art School at Cooper Union. That was in the nineties, when John Henry Twatchman was the terror and inspiration of most young art students. He made me work with frenzied zeal on block figures, and gave me some idea of values and atmosphere. Howard Chandler Christie taught us illustration, and Frederic Deilman gave lectures in perspective.

Every Saturday morning it was a custom for the students to attend a free lecture on art at the Metropolitan Museum. We would afterwards eat a meagre sandwich in the park, and spend the afternoon exploring the Museum.

On these occasions we were told, by our instructors, that we should start in the Egyptian room. They explained that in the decoration of a mummy case we would find the first primitive impulse of a race, unhampered by contact with our too standardized civilization. In short, we were to study the art of ancient Egypt as a scientist studies protoplasm. It seemed that the ancient Egyptians could far surpass us; no one objected to their lack of perspective or their peculiar construction of figures; in fact, they had a freedom of expression that we poor students were denied and, most important of all, their works of art sold for fabulous prices, while ours were of sadly little commercial value,

Now, while I liked Egypt in the museum, I despised it in the class room. In the designing class, girls were made to work for days, often weeks, copying an Egyptian pattern. After that, they would be switched over to Assyria, and thence to Byzantium and Greece. I have no quarrel with historic ornament, it is a delightful study, but I still wonder why we were never asked to express something ourselves. However, there may have been some good

the puny arm of rebellion against this marked preference for the ancients, but made a mental note of it.

After leaving the art school, I spent several unprofitable years trying to teach art in a girls' boarding school, until some years later circumstances made it necessary for me to return to live at the farm.

I greatly enjoyed the return to country life and the friendship of my own people, with their kindly hospitality, their useful lives and the thrifty cheer of their homes, the rhythm of the country dance and the glory of the harvest, the peace of white quiet winters and the spring returning with mayflowers. Yet there were people who would say of me: "The poor girl! All her art education just thrown away"! Adding piteously, "and she studied in New York too!"

By this time I was thinking of New York as an absurd place in which to study art. That great noisy commercial city with its cavernous streets, continuous traffic and compressed homes; why should they plant art schools in such unpromising soil?

The inspiration that I had brought back with me was not of New York but of Egypt. Here was I among my own people, again surrounded by the eternal beauty that was my heritage; here or nowhere could I establish a native art, an art that would express our own farm life so lovely and so little known. The art that would tell the story of the Maritimes must come from the people themselves, no one else could ever know; and then too we were so advantageously remote from modern standardization, even as in ancient Egypt.

I started with a capital of \$10.00; how I ever raised it, I don't know. I expended the entire amount in the purchase of some hooked rugs, that the country women made for me from my own designs. I was able to dispose of these rugs in Montreal at a little better price than I paid for them, which increased my capital to \$15.00, and from that tiny germ an industry grew. Those first rugs were rather poor affairs, as I remember them now; the design did not express very much of anything, except that it was quite unlike anything I had ever seen in New York, but the disposal of the entire stock gave me an impulse to continue.

I soon found that my people could often work out designs for themselves, and needed only a little directing to produce some very remarkable patterns, their very crudeness giving an additional charm. I had a theory that people who lived in beautiful

worked, it surprised me. City friends frankly and openly discouraged this theory, and referred to the proverbial lack of art in the farmhouse "best parlour". I would counteract this by pointing to the farmhouse kitchen, explaining that this room had a charm all its own that no other room had ever been able to maintain.

When horrified young art students exclaimed, "You cannot possibly teach those people design without a regular course in historic ornament", I would explain that the natural beauty of the Maritimes was very ornamental, and older than history, and we used it for our text book. I soon learned that in every community there was at least one person who had artistic ability, ready and waiting to be encouraged and used. I found it was best to talk over a design with them and learn first what phase of country life most interested them; I then let them plan it out themselves as much as possible, giving them pencil drawings or stencils for any objects that they found too difficult to manage by themselves. I then laid down a few definite rules. Nothing must be used in design that we were not familiar with in our every-day life—no lotus flowers, or birds of paradise. We had to tell our own story in our own way. No designs could be copied from magazines or articles that our city friends brought us, nothing seen in shop windows or on the fancy work counters of department stores. The further my people were removed from these things, the better work they produced. But they must be constantly on the watch for something that would be completely their own.

When the cows came home at milking time, we must study all the lines and angles in the anatomy of a cow; observe the character of the head and the way the horns and ears were fitted on. Such details of all our farm animals must be memorized for future use.

When we drove through the country, we must notice the varying branches of the trees and the graceful outlines of the hills to give us a feeling for good lines. Then, too, we must look for colour harmony—patches of blue-green turnip fields set among fawn coloured autumn stubble—gray barns with wide red granary doors—little white cottages sheltered by dense green fir woods. Endless combinations of colour in wayside flowers, winter sunrises and evening light upon the hills. We were the privileged class who could live forever amongst this wealth of beauty that was our heritage: the tourist could enjoy it for

We revived the art of weaving homespun, which was passing out, though it had not vanished entirely. One young woman had the bright idea that embroidery done on the homespun with our own yarn could be made up attractively for hand bags. This was a great success; the bags were a useful novelty, and sold quickly. Orders would come in faster than we could fill them.

I was obliged to divide up the various farming districts like a factory, appointing a forewoman for each section, who directed the work, gave out the material, brought in the finished work and took the money back to the workers. An endless number of designs were evolved to decorate our homespun bags. Our farm animals, poultry, wild flowers, trees and landscapes, stitched in gay colours, all went far afield to proclaim the story of farm life. It was a good cash crop too.

The woman who came nearest to my original idea embroidered table covers, runners and doilies of linen with coloured thread. Her designs were most original, and she never made two alike. They were always gay little farm figures, set against a background of blue hills and fir trees. Her people were always full of life and action, always working, playing or dancing. On a luncheon set that was ordered by a lady from St. Louis, the entire range of country activities was shown, men in the lumber woods and the spring plowing, children playing around the school house and mother hanging out the wash, and then the whole family going to church on Sunday. I have always felt that those busy little figures would make conversation at the dullest lunch party. It took all winter to complete the set, and the lady paid us eighty dollars for it.

Another masterpiece created by this woman was a table cover around which she represented the entire country side attending the County Fair. This was exhibited in Toronto, and finally sold there for seventy-five dollars.

Our little industry grew rapidly. I was obliged to open a shop in the town to dispose of the work, and engage a secretary for books and letters, and I got a car to take me to inspect the more distant workers. In 1920 the work reached its peak; that year the books showed that \$2500.00 had been paid out to the farming people. I felt that my \$10.00 capital had been well invested. We have never exceeded this figure. The passing of the Fordney-McComber tariff bill cut off our American market, and we could no longer send consignments of our work to Palm Beach

at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. For this we made a farm scene of wool, to which nearly all of my workers contributed something. It combined weaving, hooking and embroidery, and represented the country side on a May morning. Above it a printed placard announced that: "This Picture of a New Brunswick Farm is made all of wool by the people who live on these farms."

At the great Empire Exhibition I stood beside the glass case that contained this representation of my native land, with other examples of my people's work, and talked about it to people from far distant lands, to whom that familiar landscape seemed as remote and foreign as their palm trees and temples did to me. It was a wonderful experience. There I met people of all nations and kindreds, from the uttermost parts of the earth, black, white, brown and yellow, all meeting together on friendly terms and discussing their native products and exhibiting their handiwork. An ebony youth passed by and stopped to tell me of the flowers of his beautiful Kashmir. "My people" he said, "make lovely embroidery like their flowers." I told him that in my Canada we also had lovely flowers that *my* people also used in embroidery. "Your Canada" he said, "is it not under British control, as we are?" I told him that it was, and we became fellow citizens.

With the coming of the depression, the demand for embroidery slowly flickered out. In fact the demand for almost everything we made was flickering. At this period we turned our attention more particularly to our homespun. We now had leisure for experimenting. We were able to get some information from weavers on the Island of Harris, and learned how to put our webs of homespun through a milling process. We experimented in dyeing, and blending the wool to obtain more artistic shades. In this we carried out the same idea that we had followed in our other lines, looking to nature for colour suggestions. In our assortment of shades we had spruce green, Maritime blue, potato brown, golden-rod, lilac, sandstone red and farmer's gray. This gave the native touch to catch the tourist's fancy. In the last few years we have been able to put out a very good line of tweeds, and these are steadily growing in popularity.

The weavers, from long practice, have become very expert. They work very swiftly; one woman, for a rush order, wove twenty-four yards in a day. Compared to an ordinary factory, this is not a large out-put, but we make up for it in the lack of

of dollars. Then there is no expense for heating, lighting, insurance and the many other incidental expenses that eat into the profits of every factory. In fact I think there is much to be said for our little factory that covers an area of thirty square miles but has no smoke stack.

Last year we manufactured over 4500 yards of tweed, besides blankets and rugs. Next year we hope to reach nearly double that amount, as new markets are continually opening, now that the depression is over, embroidery is coming into favour again and we are working out new designs for that.

We import practically nothing, as we raise our own wool and can buy at a country store such simple material as we may need for lining bags, etc.

Some years ago I revisited New York; it was worse than I expected! The cavernous streets set low between the tower-like buildings, the swiftly moving crowds forever catching trains, layers of those compressed homes dotted with endless rows of windows, all filled me with compassion for the people who were obliged to live there. I was told, however, that most of the people really liked it.

I went again to see the Metropolitan Museum; it was very peaceful there. I found things had been changed about a good deal, since my day, and that annoyed me. However, I finally discovered my favorite mummy, and felt his attitude of complete repose most refreshing. As I stood admiring the decorations, that had so long ago inspired me, I drew from my hand-bag a small sample of our embroidery; it represented children skating on a pond making a rather charming little all-over pattern, full of action and color. I looked at it, and then I looked at the mummy. "Well, old friend", I said, "it is different—very different from any thing you ever saw, but then so does my land differ from your land, but I think we both had the same idea and worked unencumbered by modern standardization; anyway you have been a great help to me."

Now I would like to finish my story with a moral, if I may be forgiven for reviving such an obsolete practice. And the moral is this: If you want to live a contented life, live among your own people.