

The Improvement in Magazine Illustration in the Last Twenty-five Years.

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The Improvement in Magazine Illustration in the Last Twenty-Five Years.

Our world today is full of pictures. Every paper, magazine and book which seeks to be truly instructive and entertaining, uses them freely.

If such a thing is possible for us who have been accustomed all our lives to having "fact and fancy" impressed upon us by the double means of picture and type, let us stop and think what our loss would be if deprived of these, our dear, familiar friends. Then will the power of a good illustration be more forcibly impressed upon us.

An illustration, even though it be crude in conception and execution, is often of the greatest help in the understanding of a subject. So accustomed are we to depend on our eyes for information that anything which we can actually see as though it were happening over again before us, makes clear to the comparatively slow mind what might have remained a mystery, had not this agile little servant of ours added a

stimulous to it.

Beauty and grace are imparted to anything by pictures, and this is no less true of magazines. What our walls would be without paintings and etchings, our magazines would be without engravings and mezzotints.

Men in years past have left their highest thoughts on canvas as well as between covers of books. Few of us can go to see these pictures in their galleries, but all of us who truly wish to gain the inspiration they impart, may do so by carefully studying their reproductions as they appear in our pictorial magazines of today. A picture stays in the mind long after the words which may have surrounded it on the page have passed from memory, and thus the great truth which it sought to teach is ours forever. Surely, then, we must all agree that we could in no wise do without the excellent illustrations which fill the "up-to-date" magazine.

Since illustrations, and good ones, too, are so plentiful on every hand, let

us be satisfied with none but the best. The first requisite of a good magazine illustration is, that it shall be perfectly fitted to the thought it pictures. Whatever does this, cannot be wholly out of place. Caricatures, if adapted to their subject, may serve almost as important a place as the serious picture.

However, unless the subject is well executed, much of meaning and beauty is lost. The whole thought must be carried out, even in the slightest details, or the illustration will bring a confused idea to the mind which it should help by bring clear. The best way to secure good execution is faithfulness to the truth. Here, as elsewhere, if anything is to stand the test of time, it must be faithful to what really exists, or its fault will be discovered and it will be discarded because, worse than useless, it misleads when it should guide aright.

Magazine illustrations, twenty-five years ago, were very scarce in comparison with the abundance to which the

reader of today is accustomed. Since they had been used so sparingly at that time, it is probable that their true worth and power were not known. People were more accustomed to depend on the mind to catch the thought as they read. The idea had hardly died out that it was childish to wish for many pictures to illustrate the reading matter. Corresponding to this impression, the articles were written in a manner so plain and impressive as, in some degree, to make up for the absence of the portrayal of the thought.

But the scarcity of illustrations was not wholly due to ignorance of their incalculable value. Artistic talent was scarce, and hence high prices were paid for work which was not, often times, such as to be of much credit to a periodical. If the best artists were obtained, their work was so expensive as to make it impossible for the magazine to afford any great amount of it. Men did not realize what an immense and profitable business

could be made out of this industry. There were, of course, many artists, but they confined their work mostly to the canvas, instead of seeking to reproduce it in such shape that the masses might enjoy at least the thought, if not the coloring of such works of art.

Materials were fully as expensive as labor. Tools of the right kind were more scarce, and the metals and wood on which the pictures were engraved, were not abundant or cheap.

Today, it is small wonder that we may enjoy such multitudes of pictures, for everything is favorable to it. The age is becoming more and more one of push and haste, and we have not long to spend on any one thing. Our principal idea is to do everything the quickest way. Our magazines realize this, and have so arranged their pages that, by looking hastily through the pictures, we may easily gain a reasonable idea of the subjects treated in that particular number.

We admit that the literary standard has been somewhat lowered by this mul-

titude of pictures, since the people tend more and more to the purchase of cheaper magazines, and yet cling to those fullest illustrations. In order, then, for a publisher to secure the largest circulation, he must make his periodical of moderate price and fill it with pictures. To do this, the literary part must be cheapened, or, in many cases, reduced in quantity. So we do pay a rather dear price for the gratification of our artistic taste, if not in money, yet in the inferiority or scarcity of the literature.

But this profusion of engravings is demanded because we have cultivated a taste for them, and the general public is not satisfied without them. They are truly educative, cultivating the artistic taste of the people, and as such we have found that we must have them. Emerson says, "A picture is a poem without words," and it appeals to our better natures, teaching, many times, a lesson too tender and delicate for the most carefully chosen words.

Labour in engravings, as in almost

everything else, has cheapened and quickened in the last half century, so that an editor can better afford to hire the best labor now than he could the poorest then. Materials, also, have been made more moderate in price, so that an abundance may now be used where before the designer was necessarily hampered by economy in this direction. For instance, the copper on which the engraver worked is less expensive than formerly, simple work drawings answering the purpose.

The expense of processes has been lessened by improved methods, which also served the purpose of raising the quality of the pictures. Machinery has come in to cheapen processes by doing more and better work with one man than had been done by several men without its aid. It is true that much of the finest, most expensive work, must still be done by hand. But the machinery releases the best artists from the more insignificant details, and allows them to turn their whole attention to the higher details and allows them to turn their

whole attention to the higher departments of illustrating, while cheaper men may be employed to do the less important work.

Competition between magazines compels the use of multitudes of illustrations and embellishments. The periodical whose pages hold the eye by interesting, graceful scenes or portraits, is the one sure to gain the favor of the magazine-reading public, and thus, because of its large circulation, become moderate in price. So the periodicals of today vie with each other respecting the multitude of their engravings and halftones, until one sometimes feels that he pays for more picture than reading. But we must not complain, as we are the power behind the editor, forcing him to this course of action.

The illustrations of a quarter of a century past were not only much less frequent than now, but were of a very poor quality. One has but to glance at a "Harper" or "Century" of twenty-five years ago, to see how inferior their pictures

were to those we so much enjoy in our "Harper" or "Century" of today. Perhaps the first hindrance to creditable illustrations was the lack of real artists to do the work. As drawings and photographs had been comparatively seldom reproduced at that time, artists had not, as a class, become skilled in that kind of work.

There were few good art schools to which a man might go for training in this line, and even those that did take this branch into their course of study, had not many pupils, because an art education was expensive. Thus only a very few artists became proficient to reproduce really fine engravings or wood cuts.

Modern magazines are embellished by pictures which, aside from their useful connection, are, often times, truly beautiful and inspiring and worthy of a place on our walls. One reason this can be so and still the price of the periodical be less than formerly, is, as mentioned before, that the circulation is large, and the receipts from the ad-

vertising pages are defunded upon for profit.

Since his journal is sent to so many, the editor may use great variety and still be sure of pleasing a large share of his readers.

Processes are also greatly improved today. Wood engravings used to be the greatest means of reproducing an artistic work; but now a method called halftone has very nearly taken its place in all ordinary illustration. This is a much more rapid method, and, to my mind, a much more artistic one. A good halftone picture often reproduces a painting so perfectly that it may quite fairly represent mass and color. Indeed, we are much indebted to this new process for the smooth, clear, softly shaded pictures we so thoroughly enjoy. H. M. Duncan, in "Paper and Press," says, "One has but to institute a comparison between the magazines of twenty years ago and the splendidly executed publications of the present day to be convinced that halftone has been produced."

tion of good, in its broadest sense".

Photography is also an important factor in our modern illustrations. Long parades which were once viewed by the reporter and afterward tediously sketched from memory, are now photographed and taken to the engraving or mezzotint department, where the whole appears on paper in a life like representation - all in less time than it formerly took to draw the rough sketch, which was at last anything but satisfactory. Thus, also, a reporter can collect much more material in the same time than formerly.

After these excellent photographs have been obtained, they are reproduced by the finest artists, who make them extremely lifelike and pleasing. To be able to do this, these men must be educated in their own line of work. This is now a comparatively easy matter, for thorough art schools are so numerous and inexpensive as to be within the reach of almost all who truly crave the knowledge they impart.

Another help to the illustrator of today is the clubs which have recently been established. Almost the first of these was organized in New York only a few weeks ago, and is for the mutual help and education of its members.

All these things has the illustrator of today, which the illustrator of twenty-five years ago knew nothing of. More than this, the experience of those who have gone before is left for the modern artist to build upon. Men have learned, along with the rapid excellent processes, to study the tastes of magazine readers, and then to satisfy them as fully as possible. If we tire of one particular style of picture, how quickly does the editor's intuition warn him of it, and we are soon interested by something new and fully as pretty and instructive as anything we have seen before.

If the rapid progress of the last twenty-five years may continue unhindered for twenty-five years to come, our magazines will be really art-treasures. And if this does come

At pass, may we hope that their excellence may not be recognized with indifference but may be appreciated, because such true worth can only be a growth to which earnest men and women have given years of thought and labor.