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The Purchase Price of Beauty

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"WAT has an economist to do with beauty?" you may ask. And he, being a trained man in the art of the price of corn and cotton, but surely in the field of beauty they are outside their proper sphere. Questions of beauty are, as the poet, the artist, tells us, philosophical, even moral; they are not to be enlightened by the ordinary market-a common enough economist's province which limits him to matters of time, energy and money; and the satisfactions which make up the sum total of human consumption obviously include much more than corn, cotton and steel rails.

When I speak of the purchase price of beauty, I am not, however, referring to the purchase price of beautiful things, the prices obtaining at collectors' sales and paid by connoisseurs of sculpture and painting. These prices may or may not be the price of beauty-they are the prices of objects which may or may not carry, in the sense of beauty to the possessor. One does not buy beauty by purchasing the Venus of Milo or the Sistine Madonna-one buys simply a statue or a painting. The price one pays is to an extent paid away than by signing a check in an auction room; and yet it is very largely an economic price.

The price of beauty is the price at which is acquired an appreciation of the beautiful. That appreciation seems in some cases to be more or less innate. In other cases it is unconsciously learned by children who grow up in beautiful surroundings and whose associates appreciate fine and lovely things. Too often, in discussing the possibilities of appreciation, one stops here-if a person does not have natural taste and has not enjoyed a well-directed childhood, it is felt that he is not a very hopeful subject. He, himself, too, doesn't want to be bothered. The Sunday supplement is good enough for him.

This person, however, is the person the economist wants. Speaking neither as an aesthete nor a philosopher but as a practical minded man of affairs, the economist tells him he must learn to discipline and extend his tastes if he wishes to get the most out of the ordinary business of life; that the maximizing of satisfaction involves the utilization of all one's capability for enjoyment, that dull senses must be sharpened, drowsy apprehensions quickened, rude pleasures refined. This is mere common sense—good "business management" it may well be.

But why, if this is mere common sense, is it not more generally recognized? Why is it not everyone training his taste according to matter of course? If it is such a benefit to do so? Because the reward, great as it is, is often so far separated from the effort, because the reward often comes unceremoniously while the effort is painfully conscious. It is one of the principles of consumption that men usually prefer to sacrifice the present to future enjoyments. They require some inducement to put off a present satisfaction for a future one. They prefer today's movie to tomorrow's suntan. In the case of saving money, the difference in favor of present satisfaction is compensated for, as we know, by interest. In the case of training one's taste, one's reward is, of course, a future satisfaction far greater than the present loss. But men do not always realize this. Unless they are taught that this is so they may not know it. The purely economic side of training taste is not often stressed. It seems, indeed, rightly enough, to be left to the economist to stress it.

Granting that the training of appreciation is a matter of economic common sense, how is it to be accomplished? Is this an economic matter, too? Indeed, it is just that. Appreciation is acquired by the expenditure of time, effort. Sometimes, effort consciously directed, pain cost often. In the training of appreciation, as in other things, there is no reward without the sacrifice. Just want form the effort shall take along just what lines the training shall go, the economist cannot define. In this he sits humbly at the feet of the creator, the poet, the artist. Tell me what is truly good, he says, and I will forego that which is contrary to it. Tell me the principles of beauty and I will school myself in them until they become a part of me. Show me a lovely thing and I will place it before me until I enter into its spirit. For ofttimes the artists have been telling us and showing us, but we have not realized that we, ourselves, must make the connection; that they, after all, can only show—we must strive.

In the ordinary business of life, what does this amount to? It means one cannot afford to purchase anything which does not conform to the canons of good taste, for its influence will be persistent and insensible. One must forego the things that pleases and is not quite good, for one buys the quality of one's life with one's money. One must choose those goods, those enjoyments, rather, that represent a taste a little beyond what he has attained. In order that he may place himself in fertile conditions for growth.

Money alone will not do it, however. What sad figures are those men and women who, after they find themselves rich, and struggle to surround themselves with lovely things whose lovefulness they cannot see. How pathetic are those who are forced to pay exorbitant sums to art experts to design their public buildings and then betray themselves by ruthlessly destroying their spots of nature and beauty for these people. These cities, are not buying beauty, but a crude sort of self-satisfaction. The price of beauty is deeper than they realize. Athens purchases it—Zenith does not.

The purchase price of beauty, though often expressed in money, is not by any means a mere money price. It is measured also, and chiefly, by effort and patience; struggle and reluctant waiting. The economist must affirm this again and again—anyone's standard of living must make provision for it deliberately, and long before he can fully enter into the joy of it. A man must consciously resolve to direct his energies toward the best, whether or not he sees an immediate return; and having resolved, he must do what is harder, perhaps—he must wait.

The fact that the price of beauty is so great an extent measured by the cost of waiting makes it extremely important that one resolve to purchase it while one is young. At that time one should be made to realize that the satisfactions arising from an appreciation of the beautiful are the keenest and fullest of all purchasable satisfactions; and that the cost of disciplining oneself, considerable though it may be, is slight compared to its value.

But how does one know that, having paid the price, he will get the reward at all? One puts one's money in the bank and its solvency is one's assurance he will get his interest on the investment. What assurance has one in an investment in satisfactions? In this case the assurance is infallible. Banks may close their doors, but the human personality is indelibly formed and shaped by all that ever touches it. Those efforts in which influence on taste and character is involved carry their return within them. It is not a matter of chance or fortune; it is in the nature of the thing itself. "Can you not tell what you seek in your youth", it was once said with great wisdom, "for that is what, in your age, you will assuredly obtain?"

Something Different for Christmas Greetings
(Continued from page 2)

L Grace Magee, who is dietitian at the college hospital and teaches nutrition in the Food and Nutrition department, attended the American Dietetics Association meeting, October 12 to 15, at the