

THE SOCIETY OF DECORATIVE ART.

(NEW YORK.)



PORTIÈRE DESIGNED BY SAMUEL COLMAN.

THE recent exhibition held by the Ladies' Society of Decorative Art at the American Art Gallery could not have appeared to the casual visitor—and still less to even the cursory glance of the trained observer—particularly inspiring. It chiefly consisted of compet-

itive designs for prizes of different descriptions offered by the Society; and, though several of these were excellent, and a few of them—such as Miss Townsend's charming opaline *portière* and Mr. Maynard's allegorical panels, representing the four seasons,

for a screen—were really beautiful, nevertheless the majority, and the majority clearly preponderating, bore witness to the rather meager sense of decorativeness which we suppose Americans, as a people, must for a while yet own to. The designs submitted came from all over the country, and one could hardly help drawing the same inferences from them, as to the national faculty for the lighter qualities of fine-art, that the exhibition in the same rooms, some months before, of the Prang Christmas-card competitive designs induced. Though certainly in a smaller degree, there was evident the same lack of spontaneity of conception, and a similar lack of freedom in execution. In many of the designs, the limitations of machine-work were traceable, betraying the fact that the eye had been thoroughly familiarized with machine-work only; in many others, a rather unnatural variety, evidently due to the easily obtained notion that vari-

ety is the sign manual of hand-work, betrayed an affectation perfectly innocent, to be sure, but on the whole as uninteresting as machine monotony. But the real point to be observed is that a few years ago any exhibition at all of this kind would have been an impossibility. When any one who knows what it is possible to do, or, at all events,—which is much the same thing, we suppose,—what has already been done in art, reminds us, with the tone of a pessimist, of the actual æsthetic condition of America outside the circles of influence of the studios of two or three cities, it is considerations of this sort that are encouraging. It is not that a few of our painters—and we may now add sculptors, and perhaps architects—compare favorably with the analogous few of England or Holland or the Latin countries, which gives us the most satisfactory ground for gratulation; but the general and truly popular æsthetic progress that has

been made here within a very few years—a progress which is, relatively speaking, surprising, and which really affords some reason for assuring ourselves that there is something particularly sympathetic and apprehensive in the American infusion in Anglo-Saxon character, that discloses itself as soon as it becomes convinced of the seriousness and dignity of any department of human effort. It would be an extravagant thing to say that we now have many painters superior to Stuart and Allston, for example, taking them all around, and laying stress upon the most dignified and severe of the intellectual qualities; but it is certain—and this, as we say, is the significant circumstance—that Allston and Stuart themselves enjoy among their countrymen today an intelligent and critical vogue which neither in their own time nor even a decade ago was theirs. So with the lighter departments of art, to the development of American excellence in which the Society of Decorative Art has set itself. The Society's accomplishment is to be measured by comparative, rather than absolute, standards; and to judge the original work exhibited at their recent display with the same eyes which one would bring to the inspection of the admirable loan collection of Italian and other embroideries exhibited with it, would be obviously irrational. Indeed, we are inclined especially to remind visitors to that exhibition of the least captivating portion of it, viz., the three sides



A GLIMPSE OF THE SOCIETY'S ROOMS.

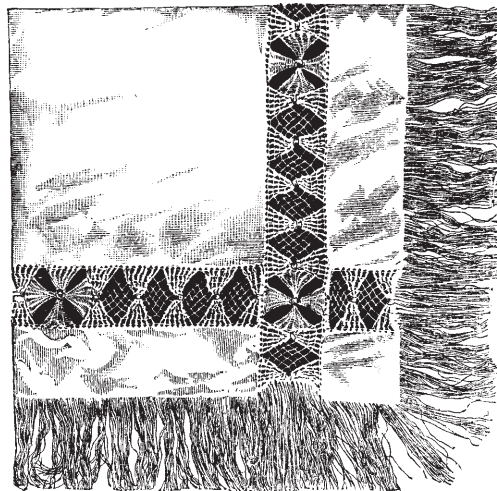


END BUFFET COVER. DRAWN WORK.

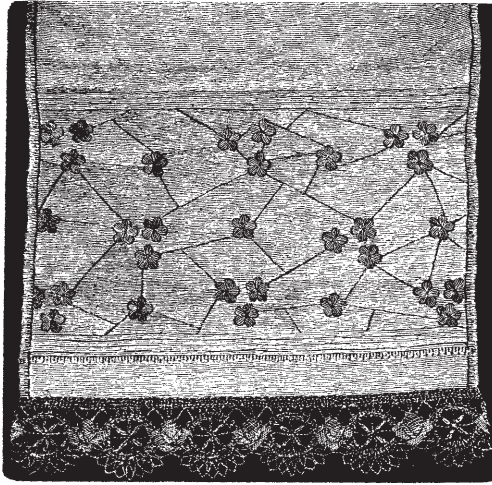
of the gallery upon which were exposed the contributions of amateurs who had only indirectly, in many instances, come within the Society's influence. The south wall was hung, in the main, with work done under the immediate supervision of, and designed especially for, the Society itself, and it made an excellent showing. A large *portière*, designed by Mr. Samuel Colman and executed by the Society's corps of workers, with its beautiful arabesques embroidered upon a ground of yellow chosen with the nicest taste—and any one who knows the widely different qualities of yellow, without, at the same time, having an acquaintance with what has been done in oriental work, will appreciate success in using this color as a basis, so easy is it to be disagreeable with it—was of itself enough to stamp the work of the Society as excellent work. It was natural that it alone should have overbalanced any contribution by a mere amateur. Mr. Colman is something more than an amateur, and work for which he provides the design and of which he overlooks the execution is sure to rival the very best work of the sort made. And, in a smaller degree, the same may be said of the other direct contributions of the Society. But the competitive designs sent were satisfactory evidence that the notion of attempting something in decorative art has penetrated many inhospitable regions of the country, and the manifest effort of many persons, without

special aptitude and after little study, has been rewarded with a reasonable measure of success.

The growth of this department of household art may probably be considered to date from that really—to us—epoch-making event, the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia. The showing America then made in art of any kind was not too flattering to Americans, and in decorative art especially there was a noticeable inferiority which struck forcibly a few ladies of cultivation and public spirit. Hence the Ladies' Society of Decorative Art. At first, a single room in Madison Avenue was found sufficient to meet the demands of the new scheme, and at all events answered for the modest beginnings of a rivalry of South Kensington. Soon, however, such narrow quarters proved inadequate. The "popular response" to the initiative thus taken was prompt and really significant of the need and opportunity for such an institution. From all over the country inquiries began to be received, asking for information and work. There is certainly little that is surprising in this. Everybody remembers, though it has already become a distinct effort of memory to recall it, the general condition of our household art less than a decade ago. In many houses there was unquestionably a great deal of feminine taste and tact displayed; this had been the case since the good old colony days and afterward, when women took pride in the varied product of the spinning-wheel, in samplers and quilts and tidies, and so on. There is hardly a "home-



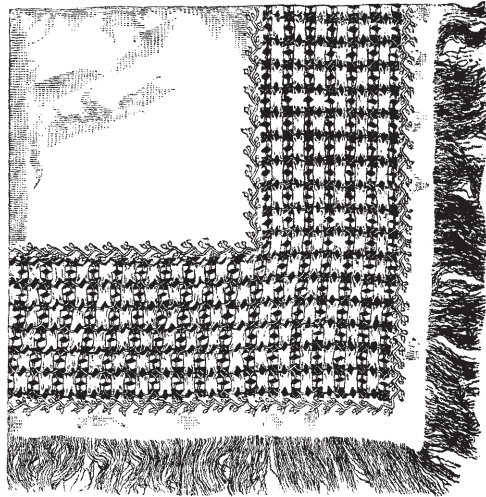
TEA-CLOTH. SPANISH DRAWN WORK.



END OF BUFFET COVER. JAPANESE AND DRAWN WORK.

stead" in New England in one of whose "chambers" or "best rooms" there is not a framed worsted representation of "Samuel Anointing Saul," or some similar object of feminine accomplishment, the relic of two or three generations back. But, aside from the primitive crudity of all this, which of course requires no mention, the object and pursuit of it related distinctly to what are called "accomplishments," and the idea of beautifying one's home by such work went to no greater lengths than could be comprised, also, in taking care of the India china and polishing the brass "skillets" and other utensils of housekeeping. To speak heroically, the household art ideal of that day was the notion of neatness allied with industry. When, a generation

or two—varying according to place—later, the notion of beauty, of having pretty things, instead of having things ship-shape, succeeded, the notion of making anything at all lapsed, and household decorations were purchased almost altogether. This has lasted until within a very few years, and though it has not been universal, we are not here concerned with exceptions, but with the general view and practice. When, then, people in general began to hear about "the South Kensington stitch," and to see the Walter Crane books, and to learn of the existence of Japan, they naturally—being Americans—became interested in a novelty so interesting. The English college of propaganda upon such subjects had been for some time putting forth its literature; the pre-Raphaelite movement and its echo here



TEA-TABLE COVER. DRAWN WORK.



END OF BUFFET COVER. IMITATION OLD EMBROIDERY.

had done something to prepare the way for a new evangel, and so, before the Ladies' Society of Decorative Art had been a year in existence, or by the time, in other words, its existence had become generally known, it found more work awaiting it than it could well do.

As to what that work is, many people have, possibly, a rather vague idea. At all events, one of the main objects of the Society is less widely known than it deserves to be. And, considering its practical importance, one is inclined to esteem what may be designated as the benevolent and charitable work the Society has done, its chief title to honor and support. There is one detail of this upon which it is doubtless possible to



EMBROIDERY ROOM.

be sentimental and which is naturally liable to exaggeration, but any one whose experience in life is at all wide must have met many members of the class of women describable as genteel dependents. If we had here a familiar literature like the second-rate novels produced in such quantities in England, it would doubtless show, as those works do, that, owing to certain peculiarities of Anglo-Saxon society, we have a large class of "distressed gentlewomen," whose limits it would be difficult, of course, to fix, but within the limits of which is a good deal of real distress. The many women absolutely dependent upon the charity, willing or grudging, of relatives and friends, and the many others who have just enough to "keep them," and yet experience something more serious than discomfort for the want of "pin money," have found the Decorative Art Society a very benevolent institution. It gives them, by letter or directly, instruction which enables them, if they have any faculty for the work, not perhaps to support themselves, but to supply just the amount necessary to bridge the gulf between dependence and independence; and it sells their work for them after it is done. The number of letters expressing a grateful recognition of these services that has been received by the Society since its foundation is very large; and, properly edited, a selection from them would, we venture to suggest, make an instructive pamphlet. But the main benev-

olent work of the institution is the instruction of professional needle-women, women who have little education and who would otherwise be obliged to work at millinery and dress-making, or even "plain-sewing," or enlist in the large army of "shop-girls"—the last of which may be said, without implying any criticism of its members as a class, to be, in the large cities at least, a peculiarly unfortunate body of working-women, owing to their long hours of work, their small pay, the hopelessness of bettering their condition, and other and different considerations. To



TIDY. IMITATION CRETONNE EMBROIDERY.

the women from whom this class is recruited, the Society offers both free instruction and employment. Employment, of course, can only be given to a comparatively small number, though this number is constantly increasing with the growth of the Society's work. This is becoming larger and more important all the time. Commissions from

now done at the rooms of the "Associated Artists," where Mrs. C. Wheeler, one of the Society's firmest supporters, presides over the department of embroidery. Trained workwomen are accordingly in increasing demand at the Society's rooms; they are as well paid as is possible in an institution which combines business enough to support it with

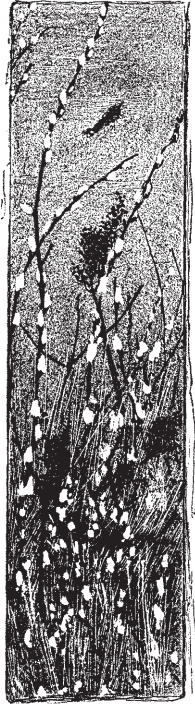


BENNETT AND VOLKMAR WARE.

architects and professional decorators for the execution of their designs for the various decorative objects that needle-work in its different departments furnishes, have not up to the present time, to be sure, been frequent; but they have shown an encouraging progression, and the Society has nearly all the work of this sort that its present capacity is equal to, in spite of the amount

its benevolence; and they are exceptionally well treated.

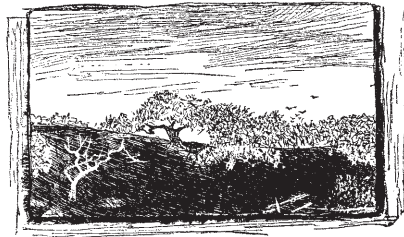
The instruction is, however, the main thing. This they could get nowhere else, and it is invaluable to them. There are regulations which make it possible for a pupil who displays special aptitude—and embroidery is an art in virtue of requiring a special aptitude—to take an extra course of



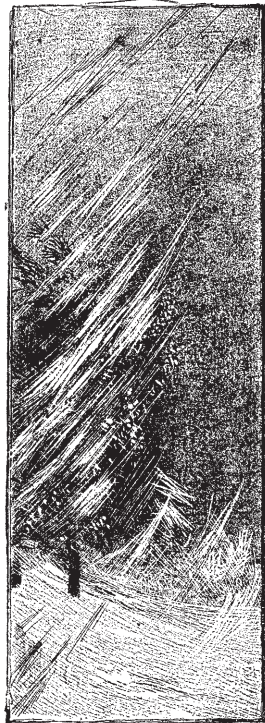
POUSETT
 Pussy Willows

PUSSY WILLOWS.

lessons and receive extra practice. Finally, being fully equipped, she is at the least a skilled artisan, whose work is always in demand. Often she becomes herself a teacher, and there are now in different parts of the country a large number of instructors in embroidery each of whom gained her own knowledge under Mrs. Pode at the Society's rooms; and in this way, it is clear, the Society's circle of influence is capable of indefinite



ORCHARD.

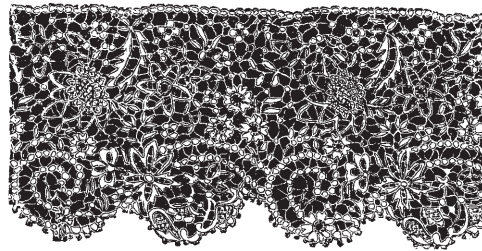


DRIFTING SNOW.

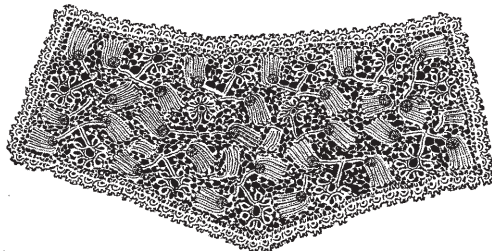
EMBROIDERIES BY MRS. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

widening, and "the diffusion of a knowledge of art-work among women and their training in artistic industries," which its circulars announce as one of its chief objects (the other being "to provide a place for the exhibition and sale of art-work"), is attained by indirect as well as by direct means. Probably in many cases the stream grows

shallow as it gets away from the source, and the quality of the work approved by the Society deteriorates, to the disadvantage of the latter's reputation. Indeed, there is complaint of this at the rooms, where there is some sensitiveness in regard to the matter, the aims and accomplishment of the institution having failed to protect it against the criticism of irresponsible and disappointed persons who should certainly be rather co-workers with it. This trenches on gossip, and is mentioned here mainly because it is believed to proceed from the strict impartiality with which, in the preservation of a high standard, much work has been adjudged lacking. Nothing, one would say, could be of more importance than carefulness in this respect. The Society is in virtue of its position an authority, and to tolerate slipshod performances of any kind must in the end prove fatal to its good influence. In accordance with the object just mentioned, the Society's rooms have from the first been a kind of exchange, bringing



CROCHET IRISH LACE.



CUFF OF IRISH CROCHET LACE.

artists and buyers together and rendering possible the disposition of work, made in various homes from Maine to California, which might not, and in all probability would not, otherwise find a purchaser. To make of this exchange a curiosity-shop, or rather let us say a commonplace shop, receiving and attempting the sale of all sorts of women's handiwork, good, bad, and indifferent, would manifestly be for the



AN EXHIBITION OF EMBROIDERIES.

Society to enter into the business of brokerage. Such a place is in itself desirable, no doubt, and such a place "The Women's Exchange," in Twentieth street, is. But, of course, the stricter the standard of selection the Society can impose upon the "wares" it takes charge of, the better for the encouragement of excellence in such work. Every contribution that is sent here is examined by a committee of admission, who decide upon its merits without knowing the name of the author. To witness the impartiality of their decisions, it is related at the rooms—and the fact may be interesting to the hundreds of

contributors whose work has been rejected—that a member of this committee recently felt obliged to resign, because she had grown familiar with the manner of certain regular contributors and so considered herself incapacitated from serving longer. There are many regular contributors to the permanent though constantly changing exhibition at the rooms, and, indeed, the number of these is excellent evidence of the practical success of the institution in furnishing an occupation for women, or rather in rendering their turn for decorative art profitable.

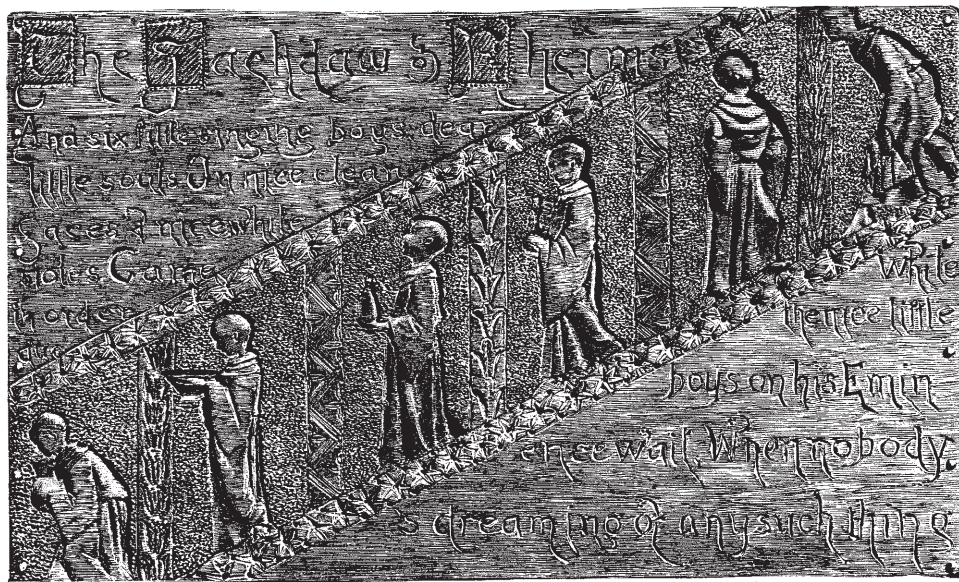
Needle-work, though the chief, and of great variety, is of course by no means the only branch of decorative work taught and executed by the Society. Next in importance comes china-painting, in which, in embroidery, there are both pay class and free. Hitherto modeling and wood-carving have not proved practicable, though there was a persistent attempt made, soon

time ago, to introduce the former, a competent teacher being engaged and every inducement offered to pupils to try to do something in a material which has undoubted decorative possibilities. The attempt failed, however, by reason of lack of interest, and though this is certainly to be regretted on many accounts, it is still to be said that any respectable degree of excellence in even the lighter kinds of sculpture demands a longer apprenticeship than the result would in most cases justify. Of wood-carving the same cannot be said, and the Society has more hope of getting something done in it. A great deal is done with it in Cincinnati, as is well known, and of what it is possible to do if one have a real feeling for what is artistic, the box by the Misses Eggleston, portions of which are here engraved, of itself furnishes a sufficient demonstration. It is an exceedingly pretty affair, and as well worth recognition as a work of art as expression in any material would be. The young lady who did the most important part of this work is a pupil of Mr. Wyatt Eaton, and, in the quiet sentiment here shown, apparently an apt one. The engraving is clever, but it could hardly be expected to exhibit fully the effect of the relief, which is extremely ingenious, the incisions be-



ONE END OF WOODEN BOX CARVED BY ALLEGRA AND BLANCHE EGGLESTON.

ing made to count with great nicety and preventing the whole from losing its appearance of a modulated plane surface, so to speak, in distracting inequalities of elevation. The design is also charming, and but for the lettering might be Renaissance work. Not that the lettering is awkward; on the contrary it is extremely graceful, and it has the main merit of an inscription, the essential prose basis of picturesque lettering—legibility, namely. But it is a little uncertain, and was probably a problem with the artists. Lace-making is not taught, the examples herewith



TOP OF BOX CARVED BY ALLEGRA AND BLANCHE EGGLESTON.



By


MILKWEED. EMBROIDERY BY MRS. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

given being from Ireland, and simply consigned to the Society as a token of gratitude for American help during the Irish distress a year or two ago. When the library has been mentioned, which has heretofore been small but is now rapidly growing, and which is at the service of out-of-town correspondents upon payment of a small sum—indeed, a

nominal sum to other than the class chiefly benefited by the privilege—the scope of the Society's work has been fully enough indicated. It is worth adding, however, as illustrating this still more explicitly, that drawings and sketches in crayon, pen and ink, oil and water colors (unless applied as decorations to some useful article, and excepting original pictures of merit as works of art), wax flowers and fruit (heaven be praised!), feather flowers, leather work, and the dreary ruck of pin-cushions, needle-books, and so on, are not admitted to the salesrooms. They are, of course, not art, and should be excluded. Pottery, porcelain, and tiles, when painted in oil and varnished, come properly into the same category. The following is a list of what is received and sold: "Pottery, china, tiles, plaques, and embroideries; hangings or curtains for windows, book-cases, and cabinets; mantel and bracket lambrequins; decorated table and other house linen; panels for cabinet-work, painted upon wood, leather, etc.; paintings upon silk, for screens, panels, fans, etc.; decorated *menus*, dinner-cards, note-paper, and articles of a like description"—the Society being doubtless as anxious as any possible contributor to have the list expanded to the utmost, provided its character as a catalogue of decorative art is not sacrificed. The accompanying drawings disclose sufficiently the excellence attained by various persons in different branches of work of this kind. They are all made from articles exhibited, and in some instances manufactured, by the Society. And attention may be directed, in passing, to the fact that the salesrooms have at one time and another contained a great deal of the material which illustrates and enforces Mrs. Harrison's recent interesting volume on "Woman's Handiwork in Modern Homes."

Nothing these rooms have ever contained, however, has equaled in interest the embroidered landscapes of Mrs. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., displayed here last April. These are absolutely original, and have a very great artistic merit besides. The imitation of natural objects in embroidery is as old, of course, as the art of embroidery it-

self. A rather theatrical scene in which figured a bull, a man, and a precipice, may be remembered at the recent exhibition of the Society, and testifies to the extent to which this sort of thing can be carried by clever workmanship without reaching the point at which it becomes of any interest other than curiosity. Mrs. Holmes's landscapes have also the interest of curiosity; this is undoubtedly the first feeling they excite; and even after examination it is still a subject of marvel and admiration with the observer that she can contrive to express such effects so adequately with such material. Nothing could be further from her "handling," as one may say with propriety, than precision and system. Technically speaking, her method is probably incommunicable. It was not a little amusing to observe the scrutiny her works received from curious ladies desirous of discovering the secret of the stitch. Doubtless some of these, finding there was no method discoverable, and that as embroidery *per se* the landscapes had small pretensions, conceived for them the disesteem which technical expertness is wont to cherish for whatever falls short technically of its expectations. Mrs. Holmes's "stitches," it is true, have nothing recondite about them. They have in this respect none of the excellence which marks the better order of Japanese embroideries, in which needle-work exhibits subtle expedients in a measure that testifies to the maturity of a classic art. But this is not at all the artist's design. There is between her aim and treatment the same correspondence manifest between the conventionalized motives and the highly developed technic of the Japanese. The latter treat landscape in the way which we all know, and which is, perhaps, the most perfect example to be found of a treatment free and vivid, and at the same time conventional and logical. Mrs. Holmes, however, treats it as do our own landscape-painters—that is to say, the abler of them. She renders, as has been said, natural "effects." The circumstance that to this end she employs crewels and a needle, instead of a brush and pigments, does not in the least prevent one from perceiving that this is her point of view. One may take leave to hope that the popularity of her exhibition has called the attention of many of our amateur decorative artists to this, and that the lesson so forcibly presented there of centering



DAISY-FIELD. EMBROIDERY BY MRS. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

the interest of a decorative object in the art of it, instead of merely ornamenting an object otherwise undecorative, may be heeded. As soon as curiosity was satis-



FORMER ENTRANCE TO SOCIETY'S ROOMS, IN 19TH STREET.

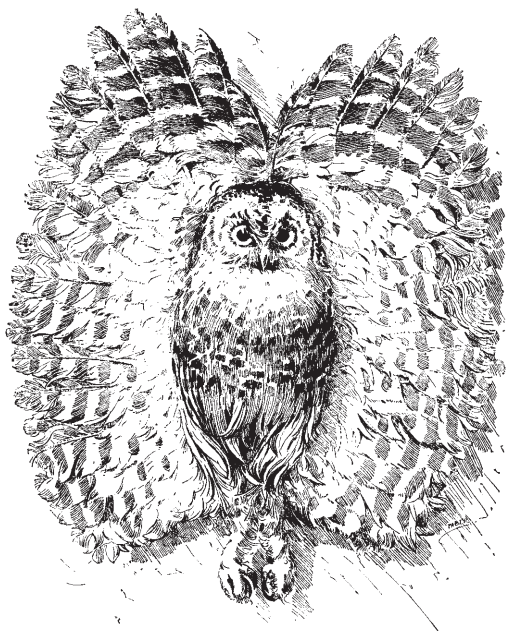
fied and these works judged simply as works of art, or, in other words, from their own point of view, no one could fail to find them delightful. Some of them were exceedingly beautiful—the orchard, for example, of which a faint reflection is given herewith, but which every one who saw it will remember. It witnessed in the fullest measure the fact that Mrs. Holmes is one of the most sensitive colorists among American artists. The pearl tones of the sky and the deep green of the sloping sward are divided, or rather bound together, by a mass of pinkish apple-blossoms, and the whole effect is exceedingly lovely. Opaline tints, which, as every one knows, are absolutely flat and meaningless when brutally managed, Mrs. Holmes seems especially successful with. But in power as well as in delicacy, her works are noteworthy. A very marked dramatic sense is shown in the upright “Drifting Snow.” And between these two instances there was a great variety of admirable work, which it is needless here to specify. Her delight in color is, perhaps, the most obvious of Mrs. Holmes’s qualities, but her composition is in nearly every case extremely agreeable, avoiding the commonplace without attracting attention to itself, and always being very happy in concealing from the observer the origin of the picture—whether, that is to say, it is as nearly as possible a transcript,

or is purely imaginative. Imaginative work, in the real sense of the epithet, hers is surely to be called, and her imaginativeness is clearly of a very poetic order. The sentiment of her landscapes is the first and last quality of them, considered as landscapes, that impresses one. All this being so, why does she not paint? is a question which has been asked, not a thousand miles away from the Decorative Art Rooms. And to people who are fond of pigeon-holing human effort in recognized categories, this question seems a perfectly natural one. Painting in oil is one thing, water-color painting is another, and surely embroidery is still another, they say, with complete justice. It is true that if Mrs. Holmes differs only from a painter of poetic sentiment and refined sense of color in the material she uses, one might say it mattered little what her medium was, but the logic by which other things stand and fall holds sway over fine-art, too, to some degree, and it would have to be acknowledged that there was something whimsical in her choice of crewels as a means of pictorial expression. But how can any one—save, of course, the experts in “stitches”—fail to recognize the very palpable charm of Mrs. Holmes’s handiwork as handiwork? It is individual and unique. Some analogy it undoubtedly bears to water-color painting, the satin background being, like the white

paper in this art, taken as a key of tone, as well as used pictorially in general. Analogy to painting in oil it has not. The "quality" of the work, its particular mode of impressionist representation, its very substance, give it a place by itself, and should stamp it as "legitimate" in the esteem of those who are careful about many things. One point of it is worth mentioning to many of our own landscape-painters, namely, its complete success in attaining illusion by gradations and oppositions of color without any light and shade; but doubtless such as need to heed such a lesson regard the work as mere amateur trifling from beginning to end.

However, this is in some sort a digression, though an excusable one. Besides the special exhibitions spoken of, the two important loan collections in aid of the Society, displayed at the National Academy of Design in 1878 and 1879, will be fresh in every one's mind, and particularly in that of readers of this magazine. With the funds thus obtained, augmented largely by gifts from private sources and subscriptions, the Society was enabled to provide new quarters for itself as soon as it outgrew its old ones. Its first removal was from its modest single apartment in Madison Avenue to No. 4 East Twentieth street (the rooms now occu-

ried by the New York Exchange for Women's Work), and its second to the house No. 34 East Nineteenth street, of which, as the place hitherto mainly associated with the institution, a view is herewith given. Last spring the larger house, No. 28 East Twenty-first street, was rented, and is now thoroughly equipped and decorated in admirable taste. On the ground floor at the rear are the salesrooms for materials (which the Society imports and selects for its patrons and *protégées*), and the room of the Committee on Admission; in front, on the right as you enter, is the committee room of the Board of Managers. On the second or main floor, the salesrooms proper run through from front to rear, the front hall room being the superintendent's office, and the rear one the library. The two front rooms on the third floor are devoted to china-painting and drawing, and those in the rear to stamping and the free classes in embroidery. The entire fourth floor is given over to embroidery. Every one who is familiar enough with the work of the Society to appreciate it must hope that ere long another house of the same size will be required for the adequate discharge of the beneficent engagements so generously undertaken, and hitherto so successfully carried out



OWL MOUNTED AS SCREEN.