A MEMOIR, THE JEWELLERY OF THE ANCIENTS

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GENTLEMEN,

I have asked the favour of being permitted to lay before you, in a few words, the result of my researches on the subject of the Art of Jewellery as practised by the ancients, not only with reference to the forms which ornaments, serving as such brilliant additions to the female toilette, assumed at the periods referred to, but with reference also to the no less interesting processes of execution employed by the artists of those times. These processes are unhappily lost, with many other secrets of a civilization which was the mother of our own, a noble inheritance of which barbarous ages have robbed us of the greater part.

It must with humility be confessed, that we see at present rising, as if by enchantment, from the forgotten cemeteries of Etruria and of Greece, objects in gold, of a workmanship so perfect, that not only all the refinements of our civilization cannot imitate it, but cannot even explain theoretically the process of its execution. It appears that the Greeks and Etruscans had, so to speak, acquired a complete knowledge of all those practical arts in their highest degree of perfection, by the aid of which the most ancient people of the East wrought the precious metals.

Once initiated into the modes of treating the raw material, and of subjecting it to all the caprices of their imagination, the artists of Etruria and of Greece had but to apply these processes to elegance and to the vast resources of the art, such as their own genius conceived. Thanks to the vivifying breath

I will not enter into the history of this decay of jewellery, losing every day its artistic character to become more and more in modern times a mere object of trade and of paltry speculation. Grieved at witnessing in Rome the prevalence of this deplorable influence, my father, brothers and myself believed that it might be a matter of some importance, in the midst of the universal improvement of taste, to give a purer and higher direction to the art to which we have devoted ourselves.

We have been established as jewellers at Rome ever since the year 1814. All the efforts of my father were, up to that period, directed to the imitation of the works of French and English jewellers. From 1823 to 1827, however, he turned, for greater assistance in his art, to the technological sciences, and in 1826, in a Memoir read by him before the Academy of the Lincei on the Chemical Processes in the Coloring of Gold, he indicated the part played by electricity in phenomena of this nature,—a discovery which belongs rightly to him, and which was confirmed at that time by many scientific publications.

At about the same time, some fortunate excavations brought to light the treasures hidden beneath the soil of ancient Etruria. Every one was struck with admiration at the beautiful ornaments discovered in the cemeteries of this mysterious country; and my father was the first to form the design of imitating some of them. Encouraged by the praise and counsel of friends of the arts, among whom I may mention as holding the first rank the Duke Michelangelo Caetani, known to many of you as possessing the purest taste and the feelings of a true artist, he revived at Rome the art of the jeweller by taking as models the most perfect examples that antiquity could furnish to him.

The discovery of the celebrated tomb known as that of Regulini Galassi, at Cervetri, was an event of the highest importance in regard to our enter­prise. On the Papal Government expressing a ,wish to become possessed of the objects in gold found in this crypt, my father and I were called upon to examine them with the utmost care. We had thus an opportunity of studying the particular character of Etruscan jewellery, and, holding thereby in our hands the thread which was to guide us through our researches, we set earnestly to work. The subsequent discoveries of Campanari at Toscanella, and of the Marquis Campana at Caere, and the excavations lately made at Vulci with so much intelligence by our friend Alessandro Francois, by Prince Torlonia and by M. Noel des Vergers, have revealed new treasures to us and have furnished models of the most exquisite elegance.

Our first object was to detect the processes by which the ancients worked. We remarked that all their Jewellery, except that intended for funeral cere­monies, instead of owing the raised parts to chiselling or engraving, were formed by separate pieces brought together and placed one upon the other. This it is, in my opinion, that gives it so peculiar and marked a character, derived rather from the expression, as it were, of the spontaneous idea and inspiration of the artist, than from the cold and regular execution of the workman. Its very imperfections and omissions, purposely made, give to the workmanship that artistic character altogether wanting in the greater number of modern works, which, owing to a monotonous uniformity produced by punching and casting, have an appearance of triviality depriving them of all individual character—that charm which so constantly strikes us in the pro­ductions of the ancients.

The first problem then that offered itself to our attention was to find the means of soldering together, with the utmost neatness and delicacy, so many pieces of extraordinary thinness. Among others, those almost invisible grains, like little pearls, which play so- important a part in the ornamentation of antique jewellery, presented difficulties nearly insurmountable. We made innumerable essays, employing all possible agents and the most powerful dissolvents to compose proper solder. We consulted the writings of Pliny, Theophilus and Benvenuto Cellini; we neglected no other sources of in­struction with which tradition could furnish us. We studied the work of Indian jewellers and those of the Maltese and Genoese, but it was only in a remote corner of the marches at St. Angelo in Vado, a little district hidden in the recesses of the Appenines far from every centre of civilization, that we found still in use some of the processes employed by the Etruscans. There yet exists, in fact, in this region of Italy, a special school of traditional jewellery, somewhat similar—not certainly in taste or elegance of design, but at least in method and workmanship—to the ancient art. The beautiful peasant girls of these districts, when at their wedding feasts, wear necklaces and long earrings called *navicelle,* much resembling in workmanship the antique. We procured then from St. Angelo in Vado, a few workmen to whom we taught the art of imitating Etruscan j'ewellery. Inheriting the patience of their forefathers, and caring nothing for those mechanical contrivances by which geometrical exact­ness is attained in modern jewellery, these men succeeded better than all whom we had previously employed in the imitation of that freedom of style, which is the particular characteristic of the art among the ancients.

In substituting arseniates for borax as solvents and reducing the solder to an impalpable file-dust, we obtained results of a sufficiently satisfactory nature. We profited also by the chemical studies of my father in the colouring of gold. We dispensed, as much as possible, with the use of the punch and of the jet. Having come to the conclusion that certain works of the ancients, very delicately executed, must have been done by women, we confided to intelligent work­women that which required the most delicacy. The result was excellent, espe­cially in the placing and soldering of that little granulation which is carried over the face of most Etruscan jewellery. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the ancients had some special chemical process for fixing these strings of small grains of which we are ignorant; for, in spite of all our efforts, we have been unable to reproduce some exquisitely fine workmanship, and despair of being able to do so, unless aided by some new scientific discoveries. We do not, however, intend to discontinue our labours, and it is therefore with confidence, gentlemen, that I address myself to you. If your studies of antiquity in all its branches have brought to your notice any passages in the classic authors which may put us on the track of discovering the secret of which we are in search, be so good, in the interest of art, to point them out to us, and be assured that we shall feel grateful for your assistance. This appeal to you, gentlemen, terminates the account I wished to lay before you of the revival of the art of jewellery attempted at Rome by my father, myself and brothers under the intelligent direction of the Duke Caetani. We considered it conducive to the attainment of our object to call archaeology to our aid, and we have thought also that a comparison of the styles of different epochs was necessary to exhibit the perfection of antique art. We have, therefore, by imitating the charac­teristic types of each school, followed the several phases of jewellery from its glorious Grecian epoch to the fifteenth century.

I shall do myself the honour of submitting some of these to your inspec­tion, that you may be able to judge yourselves of the results of our studies of the art under its ancient forms, which have been, and will still continue to be, our models.

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