

The Ethics of Home-Decoration

by J.R. Miller

The home has a profound influence on the character of a child, and its decoration and surroundings should be carefully considered to promote refinement and purity.

Scripture: Psalm 101:3, Proverbs 4:23, Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 5:14-16, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Ephesians 5:8-10, Philippians 4:8, Colossians 3:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, 1 Peter 1:15-16

Topics: "Home Decoration", "Moral Influence"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the ethical implications of home decoration, arguing that the environment in which children grow up significantly shapes their character and moral development. He asserts that homes should be adorned with beauty and purity, as these influences are absorbed by children and impact their future lives. Miller highlights the importance of selecting aesthetically pleasing and morally uplifting decorations, including art, to foster a nurturing atmosphere. He warns against the dangers of allowing impure or vulgar images in the home, as they can leave lasting negative impressions on young minds. Ultimately, he calls for a conscientious approach to home decoration that prioritizes the moral education of children.

Transcript

This is not an essay on household taste or on the artistic principles which relate to the adornment of homes--but there is an ethical side to this subject on which I have a suggestion or two to offer.

It is trite to say that every home influence works itself into the heart of childhood, and then works itself out again in the subsequent development of the character. None of us know how much our homes--have to do with our lives. When one's childhood home has been true and tender--its memories can never be effaced. Its voices of love and prayer and song--come back like angels' whispers, like melodies from some far-away island in the sea--when the lips that first breathed them have long been silent in the grave.

No one can ever get away from the influence of his early home. Good or bad--it clings through life. Homes are the real schools and universities in which men and women are trained--and fathers and mothers are the real teachers and makers of life. The poet's song is but the sweetness of a mother's love flowing out in rhythmic measure through her child's life. The lovely things men build in their days of strength--are but the reproductions of the lovely thoughts that were whispered in their hearts in the days of tender youth. The artist's picture, is but a touch of a mother's beauty wrought out on the canvas. A grand manhood or womanhood, is only the home teachings and prayers, woven into life and form.

It is proven that even the natural scenery in which a child is reared, has much to do with the tone and hue of its future character. Those who are cradled among the grand mountains or by the shore of the majestic sea, carry into their mature years the mystic influence of those scenes. And there is no feature of a home itself, or of its scenery and surroundings, that does not print itself on infancy's sensitive heart like the images on the photographer's prepared plate, to be brought out again in the future character.

This truth is not properly appreciated. The educating effect of home-decoration has not received that attention which it deserves, nor has its moral value come into general and thoughtful consideration. The subject has been discussed from the view-point of art--but not from that of 'character' culture.

Much has been said and written of books, good and bad, vulgar and refining; and of the importance of putting such only as are pure and elevating books into the hands of the young. In like manner, the importance of their early companionship has received much attention. But the moral effect of home adornment needs to be considered just as thoughtfully and carefully, as that of either books or associations.

It is important that in the education and training of children, that we throw around their sensitive lives--all of beauty, purity and inspiration that we can. The sites of our homes should be selected with reference to this. In this regard the country has usually wonderful advantages over the city.

Its lovely natural scenery is a gallery hung with the rarest beauties, and yet there are many builders of homes who seem never to give a thought to this. They choose sites for some temporary convenience or on the ground of inexpensiveness in the midst of unlovely, or even repulsive, surroundings, when at a little additional cost they could have placed their homes in the midst of picturesque scenery and refining surroundings. Apart altogether from the question of taste, the moral influence of the scenery on which the doors and windows open, is of immeasurably more value, than any difference in monetary cost. There is no refining and purifying power--like that of true beauty.

Then the ornamentation of the grounds around a home, furnishes another opportunity not only for the display of taste--but for the choice of important educating influences. These may be permitted to remain without any adornment whatever, open to passing hoof, trodden down, void of any trace of beauty. Former improvements may be allowed to fall into decay, leaving broken gates, tottering fences, unpainted buildings, grounds overgrown with weeds, with not a lovely walk, or an inch of green grass, and not a tree or shrub, not a vine or flower! Or they may be made tasteful and beautiful, with neatly-painted buildings, gates in order, bright green lawn, shade-trees, pleasant walks, lovely plants and beds of flowers. In the mere education of taste, the influence of these different surroundings is obvious--but there is a moral effect that is vastly more important. Holiness and beauty lie very close together, and the influence of all repulsiveness is toward evil.

The moral effect of interior home-decoration is still greater. We should make the rooms in which our children sleep and play and live--just as bright and lovely as our means can make them; directed by wisest skill and purest taste. And not only should the adornments and decorations be pleasing to the eye--but it is of importance that we give the most careful heed to their moral character. There are many pictures found in even Christian homes, whose influence is toward impurity. There are other pictures whose influence is toward gloom, and there are those again whose chaste beauty, bright cheerfulness and rich suggestiveness make them continual inspirations toward refinement and moral excellence. They frame themselves into young hearts, and become a joy and comfort forever.

A young artist once asked a great painter for some word of advice which might help him in all his after-life. Having noticed on the walls of the young man's rooms, some rough and coarse sketches, he advised him, as a young man desirous of rising in his profession, to remove these, and never to allow his eye to become familiar with any but the highest forms of art. If he could not afford to buy good oil paintings of the first class, he should either get good engravings of great pictures or have nothing at all upon his walls. If he permitted himself to become familiar with anything in art that was vulgar in conception, however perfect in execution, his taste would insensibly become depraved; whereas, if he would habituate his eye to look only on that which was pure and grand or refined and lovely--his taste would insensibly become elevated.

This advice is of perfectly pertinent application to the use of pictures and statuary in home-decoration. Children from their earliest years, are naturally fond of pictures. Their eyes rest much upon them, and insensibly they have much to do not only with the formation of their taste--but also in giving moral tone and color to their minds. Familiarity with vulgarity and coarseness, will inevitably deprave; and looking upon pure and beautiful things, will imperceptibly--yet surely, refine, elevate and inspire.

Lovely pictures in a home, have a wondrous and subtle power in the education and refining of child-life. They may be but wood-cuts or engravings--but let them be chaste and pure. Let us hang nothing in our parlors or play-rooms or bedchambers or dining-rooms, that would bring a blush to the sweetest modesty, or start a suggestion of anything indelicate in any beholder's mind. Every picture, engraving or print will touch itself into the soul of each child reared in the home. That which is impure or gross--will leave a stain; and that which is refined and lovely--will become a sweetening memory forever.

The whole question of what is modest and pure in art--is one that few Christian moralists have had the courage to meet. It is the custom to characterize as "prudish" any criticism based upon ethical grounds, or any judgment of a picture or a statue which considers its moral influence. But as Christians, we are bound to look at everything from a moral point of view. A painting may rank very high as a work of art, both in conception and execution, and yet its influence be toward impurity. If this is the case, it is not fit to hang on the wall of any home! In the adornment of our homes, so far as works of art are concerned, Christian people cannot properly overlook this principle.

The display of undraped figures on canvas, must necessarily exert a harmful influence, especially upon the minds of the young. The religion of Christ is chaste, and condemns everything in which lurks even the faintest suggestion of impurity. Whatever, then, may be the merits of pictures or statuary as works of art, true Christian refinement must fix its standard along the line of perfect purity. The same principles that we apply to books, to speech and to behavior--we must apply unflinchingly to the selection of pictures for the walls of our home!

I know that this principle is denied. People tell us that it is only a prurient imagination that sees impurity on canvas or in marble. They call it prudery and quote the motto, "Evil to him--who evil thinks," or the Scripture aphorism, "Unto the pure--all things are pure." They taunt us, too, with ignorance of high and true art, and begin to chatter learnedly about nature. The ability to be shocked, they say, by any representation of simple nature--is an evidence of an evil imagination. Such things have been said so often, and modesty has been so much laughed at, that pure and delicate-souled people do not dare to seem to be shocked; they think they ought to be able to look at anything in art. The figures introduced in parlors and drawing-rooms wax more and more wanton, as the petrified impurity of ancient heathenism is dug up and brought to fill the niches of a pure and chaste Christianity. How will this affect the purity of our

households?

Ignoring utterly the charge of prurience and over-delicacy, pleading for the utmost purity in the influence of the homes in which our children are growing up--I must reassert the principle, that nothing which would be indecent in actual life--can be proper in art. No sophistry can make anything else out of the laws of perfect purity, which religion inculcates. The least indelicacy or wantonness in any picture or statue in a home, cannot but exert a subtle influence for evil over the minds and hearts of the children! We admit this principle in reference to all other things. We believe that every shadow and every beauty of the mother's character, prints its image on the child's soul--that the songs sung over the cradle hide themselves away in the nooks and crannies of the tender life, to sing themselves out again in the long years to come.

We believe the same of every other influence, and must we not of pictures and statuary as well?

A godly man said that when quite young, an evil picture was shown to him on the street. He saw it only once and for a moment--but he had never been able to forget it, and it had left a trail of stain all along his years!

I plead for most earnest consideration of this whole question of the morals of home-decoration. A dew-drop on a leaf in the morning mirrors the whole sky above it, whether it be blue and clear or whether it be covered with clouds. In like manner the life of a child, mirrors and absorbs into itself, whatever overhangs it in the home--beauty and purity--or blemish and stain!

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