

MARTINEAU, Harriet. 1851. "Flower Shows in a Birmingham Hot-House". *Household Words* 4 (82), 18 de octubre: 82-85.

Let us not omit noting the significance of the fact, that a quicksilver mine exists in California.

### FLOWER SHOWS IN A BIRMINGHAM HOT-HOUSE.

FORTY years ago, one of the things we were most sure to see on entering the parlour of the farm-house, lodging-house, or shop-keeper's back-room, or the kitchen of the best sort of cottage, was a gaudy tea-tray, set up against the wall on the top of the bureau, or the side-table, or the dresser. On the tray might be painted a yellow tiger, or a scarlet lion, or a pink shepherdess with a green shepherd; or a very yellow sheep beside a very red cow; or flowers and fruit, not particularly like anything that ever was really seen. Those were the war-days; when the English taste had no opportunity of being improved by intercourse with foreign countries. Those were the days when brown and white cats, and green and scarlet parrots in frail plaster, stood on the mantel-piece, where we now see busts of great men, and casts of the Graces and the Muses, and of Cherubs and Gladiators, and of Joan of Arc, and William Tell. Those were the days when we knew nothing of the most graceful and brilliant flowers that the great were importing from foreign lands. The China-rose was only just beginning to grow beside the cottage window. Lady Holland was bringing the dahlia from Spain; but it had not yet superseded the sunflower in common gardens. The fuchsia has still the small red blossom that we now see less often than the variegated and highly-magnified kinds which are the pride of the window-sill in town and country. There might be no harm in this; for there are many who prefer the original fuchsia to this day. But it was not common, and we do not remember that it ever grew to half the size that may now be seen all over England. If there were verbenas in those days, they must have been rare; for we saw no parterres of brilliant lilac and scarlet and rose-coloured verbenas, such as now catch the eye of the traveller, as he is whirled along the railway. Again, all the Californian annuals are new;—but there would be no end, if we were to make a list of the beautiful things that have become common since the Peace; things, beautiful in themselves, and elements of beauty in the arts of common life. To see what the advance has been, we need but look at the papers on the walls of humble parlours; at the mantel-piece, and at the grate and fender beneath, and (to come back to our first thought) at the tea-tray on the top of the bureau.

Forty years ago, the tray was heavy—being of iron. It was gay when new, but the colours soon flaked off in the middle group, and rusty spots broke out in the black ground. It warped, and stood uneven, and clattered with every jog of the table. The

rim was apt to crack, and leave jagged edges, which tore whatever they caught. When this rim became rusty, any drop which fell upon it from the kettle was sure to leave an iron-mould on the sleeve, or apron, or cloth, which touched it. In finer houses, there were better trays; lighter to carry, less ugly to the eye, and less mischievous when they began to wear out. But nobody looked for much beauty in trays, and there was little variety. They were either of an oblong square, or round. They were plain black, polished in the middle, and there were lines, and sometimes vine or oak-leaves in gilding round the rims, but the gilding did not wear well. Those who chose to have their trays kept bright and clean, must make up their minds to see the gilding rub off in patches, leaving a dull surface which no "elbow grease" could polish. The advantages of lightness and steadiness remained, however, when the first beauty was gone. This was because the trays of the gentry were made of a good material. They were made of paper. It had then been known for half a century that paper would wear better than iron, in this particular article. Not only is paper, under certain management, harder than wood—turning the edges of tools sooner than any common wood—but it was found to stand the wear and tear of daily use better than iron.

What could this paper be? and what could be the management of it? The paper is a kind of blotting-paper, soft and porous. It is when changed by treatment to *papier mâché* (which is French for "chewed paper") that it becomes hard enough to turn the edge of the plane and the chisel. We went, the other day, to see the process, and found that we were viewing the works of the very men, Jennens and Bettridge, who, forty years ago, set to work to improve the national tea-tray, and who have since carried their improvements into every sort of dwelling—from the cottage kitchen to the state rooms of Buckingham Palace. There are other palaces, too, in which this mashed or chewed paper is found, in the shape of inkstands inlaid with pearl; brilliant chess and work tables; folding screens adorned with trailing flowers, with burnished humming-birds glittering on the sprays; chairs and couches, framed in a series of classic groups; miniature frames, and paper-knives; and even rosaries, for Catholic or Mahomedan use; the beads of which are black and polished, and light as jet, while less liable to fracture. In Egypt, the Pasha may be found dining from a vast tray made at these works—a tray made to receive the filligree saucers on which great Oriental dinners are served. And at the Persian court there will soon be seen tables, and screens, and flower-stands, all glowing with our common fuchsia, and rose, and convolvulus. But, amidst all we saw in that wonderful show-room, there was nothing which charmed the eye and mind so much as

a tray, of a simple form—circular, with a scalloped rim—with a handful of glowing verbenas in the middle; so natural, as to deserve to take a good place in any school of flower-painting.

From this room, full of landscape and flower-painting, of arabesques and mosaic, of pearl, and gilding, and burnish; of couches and tables, screens, allumettes, card-cases, paper-knives, pen-dishes, rosaries, hearth-brush cases, desks, jewel-boxes, and a host of other beauties, we went at once among the primary elements of the manufacture. The first thing we saw was the model of the great tray for the Pasha of Egypt. The rim hung against the wall, giving no idea of the beauty which was to grow out of it. Next, we passed a pile of the paper, as it came from the mill—simple grey blotting-paper, which tears with a touch. Some women were pasting sheets of this paper, one upon another, on a model—the paste being made of flour, glue, and boiling-water. A man who was covering the model of a tray, where the stress would fall between the level part and the rim, was pasting slips of paper from the one to the other. The advantage of thus uniting a great number of sheets, over every other method of producing the same thickness, is that the faulty spot of one sheet comes between a sound portion of two others; and thus an equality of substance is produced. An ordinary tea-tray, which is about a quarter of an inch thick, is made of ten layers, or about thirty sheets of paper. The greatest thickness attained (without a hollow) is that of six inches; a wonderful solidity to be obtained from paper.

And here we found—what we were far from thinking of—a new illustration of the mischief of the paper-duty. The duty paid on this paper is three-halfpence per pound; and the price is sixpence halfpenny. For a cheaper and coarser manufacture, the fragments of this paper, together with rags, are reduced to a pulp at the paper-mill; and this pulp (which may be called the "devil's dust" of the *papier mâché* manufacture) is pressed into form, and used for the cheapest trays. A set of three trays, of this material, can be sold for ten shillings. In the raw state, the sheets look like thick oat-cake. The material does not admit of good finish; and, what is of far more importance, it has little wear in it. It may be torn by the hand; it easily bursts asunder when burdened with any heavy weight. But the duty is only three-farthings per pound on this mashed paper; and the cheapness thus occasioned causes a preference for the bad article over the good, which would be accessible but for this duty. Messrs. Jennens and Bettridge do not affix their names to the articles they make of this material, because they cannot warrant the wear, and cannot be proud of the workmanship. They have represented to the Excise the mischief that is done by this duty, in depraving

the manufacture; and they have even asked that, if the duty cannot be removed from the real paper, it may be laid equally upon the paper-pulp; that the manufacturer and the buyer may have a fair chance of producing and enjoying a good article. The potentates of the Excise have listened respectfully, and promised consideration; and the thing to be desired next is, that their consideration should be quickened and deepened by a popular demand for the repeal of the duty. Official men should know, that while authors and publishers are straitened in their best enterprises by this duty, and the upholsterer cannot fully display his art in paper-hanging, the humble housewife is mourning over the wrecks of her best china, smashed by the tea-tray having burst across the middle. One would like, too, that—as it is quite possible to put such a luxury within common use—the cottage tray should have the smoothness and polish of a mirror, instead of being rough and dull, even when new.

Articles which are flat, or merely curved, are removed from the mould simply by cutting off the overlapping edges. Round articles, such as vases, allumette stands, and hearth-brush cases, are split, and joined together by glue. Every article is subjected to strong pressure, in various presses, to prevent warping. After that, the processes are the same as in cabinet-making, allowance being made for the material being harder to work than wood. When thin, it is lighter than wood; or, rather, its texture admits of its being used thinner; for, in the mass, it is heavier than wood. The reason why screen-stands, the legs of work-tables, and feet of pillars, are so light, is, that the material admits of their being made hollow. They are formed on a mould, and paper is afterwards pasted over the bottom, leaving a hollow space within.

The rough articles are now brought under the saw, the plane, the chisel, the file, and the lathe, as if they were wood. The sharp edges and round mouldings, which come out from the rough surface in the lathe, are curious to see, when one considers what the material really is. A final smoothing is given by sand-paper, before the varnish is applied. The varnish (shellac) is obtained from the same manufactory which supplies the coachmakers. The articles are "stoved,"—put into ovens, where the varnish turns black under a heat of two hundred and thirty degrees. Fresh coats of varnish are laid on—from twelve to eighteen, according to circumstances; and the articles, after each coating, remain in the stoves from twelve to twenty-four hours. This must be unwholesome work to the superintendents of the process. The heat of the stove rooms is very great, and the smell of baked varnish almost intolerable to novices.

In the midst of the series of varnishings occur the decorative processes. A large quantity of goods, partly varnished, and smoothed by being rubbed with pumice-stone,

sand, and rag, are ranged on shelves and in racks, in a gloomy apartment, where everything is black. These are the "plain goods;"—goods which are hereafter to be decorated to order. When the order comes, and a tray, for instance, is to be inlaid with pearl, with certain initials on a medallion in the centre, a neat-handed woman may be seen to undertake the task: or, more probably, a skilful man; for the nicest parts of the work are usually done by men. We were rather surprised at this, till we heard the reason. The decorative parts of this manufacture seem to suit women's faculties of head and hand; and it looks strange, at first sight, that only about a fourth of the three hundred people employed in this establishment are women; and that the women do the coarser parts of the work—having, necessarily, lower wages than the men. The reason is, that women do not learn the business and stick to it, as men do. A boy serves an apprenticeship of seven years; and then regards the business as the main employment of his life. Girls come for months, or years, as it may happen: and it never does happen that they look upon it as the one settled business of their lives. They marry, or they think of marrying. They are, sooner or later, more or less unsettled; and it commonly happens that a home and a baby call them from the manufactory, as soon as they have become thoroughly trained to their work. It is, therefore, most probably a man who has to inlay this tray with pearl.

The pretty flakes of pearl which lie about in little heaps, and in saucers and cups, are, for the most part, from New Zealand. Some come also from Guernsey. For the best and most expensive kind of work, the flakes are carefully selected, that the grain (so to speak) may lie all one way, that there may be no cross lights in the figures. In a chess-table, worth sixteen guineas, which we saw in the show-room, the squares are formed of these pearl flakes, disposed in different patterns, with all the grain lying one way. The pattern is disposed on the varnish, to which it is fastened by an adhesive substance. Coat after coat of varnish is then laid on, and the pearl is covered with asphalt, till it first glimmers red, then brown, and then disappears completely buried from sight. When the last coat is fairly baked on, the surface is rubbed with pumice-stone, as before; then with sand and rag; then with rotten-stone; and the pattern is revealed. It now only remains to give the final polish with the hand, under which the surface becomes bright as a mirror. A peculiar quality of hand is requisite for this; a quality attained only by practice. The finest of aristocratic ladies, whose hand is seldom out of her glove, could not polish a pen-dish, or door-plate. She might possibly find that she had scratched it; while she might see a hard-working, poorly dressed woman, with long, bony, turned-up fingers, skinny and yellow, producing an un-

rivalled polish, though she finishes her job by daubing the work with little touches of oil, which she carries smeared upon her left wrist. This is to remove any dust or dimness which may have lodged in any corner, or crease. One final stroke, removing the oil, turns out the work complete.

If the tray, or other article, is to have the initials of the purchaser, or any other figure, embossed in the centre, it is done by embedding a plate of pearl; painting the letters or figures on it, in a substance which cannot be corroded; and then rubbing over the whole with rotten-stone, and an acid which corrodes the pearl. More varnish is then laid on; and the raised letters are disencumbered of their covering.

There is a great fancy at present for a style of ornament which we do not at all admire. The pearl is used for flowers and fruit, coloured after nature, but looking as unlike nature as anything can well do. Flowers and fruit do not shine and glitter; but tinfoil does: and there is too much of a tinfoil look about this method of ornament. The genuine flower-painting will be far more permanent, no doubt; for it is very beautiful.

In the colouring room, one of the prettiest processes seen is the gilding of borders and other designs. The artist paints his border with a steady hand and graceful strokes, with a camel-hair pencil, dipped in isinglass and water. He then lays on leaf-gold; and presently rubs off the superfluous gold, leaving the pattern gilt. Near him may be seen another man varnishing a set of maroon-coloured pen-dishes. These had been coloured brown, and then painted over with lake, to produce the maroon colour; then gilded in graceful patterns with isinglass and gold leaf; and now the last transparent varnish is laid on with a brush. Not far off sits another artist, with a convolvulus in water before him. He is painting flowers on a work-box. On some of the screens in the show-room, the flowers were finished with a most mysterious softness. We could not conceive how such a melting away of colours could be managed. We now see how it is done. An artist has laid on various flowers in white or cream-colour; he throws on some colouring powder; depositing it in the darkest centre, and wiping it thinner and thinner towards the lighter edges. A flower thus tinted, with the dark folds of the centre, indicated by the black under surface being more slightly covered, gives real enjoyment to the eye that rests upon it.

A patent was taken out, two years ago, by this firm, for inlaying gems under glass. We saw some panels—such as might form the doors of small cabinets, or the top of jewel-boxes—splendidly inlaid with pearls, rubies, amethysts, emeralds, and turquoises. Two of these were designed from the Queen of Spain's jewels; the quick eye of the artist having seized their character, while on view in the

Exhibition. We are not learned in jewels; but it appeared to us that these panels are quite as pretty as the Queen of Spain's jewels; and that neither the one nor the other is half so pretty as the convolvulus in the wine-glass, or the half-open lily, or drooping fuchsia, on many a screen or paper-knife in the colouring room.

There is something to be said about the forms, as well as the colouring of these beautiful productions. Those who have seen the contributions of this firm to the Exhibition will not be surprised to hear that such men as Bell the sculptor, and Redgrave the painter, are employed in its service. The Oriental chair at the Exhibition is a marvel for beauty of form, ease to the lounge, splendour of decoration, and—as we learned while viewing the model—difficulty of production. It is said to be unique: but it will probably not be so for long; for orders from Eastern potentates are flowing in fast. Mr. Redgrave has transferred to trays the convenience of horse-shoe tables. Instead of the painful sight of waiters holding trays of wine and cake at a long stretch, supporting the inner edge against their bodies, we shall now see them in a state of ease, if not an attitude of grace. The inner rim of the wine and fruit tray is now cut out, so that the whole tray presents the arc of a circle projecting towards the guest, and relieving the waiter from his strained attitude. At each corner is a little pit, sunk to contain the decanter.

From end to end of the show-room of this manufacture, there is a refinement of convenience as well as of beauty, which would make one ashamed, but for the evidence presented throughout, that the luxury is not confined to the rich, even now, and that it is likely to descend more and more abundantly into humble homes. The truest beauty—that which is natural—ought to cost nothing: beauty of form ought to be had as cheap as ugliness. The humblest cottage may as easily be well-proportioned as not; and the cheapest tea-tray will soon be of as convenient and graceful a form as the most cumbrous. It may be of plain black, with a simple coloured or gilt border, instead of being painted with flowers, or inlaid with gems; but it will be ornamental from its form, and will drive out for ever the yellow tiger, and pink and green shepherdesses of a grosser time. At a more removed, but already-promised period, we, or the next generation, may see the inkstand or writing-desk in the cottage-window, or on the bureau, where the pen has scarcely yet found its way. If we can but see this, we shall willingly let unique Oriental chairs go to Persia, and sixteen-guinea chess-tables to India, satisfied with our humbler share in the improvements of the arts of life. We may even look without envy on our Norwegian neighbours, if we see them line their churches with papier-mâché. There is a church actually existing, near Bergen, which

can contain nearly one thousand persons. It is circular within, octagonal without. The relievos outside, and the statues within, the roof, the ceiling, the Corinthian capitals, are all of papier-mâché, rendered waterproof, by saturation in vitriol, lime-water, whey, and white of egg. We have not yet reached this pitch of audacity, in our use of paper; but it should hardly surprise us, inasmuch as we employ the same material in private houses, in steamboats, and in some public buildings, instead of carved decorations and plaster cornices. When Frederick the Second of Prussia set up a limited papier-mâché manufactory at Berlin, in 1765, he little thought that paper cathedrals might, within a century, spring out of his snuff-boxes, by the sleight-of-hand of advancing art. At present, we old-fashioned English, who haunt cathedrals, and build churches, like stone better. But there is no saying what we may come to. It is not very long since it would have seemed as impossible to cover eighteen acres of ground with glass, as to erect a pagoda of soap bubbles; yet the thing is done. When we think of a psalm sung by one thousand voices pealing through an edifice made of old rags, and the universal element bound down to carry our messages with the speed of light, it would be presumptuous to say what can and what can not be achieved by Science and Art, under the training of steady old Time.

#### A SULTAN'S WARNING.

In days now past, (why need we name the year?  
For good men and good deeds rest not on Time,  
But are as orbs, perfect within themselves,  
And firmly hung on their own central strength,)  
A Sultan—of the many-steeped town,  
Stamboul, that looks across the narrow straits  
Tow'rds Asia and the lands of morning—felt  
The time had come for shaking the thick blood  
Of high-fed empire, which had, from repose,  
Engender'd humours knotty and corrupt,  
Whereof the body languish'd, keeping yet  
A sort of insolent pretence of health,  
Which was, in truth, though fair to outward show,  
The hectic fever-flush of luxury.  
These things the Sultan fiercely weeded out;  
Whereat the nobles murmur'd; and the priests  
(As men who feel an earthquake's gathering throbs  
Under their feet, even in the Temple) shriek'd  
Prophecies of the ending of the world.

Death found the Sultan eager at his work,  
And bore him off into the idle grave;  
But the young monarch who succeeded him  
Kept the same path, moveless and strong as Fate,  
So that, to sight of priests and noblemen,  
A glaring phantom, with a scimitar,  
Over the land stood imminent and huge.

One morning the new Sultan knelt in pray'r  
Before his father's sepulchre; when, just  
As earth dropp'd outward, and his spirit hung  
In vasts of space, 'twixt starry Eden-worlds,  
He heard a voice within the cavernous vault,