

On the Influence of the Arts of Design upon the Products of Industry,
12.8.1827 - [Original Text \(French\)](#)

If the question we propose to examine is not new, it will at least be granted the merit of timeliness. At the moment when the Government has just issued an appeal to French industry, it is not inappropriate to cast a glance over the prodigious multiplicity of our industrial products, over their general perfection, and over the influence exercised upon them by the arts.

Two things are to be considered in this perfection of industrial products: intrinsic quality or value, and taste. We shall not concern ourselves here with the former; the latter alone claims our attention. It is, in effect, solely with regard to form and to the various modifications imposed by taste that industrial products come into true contact with the arts.

It is through the elegance that characterizes them today that the distinctive boundary between the domain of industry and that of the arts has gradually diminished, and even tends, in several instances, to disappear.

Ornaments for mantelpieces, which once seemed destined to preserve an immutable form, have themselves undergone perceptible transformations. Their arrangement and their details have converted them into small monuments which raise the marble-worker almost to the level of the sculptor.

Shall we say nothing of carriages, which occupy so great a place in the pleasures of the wealthy and in their vanities? Although fate has not destined all men to travel in such conveyances, it would require more than mere caprice to close one's eyes to the elegance of modern equipages; and one must confess that the forms of contemporary vehicles bear comparison, even the closest, with those of earlier times.

The same spirit has manifested itself in the production of artificial flowers, which may perhaps deserve to be ranked among the lesser arts. They adorn the toilette of women and embellish our apartments in a pleasing manner. Not only have these flowers been made to resemble nature more closely—a form of imitation certainly more commendable—but research and invention have multiplied. The flora itself could not

remain foreign to this movement; flowers of the Cape or of New Holland are today more commonly found in the shops of milliners than in the Jardin du Roi.

Let us now examine to what extent the arts may have exercised their influence in this great industrial revolution. Must this revolution be attributed exclusively to the progress of the arts, or is it not more just to seek its cause in the general taste diffused throughout all ranks of society?

Assuredly the arts have, in recent times, shed their most brilliant lustre; masterpieces have been drawn from them with a splendour hitherto unknown. Yet at other, more remote periods, painters, sculptors, and architects extended their conceptions through works that still command our admiration—it suffices to recall the celebrated age of Louis XIV—and yet one does not observe that industry advanced at an equal pace.

For a long time it was found stationary, while the arts rose, as it were, abruptly to a higher degree of perfection. There is therefore no exact parallelism between their respective progress; rather, the true correlation lies not so much in the productions of the arts themselves as in that governing principle which gives industry its rule and direction.

Instead of aspiring to improvement, modes and usages formerly sought to remain immobile; the arts alone advanced, while industry followed at a distance, unable to obey the same impulse.

One natural consequence of this intellectual movement was that taste—that intimate sentiment which enables us, in every object, to discern what is fitting and what is not (*quid deceat, quid non*)—remained within industry in a habitual state of imperfection, which the arts alone could not suffice to correct.

While mechanical labour fashioned the instruments of drawing and imitation, the arts developed in the solitude of the studio and the cabinet; they received their inspirations in silence and repose, far from the agitation of material interests.

Thus may be explained the profound distance that long separated art from industry. But this distance, produced by circumstances, diminished as the needs of society increased, as tastes multiplied, and as the intermediate classes sought to participate in the enjoyments of luxury.

It was then that industry, called upon to satisfy these new demands, felt the necessity of drawing closer to the arts—of consulting them, invoking them as auxiliaries, and borrowing from them those forms which speak to the imagination.

Industry thus became, in a manner, the popular interpreter of the arts; it vulgarized their principles by applying them to objects of daily use, and it is through this fruitful alliance that taste has been able to spread through all conditions of society.

Yet here a grave consideration presents itself. If industry must draw near to the arts, this union must not degenerate into servile imitation. If industry copies the arts without understanding them—if it contents itself with reproducing forms without grasping their spirit—it will fall into monotony, and taste, instead of being diffused, will be corrupted.

Industry, on the contrary, must take from the arts their generative principle, not their fixed forms. It must draw inspiration freely, modifying them according to the destination of objects, the requirements of use, and the particular means proper to itself.

Then—and only then—will this alliance yield all its fruits; then taste will become a social habit rather than a privilege; then French industry will be able to sustain foreign competition with advantage, not by the mere abundance of its products, but by their real and lasting superiority.