

SHORT ARTICLES

COMMUNITY ART

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Richmond, Ind.

IF ANY ONE were to ask what is the most permanent thing produced by man—what lasts longer than anything else upon this planet—I think the answer ought to be, its monuments of art. Nearly all that we know of the past life of humanity we have learned from its architecture, its sculpture, its painting and its literature.

And the great bulk of the art which has thus endured has not been that which was created by one private individual for another but it has been community art. Often indeed it was the sovereign whom it celebrated but that was because he represented the state. Often it was the temple or the church in which it was embodied but that was because the god to whom these were built was the god of the community that built them.

We have less community art in America than in the old world. The great paintings we possess are largely in private collections. Now the possession of the most priceless treasures where they are not open to the public is of very little value to our people. We have indeed a number of excellent galleries but these exist principally in our metropolitan centers. A beginning has also been made in some of the smaller places—witness the fine art gallery and museum established by Mr. Parrish in Southampton, Long Island. Such things if widely distributed will be of great value. But to get the very best results they should come, not from the outside as a benefaction, but from within out of the desire of the community itself. When the people feel that a gallery is theirs, established by themselves to fill a need which they have personally realized, they will inevitably take a warmer interest in it than if it came from some outside source. Let the paintings and the statues be received from every quarter, but those that are purchased by the community itself will awaken a livelier concern than those bestowed by others. The competition aroused when they are chosen and the discussion as to their merits, has a distinct value of its own. The people are thinking about art and are considering the canons by which art is judged.

Sometimes the selections may be bad, but that need not often happen if competent experts be called in to award prizes or to pass in other ways upon the merits of prospective purchases, and it is an evil which will

constantly diminish as better taste and judgment in such matters are acquired by the community.

These are not dreams, the thing has been tried in the little city of some twenty-four thousand inhabitants in which I reside—in Richmond, Indiana. Nearly twenty years ago some of our citizens who were interested in painting and sculpture and who had a number of good pictures in their homes, determined to hold a public exhibition for the benefit of the town and they organized an art association for the purpose. The exhibition was held in one of the public school buildings, it was free to all, and it consisted almost entirely of paintings and other objects which were loaned by individuals. It attracted widespread interest, the display was a creditable one and it was determined to repeat the experiment every year and to make the association permanent. We were fortunate in choosing for our president, Mrs. M. F. Johnston, who had taken an absorbing interest in the enterprise from the first and who devoted a great part of her time and her most unflagging energy toward making the movement a success. The expense was very little, only a few hundred dollars a year. She enlisted the superintendent of schools in the movement; she also awakened the interest of artists in all parts of the country and they willingly sent their productions for exhibition. Then some bronzes and busts were sent, one or more tapestries were found in the collection and a good deal of bric-a-brac of considerable artistic merit. Then, a wealthy man, who had formerly lived in Richmond, gave \$500 a year for a number of years to purchase a picture to be selected by the association. One of the members gave a prize of \$50 for the best work exhibited by an Indiana artist and another prize for the best work exhibited by a local artist. It was astonishing what an amount of competition these prizes elicited, not for their money value, but for the reputation acquired in winning them. We have had a number of local artists and the quality of their work, sometimes crude at the beginning, has gone on improving until some of them are known to-day over the country.

There was usually a reception on the opening night and artists from other cities—Cincinnati, St. Louis, Indianapolis and Chicago, who had been brought in as members of a committee to pass upon the various paintings, often gave us addresses upon subjects connected with their work.

Then the school board began to take a more direct interest. When our new High School building was erected, three large and beautiful rooms upon the upper floor, lighted from the ceiling by day and by electricity at night, rooms as well designed and equipped as those of the best art galleries anywhere, were devoted to the association and a part of the expense of the exhibitions was assumed by the board. One of these rooms is now occupied by the permanent collection of the association. For during all these years we have gone on buying pictures, and a great deal

of care and very good taste were shown by our various committees in their selection. A number of paintings have been given to us and though we have not by any means accepted all that have been offered we have now by purchase and gift some thirty pictures of excellent quality in a room which is always open to the public.

Then it was found that one exhibition a year was not enough—we could not accommodate all the paintings and other objects in the space we had, so we had two and then three exhibitions during the year, one for the artists of the whole country, one for Indiana artists alone and then one for local artists and designers, and I must say that the one of last spring, which we called “Made in Richmond,” was not at all to be despised, when compared even with those in which the whole state and the whole country were represented.

The thing kept expanding. Our temporary exhibitions have now increased from two or three a year to eight or nine so that it is rather an unusual thing if there is not some temporary collection as well as our permanent gallery to be seen in these rooms at the high school. Sometimes it is a collection of water colors, or of etchings or specimens of decorative or household art. Just at the entrance is a fountain, one of the best bronzes of Janet Scudder—a boy with a tortoise. Our latest acquisition is an admirable portrait of the artist Wm. M. Chase by himself, contributed in part by a gentleman who formerly resided in our city and in part out of a fund raised by the association. And the association has done all this out of an amount of money collected from its members not exceeding on an average \$1,000 a year.

The success of Richmond in this experiment was so great that other cities of Indiana and elsewhere in the middle west sought to follow our example and invoked the aid of Mrs. Johnston for the purpose until now the pictures which she selects after visiting the studios of artists in different parts of the country are sent around upon a circuit from one city to another, remaining two or three weeks in each, and we secure the benefit of this collection for much less cost than when the work was done for Richmond alone. In addition to this there are twelve of the cities of Indiana which are now beginning to make permanent collections of their own.

The students in our schools visit our collections as part of their regular work, some of them use the paintings to copy from, or as themes from which to develop their own drawings or paintings, or for the purpose of describing and criticizing them in written compositions; and at the end of each school year, exhibitions of their own work are given. The rooms at the high school are also used as the meeting places of the art study club, the music study club and for other similar purposes. They are indeed a social center for all kinds of cultural and for many kinds of social service work and their usefulness to our city is thus very considerable, even outside their primary purpose as an art gallery.

And this has been largely the work of our women. The present president of our association like her predecessor is a woman. The women have done far more than the men in advancing this cause of education in art.

Now who shall foresee the end of such a movement? If every town in America should devote a like proportion of its energy and effort to the development of community art, our people in another generation would be entering upon a period of leadership in this great element of human culture.

WOMEN AND FIRE PREVENTION

HARVARD has created a valuable precedent in establishing a chair of preventive medicine; and the Bryn Mawr alumnae have created an equally valuable one in the realm of fire prevention. A brief history of the achievement is worthy of a place in the NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW, not only as a lesson in fire prevention, but as one in effective civic agitation. So here it is, partly in the form of quotations from the documents and partly in the form of narrative by those who were actively concerned.

The suit around which the story clusters was started about two years ago by the city fire marshal in the Blankenburg Administration, against the firm of Gimbel Brothers, to compel them to do away with certain conditions in their great department-store building in Philadelphia, alleged to constitute an extraordinary fire hazard, endangering not only their own property and the persons who work in and patronize their establishment, but buildings and the occupants of them in a large territory surrounding the store.

Striking practical support of the city's allegation lies in the fact that the owners of surrounding property have to pay approximately \$100,000 a year in extra fire-insurance premiums because of the belief of the fire insurance underwriters in the reality of the hazard.

On the other hand, it is only fair to say that Gimbel Brothers have taken extraordinary measures to forestall the starting of any fire, by the installation of modern fire-extinguishing precautions and apparatus.

The agitation of the subject on the part of architects, insurance underwriters, business men, and public-spirited citizens generally, and the effort to induce the Gimbels to rectify the structural conditions complained of, have been more or less continuous, though without success, ever since the firm started putting together its conglomerate of buildings, about fifteen years ago.

The Bryn Mawr Alumnae Committees, on the threshold of an inquiry into fire conditions where women and girls are employed, discovered this case and issued a formal printed statement: