

ART, CULTURE, AND THE COMMUNITY

A Lecture by

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Art and culture bring gentle charm to the community. Gentle charm is that quiet satisfying quality toward which community life tends as it approaches fullness.

As I recall the Houston I first knew some twenty-four years ago as compared with the setting of today, the reality of this simple truth is most clear.

A university was to be begun. More than a year had passed in serious study in which its functional arrangement and its intimate beauty had been planned, unplanned, and replanned to reach order and charm.

Christian Italy of the centuries before 1200 A. D. had become a daily reality in the drafting room. Ravenna, Genoa, Rome, and Venice had given of their fineness to a maturing conception of the University which was to be built upon the marsh lands of Texas.

As we meet this afternoon in the quiet of this Museum of the Fine Arts, it is fascinating to look back over the few years in which the growth of Houston has attained a greater meaning.

In the late summer of 1910 I rode by this location for the first time. I say rode--really I bumped and splashed by. In a light surrey and at a slow pace we dodged as many of the ruts in the old county road as we could and headed for the Rice Institute campus.

It was a campus which to me had form and completeness. Romanesque cloisters inclosing courts, flower-filled and bright in southern sunlight; towers seen through fitting vistas, halls colorful in grey-pink brickwork and lively marbles--all a composition of definite identity and tranquil charm. My ride brought me through a little pine-grown belt to an open, endless, formless swamp. Upon each side of the road, raised high above the prairie, deep ditches ran--and back among the pine trees loud-voiced frogs claimed supremacy over all else.

This particular section of the Houston of 1910 is probably only a dim memory to many of you. Even the city of that day seems but a memory. A muddy, dismal city which was at the moment proudly repeating at every turn the new census report of some 78,000 people. A City in which, for safety, one walked down the middle of the streets after ten at night once he had passed beyond the five or six lighted blocks in the center of the city. Visions of a University of outstanding beauty! Tree-lined boulevards leading to it! An order and quiet fitness comparable with its meaning! I wonder whether the contrast was ever more intense. The story was exquisitely recorded in the lines of Henry Van Dyke at the opening of the Rice Institute.

"Your old men have dreamed this dream
and your young men have seen this
vision. The age of romance has not
gone, it is only beginning."

In the decade between 1910 and 1920 the Rice Institute became a small but growing institution of learning. Its physical connection with the city was made more comfortable by the extension and paving of the county road into Main Street Boulevard. The intervening lands took promise of definite form.

In 1910 the only turning to the right from Main Street out in this section was a narrow trail called the Poor Farm Road. Into it from time to time one might see a lazy mule team head leisurely in the direction of the setting sun, with no objective ahead except the horizon--and apparently with abundance of time to reach it.

The gift of George Hermann of the pine lands to the left of the road and their subsequent improvement as a city park brought a scheme of orderly planning for greater circulation and convenience to this vicinity. Montrose Avenue was extended through the fields from the railroad tracks to Main Street, and the drives of Hermann Park planned to continue the vista of that Avenue. The triangle lying between Main Street, Montrose Boulevard, and the Poor Farm Road was given to the Art League for the site of the Museum. Between this site and the Institute, the lands bordering Main Street and facing the Park were plotted for suburban homes of imposing dimension. Order was arriving--where formlessness had ruled.

The decade from 1920 to 1930 saw further growth and development at the Rice Institute, and the building of this Museum of the Fine Arts as we know it today; with greater improvement of the park and the building of the residences between the Museum and the Institute. These years witnessed an extension of the charm of this increasing order reaching back toward the city in churches

built or planned and semi-public conception of the future use of the lands reasonably near the Museum.

No one of these steps was more than quiet expression of a growing public acceptance and response to the fitness of the charm of an orderly environment.

Institute and Museum have pursued an orderly, though modest, course. Each has prepared its initial expression of its purpose. Each has accepted its growth and fulfillment to be inherent in the people and in their idealism.

Twenty years are but a brief span in the life of a city or in the history of a nation. In the years from 1910 until today much has transpired to bring to Houston in the vicinity of the Institute and the Museum a warm rich understanding of the kindly human meaning these lasting elements embody. The picture of today is a charming beginning from the chaos of 1910. It promises, by reason of its elements common to the gentler desires of all men, a continuity of fulfillment.

Still, though twenty years be a brief span in an historical sense, let us remember--first from 1914 to 1918 and again from 1929 until today--the ordered movement of city, state, and nation has met interruption of unusual intensity. The very foundations of the order of society as it was understood in 1910 have been challenged to death-struggles and the reality of these conflicts have absorbed men's minds and efforts.

Through these trying times the record of College and Museum is progress. Their idealism is as clear as in the foundation--and more clear by far--for the warmth of understanding, the

quiet charm of happy meaning, has each year become more and more a real possession in the life of all the people of our city. The universality as well as the intimate individuality in the meaning of each is its charter of permanence.

"Erected by the people for the use of the people!" The Ionic tradition among the Greeks was a gentle tradition. Its beauty made it everlasting. The delicately sculptured frieze which graced the Ionic order was the consistent portrayal of the charming artistry common to that civilization. When we carved upon the Ionic frieze of this Museum a dedication, its simplicity as well as its permanent meaning was of the spirit of Greece.

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Each generation finds its ideals inherited from the past, and brightened or blurred by the light or the mists of contemporary philosophy, clarified or clouded by the intensity of its peril or its progress. Superficial elements may be in ascendancy, sentimental sweetness or sorrow may be supreme, or occasionally the soundness of a vigorous era may record definite forward movement. In each such period the foundation of all forward movement is that which is recorded in the Museum dedication. The effort of the people for the further helpfulness of the people. Not of the few for the pleasure of the many, nor of the many in memory of the few--but the cooperative conception of common creative good.

It seems absurd to look back upon art's position in America and the attitude which prevailed so long concerning Art Museums in particular. Massive mausoleums nearly valueless except as vanities of vast wealth.

Cardinal Newman said of the University--"It is in its essence a place for the communication and circulation of thought." "Mutual education is one of the great and incessant occupations of human society."

In his architectural history of the University of Cambridge Willis writes, "The word college is a term which properly belongs to a number of persons incorporated as colleagues for certain common purposes, and has no relation to the buildings in which they dwell."

Emerson states so clearly--"Designs in art or in the works of nature are shadows or forerunners of that beauty which reaches its perfection in the human form." And again--"Things are pretty, graceful, rich, elegant, handsome, but until they speak with the imagination, not yet beautiful. This is the reason why beauty is still escaping out of all analysis."

From every sane perspective we must see the Museum and the College take their beauty in so far as they become the avenues of satisfying advancement in the life of the people. Amid confusion in art as in politics we see strange distortions which would seek to parallel the disorders of the world. They have but a momentary position, for the clearer light of truth and taste follow an even tenor of their way. Where terror and despair are not completely in command, the mind and soul of man would tread a course closest to human hearts and to their happiness. The strength and vitality of art and of education lies in the people; and as each becomes more universal, there spreads a happy delight in the community.

Going back again for a moment to the local history of the Art Museum and the Institute. The years of experimentation, if we would so name the period of their foundation, have been years of world-wide travail. The guidance in each case has been one of clear idealism. The record has been progress.

That progress lies not in wealth nor in privilege--it lies in its welcome in the hearts of the people.

The democracy of art and of letters is irrefutable. At Rice the story has been the will to know--at the Museum, the unbiased right to choose.

The record will continue to be a record of progress so long as these avenues are left open. Our young men and young women should be nourished in an environment which prides itself for its openness of opinion, and the beauty of the setting under which such freedom can be enjoyed. Let their imagination take its breadth from the vast prairies of Texas which opened vistas to the pioneers before us. Let their vastness excite, with clear relation to good common sense, the glorious frontiers of further achievement. In each let the object be the sound emotion which fills all worthwhile human endeavor.

Unlike our Victorian vaults where pictures and the very walls hushed our voices, and the imagination, as well as the umbrella, was checked at the entrance, the Museum of today joins the college of today as the nursery of the imagination and expresses not an art which is dead--but an art which is living, rising from the hearts of the people and whose expression will be of good will and gentle charm, which all can understand.

The order of the past in America was one expressed by its romantic oddities and fashions, which from courtesy we can call graciously frivolous. An art which was in keeping with its barren museums--an art apart from the open air of human sympathy--a petted thing which had no joyous kinship with the people, and as such imitative rather than vigorously creative.

America had been engrossed in the winning of a continent, limitless lands to be brought into production, vast rivers to be controlled, and mountain ranges to be passed. Out of its labors had come a material civilization with wealth outstripping wisdom, and political propaganda supplanting the pioneer spirit.

The very vastness of the conquered country made for material success. But in the pursuit of such endeavors the arts had been left behind. When they were sought again they were of a bygone age and with little to attach them to the life of the new nation.

So eventually the picture became a dull one--and the idealism, which it was art's place to nourish, sank low amid softness of success. Art's constants remain. A few years of privation have wakened deeper and truer ideals of the mutual need of men for a more satisfying correctness and fullness to their daily lives. The false ideals of the post-war America were but the final flare of an unbalanced society which had been going a bit farther from success to success. We shall not see those thoughtless days again.

The pioneers of Texas have left to us a state sublime in its vastness, supreme in its clearness of opportunity, and sound in its citizenship and its conception of freedom. Shall such a

state plead for privilege of education or for the gentle charm which art and culture bring? Whatever the adjustments of the new deal, they are simply the successive steps of an awakened America in which art shall not be a luxury, nor education a material tool. From this day forward the man who helps the many is the truest American--and likewise the man who lives the happiest. The man who helps himself alone lives to hopelessness.

An ordered civilization bespeaks a gentleness and a delight in the community. Reaching toward such a civilization, the country is today making many needful adjustments. The objective is a saner and a sounder commonwealth--the steps along the way may appear in the nature of experiments, but in each we see the nearer adjustment to fair dealing and frank acceptance of a consistent human kindness.

Amidst such a civilization art and letters will be creative components--for art certainly cannot live by dull distraction but rather, if it live at all, it is within the heart of a kindly people. Education lives only as it tells of "colleagues in a common purpose". Now this brings me to what I feel is the important meaning of those institutions of today which still hold the course of idealism as their foundation and their purpose.

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What I desire to suggest is this: has not the rapidly unfolding panorama of our nation's life been one so constantly involved in rapid change and

Material development during the past three generations that we have come to know an America quite different from the ideal of our fathers. While in some dream-like way we all knew our country as a country of true and high idealism - had not the mechanism of modern efficiency little by little given us as it were an America which had developed a narrowing rather than a widening of our lives, lives which were becoming more restricted even as the boundaries of knowledge were rapidly expanding.

Pure learning was being set aside unto itself, unrelated to and apart from any direct contact with the life of the whole people. Art, particularly painting and sculpture, was being permitted to become farther and farther apart from any definite expression of joy and helpfulness to us. The clear vibrant qualities of the soul of the nation whose position had been foremost in man's best civilization throughout all ages had been relegated into a forgotten region - so remote as to be only recalled upon historic celebrations. But the farther removed these constants of human expression, the more disordered our restricted civilization became.

The life of our nation was overflowing with business, pleasure, and the diversions which were commercially tinged. We were certain our civilization

was an industrial and financial one, but did we recognize it was becoming, year by year, more and more restricted, lacking the fulness as well as the privacy of that kindly human philosophy which had brought our nation into being?

I may not make myself clear - but what I feel very clearly is that, the change from year to year had been so gradual - so varied - and so seemingly unimportant at the moment, that we had finally come to a generation in which the resulting life, habit, and custom of our nation had in it less of freedom, less of general understanding of the virtues of gentle living, and much less of the constitutional America we should have inherited, than we realized. When we were finally faced with the clear revelation of our course, we found the sterling idealism, written in every principle of America's infancy, out of immediate relation and seemingly illadapted to our need for its immediate use. Much as the arts had been left behind as the successive generations followed the trails of the covered wagon - and when sought again possessed the qualities of a bygone age - so with our ^{national} ~~natural~~ idealism.

As the week to come brings memory of the victory of Texans at San Jacinto and the words which inspired them, - "Remember the Alamo", "Remember Goliad" - and as they shall come again and again throughout the years and generations yet unborn - let us hope that they shall come with fresh call to awakened minds of

men and women in whom a welcome response springs inherently through a mutual understanding of the human rather than historic relation. May they fill with warm joy ~~our~~ hearts which have not deserted their altar fires - as "those of a forsaken worship". Art and culture bring gentle charm to the life of the community, the satisfaction through which it gradually approaches more and more complete fulness. These live in the hearts of an awakened people. They are the lasting constants of a people's expression of their most treasured ideals, by which they pass them on - torch bearers of truth, shining more brightly because of the love, constancy, and devotion in which they are held by us.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston becomes one of our pledges of faith to the unfolding fulfilment of that fulness of quiet charm in life which the founders of Texas visioned for their descendants.