(April 30, 1934)

The Origin and Place of the Industrial Museum

By C. T. Currelly, M.A., LL.D., F.R.G.S., F.R.S.C.

President Arscott:—Gentlemen, we are today to have an address from one of our old friends, Dr. Currelly. Dr. Currelly, as you are aware, is Director of the Royal Ontario Museum. He has been associated with the museum since its very inception. I think we all owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Currelly for the many years of hard work and the strenuous efforts he has put forth in bringing that enterprise to its present high standard. The subject of his address is, "The Origin and Place of the Industrial Art Museum." I have much pleasure in asking him to address you.

Dr. Currelly:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I was asked by several of your members, if it should be my luck to be invited to address you that I would talk on this subject. As you know, at any time in the world's history when people have been able to be moderately comfortable and have been able to sit back a little and look at themselves, they have taken a very great deal of interest in the fine work of the past. That goes back to a very early time, but we get the centre of things about the time of Christ and later in Rome. Men began building bigger houses within the temple, so Roman palaces became quite large and they tried to fill them with fine things from distant and strange countries or from the past. The great cemeteries of Egypt were ransacked. Probably two-thirds of the graves were ransacked by Romans in order that they might get things to take back and place them in the houses of Rome. The famous treasure of St. Mark's, the Crusaders brought back to Venice, is a remarkable collection of early

Egyptian stone vases that were some thousands of years old when taken to Rome and they were even mounted with jewels and put into the great churches of Constantinople and are now in Venice.

With the coming of the Renaissance, a time when there was a certain definite amount of security, the princes of the church, lay princes and great figures were building their great buildings. They were collectors of the fine work of the past now, to a large extent, going back to the Roman times, and it was the classical spirit they were trying to get. Place after place was excavated and collectors took everything they could get a hold of. During this time the idea was that these things belonged to the very rich. If you were very rich you had these things and showed them to your friends and talked about them. They did not belong to other people. Feeling eventually became more and more bitter about this state of affairs and when the French Revolution got going one of the first things that was done was to work out some sort of a museum plan for France. France was about half starving; there were little revolutions going on and security was by no means good, but they devoted this time to working out some kind of a definite museum plan for the population of France. The only explanation of that must be that the middle class people were very, very wild at having been deprived of this type of education. Britain has usually led in that kind of development. It was in the middle of the eigthteenth century when the British Museum was started in order that all might get all they could out of an examination and study of the works of the past. But this was entirely a classical idea. It was that they might get the spirit of Greece and Rome that they got some clear idea of what lay behind the literature and it was a help to classical education essentially.

When Napoleon got under way, he got the idea either from himself or somebody around him that if France was going to make any real headway in manufacturing, they would have to get hold of the great things that men had done. As you all know so well, when the world has taken an extreme interest in anything, it has done it extraordinarily well. At the present moment, the great interest is in machinery. The world has never seen such machinery. We may be looked back to as the great period in machinery because the interest may wane.

If we had been gathered about 1480, a great deal of our conversation would have been about clothes. We would have been like peacocks—wonderfully dressed. We would have been discussing some new weave or some new development in textile. That was the period when the world was giving its attention tremendously to textiles. There have been great periods when the world was intensely interested in something and has done it very well. France, at that time, was taking too much from England. The French gentleman who was well-dressed had his clothes from London. A great deal was exported to France. Napoleon said, "If we can only get together the great material from different periods, and get them at the disposal of our people it will be an incentive to the workmen to produce better stuff and it will be an incentive for the buyer to demand better stuff." So he had an archaelogical department in his army. Wherever the army was these men would search everywhere they could get anything to see if there was not some magnificant work of the past. These things were brought back and housed in different parts of France. A great deal of time was taken to supply France with museums showing silk, art and textile developments. There was always a general run to the museum so that the people had a chance to see what the world has done. So far as I can find out they said very little about it.

In 1851, Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, as you know, developed a great international exhibition. The general idea was that people would come to Britain to see what magnificent things Britain was doing; that they would buy British goods and Britain would make a good lot of money and everybody would be happy ever after. Unfortunately, however, when the world came together at London, they came to see what magnificent things France was doing. This thing was a boomerang and hit back terribly. A Royal Commission was appointed to go into the matter to see why it was French silk, while not so

good, sold more readily. Many persons said that they used French goods because they were so much more attractive. The result of this was that the Royal Commission recommended the formation of a great museum with branches. The great Victorian Albert Museum was built and very rapidly indeed its effect was seen upon British trade.

Germany started in very strongly indeed, particularly after the Franco-Prussian war. They did everything with German thoroughness and organization. Everything was organized from headquarters. So the development in Germany was perfectly astonishing. With that extraordinary ability they have of combining everything with everything else, they went right even in anthropology. Here, for example, they sent three men down the west coast of Africa. They had it very well arranged. The Kaiser himself was patron of the whole thing and every man in connection with the museum had a free pass anywhere he wanted to go.

These men went down the West African Coast, stopping at every place where the steamer was calling and making a very definite study indeed of weaving and everything, both in basketry and in textiles, that they could get a hold of. These were decorated with different designs. Of course, all these designs are prayers. This one would keep spooks and wood spirits away, and so forth, so that every part of these designs was a question of prayer. These Germans went about, carefully taking in the complex types of weaving and studying the magic the words would hold. When they got back to Germany they worked it out quite scientifically. They brought in some young draftsmen and got them to combine the work of many years into one. They then sent the designs to the cotton printers. They said, your cottons may not have kept spooks off in the past but go back and weave this and the people will buy them. That knocked out two-thirds of the British West African trade in two years and cost Britain millions, and numbers of cotton people were thrown out of work.

Now, if I may go back just a moment, when Napoleon III. came to the throne he went out for the museums "for all he was worth," and he had the power of titles so that

money was rolling in from people who wanted titles because Napoleon's attitude was: "If you do something that is really lasting and an improvement for the country then that is the thing for which a title should go." The Germans did the same, I may say. So money rolled in by hundreds of thousands.

Mr. Pierpoint Morgan began to see how Americans were buying their expensive goods and manufacturing their cheap goods. He started to work on the press. This is something similar to what you might have seen in one American paper after another, "I wonder how many of our readers who cross the sea, from time to time, can remember the number of American dealers going to France to buy goods. Most of our readers have probably found salesmen going to Europe, not in the hope of selling goods. I think we may safely say that none of our readers has seen on the boat a single French salesman coming to America to sell goods, We have to go to get their goods because they are the only people who can produce them."

Mr. Morgan usually did things in an unusual manner and he did things in a way that was new to the museum world. It is said that he put $37,000,000 of his own into it. He went about asking who was the best man in connection with an industrial art museum and he was told that Sir Barton Clarke of Great Britain was, without any doubt, the best man in the world. So he went to Britain and wanted to know how much he wanted to go to New York. Clarke was a little more than middle-aged and was quite comfortable with the assurance of a pension so he named a prohibitive figure for a few years with a prohibitive pension at the end. Morgan said, "All right. Send in your resignation." Morgan knew whatever he paid Clarke was nothing, if the expenditure were wise he was going to save it a hundred times over. So the Metropolitan Museum got started and one museum after another started and developed. Now, the effect has been extremely noticeable. The United States are not now importing all their fine goods which, for a long time, they did. They have at last learned thoroughly that it is no use manufacturing a thing if you cannot sell, and most people buy on the appearance.

The last big jump has been in Soviet Russia where they have forty museums in Leningrad and forty in Moscow and museums in other towns. There they have gone even as far as the Germans in putting up to the public the test of what not to buy and what not to make. I was told that these museums are thronged, at the present time in Russia, by people who are trying to find out what is fine and what is not fine.

One of the tragedies we had was that when our people came here they came at the lowest ebb of English taste. So we started off rather badly. I have had an exceptional chance in studying what you might call the raw material for Canadian taste. And it is good. But we have had so few opportunities, just as the Americans had a short time ago, of seeing things that are really fine. Now, when it comes down to real competition, especially competition in the international market, it is the appearance of things that sells them or leaves them on the shelves. Thus, we came into matters extremely late.

Some time ago a few men in the States were sitting discussing their plans and Munsey the publisher was with them. He said, "I was examined today and the report is very, very bad. I have not got long to live. I have a lot of money and do not know what to do with it." A managing director of a large institution told Mr. Munsey that if he were in the department store business he would know what to do. He told of the great improvements industrial art museums had made in their manufactures and how certain things had been substituted for imported lines. He spoke of the work of the Metropolitan Museum and said, "I see how far we have got to go to get our people educated to know what is really fine." So Mr. Munsey made his will and left a bequest to the Metropolitan Museum. One man after another has done the same thing. One small town in Massachusetts got $20,000,000, and so forth.

And they are thoroughly alive to this question, that if they are not going to be hewers of woods and drawers of water to Europe and if they are going to instil in people a real joy in creative work, they have to present to them things that will be an inspiration, things where a couple of

men will say, "How in the world did he do it?" The discussion will start, "How in the world did that man get that color or get that feeling in that?" and so forth.

There is another side that is being pushed that is somewhat more academic—that these people may know something of the development of things around them—that we may know about the dishes we use and the knife and fork we eat with. Might I give you an example?

Our ancestors carried a knife in a sheathe on a belt and used it to cut a piece of meat which they put on a wooden trencher. They then used their fingers and licked their fingers and wiped them on their clothes. But there were some fussy men who were extremely well-dressed who substituted something like a thorn to pick up their meat. It was like a spike. There were some extra fussy men who turned the trencher over for the next course and helped it on with a spoon. They were spike and spoon or "'spick and span" people. They did not have to wipe their hands.

That was early in the sixteenth century and the Bishop of London preached a sermon in which he pointed out that fingers had been made before these things and that it was flying in the face of Providence to use these terrible contraptions now on the market. Then later a knife with a wider blade called a pea-eater was made.

That is just a little example of the history of man's craft and the things we use which do interest and intrigue us; in fact, it is sometimes exciting, the knowledge of things that are round about us. The diplomatic and military is, I think, going, and I am looking forward to the time when in our schools everywhere the history will be the history of the big things. So far as I can see the development of hard glazed plate has been associated with the development of the British Empire. The population in sixty years doubled what it had been nearly five hundred years before that development and they produced men that were able togo to Australia, Canada and other parts of the Empire. These things made our civilization and made our Empire.

I am sorry to say that the world supply of valuable

things is drawing very closely to an end. We have had the most incredible luck, except in getting money, of any museum that I know. Things have come to us in a most marvelous way; we have had sums of money that would make our American colleagues laugh, but we have obtained material in extraordinary ways.

I am very sorry to say that we are the only large museum that Canada can ever see. The stuff is not there. No money can buy a great deal that is off the market. I had a dealer going over my things that I had picked up many years ago. He said that he had not seen any on the market for fifteen or twenty years or whatever it might be. That is one of the tragedies of Canada. We have had this marvelous luck and there are still certain possibilities. If you know the ropes and know the market and if we can get hold of a little money there are still certain possibilities, but we have to carry the burden for the whole Dominion. It is not whether we like it or not, but we have to carry the burden of that type of education whether it is for the general public or draftsmen who are coming to study, and we have hundreds working in the museum. We have to carry the burden for the whole Dominion.

MR. ARSCOTT:—Gentlemen, I do not think we have had a more interesting address in months than we have had today. Dr. Currelly, we thank you for giving us a most delightful address. It has been a very comprehensive outline of the development of the museum and has brought to our attention the great part it is playing in the history of the world. I thank you very much on behalf of the Club, for coming here today.