

**Budget: A Grove of Academus**

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In a Literary Club paper of 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2020, and a budget of 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2022, this author explored educational systems and underpinnings in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cincinnati. The first paper delved into Cincinnati's 1840 reimagining of the *Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge* and then ventured forward into reconstruction-era America. The second offered a selection of ambitious academic 19<sup>th</sup> century societies and volunteer endeavors in Cincinnati, especially those with broadly democratic principles or service.

The various organizations of peoples, ideals, and influences outlined in these histories act as precedents for the succeeding story of Cincinnati's lectures of 1878. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century Cincinnati exuded the character of a boomtown amidst infrastructure growth, expanding universities, and exaltation from east coast writers and press. Art making was in excellent form, both of industry and in painting and sculpture.

Cincinnati's social influencers from Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial International Exposition returned in heated pursuit of a new arts institution befitting our city's ambitions. Two free and open lectures in March 1878, one by Colonel Sidney Maxwell and one by Colonel George Ward Nichols, made the case for creative industries as economic development and for the educational advancement of our citizenry.

It is the third lecture, in early April 1878, that brought the rhetoric to a point. Charles P. Taft, born in Cincinnati, editor of the *Times-Star* and future Congressman and out-of-town owner of the Philadelphia Phillies and subsequently of the Chicago Cubs, made the case himself. *The South Kensington Museum: what it is; how it originated; what it has done and is now doing for England and the World; and the adaptation of such an institution to the needs and possibilities of this City*, was typically direct and delivered with clarity of purpose.

By 1880, a lead donor was found in Charles West and his gift matched with a public membership campaign. The Cincinnati Museum Association subsumed its predecessor organizations, including the powerful and effective Women's Art Museum Association, within months and began work towards an 1886 opening day.

Much of this history is well known to Literarians and Cincinnati's historians. Yet a question still arises in the heart and mind: what made Charles Taft's call to philanthropy and altruistic investment in public art education so effective in Cincinnati? Why did his reference to the grand South Kensington Museum experiment work in Cincinnati, when other city's attempts were more akin to very small private club galleries in existing buildings and homes?

It is fair, and certainly more than conjecture, to extrapolate that the earlier innovations in public education in Cincinnati are to credit. Over five hundred people attended certain lectures of the fourteen chapters of the *Society for Promotion of Useful Knowledge* as early as mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Cincinnati. The later establishment of numerous colleges, libraries, societies, and schools in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cincinnati were notable both for their number and their scope. Prosperity was an assist, yet most founding minutes makes the converse case. These academic institutions themselves built and created a thriving and wealthy city.

So I return to Charles Taft's pivotal and persuasive lecture of April 1878. The famed South Kensington Museum which he casts as a learning model in Britain is at the center of the thesis. The city had readied itself for decades to hear Taft's interpreted vision in that moment.

The South Kensington Museum was a sensation from the moment it opened its new facility in 1857 after a brief five-year experiment in Marlborough House from 1852-57. The museum was established to be different and the public responded in great numbers. By 1899, it was renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum and remains today one of the most popular museums in the world.

Lilly Cao's smart article, *The Educational Objectives of the South Kensington Museum: Developing British Industry Through the Cultivation of Aesthetic Taste*, belies her youth in its excellent scholarship. She outlines skillfully the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in European art politics: British manufacturing largely followed the original production of the French publicly funded academies. War had necessitated factory efficiencies but failing attention was given to the hand-made or crafted. Parliament grew in concern and by 1835 openly questioned the quality of English arts. The Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures was formed.

Among the goals for Parliament was to engender skill and appreciation "of the principles of design among the people." Among the various programs, "public galleries" were included as a priority. Ms. Cao notes that the subsequent Department of Science and Art was organized within the Board of Trade. The progressive and activist leaders included Henry Cole and his compatriot Jeremy Bentham.

In 1857, the South Kensington Museum opened its vast halls as a mutual endeavor of commerce, education, nation-building, and art. It was different from the opening day. Education and teaching lay at the center of every exhibit, rather than acquisition, archive, and collection as an end unto itself. Artistic excellence was a key to human-centered progress. Staff included liaisons to educational institutions and the museum operated non-traditional hours to serve a working public. Detractors emerged but were largely silenced by the museum's public success in numbers, attention, and effectiveness in its goals. Cao cites, "in a 1912 publication on the importance of South Kensington as a *training apparatus* for the 'various branches of Art industry,' its author, a former Royal College of Art student, describes South Kensington not as a museum complex but as a 'Grove of Academus.'

The success of the South Kensington Museum must have been appealing to a city leader in Charles Taft amidst a burgeoning context of profitable and growing creative industries in Cincinnati. Two key factors would lead any young city to a similar conclusion: one, a high value

on intersectionality and universal access to educational infrastructures, and two, a relatively easier path to building important collections for the museum. Both are central to the founding of our Cincinnati Art Museum and its role in civic advancement. Social mobility, early acquisition of decorative arts, musical instruments, period rooms, African and Native American art forms, integration with the new Art Academy of Cincinnati and its students and faculty: all of these are strategic pieces consistent with South Kensington's notion.

The academic societies, clubs, lectures, and libraries of earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century Cincinnati provide the final connecting argument to our Cincinnati Art Museum. Charles Taft's high-minded ideas for an experimental and innovative art museum dedicated to social progress was far from the blueprint found in east coast institutions, or at the Louvre or the British Museum. Cincinnati found excitement in the newness and a future model that matched with its city's confidence. In short, Taft's proposal provided a path to speedy success for our new museum, matched with youthful energy and confidence. Our fair and animated Cincinnati matched its every step.