John Cotton Dana and the Politics of Exhibiting Industrial Art in the US, 1909–1929

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Between 1909 and 1929, John Cotton Dana directed New Jersey's Newark Museum and pioneered the museum exhibition of mass-produced goods, initiating a trend among American art museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Through his work, Dana hoped to reform the museum community, society and industry. He saw his museum's activities as a progressive response to the problems of increased industrialization, an expanding consumer culture and the country's search for a national aesthetic based on the machine. This paper examines Dana's influence by investigating his correspondence, publications and exhibitions, including the first display in America of modern industrial design, the 1912 exhibit of the work of the Deutscher Werkbund.

Keywords: Dana, John Cotton—Deutscher Werkbund—industrial design—Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York—museums—Newark Museum, New Jersey

Introduction

Beauty does not wait on time, cost or prestige. To see it, we need only open our eyes and our minds. If the decoration of your home is good, it is so because it is chosen with skill, not because it cost so much money. The contents of these cases suggest how much of beauty of art lies within the purchasing power of the humblest home.

John Cotton Dana, label for 1928 Newark Museum exhibition, 'Inexpensive Items of Good Design'.

Between 1909 and 1929, John Cotton Dana, director of the Newark Museum, New Jersey, challenged the public's understanding of museums, art and design [1]. Directing his museum in an industrial city, Dana pioneered the exhibition of mass-produced goods and the display of their production processes, while proclaiming that 'beauty has no relation to age, rarity, or price'. Beauty, he offered, could be found in ordinary goods such as bathtubs, tools or even a well-displayed glass of water. During a period of increasing industrialization, expanding consumer culture and the country's search for its own aesthetic expression on the world stage, Dana believed that his displays could educate working people, liberate consumers from promoters of fashion obsolescence, and contribute to both a national art-in-industry movement and the development of a uniquely American aesthetic, a machine style rooted in the country's industrial prowess. Through his provocative writing and exhibitions Dana became known as the 'prophet of art in industry'.

Both his contemporaries, as well as historians of today, acknowledged Dana's profound influence on museum practice in the early twentieth century. He has been recognized as a leader in museum education, and as a significant influence on the increased exhibition of industrial design in America's art museums, most notably at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Metropolitan began displaying commercial products in 1917, after years of cajoling by Dana. In the 1930s other prominent art museums
followed suit, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York. To dramatize his philosophy, Dana contrasted his museum's work with what he characterized as the elitist and conservative activities of the nearby Metropolitan. He promoted his ideals and broadcast his critiques in the New York press, business publications and throughout the nation's museum community. Dana's friend, Henry Kent, who had been made secretary at the Metropolitan in 1913, credited Dana's constant and often antagonistic proselytising with substantially altering the direction of America's museum profession. In 1929 he wrote: 'When the history of the museums in this country is written, Dana's philosophy and humanity will be remembered as having changed for the public good the whole trend of these institutions in the relation to people."

This paper examines the influences on and effects of Dana's professional practice. It looks first at the development of his museum philosophy, which was founded on his Puritan upbringing, librarian training and his knowledge of design reform movements, most notably the American Arts and Crafts Movement and the Deutscher Werkbund. The application of Dana's philosophy will then be studied through specific Newark Museum exhibits which addressed the needs of local industrialists, workers and consumers. This discussion will trace the influence of Dana's museum practice on the American museum community in general, and the Metropolitan in particular. It will explore the circumstances of Dana's perhaps most important exhibit, the first exhibition of modern industrial design in the US, 'Modern German Applied Arts' (1912). The display represented the work of the Deutscher Werkbund, a seminal German design reform association founded in 1907, which championed the improvement of the industrial goods through the combined work of artists, industrialists and craftsmen. The paper will then investigate the links between the Newark and Metropolitan museums, exploring Dana's prior friendship with Kent, and tracing the former's efforts to encourage the display of industrial goods at the Metropolitan. Dana offered the 'German Applied Art' exhibit to the Metropolitan in 1911, which it refused owing to its commercial nature. The paper will also investigate Dana's efforts to educate local workers through process exhibits, displays that revealed the stages of craft manufacture and industrial production. At the time these were viewed as efforts to end alienated labour, a goal of the American Arts and Crafts Movement. Dana's exhibits of inexpensive and 'beautiful' goods purchased at department stores will be presented as attempts to educate and emancipate consumers. The final section of the paper will explore the way in which the Newark Museum promoted an American machine aesthetic.

Dana's background and museum philosophy

John Cotton Dana was born in Woodstock, Vermont in 1856 to an established New England family. He studied law, but gave up the profession for a life of library and museum service, later becoming librarian and museum director of the Newark Museum and Library, New Jersey. His stewardship of the Newark Museum lasted from 1909 until his death in 1929. Dana's belief in individual liberty, accessibility and pragmatism may well have derived from his legal experience. The eminent museum historian Edward
Alexander has pointed to Dana's Puritan background as the source of his educational crusade and his desire to confront professional, social and political issues. In 1899 Dana described himself as an 'egotist, a pessimist, and an anarchist' and admitted that he had 'passed through a mild attack of socialism.' However, it was his knowledge of design movements in the United States and Europe, rather than radical politics, that guided his museum practice, which was informed first by the American Arts and Crafts Movement and later by the Deutscher Werkbund.

The American Arts and Crafts Movement was a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reaction to increased industrialization, modernization and urbanization, and was a product of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. John Ruskin and William Morris were the principal architects of the movement in England, from which the Americans borrowed. Ruskin and Morris condemned industrial society's division of labour and espoused an ideal that emphasized a lifestyle centred around craftsmanship, simplicity of design, honesty of materials and an appreciation of utility. The Arts and Crafts philosophy found virtue in non-alienated, craft-based labour, where artisans controlled each step of production. By uniting art with labour, the craftsman ideal was thought to counter social fragmentation and reclaim the unity and beauty believed to have been lost through the degradation of work.

Dana's friend and colleague, Holger Cahill, recognized the Arts and Crafts Movement as a significant influence on the museum director, especially its philosophy of art in life and an end to alienated labour. In 1944 Cahill, quoting Dana, wrote that after becoming the librarian of the City Library Association of Springfield in 1898, Dana 'gathered together a collection of products of the artist-artisan to bid us, as Morris would say, find pleasure in the things we must perform use' While at Springfield, Dana invited the colourful American Arts and Crafts Movement leader Elbert Hubbard to discuss the activities of his Roycrofters workshop. By 1912 Dana had studied at William Morris's bookbinding workshop. In 1916 Dana had written his own book on 'joy in labour', a concept central to the craftsman ideal. However, Cahill notes that despite Dana's acceptance of the Arts and Crafts ideal 'in the tradition of Ruskin and William Morris, he wholeheartedly accepted the machine.' Dana's 'whole-hearted' acceptance of the machine was emphatically illustrated in the Newark Museum's 1912 exhibit of the Deutscher Werkbund, 'Modern German Applied Arts'. This display established Dana's reputation as the 'prophet of art in industry'. The exhibition was jointly organized by the Werkbund and Karl Ernst Osthaus, director of the industrial museum at Hagen, Germany. Alexander has recognized it as the 'first important American exhibition of modern foreign industrial art'. Dana viewed the German group as an important example of an industrial arts association from which Americans might learn. According to a 1910 statement, the goal of the Werkbund was to advance the 'best in art, industry, craftsmanship and trade' and to coordinate 'all those efforts to achieve quality that are evident in industrial endeavour'. These goals characterized Dana's programme for his new museum in Newark.

Until the construction of the museum's own building in 1926, exhibitions and activities took place within a few rooms of the public library. Because the Newark Museum was a product of the Newark Library, it was not bound by art museum traditions. The librarian tenets of accessibility, popular education and meeting local needs guided the Newark Museum. Dana wrote that 'the modern public library is in many respects a museum, and in its attitude towards those who own and maintain it, is more modern than most museums.' Dana viewed most art museums, such as the Metropolitan, as inaccessible 'gazing museums', where an air of authority discouraged the interpretation of the collection.

Dana wrote that because the museum was situated in a manufacturing town the staff took an 'experimental' approach to exhibitions, emphasizing local needs with the 'knowledge that we were supported by, and duty bound to try and be of direct value and service to a city of industries.' For this reason the museum exhibited Newark's products, commercial articles of everyday use. Budget constraints made it impossible to compete with New York's museums in the purchase of art objects. Encouraging patrons and the public to consider the aesthetic and educational value of local products, Dana presented exhibits intended to educate local industrialists, labourers and consumers.

In the reform tradition of the American museum
community, Dana believed that museums had a civilizing effect upon society. Dana credited George Brown Goode as an important influence on his philosophy of museum access. Goode was appointed assistant director of the Smithsonian Institute's United States National Museum in 1879, and believed that museums of the future should be useful to all classes of society. In 1881 Goode wrote that the educational museum began with the Crystal Palace Exhibition at London in 1851, and provided the 'systematic exhibition of the products of the earth and the achievements of human industry for the instruction of visitors, the improvements of public taste and the fostering of art and design.' Goode thought that 'the mechanic, the factory operator, the day labourer, the salesman, and the clerk, as much as the professional man and the man of leisure' should have access to museums.

Dana's most succinct expression of his museum philosophy appeared in his 1913 manifesto, 'The Gloom of the Museum'. In it Dana proclaimed that fine paintings had no effect on the 'development of good taste and refinement' of ordinary people, while objects of daily use did. This philosophy had been articulated in previous decades by such design theorists as Ruskin, Morris and Gottfried Semper. In his own museum, he preferred the collection of reproductions of famous canvases to actual paintings. 'If oil paintings are put in the subordinate place in which they belong, the average art museum will have much more room for the display of objects which have quite a direct bearing on the daily lives [of visitors].' Dana criticized the elitist nature of museums, insisting that they should not simply be showplaces for the wealth of the city's élite. He wrote that the museum community should 'have no absurd fear that it will be commercialized and debased if it shows what is being done today in the field of applied art in its own city and in other parts of the world.'

A museum without masterpieces, even in an industrial city, was an innovative concept. In order to argue his case successfully, Dana deployed his great skills of argument and publicity and thus challenged America's conservative museum community. Dana contrasted his more prosaic approach with that of the country's most prestigious museum, the Metropolitan. He characterized the Metropolitan as élitist, historicist and Eurocentric, and asserted that its collection of masterpieces did not appeal to the average person. Dana's critique opened a dialogue between the two institutions, and sparked an active discussion within the museum community concerning the exhibition of industrial products.

'Modern German Applied Arts' (1912), the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition

As late as 1914, America remained dependent upon Europe for its aesthetic inspiration in art and design. After 1914 there were attempts to launch an American art-in-industry movement, an active alliance of designers, industrialists and businessmen who would raise the quality and aesthetics of American mass-produced goods. Throughout the 1920s, John Cotton Dana and his brother Charles attempted to establish an American art-in-industry association, similar to the Werkbund. Yet in 1923, Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, felt that American industry remained aesthetically underdeveloped. In 1924 Charles Richards, director of the American Association of Museums, admitted that American applied art was 'entirely based on the adaption of the old styles.' When invited by the French to recommend products of American manufacturer for the 1925 'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels', Hoover declined. Hoover feared that American industrial goods might be viewed as inferior to and derivative of European ones.

Although most American manufacturers and museum professionals became aware of the modern trends in European applied art as a result of the Paris Exposition, Dana had promoted innovative design from Germany thirteen years earlier. By mounting an exhibition that might provide an important blueprint for an art-in-industry movement in the United States, the Newark Museum's 1912 'Modern German Applied Arts' exhibit discouraged America's aesthetic dependence on historicist design [2]. The groundbreaking show displayed over 1,300 items, including contemporary prints, books, ceramics, glass, wallpaper, metalwork, advertisements and photographs, representing the work of some of Germany's leading architects and designers, including Peter Behrens, Walter Gropius, Bruno Paul and Henry Van de Velde. After Newark, the Werkbund exhibit travelled to six other US cities [3–8].
The Werkbund coalesced around the ideas of Hermann Muthesius, an architect who by 1887 was an appointee of the Prussian Board of Trade. A prolific writer, his two most influential books Stilarchitektur und Baukunst (1903) and Das Englische Haus (1904/5) outlined his aesthetic outlook of truth in materials, practicality, purpose and a preference for vernacular and popular forms. Like Dana, Muthesius scorned the fine artist, and presented the engineer and the industrialist as being the vanguard of an imminent cultural revolution.

While the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Werkbund shared certain concerns, the former represented a romantic retreat into the past, while the
latter sought a practical response to present industrialization. The American Arts and Crafts Movement idealized craft production and promoted a return to the medieval guild system, while the Werkbund sought a partnership between art and industry, and designers and factories. The Werkbund embraced the craftsman ideals of simplicity in form and honesty in materials, yet approached industry and the machine as allies in the project of modernity.

The influence of the 'Modern German Applied Arts' exhibit within the museum profession has been widely recognized by historians. Dana's Werkbund exhibit provided an important precedent for future industrial design exhibitions within American art museums. In 1911 Dana offered the show to the Metropolitan. Despite the Metropolitan's tradition of exhibiting and collecting historical decorative arts, they refused the Werkbund exhibit 'on the ground that the objects were commercial,' wrote Dana. The Metropolitan explained that 'the Trustees have decided not to enter the field of what might be called Trade exhibitions.'

Recognizing the German Werkbund's role in the international development of modern design, Dana wrote in 1926 that the 'Modern German Applied Arts' exhibition 'was in many ways distinctly prophetic of the modern changes in all the arts from textiles to etchings and from wood-carving to porcelain.' Dana described the 1925 Paris Exposition as a belated response to the earlier successes of the Werkbund and its emphasis on industrial art. He explained:

the modern idea . . . the relation of art to machine, largely developed . . . and fostered through the Werkbund . . . had made long strides since 1900; for the Paris
exhibition was most definitely an exaltation of the machine and a plain demonstration ... that the factory ... must be a handmaid of the arts.\textsuperscript{48}

Dana’s summary of the development of the ‘modern idea’ in industrial art reflected his biases and enthusiasms, as well as his avid desire to present his museum as progressive. His view neglects the Paris Exposition’s emphasis on traditional, highly skilled craft objects, which might have been understood as abusing the very notions of machine production embraced by the Werkbund.

Jay Cantor has suggested that class differences may have motivated the Metropolitan’s refusal of the Werkbund show. Referring to the Metropolitan, Cantor writes that ‘both the historical decorative arts and traditional craft production had become associated with upper class taste in distinction to machine production, which was the clear demarcation of class.’\textsuperscript{49} Dana was certainly aware of the class differences.
between his ideal Newark Museum visitor and his characterization of the Metropolitan's audience. In a paper Dana delivered at the 1926 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums at the Metropolitan, he criticized the elitism of any art museum which 'aims its influence at the cultured few', and exhibits expensive and rare objects which are 'largely the natural outcome of the love in ignorant wealth and of conspicuous waste.'

The worker as museum visitor: exhibiting industrial processes

The Newark Museum's emphasis on the display of industrial arts reflected Dana's deeply held commitment to the welfare of local workers. Such a concern reflected the paternalist attitudes of politicians, educators and industrialists during a period of progressive social reform, and increased industrialization within a workforce populated primarily by non-white native-born Americans and recent immigrants. During its industrial boom from 1860 to 1910, Newark's population increased from 72,000 to 347,000, many of whom were European immigrants. Dana was concerned about the education and socialization of working people, especially foreign labourers. This is notable in his 1902 address to the Newark Board of Trade, which requested funding for a local technical school. His comments pointed to the tensions inherent in industrialization, the threat of industry to the happiness of immigrant families and the responsibility of industry to 'make' both goods and 'good men':

Last Sunday evening I walked along Mulberry Street among the tenements and factories . . . The streets were alive with men, women and children of alien looks, loud voiced and gay. Smoke poured out of tall chimneys, and they and their factories loomed up in the mist monstrous, picturesque and imposing. Here was industrial America. Here was the machine age . . . 'Here is a city which is a maker of things . . . here is evidence that a city which makes things must see to it that it also makes good men.'

In the tradition of social reform, Dana's first presented the 'problem'—uneducated immigrants and imposing factories—and then provided the 'solution'—a technical school that would improve the working populace. In the years after the 'Modern German Applied Arts' exhibition Dana continued his efforts to educate the working people of Newark. He organized exhibitions illustrating the products of local industry, focusing especially on manufacturing processes and materials. These exhibits were designed not only to encourage a knowledge of technique, but were also thought to discourage alienated labour. Such a philosophy was in accord with the Progressive Era's social reform agenda and Dana's commitment to education and local industry. Most importantly, however, it reflected the Arts and Crafts Movement’s emphasis on non-alienated production. The exhibitions that exemplified this approach included 'New Jersey Clay Products' (1915), 'Textile Industries of New Jersey' (1916) and 'Nothing Takes the Place of Leather' (1926-7) [9]. In these exhibits a visitor could see demonstrations where potters, spinners, weavers and leather workers practised their crafts.

In 1926 Dana noted that during process exhibitions 'it is no rare thing to see groups of men in working clothes studying exhibits . . . during the noon hour . . . and after the whistle blows at night.' Commenting on such exhibits at the museum, a New York Times journalist addressed the issue of alienated labour and the potential for its alleviation through Dana's displays:

The museum folk tell with much pride of an incident at the celluloid exhibit. A group of men reappeared day after day, staying only a short time, but poring over the tables and cases with great interest and having much to
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Fig. 9. 'Nothing Takes the Place of Leather' exhibit, 1926. A group from H. R. Macy & Co., New York watch a glove-cutter at work. The exhibition demonstrated the production of leather goods, from raw material to finished products.

...talk about. It was discovered that they were the workmen from a nearby celluloid plant, seeing for the first time their product as a whole; they had known only that part of its creation which they handled.56

As early as April 1925, the Newark Museum began keeping its doors open after working hours in an effort to increase accessibility: 'For the sake of industrial workers and others occupied by day, the Museum is to be opened every evening, including Sunday.'57 Echoing George Browne Goode’s writing of 1897 on museum access, Dana expressed his pride that such exhibitions attracted a diverse cross-section of the working community who gained a better understanding of their achievements: ‘Managers, owners, artists, designers, foremen, and labourers... [were] aided by that sympathy and goodwill of their fellow citizens... which comes from knowledge... of what they are accomplishing.’58

The relation between the Newark Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art

In 1917, in a reversal of Metropolitan Museum’s policy, Secretary Henry Watson Kent organized his museum’s first exhibition of American industrial art, ‘The Designer and the Museum’, which displayed commercial goods inspired by a study of the museum’s collection.59 The 1917 exhibit inaugurated twelve years of industrial arts exhibits at the Metropolitan that were intended to promote good design among American manufacturers. In 1918 the Metropolitan hired Richard F. Bach as Associate of Industrial Relations to assist Kent. The museum’s earlier aversion to things commercial was now openly disavowed in its 1920 bulletin. The author wrote that the 1919 ‘Exhibition of Work by Manufacturers and Designers’ was ‘useful in a thorough and (though the word may be an anathema to some ears) commercial way.’60 In 1924 the manufacturing requirements of entrants were clearly spelled out. Entrants were not limited by manufacturing technique. They could contribute products of hand or machine manufacture, including unique objects and multiples.61

Through the display of such industrial art the museum took what Dana viewed as cautious steps towards the display of American commercial design. Rather than developing a unique American idiom, during its first years the industrial arts exhibitions succeeded in attracting products of a ‘period-revival mode’.62 Dana harshly criticized the Metropolitan for its strict limitations, calling the exhibits ‘modest’ and ‘timid’ efforts.63 In a letter of 1917 Bach admitted that the Metropolitan’s first industrial arts
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exhibit emphasized luxurious goods and may have had a limited effect on everyday commerce:

It is, however, almost entirely an exhibit of articles de luxe . . . It ought to be exhibited down town where shoppers (ordinary shoppers) would see it. The ordinary shoppers might begin to want such things. Then manufacturers would begin to make them. Then the Metropolitan would really have something to do (perhaps).  

Christine Wallace Laidlaw refutes the suggestion that the Metropolitan’s abrupt change in exhibition practice was ‘inspired’ by Dana’s 1912 Werkbund exhibition.  

Wallace suggests that the museum’s policy shift was a result of new staffing, following the 1913 death of the Metropolitan’s president J. P. Morgan. According to Wallace, the new changes were instituted after the promotion of Robert de Forest to president and Henry Watson Kent to secretary, both of whom were followers of the Arts and Crafts Movement and were deeply interested in the benefits to the public of art in daily life.  

However, it is clear that Dana had influenced Kent’s museum philosophy as early as 1898. Kent wrote that while he was curator and librarian in the nearby town of Norwich in 1898, he met Dana who was librarian of the City Library Association of Springfield, Massachusetts. Kent wrote that their association was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Dana’s professional influence upon him was an ‘education’, Kent wrote. The two friends shared ideas about museum and library practice, and in 1904 published a series of books together entitled The Literature of Libraries.  

In his autobiography of 1949, Kent wrote that he and Dana embraced similar concerns, but that Kent was restricted by the Metropolitan’s collections and trustees:

Dana, as always, was full of schemes for making his library and museum useful. In this manner we saw eye to eye, even though in later years, when he was in Newark and I in the Metropolitan Museum, the methods by which we tried to work out this principle differed somewhat because of the different material and trustees we had to work with.  

Throughout the 1920s, both the Metropolitan and the Newark museums actively exhibited industrial art, thus narrowing the gap between commerce and culture. Both museums were affected by the increasing influence of America’s department stores and the rising interest in modern European decorative arts, especially those exhibited at the Paris Exposition in 1925. During these years the two museums exhibited the often opulent work of French modern decorative artists and co-operated with department stores in exhibitions of industrial art.  

While the Metropolitan made small steps towards the art-in-industry ideal, however, the Newark Museum continued to play provocateur in its efforts to publicize the beauty of inexpensive everyday goods.

In a New York Times article of 1926, Dana applauded Bach’s industrial arts exhibitions and his ‘long deferred work of promoting design in industry’. Yet Dana scolded the Metropolitan for the restrictions of its initial industrial art displays, which required the designer to ‘draw his inspiration and basic ideas from objects in the Metropolitan museum . . . saying in effect that the only good design is the old design.’  

For Dana, the Metropolitan’s practice of limiting exhibited designs to those based on the collection implied that the art museum in general, and the Metropolitan in particular, was the fount of good design, and that work inspired by ordinary goods found outside the museum were neither worthy of inspiration nor exhibition. Presenting a paper at the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums held at the Metropolitan in 1926, Dana argued that the art museum ‘almost invariably develop[s] this theory, and lives up to it: that art can be found only in the forms and decorations of the objects it has collected, and that good taste can be evolved only by and through contact with these objects.  

For the Metropolitan’s 1924 industrial arts exhibit the requirement that objects entered be based on the museum’s collection was dropped. The policy shift may have been motivated primarily by foreign competition in the applied arts. Significantly, this change occurred precisely at the time that America’s role in the Paris Exposition was under severe threat.  

Rather than merely illustrating the inspirational use of the museum’s collection, the post-1924 industrial arts exhibitions now emphasized American excellence in design. Exhibits prior to 1924, such as the ‘Sixth Exhibition of American Industrial Art’ (1922), did not focus on American design quality as an isolated phenomenon or in comparison to other nations. The 1922 catalogue stated that: ‘It had not been the purpose to show . . . the best that can be done . . . but rather to show a limited number of worthy pieces considered representative . . . of material, style, form,
color, texture and technique.' The exhibits of 1924 and 1925, however, emphasized the progress and quality of American design. These later exhibits aimed to present an ‘annual record of the status of design in American industrial art’, and provide ‘ample proof of the Museum’s steadfast opinion . . . that the hope of industrial art design lies in America.'

At the Metropolitan the art-in-industry spirit initiated in 1917 was being augmented by a new and parallel emphasis on the display and collection of luxurious modern European decorative art. This new direction was spearheaded by the Curator of Decorative Arts, Joseph Breck, who initiated the Metropolitan’s first display of modern decorative arts from the permanent collection in 1923. In March 1925, the Metropolitan exhibited a selection of objects, including furniture by Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, glass by René Lalique, and ironwork by Edgar Brandt, purchased by Charles Richards at the Paris Exposition for the American Association of Museums.

In 1927 and 1928 there were no industrial art exhibitions at the Metropolitan. Instead, a modern Swedish decorative arts exhibit in 1927, and an international exhibition of modern ceramics in 1928. In 1929 the museum’s Advisory Committee on Industrial Arts presented an exhibit of room displays whose contents and designs were the products of nine architects. The exhibit followed the display technique of the Paris Exposition’s ensemble room.

The Newark Museum’s response to the Paris Exposition provided an opportunity to compare the decorative arts of Europe and America, as well as those of France and Germany. In 1926 the museum presented an exhibit of modern decorative arts that ‘reflected’ the displays of the Paris Exposition, and presented work from Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, Denmark and Sweden, including silver by Georg Jensen and glass by Orrefors. It is significant that the Newark Museum’s ‘Paris Decorative Art Show’ included German products. This represents an example of Dana’s continuing efforts to publicize his appreciation of the German design. Placed alongside the exhibits of European designs was a case devoted to ‘modern American pottery, metal work, and textile printing’, which, according to the 1926 issues of The Museum, the Newark Museum’s publicity mouthpiece, ‘stood up very well as compared to the best work of the Europeans, and showed that there was applied art in America of which Americans need not be ashamed.’

Dana had long championed the exhibition of commercial goods, and had argued that the museum should learn its lessons from the department store, which Dana saw as a more useful public institution. Dana commended the Metropolitan for exhibiting commercial goods at its 1927 ‘Exposition of Art and Trade’ at Macy’s, an exhibit produced in co-operation with and displayed in the department store. The ‘exposition’ included household objects, such as fabrics, glass, jewellery, furniture, rugs, metals and graphic arts. Dana, however, undercut his approbation, noting that he first suggested combining the work of the department store and the museum in 1913 in his article ‘The Gloom of the Museum’.

Dana’s exhibitions of inexpensive everyday goods and the pursuit of an American machine aesthetic

In the late 1920s Dana continued to promote the display of ordinary goods, but shifted his emphasis away from production and towards consumption, diverging from process exhibits such as ‘New Jersey Clay Products’ (1915), to consumer-oriented shows such as ‘Inexpensive Items of Good Design’ (1928), an exhibit of household goods purchased for under 10 cents, and a similar exhibit the following year of items bought for less than 50 cents. Through such exhibits, Dana remained dedicated to the promotion of industrial products, while encouraging museum visitors to negotiate the terrain of an expanding consumer culture.

Dana’s consumer exhibitions encouraged what he considered a proper relation between goods and individuals. Modernists and reformists of the early twentieth century considered the nineteenth century’s Gilded Age an unhealthy period of material excess. The era’s moral failing was thought to be visible in urban overcrowding and overwork in modern industrial life, while mass production and consumption were viewed as uncontrolled and symbolic of the ethical shortcomings of the era. A 1923 article describing the Newark Museum’s efforts to reform consumption and production articulated the contemporary view of the materialism of the last
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Fig 10. Glassware from the Newark Museum exhibit 'Inexpensive Items of Good Design', 1929

decades of the nineteenth century: 'Then people wanted more and more things, and the machine turned out more and more without much attention to how and why. Slap-dash too often took the place of patient skill, and the bizarre shed aside the beautiful.' It was hoped that re-educating consumers to appreciate the simple and beautiful, rather than the complex and 'bizarre', would urge them towards a more virtuous and truthful life.

Dana believed that if consumers made purchases based on aesthetic appreciation rather than fashion trends, they would obtain a sense of individual freedom. Throughout the 1920s, his exhibitions reflected this philosophy, but his 1928 and 1929 exhibit, 'Inexpensive Items of Good Design', made it explicit by emphasising the 'beauty' of the affordable objects on display.

As early as 1922, Dana expressed his belief that aesthetic education could promote consumer independence:

Our women-folks, for instance, are doing more and more choosing for themselves in the matter of fabrics and dress design, even if they don't know that they are butting into the world of art the minute they do a thing like that . . . And when the masters of the ladies garment trade send out their edict, 'Skirts will be longer this season,' the American girl may tell them to guess again.

After the success of the 1925 Paris Exposition, French Art Deco became a dominant style in American goods. For those encouraging a uniquely American design idiom, the influence of the French style was understood as a major setback. In a 1929 Forbes

Fig 11. 'Inexpensive Items of Good Design', 1929. '. . . a parfait glass of shimmering green, then a rose-pink vase, a finger bowl of lapis and a lavender sherbet glass. Their prices: 19 cents, 25 cents, 25 cents, and 25 cents.'
article, Holger Cahill, a Newark Museum staff member and Dana's partner in the gospel of art-in-industry, roundly chided the Metropolitan for both embracing what he viewed as a decadent European trend and ignoring what he accepted as America's more humble and honest machine style. Cahill argued that American designers and artists should look not to Europe, but to American 'engineers and manufacturers (who) are making real contributions to modern design.' Referring to the Newark Museum's 1929 exhibit, 'Modern Design in Metal', Cahill noted that 'practically all the work [was] suited to mass production', and that the 'sales appeal of beauty wedded to utility . . . in this age of ours must always be the test of value in art in industry.'

Unlike most American manufacturers of the period, many European and American avant-garde artists of the 1910s and 1920s looked to American industry for aesthetic inspiration. In their search for an expressive idiom appropriate to the experience of modernity, they paid artistic homage to what they viewed as the energy and drama found in American industrial forms, such as grain silos and automobile factories. American industry was represented by many foreign and American artists as the locus of a machine style suited to modern living.

In 1932 Cahill became director of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. Two years later, MoMA's 'Machine Art' exhibition, a reverential display of machine tools, mechanical components, and industrial design inspired by machinery, officially sanctioned a neo-Platonic machine style as a uniquely American design aesthetic. The organizers of the exhibit, Philip Johnson and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MoMA's director, constructed an American aesthetic inspired by the geometric simplicity of Bauhaus design, but which claimed its pedigree in the vernacular of American machinery. In his catalogue essay Johnson proclaimed his preference for an 'industrial art' which was 'free from that tradition' of the 'Arts and Crafts'. He rejected the machine styles of the 'modernistic' French machine-age aesthetic and American 'principles such as "streamlining".' Instead, he praised the Bauhaus for what he considered their partial attainment of his ideal. However, he pinned his hopes on American industrial art, which he viewed as relatively free from Arts and Crafts influence and more dependent on the 'tradition of machine construction' which was 'purer and stronger', giving special mention to America's 'precision instruments' which have 'led the world'.

By 1929 Forbes had published a series of art-in-industry articles by Dana and Cahill, and had planned to compile them as a book. At this time big business was eager to take advantage of 'the cash value of art in industry' and John Cotton Dana was heralded as its apostle. Dana's 'Cash Value of Art in Industry' was the series' pivotal essay. It garnered substantial praise and generated great excitement within the business community. Having recognized the application of art to industry as an important way of selling goods, Forbes' vice president, Walter Dryden, personally wrote to 'practically every executive in America about art in industry', accompanying the correspondence with copies of Dana's article.

In a 1926 article, Dana wrote that the country's vernacular machine products provided the basis for a truly American aesthetic idiom. Dana noted that:

few of us, at the time the Newark Museum began its career, dared say that they found art and beauty in industry, in the products of American factories. But the fact is that it is precisely in industry that the most native and original art expression of America has come . . . who that counts himself civilized, in any continent, has not heard of American bathtubs, of American automobiles?

Three years later, Dana's friend Henry Kent applauded Dana's work in educating labourers and promoting the machine aesthetic. Writing in the Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kent noted that Dana did more than simply pioneer the exhibition of 'machine art'—he recognized it as a 'conscious' and collective impulse. Dana, Kent wrote:

saw the museum not only as an arbiter in questions of aesthetic taste, but also as a guiding influence in the problems of everyday occupations. He arranged exhibits of the industries of New Jersey, and of machine art, which he interpreted as the expression of creativeness on the part of a great conscious group, instead of merely the self-expression of one individual.

By 1929 the modern art establishment had recognized the machine style as an important aesthetic contribution. Many modernist artists and architects incorporated machine imagery into their compositions. Modern designers based their work on the simple forms found in industry. By 1934 MoMA had displayed its important, though programmatic,
‘Machine Art’ exhibition, which presented tools, machines and household goods as fine art.

Conclusion

During his two decades of museum work, Dana sought to reform labour, consumption, museum practice and industry. He vigorously discouraged alienated labour through his exhibitions. He energetically publicized the democratization of taste. The nation’s museum community watched closely and learned from Dana’s provocative work. Through gentle prodding, he led the Metropolitan and the American museum curators towards more inclusive practices, thus challenging traditional distinctions between fine art and utilitarian products. By the early 1930s, museums such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Metropolitan and MoMA included industrial goods in their remit. Through Dana’s articles in Forbes, industrial leaders were alerted to the ‘cash value of art in industry’. The idea that America had achieved its own artistic expression based on the formal qualities found in machines and mass-produced goods gained currency in the US and abroad. By 1929, Dana had effectively challenged the idea that the ‘beautiful’ had to be rare, expensive and old.

After Dana’s death on 21 July 1929, the leaders of the Metropolitan recognized his influence on the museum community. The president of the Metropolitan, Robert W. de Forest, wrote that ‘John Cotton Dana . . . was an inspiring and redoubtable leader in awakening our art museums and libraries to their real opportunities and in inspiring effective action.’

By assuming taste to be a necessary and significant part of social life, Dana addressed major issues of the early twentieth century: the degradation of labour in an industrial world, the autonomy of the individual in a consumer society and the development of an independent American aesthetic and identity. A year before his death, Dana looked back on his life’s work and, in a rare self-congratulatory moment, concluded:

[the ‘Modern German Applied Arts’ exhibition of 1912] was then not ignored, but not seen for what it was. Today the world is crazy about somewhat the same thing. Moreover, museums are tying themselves up to department stores, and I am coming into my own. Isn’t it grand?

Notes

1 H. Cahill, ‘America is making real progress in art’, Forbes, 1 April 1929, p. 22.
3 In his paper Dana argues that the exhibition of a glass of water could effectively teach the museum public about beauty. J. C. Dana, ‘In a changing world should museums change?’, Papers and Reports Read at the Twenty-first Annual Meeting of the American Association of Museums, New York City, 17—19 May 1926, American Association of Museums, No. 1, Washington, DC, 1926, p. 23.
4 From an obituary circa July 1929 Forbes reprinted in The Museum, Museum Association, Newark, NJ, p. 82.
8 For a history of the Metropolitan, see: C. Tompkins, Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, E. P. Dutton, 1972.
10 Robert W. de Forest, The Newarker, April 1929, p. 22.
1917 that required entrants' hand- or machine-made products to be based on the museum's collections. This restriction was dropped after 1924. MoMA's industrial design exhibits were concerned more with promoting mass-produced goods and included: 'Machine Art' exhibit of 1934, which aestheticized machine-made products; a series of useful products exhibits were focused on affordability, such as 'Useful Household Objects Under $5' (1938); 'One-hundred Useful Objects of Fine Design Available Under $100' (1947); and a group of 'Good Design' shows of 1950–5 emphasized modern design and the museum's role as an arbiter of taste.

9 'Art for the people's sake: the Newark Museum idea', New York Times, 20 April 1924, p. 12. J. C. Dana, 'Art in industry: products of machines are now shown in museums', New York Times, 15 April 1926. J. C. Dana, 'Cash value of art in industry', Forbes, 1 August 1928. J. C. Dana, 'Introduction', in E. E. Calkins, Business the Civilization, Little, Brown, and Company, 1928. The Museum, the Newark Museum's monthly journal, began publishing in March 1925 and was delivered to local press. It was explicitly designed to 'make the Newark Museum better known, to give it more publicity; to advertise it', March 1925, vol. 1, no. 1. The journal was also 'sent free to members of the American Museum Association; to other museums... to a few libraries and to many art, scientific and industrial journals', September 1926, vol. 1, no. 6.


11 J. C. Dana, 'Draft of Art in Industry Society Certificate of Incorporation', 1928, J. C. Dana, 'Cash value of art in industry', Forbes, 1 August 1928. J. C. Dana, 'Introduction', in E. E. Calkins, Business the Civilization, Little, Brown, and Company, 1928. The Museum, the Newark Museum's monthly journal, began publishing in March 1925 and was delivered to local press. It was explicitly designed to 'make the Newark Museum better known, to give it more publicity; to advertise it', March 1925, vol. 1, no. 1. The journal was also 'sent free to members of the American Museum Association; to other museums... to a few libraries and to many art, scientific and industrial journals', September 1926, vol. 1, no. 6.


13 Ibid., p. 381.


16 H. Cahill, 'John Cotton Dana and the Newark Museum', in Museum in Action: Presenting the Museum's Activities, Newark Museum, 1944, p. 24. Dana's interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement continued into 1924, when he was in contact with Ellen Gates Starr, co-founder of Chicago's Hull House, an important settlement house that embraced social reform politics and promoted the craftsman ideal to Chicago in the late 1890s. Letter from J. C. Dana to E. G. Starr of Hull House, Chicago, 19 October 1900, Dana Papers, Newark Public Library (hereafter referred to as Dana). Boris, op. cit., p. 45.


18 Letter from J. C. Dana to H. L. Johnson, 17 July 1912, Dana, p. 24.


20 Cahill, 'John Cotton Dana...', pp. 23-4. Ruskin and Morris did not completely reject 'the machine'. They criticized its misuse, but also sought to solve the 'problem' of how to 'marry, on a scale sufficient to provide affordable well-designed goods for the majority, the economics of mass-production to their requisite sense of the importance of job satisfaction and the 'joy of making' for the factory worker.' J. Woodham, Twentieth-Century Design, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1997, p. 14.


22 Alexander, op. cit., p. 395.


24 Dana accepted the librarianship of the Free Public Library of Newark, New Jersey on 18 December 1901. On 29 April 1909, the Newark Museum Association was chartered to establish its own metropolitan museum. Alexander, op. cit., pp. 386, 390.


26 Dana's best explication of his philosophy of the gazing museum can be found in Dana, 'The gloom of the museum', p. 399.


28 Alexander, op. cit., p. 284.

29 Smithsonian, Annual Report, 1881, p. 83.


31 Dana, 'The gloom of the museum', p. 399.


33 Dana, 'The gloom of the museum', p. 399.


35 Dana, 'The gloom of the museum', p. 399.


37 J. C. Dana, 'Draft of Art in Industry Society Certificate of Incorporation', 1928, Dana Letter from J. C. Dana to C. L. Dana, 3 November 1920, Dana Letter from C. L. Dana to J. C. Dana, 1920. Dana suggests that American industrialists and museum professionals look to Britain's recent efforts to establish a 'British Institute of Industrial Art', The New Relations of Museums and Industries, p. 6. The British government did establish the BIHA in 1920 with a government grant. This, however, was withdrawn after 1923-4.

38 Pulos, op. cit., p. 304.

39 Charles Richards, 'America's part in exhibition is threatened', The Museum News, vol. 1, no. 5, 1 March 1924, p. 2. Richards led a special commission of 100 representatives of trade association members, architects and designers to visit and report on the Paris exposition. Pulos, op. cit., p. 304. Richards' findings were published in US Department of
Nicolas Maffei


40 Pulos, op. cit., p. 304

41 The Werkbund exhibit travelled to the following locations: National Arts Club, New York, New York; The Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio; The John Herron Art Institute, Indianapolis, Indiana; City Art Museum, St Louis, Missouri.


43 Ibid., p. 39.

44 See Meikle, op. cit., Davies, op. cit., Shifman, op. cit. and Alexander, op. cit. J. Meikle notes that Dana 'led an industrial art museum movement', and that while 'a few smaller cities too poor for old masters, heeded his gospel of utilitarian beauty and opened up industrial art department. His most important convert was Richard F. Bach, who in 1918 began an industrial art program in the nation's most prestigious art museum, New York's Metropolitan', Meikle, op. cit., p. 20.


46 Lipton, op. cit., p. 40. However, the great cost of the show may have been a contributing factor in the Metropolitan's refusal.

47 Dana, 'Art in Industry', op. cit.

48 Ibid.

49 Cantor, op. cit., p. 342.

50 J. C. Dana, 'In a changing world should museums change?' Originally presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums held at the Metropolitan, New York, 19 May 1926. The Museum, vol. i, no 6, September, 1926, Museum Association, Newark, NJ, p. 82.


52 Alexander, op. cit., p. 403.


55 J. C. Dana, 'A museum of, for and by Newark', The Survey, no. 55, 1926, p. 615.


57 'Newark Museum is opened with private view', The Museum News, vol. III, no. 20, 1 April 1925, p. 3

58 'An industrial exhibit in a municipal museum', American City, July 1915, p 22.

59 Laidlaw, op. cit., p. 92.
81 Ibid.
82 Dana, 'The gloom of the museum', p. 400
83 Lipton, op. cit., p. 41.
84 Ibid. Dana, 'The gloom of the museum', p. 399.
86 M. Coult, 'In the interest of technical arts', reprint from Civic Pilot, September 1923.
89 Cahill, 'America is making real progress in art', p. 22.
93 Ibid.
94 J. C. Dana, 'How industrial leaders create ART', Forbes, June 15, 1929, pp. 38, 40, 42.
95 Dana, 'Cash value of art in industry', pp. 16-18, 32.
96 Ibid.
97 Dana, 'A museum of, for and by Newark', p. 614.
101 Letter from J. C. Dana to Jennie Hirsch, 2 June 1928, Dana.