

Can There Be Machine Art?

The New York Exhibit of Modern Art Is Challenged With the Observation That "Art Is an Excess Over Use—In the Perfect Machine There Can Be No Excess"

THE Museum of Modern Art in New York, is reported to have bought the contraption called "Mobile" by **Alexander Calder**, mentioned in the March 17 DIGEST as among the sculpture exhibits at the Municipal Art Exhibition at the Rockefeller Center. It is an arrangement of metal disks suspended from a rod and designed to move in a current of air. It is companion to another "Mobile," showing suspended disks and weights within a circular wire exhibiting an exquisite balance and charming mobility of action. But one asked if here was sculpture.

That one of these caught the fancy of the Museum's director helps to explain the choice of the exhibition of "machine art" now going on there.

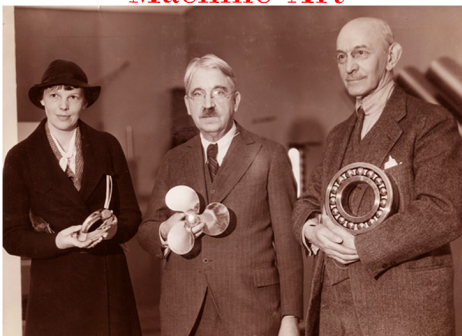
The objects shown represent a collection of bottles, glass jars, flasks of graduated sizes, wooden salad and berry bowls, flat white porcelain plates, cream jars, knives, spoons, ladles and other domestic utensils; industrial utensils such as self-aligning ball-bearing, and an outboard propeller; office equipment comprising a lavatory panel, stream-line metal sink, a dictaphone, cash register, a door knob and lock. There are scientific instruments, chairs and tables.

This large agglomeration is so well arranged as to suggest artistic feeling and the pieces are executed in the most modern spirit of utility, without encumbering or foolish ornament, designed with the last economy of means to accomplish the ends they are to serve.

But why brought together in an art museum? as some of the critics ask, who refuse to be beguiled by the name of Plato, whose pronouncement is the Museum's text from which it preaches:

"By beauty of shapes I do not mean, as most people would suppose, the beauty of living figures or of pictures, but to make my point clear, I mean straight lines and circles and shapes, plain or solid, made from them by lathe, ruler and square. These are not, like other things, beautiful relatively, but always and absolutely."

Then as if to point a moral justification the catalog quotes from L. P. Jack's "Responsibility and Culture": "Industrial civilization must either find a means of ending the divorce between its industry and its 'culture' or perish."



Judges of Most Beautiful Products in Machine Art

(Left to right) Amelia Earhart, holding large spring; Prof. John Dewey, with out-board propeller; and Charles R. Richards, with ball-bearing

The challenge was taken up by Royal Cortissoz, art critic of the New York *Herald Tribune*, who declared that "the passage quoted does not give a sanction to the exhibition at all." A work of art "presupposes the intervention of the artist in a very personal sense," so art and the machine can have no congress with each other. Our pleasure in art "springs not merely from the artist's handling of forms but from his emotion, his imagination, his whole character."

Plato himself, Mr. Cortissoz pointed out, would have been just the man to point the distinction between art and the machine, only he never got around to it, and "it is reasonable to assume that he never foresaw the necessity of exposing the difference between a spiral spring and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel."

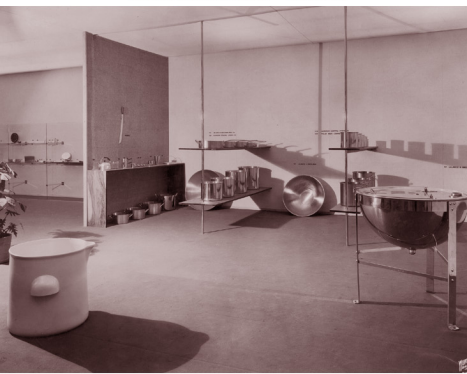
Mr. Cortissoz bolstered his argument by quoting Dr. Jowett, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, and famous translator of Plato, who wrote: "Plato knows nothing of schools nor of the history of art. . . . Art, according to the conception of Plato, is not a collection of canons of criticism, but rather a subtle influence which pervades all things animate, as well as inanimate. He judges art by one test, 'simplicity,' but under this he includes moderation, purity and harmony of proportion." Architecture and sculpture, music and poetry he placed under censorship in "The Republic." The "illusions" of painting and the "false proportions" of sculpture he regarded as a sort of magic. "He has observed that excessive devotion to art is apt to produce effeminacy of character."

Perhaps some parts of the above paragraph might seem to support the Museum's choice of material for exhibition, but Mr. Cortissoz's final shot was that "for once, the Museum in its intense desire to be modern has overplayed its hand."

Likewise Henry McBride (New York *Sun*) threw up his hands in dismay:

"If you should happen to be a plumber—gracious heavens! how this show will set you up!

Machine Art



“There can be no infinitesimal trace of art in an object made by machinery. That is not what art is. A suspicion of art may attach to the construction of the machine but not to the product itself. It must be called by some other name than art. And the machine would certainly not be hampered by such a clog as art if the complete communists could have their way. Art is an excess over use. In the perfect machine there is no excess.”

Despite the critics the galleries accommodated many interested visitors, and many accepted the management’s invitation to sign a card stating their choice of the most beautiful object.

One critic, Emily Genauer (*World-Telegram*) fell in with modernist doctrine and declared the exhibition is a display of beautiful objects, “whether their fine design was conceived by artist or engineer, or is merely a concomitant of mass production,” and it stands in line with what the most modern artists aim at, whether you accept or reject them.

“This is an era that abhors sentimentality and pretense. It is rational, material and secular. It responds primarily to concepts of reason, science and economics. And it translates itself into an art that has as its basis utter simplicity of design and the rejection of elaboration. Modern design stems directly from the machine, recognizing honestly the fact that since the machine governs our existence, we must assimilate it esthetically.”

L I T E R A R Y D I G E S T