

First Municipal Gallery

Davenport has long been a friend of the arts and sciences. The Academy of Science opened its own building back in 1878. The city helped sponsor a Tri-City orchestra as early as 1916. In 1921 Davenport residents raised \$31,000 to entertain the National Federation of Music Clubs. It is not too surprising, then, that four years later Davenport opened one of the first municipally-owned and operated public art galleries in the United States. The story behind this achievement is worth telling.

Early in 1925 the city of Davenport accepted a gift of over 300 paintings from the private collection of C. A. Ficke, a prominent attorney and former mayor. However, the gift was made with the provision that the city should make it the nucleus of "The Davenport Municipal Art Gallery." It also required that a suitable building and some funds be provided for the maintenance of the Gallery. In order to make a public project of this, it was necessary to introduce a law in the Forty-first General Assembly "authorizing the establishment of municipal art galleries in cities acting under special charter having a population of fifty thousand (50,000) or more, providing for the appoint-

ment of a board of art trustees for the management of such galleries, and fixing the duties, powers and responsibilities of such board."

Following the enactment of this law, the newly-appointed board of nine trustees was faced with the problem of finding a building suitable for use as a Gallery. It was at this time that the old Armory building and skating rink belonging to the city was turned over to the Board, and funds were appropriated to remodel it into a Gallery and to hire a Director and the necessary staff. The Davenport Municipal Art Gallery was consequently opened to the public in October, 1925.

This was just the beginning. The Gallery in less than three years became such a part of the community life that newspapers boasted in paid advertisements about Davenport having "The First Municipal Art Gallery in Iowa," and cartoons about the Gallery's activities also appeared in the local papers. The original collection of C. A. Ficke was evaluated by Mr. Harshe, an expert from the Chicago Art Institute, and found to contain the largest group of Mexican colonial paintings in this country with representative examples of such painters as Echave, Juarez, and Arteaga.

To this collection other purchases have been added, purchases which were made possible by additional donors such as Dr. C. T. Lindley, Clara Brandt, and L. W. Ramsey. Funds were also

available for purchases from the Friends of Art, an auxiliary organization which incorporated in 1928 to help the Gallery program with financial assistance from its membership dues. Recently, a donor program has been worked out by the Board and the Director, creating a plan for the disposal of gifts for purchases. Recently also this building-up of the permanent collection has been linked with the children's art program, which will be described later.

How much is the Davenport Gallery used? The attendance figures for 10 months in 1946-1947 (the Gallery is closed each summer during July and August) ran as high as 31,400. Naturally the greatest assets are the studio space and the exhibition rooms. But these are by no means all. The Gallery has become almost as much a part of the public life of the city as the public library and the city parks. For example, pictures from the Gallery are circulated on loan to other civic buildings such as the YMCA and the Chamber of Commerce. The Gallery is also available for use by clubs and for small musicales. It sponsors lectures and films on art or related subjects. It is used for Sunday teas and lectures. It has sponsored exhibits of national importance such as the Britannica Collection (April, 1947) and the Gallery holds annual exhibits of local and regional artists. There is an art library containing material

on the history of art which is available for circulation, and finally there is a community art room which sponsors an art fair to encourage the sale of work by local artists and to make such work available to the public.

Thus it is evident that the public comes to the Davenport Municipal Gallery. It is also evident that the Gallery projects its activities into the community. One of the most interesting and important phases of this is the children's program on which a great deal of time and thought has been spent.

Since the Gallery is municipally owned, the selection of children for the Saturday art classes has been put on a democratic basis. There is a quota system worked out so that one out of every 150 school children may have instruction. Selection of these children who range from 7 to 18 years is made on the basis of suggestions from the individual schools which send a list made up of pupils showing particular interest and talent in art. There is always a waiting list beyond the number accepted — a number which has at the present grown to 130. The children are charged 50 cents for their materials, but their instruction is paid for by the Friends of Art. So great is the enthusiasm for these classes, that the Gallery hopes to be able to expand this program to include all children who are interested in art whether or not

they have any initial talent in drawing or painting.

These Saturday classes are by no means the extent of the program for children. They are encouraged also to attend traveling exhibits and tours are arranged for the schools of Davenport, Rock Island, and Moline as well as for rural schools of the area. Special groups such as Camp Fire Girls and Girl Scouts also have tours arranged for them. For two years now all children of the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades have been coming to the Gallery to help select a painting for the permanent collection. In November of 1946 the children even contributed nickels and pennies toward the purchase of Aaron Bohrod's "Merry Go Round" which they chose as their favorite from a current exhibition. The next year they selected Fletcher Martin's "The Matador"; the Gallery, however, on that occasion purchased the canvas. In the words of the Director, Elizabeth A. Moeller, "We are employing the democratic process of having our people help us in the selection of some of our acquisitions — quite in contrast to what was once done in galleries."

The unique way in which school and Gallery work together in Davenport was recently publicized in the February, 1948, issue of *School Arts*. The Rock Island schools have responded to the Gallery's excellent program for children by sponsoring an art essay contest. Children come to the

Gallery, study the paintings (usually during a show of local Rock Island artists), and then write competitive essays for which awards are made to the schools as well as to the individuals. It is hoped that this program eventually will lead to a child's gallery as well as to informal classes for all children who are interested in art.

The program of instruction at the Davenport Gallery is not limited to children. There are currently three adult art classes in painting, in design, and in figure and portrait drawing. For two of these classes college credit is given and instructors are borrowed from the art department of St. Ambrose College.

One of the most interesting exhibits at the Davenport Municipal Gallery is the one for "Art and Artists along the Mississippi." The first was held in 1940, with a second in 1941, after which the exhibit was given up during the war years. Plans are underway, however, to revive this show in 1949. Designed for artists along the Mississippi Valley from Minneapolis to New Orleans, it has shown both amateurs and established artists such as Emil Ganzo, Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, Aaron Bohrod, and Thomas Benton. Related naturally to the development of regional consciousness in the Middle West, this show at least furnishes an exhibit outlet for the many local artists who until fairly recently were dependent on

eastern galleries to furnish opportunities for their work to be shown.

The Davenport Municipal Gallery, through its classes, exhibitions, tours, circulating art library, and lectures on art appreciation has become a vital part of the cultural life of the entire community. It still has problems but its possibilities are much greater than its problems. Gradually the Gallery rooms have been relighted and redecorated, permanent storage racks have been built, and a conservation program for at least the most valuable items of the permanent collection has been put into effect. The old armory and skating rink at 120 West Fifth Street has come a long way in the last twenty-five years.

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