

A “New Museum” and a “New Library” a Century Ago

The Career of John Cotton Dana, Radical Democrat

Carol Duncan (Professor Emeritus at Ramapo College)

My talk this afternoon is about John Cotton Dana, famous in his day as a reformer of American public libraries and museums. From 1902 until his death in 1929, he headed the Public Library of Newark, New Jersey, a city that was only a few miles West of New York; in 1913, he also became director of the Newark Museum. My talk will begin with his career as a librarian and will then turn to his museum work. But first, I want to say a little about Dana’s youth and the generation of reformers to which he belonged.



fig. 1 Denver, Colorado around 1900

Dana was born 1856 in the Northeastern state of Vermont. The Dana family were prosperous merchants and professionals with a long history of political and church leadership. The young Dana was supposed to become a lawyer, but he developed a strong loathing for that profession while still a student. At the age of 26, having finished his studies, instead of joining a law firm, he took a train to the Western city of Denver, Colorado [fig. 1] (You can see the Rocky Mountains in the distance). There he lived and worked for the next several years, doing various odd jobs, all the while pursuing an ambitious reading program that had nothing to do with the legal profession. He read broadly, from ancient Greek and Latin poets to contemporary fiction. He was increasingly drawn to the work of modern scientists and social sciences—for example, Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, men who continued the scientific and philosophical inquiries of European Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century. The more he read of this “new learning,” as it was called, the more critical he became of the narrow Protestant teachings fed to him at home and at school. Soon he began to publish essays and criticism in newspapers and journals, becoming known as a man of modern ideas, fiercely secular and democratic in outlook, with a special interest in education.

Dana’s career would unfold during the period in American history known as the Progressive Era, the late 19th century and the first one or two decades of the 20th. It was a period that saw the formation of giant corporations and also the influence of

these corporations on government, a development that, in the eyes of many, was a serious and corrupting danger to American democracy. The growing presence of immigrants in the nation's industrializing cities posed what some thought another threat to the democracy since so many of the new-comers were uneducated and ill-prepared to assume the role of responsible citizens. Dana was one of a number of Progressive era reformers who responded to these conditions with fresh ideas and new kinds of institutional forms. The two best-known reformers of this era were John Dewey and Jane Addams. Dewey, who is still studied as an important Pragmatist philosopher, also led the reform of American schools. Jane Adams was a founder of Hull-House, a social and cultural center located in the middle of a Chicago slum that offered practical help and education to immigrant children and their parents. Like Dana, these and other reformers understood that they were living through a period of rapid social and economic change. In their view, threats to American democracy could be met only by expanding and reforming education—the education of adults as well as children, both native and foreign-born. Accordingly, they spent their lives redesigning and secularizing the nation's core educational institutions: Dewey took on childhood education, Jane Addams invented modern social work, and Dana redefined the American public library and then tried to do the same thing to art museums.

Dana entered library work in 1889 in Denver, where he had been living for some time. Denver owed its existence to the completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad, which, almost overnight, turned it from a small town into a thriving, good-sized city [fig. 2]. When the city government decided to establish a public library, Dana, by now well known as a progressive-minded writer, was chosen to direct it. The library he created was as different as possible from the conventional libraries he knew as a child. Libraries in the 19th century were very much the literary counterparts to art museums. Just as museums collected old-master paintings, drawings, and sculpture, so libraries stocked literary classics of the past. Both libraries and art museums were pitched to educated middle or upper-class adults, offering them for enlightenment, spiritual uplift, and cultivated pleasure. Librarians were seen as custodians of high culture. They decided what books the public could read and were expected to keep off their shelves vulgar or morally dubious works. Visitors to libraries were not allowed to peruse the shelves on their own. In short, libraries were known as stuffy, prissy, high-toned places patronized by ladies and gentlemen.

Dana developed an entirely different kind of library. He did not do this single-handedly; at the time, there was a movement to modernize libraries in both the



fig. 2 Denver, Colorado, around 1900

United States and Great Britain. Dana was among the most inventive of the library reformers, and he quickly became its most articulate leader. The library he created in Denver became famous as the model of a modern, democratic institution [fig. 3]. Its shelves were fully open to the public, giving readers a freedom that many conservative librarians found worrisome. A special room allowed children the same free browsing. The library's doors were open seven days a week, twelve hours a day, to better accommodate working people, and red tape and restrictions were reduced to a minimum. Breaking with the dignified, elitist tone most libraries sought, Dana attracted new library users by advertising the library in the city's newspapers. He also laid out for his staff clear directives for creating a welcoming, democratic environment. The staff was not to affect an official air or patronize users or correct them. They were (in Dana's words) to

“treat boy and girl, man and woman, ignorant and learned, gracious and rude, with uniform good temper, without condescension, never pertly... [They were to take special pains to] put the shrinking and embarrassed visitor at once at ease.”



fig. 3 Reading room and open stacks, Denver Public Library, 1893



fig. 4 Newspaper room, Denver Public Library, 1893



fig. 5 Denver Public Library, 1893, detail

The democratic library, as Dana conceived it, not only made people feel comfortable; it also provided for everyone's interests, no matter what their age or education. It offered all kinds of things that traditional libraries shunned, including newspapers, popular novels and magazines, technical manuals, and “ephemera” — materials such as directories or other publications that became obsolete and periodically needed to be replaced [fig. 4]. As Dana often said, the public library belongs to the public, not just some of the public. It is safe to assume that he directed the

taking of these photographs [fig. 5]. It can be no accident that the reader closest to the viewer in this picture (the second man on the left) is pointedly a poorly-dressed working man and possibly not white.

The effort to engage a wide public served a purpose broader than simply satisfying individual interests. It also produced social value. If the many could learn to use the library in the way Dana imagined—and this meant discovering and developing their individual potentials—then the more people there would be creating, discovering, and inventing new things and new ideas, and the more society would benefit from their artistic, technological, and intellectual activity. The democratic library was therefore an engine of progress, an instrument that, more than any other, could foster change. Dana, who was fond of saying that all progress is change, saw his job as facilitating what he believed was a process that happens naturally once it gets going. The trick was to get people into the library in the first place. Even those who first came to the library to read popular novels or magazines, once inside, would eventually find their way to more serious fare.

Central to Dana's concept of progress is the place of debate and opposition. He believed that the innovative mind—the kind of mind that invents new ways of thinking and doing things and thus pushes society forward—this kind of mind is fed by opposition. Progress comes not from unquestioned conformism to established authority but rather from challenges to authority and the free play of ideas. The public library—he called it the people's university—is the place that most fosters this process. Unlike actual universities, libraries have no teachers to grade or censor thought. It is better to be in a room full of adults who come together freely to examine ideas about subjects of common interest, he said. "With no thought of textbooks, university degrees, or accepted canons, each one [puts] forth heartily his own ideas." We are always in danger of submitting too much to authority, he warned. "There is a growing tendency in this country, as in others, to unify all systems of education so...that from the beginning to the very end of his school life the child shall be in the hands of people of one mind and one thought..." When all education is so unified, the thought of the nation becomes homogenized, and new ideas are squelched before they can be tested. True education occurs only outside the reach of authority. "We shall not have true education in this or any other country" he said, "until we have utterly eliminated the teacher."

Dana's library had to be completely free of censorship. Everyone, young and old, educated and uneducated, must have unrestricted access to the *entire range* of ideas, information, and cultural forms circulating in the public realm at any given moment. A society that continuously makes and remakes itself, pragmatically moving from one provisional truth to the next, requires an open, laissez-faire environment of uncensored discourse, an environment in which the freedom to think, speak, and dissent are guaranteed by law and safeguarded by institutional practices. This, in Dana's view, is exactly what libraries do best. "The library," he declared, "should be a mental irritant in the community; it should help make the old fresh, the strange tolerable, the new questionable, and all things wonderful."

Dana took on his new job as Denver's first public librarian eager to put these

convictions into practice. One of the first things he did was issue a call to the community for new, preferably controversial, ideas. Ours is a period of rapid change, he wrote, a period when “old ideas, for centuries considered as above criticism, are freely challenged.” Everyone with new ideas about how the world can be improved, was invited to bring to the Denver Public Library books, pamphlets, and any other materials advocating whatever causes they wish to advance. As far as Dana was concerned, the more radical the ideas, the better. This is a photo of him dates from 1893, when he was at his most radically and fervently democratic, and most confident that American public libraries, were the engines that would change the world [fig. 6]. And here he is, a new kind of librarian, overseeing not just a collection of books, but a complex, dialectical process of social and cultural change.

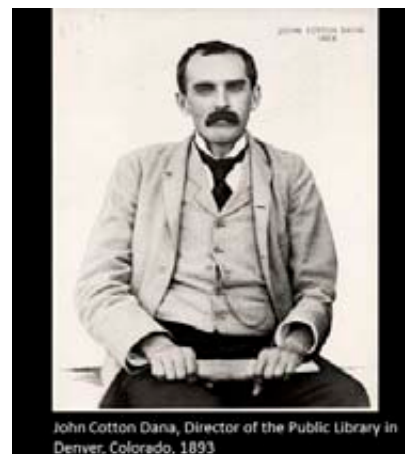


fig. 6 John Cotton Dana, Director of the Public Library in Denver, Colorado, 1893

He did everything he could think of to support groups of people seeking to change the city for the better. He bought books and other materials relevant to their interests and provided them with meeting rooms in which they could plan their actions. Colorado was one of five Western states that granted women the right to vote and hold public office in the 19th century [fig. 7]. Women were the city’s most active, organized, and effective reformers, especially in the public school system. In fact, it was thanks to a women’s campaign that the city brought into existence its first public library. In the Denver Public Library, no group was better served.



fig. 7 Women’s Reading Room, Denver Public Library, 1893

Just a few miles west of New York City, Newark manufactured everything from chemicals and machinery to hats, beer, and cakes [fig. 8]. By 1910, its population stood at 350,000; it had more than tripled its size in the previous 40 years and would continue to grow at the same pace. Most of its growth came from massive waves of immigrants recruited from



fig. 8 Downtown Newark, New Jersey, 1916

all corners of Europe by the city’s expanding industries. The city was a patchwork quilt of working-class German, Irish, Jewish, Greek, Italian, Chinese and African-American neighborhoods. Altogether, two of every three people were foreign born or children of the foreign born.



fig. 9 Newark Public Library

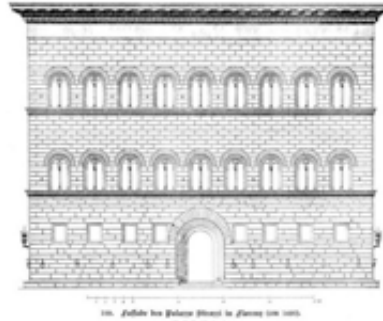


fig. 10 Strozzi Palace, Florence



fig. 11 Strozzi Palace, Florence, Italy



fig. 12 Newark Public Library interior



fig. 13 Newark Public Library, finished in 1900

Newark’s development was firmly in the control of its industrial and commercial leaders. They were determined to make it a modern, well-run city, the kind of place that was beneficial to capital investors. They paved streets, built sewers, schools, parks, and streetcar lines, and then began to ornament their city with public buildings and monuments. In 1900, an expensive new library building was completed [fig. 9]. Its architects had based their design on one or two 15th century Italian Renaissance palaces. In both Europe and the United States, Renaissance architecture stood for the pinnacle of civilized achievement, and the best architects borrowed features from it liberally. Such buildings brought dignity and prestige to a city and—not incidentally—enhanced the social status of its ruling elites. On the right is a drawing of the Strozzi Palace in Florence [fig. 10], a famous example of Italian Renaissance architecture and supposedly a source of Newark Library’s design [fig. 9]. The library’s interior court follows its Italian model even more closely [figs. 11, 12]. (In Dana’s view, such expensive architecture was a waste of money that could be better spent on books, but he did not say this publically—at least, not at first.) And

here is a later photo—what the building looks like today [fig. 13].

Dana came to his new job as determined as ever to make the library a great center of learning, entertainment, and progress. The city of Newark, however, presented him with far greater challenges and obstacles than he had encountered before. Encouraging children to become serious readers had always been one of his chief goals. In Newark, few the city's thousands of immigrant children stayed in school beyond their adolescent years. Their families needed them to go to work, and in the shop and factory jobs that awaited them, intellectual curiosity and independence of mind were rarely an advantage. The businessmen who ran the city and controlled the budget of the public library were more interested in securing an obedient, technically efficient labor force. Dana sometimes clashed with them when they failed to underwrite his democratic policies, but he never really confronted the contradiction between his democratic values—his belief that every individual has a right to realize his full potential—and the constraints that poverty and class imposed on its workers. Notwithstanding his genuine love of democratic values, he was, at bottom, a bourgeois liberal. He saw businessmen as the real movers and shakers of society, the people whose enterprising commercial and manufacturing knowledge brought the greatest material progress to the most people.

Nevertheless, he worked hard to find a balance between his democratic idealism and the realities of Newark's class system. He created an innovative new business branch of the library, and at the same time, he put branches of the public library in the middle of immigrant neighborhoods and stocked their shelves with books written in languages that immigrants could read. His library staff made sure that foreign workers and their children felt at home, something that did not always happen in American cities with large immigrant populations. For those children who could not get to a branch library, he created a library on wheels and sent it to them [fig. 14].



fig. 14 Newark Public Library book wagon, c. 1928

I turn now to Dana's career as a museum director. His interest in visual culture began long before he moved to Newark. Already in Denver, he had embraced the idea that people were not born with a taste for beauty; they acquired it from their culture and surroundings. Wishing to promote the public's visual literacy, he decorated the Denver library with prints and art objects and kept the shelves well stocked with books on art, architecture and design. In Denver and later in Newark, he created data bases consisting of thousands of prints and photographs of artistic,

scientific, and technological interest, all catalogued and easily accessed [fig. 15].

The belief that beauty could be a part of everyday life was widespread in the early years of the twentieth century on both sides of the Atlantic—widespread, that is, among educated people. Critics often pointed to Japan as a model of visual culture. Popular Japanese prints of the 19th century were avidly admired as objects that could give even modest households a touch of visual pleasure without great expense. In Denver, Dana hung Japanese prints on the walls of library reading rooms. Later, in Newark, he built a major collection of them. He used them to prove that aesthetic values need not be confined to art museums and galleries. Beauty, he argued, could be found in all kinds of things, not just in paintings and sculpture. He was one of the first to find aesthetic value in the comics and cartoons that appeared in Sunday newspapers and in bill-board posters. As he told a group of school teachers in 1906:

“The house, the common everyday house, the chair, the table, the pitcher, the cup, ... the picture in the Sunday paper, ..., on the bill-boards, these are the things you daily and hourly see, here is where if anywhere you ... should teach the children to see clearly, to have a feeling for or against.”

Throughout his career, he would take great pleasure in deflating high culture and espousing the aesthetic values of popular culture and mass-produced objects.

So in 1909 when Newark’s wealthy businessmen announced the creation of the Newark Museum, Dana was very interested. The men behind the new institution—the museum trustees—hoped that one day soon, they would be able to give their museum a new building of its own, but for the present time, it would occupy the two upper floors of the library. In fact, the library’s upper floor had been designed to function as galleries [fig. 13]. It’s hard to see in this photograph, but there is a large space under the roof that made a good gallery space [fig. 16]. Dana managed



fig. 16 Art Gallery on the 4th floor of the Newark Public Library, ca 1909



fig. 15 Picture Collection, Newark Public Library

the museum informally for a few years, and then, in 1913, became its official director—with no increase in salary. By then, his accomplishments as a library reformer had earned him a national reputation. He now set his sights on becoming a reformer of art museums. He began thinking about how he could translate his library reforms into

museum practices. Soon he began campaigning for a new museum building in which to house what he called a new museum idea. The people he most needed to convince were the museum's wealthy trustees [fig. 17]. The city government contributed funds to the library's expenses, but new buildings depended on private donations.



fig. 17 Newark Museum, Board of Trustees

Dana's new museum idea was not at all what the trustees had in mind when they drew up the charter of the Newark Museum. Their goal was to create a conventional art museum as much as possible like New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art or Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. At the time, the United States was in the middle of a wave of art-museum building. The period is often referred to as the Gilded Age. Lasting from the end of the 19th century to the War of 1914, the Gilded Age was a period of enormous industrial growth, the accumulation of great fortunes, the building and furnishing of lavish mansions, and the construction of grandiose municipal museums. The Metropolitan Museum of Art [fig. 18] and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts [fig. 19] were the envy of upper classes in almost every American city. In their turn, these grand palaces of art did all they could to emulate European national galleries like The Louvre Museum in Paris or the National Gallery in London. Smaller cities like Newark were thus trying to imitate what were already imitations. Still, even a small public art collection could advertise a city's prosperity and provide a flattering frame for its ruling classes—membership on a museum board of trustees confirmed one's place in a city's upper crust. Of course, the grander the museum, the greater the light it could reflect on its donors.



fig. 18 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City



fig. 19 Boston Museum of Fine Arts

It is important to mention another factor driving this age of American art-museum building. In many American cities, Newark included, the overwhelming

presence of immigrants could alarm its so-called “old-stock” Americans—people of Northern European ancestry who settled in the New World generations before. Many among them feared becoming culturally and politically eclipsed by the newcomers. Art-museums, symphony orchestras, and other such cultural institutions could decisively certify Northern European art traditions as the official high culture of America. Art-museum officials often claimed that their institutions united the diverse classes and ethnic groups of a city into one community by providing them with a single high culture, but almost everywhere, the bulk of museum visitors were educated, white Protestants belonging to the middle and upper classes. Museums affirmed the authority of what was, after all, the high culture of the American ruling class.

Invariably, the new municipal museums referenced one or another moment of the classical past—periods considered the pinnacle periods of Western civilization. Boston put a Greek temple in the middle of its façade while the Metropolitan Museum in New York copied an ancient Roman bath. Other cities chose to follow the example of Italian Renaissance palaces. The more expensive and impressive the architecture, the more eager were American millionaires to be listed as donors to it. Legions of them flocked to Europe, where they gathered art treasures by the boat-load. As a consequence, the museums of Boston, New York, Chicago, and other cities accumulated large reserves of (supposedly) old-master paintings, rare tapestries, antique furniture, and much else that was old and expensive. Newly rich financiers, railway barons, and steel magnates especially sought objects once owned by kings, dukes, or princes of the church. In this way, public art collections became stage-settings where members of banking and industrial elites could represent themselves in the borrowed luster of bygone royalty and aristocracy.

Dana loved pointing to the absurdity of American museums built to look like “temples of dead gods” or “copies of palaces of an extinct nobility.” American museums, he complained, are gloom-filled structures whose displays are boring to most people, tiring to everyone, and useful to only a few. At most they testify to “conspicuous waste by the rich” and to the “unwise expenditure of public funds.” The reference to “conspicuous waste” comes from the writings of the American political economist Thorstein Veblen. His book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, was widely read, and Dana was among its most enthusiastic admirers. In it, Veblen compares the super-rich of the Gilded Age to primitive savages—quite the opposite of their self-image as cultivated and civilized. Their insatiable appetites for costly luxuries, immense houses, and stupendous art collections were but different ways of conspicuously wasting wealth. The point of such waste, Veblen maintained, is to visibly display class—to distinguish the upper class from its social inferiors—those on whose productive creativity and labor the idle rich parasitically live. Dana relished Veblen’s ideas and often applied them to art collections. The museums of New York, Boston and other cities, he wrote, are little more than elaborate exercises in class identity. He wrote scathingly of the uncritical admiration and outrageous market value bestowed on objects just because they were old and rare. He especially targeted the faded oil paintings that American millionaires bought believing them

(often erroneously) to be masterpieces of the past.

Dana understood that the trustees of the Newark Museum, if left on their own, would follow the lead of New York and Boston. Very soon after the museum's founding, he began writing and giving speeches about a different museum possibility, a museum that looks not to the past but to the future. Instead of copying Greek Temples and Renaissance palaces, he proposed high-rise museum buildings, functional structures with steel frames that would look like modern factory or office buildings.

Instead of the gloomy, tomb-like silence of conventional galleries, his museum would be full of learning, intellectually engaged, aesthetically stimulated, adults. And there would be plenty of noisy, active children eagerly touching things, playing with them, and asking questions of a well-prepared and well-paid educational staff—as in this photograph of a 1916 exhibition of textiles in which children could try out and touch the exhibits [fig. 20]. “It is easy for a museum to get objects,” he wrote, “it is hard for a museum to get brains.”

Instead of a shrine to the possessions of ruling elites past and present, Dana's museum would stimulate thoughts about modern life outside the museum, like good libraries or progressive schools. It would have a lending department so that people could take home items and study them at leisure. Teachers could borrow interesting things for their classrooms, and the staff would send small, travelling exhibits into department stores, post offices, and other places where people thronged. And, of course, there would be an up-to-date education department whose staff, guided by the writings of John Dewey, understood that children learn best by doing things, not by memorizing.

Dana always stressed the importance of aesthetic values in everyday life. Like other intellectuals, he decried the ugliness and blight of modern industrial cities and the hideous designs of machine-made objects of everyday use. But while others preached a return to a craft economy, Dana accepted the machine age as here to stay. He insisted that machine-made objects could be beautiful if designers took up the



fig. 20 Children at an exhibition of textiles, Newark Museum, 1916



fig. 21 Werkbund Exhibition, Newark Museum, 1912

challenge of learning the formal vocabulary of the machine and what its aesthetic strengths could be. The museum did hold exhibitions of fine arts and crafts, but whenever he could, Dana privileged well-designed, machine-made things, including books and prints, over painting and sculpture. One of his aims was to foster a culture of consumerism that would democratize aesthetic quality. The first ambitious exhibition he



fig. 22



fig. 23

Poster from the Werkbund Exhibition, Newark Museum, 1912

brought to the museum was the 1912 show of products made by a group of German manufacturers dedicated to good design [fig. 21]. The Werkbund Exhibition included machine-made objects that seemed to reach for a new aesthetic, and it was full of useful everyday things like textiles, tableware, inexpensive prints, and pottery. There were also examples of modern graphic design, like these advertising posters [figs. 22, 23]. Dana relished exhibiting objects like comics and advertising posters that would never be seen in conventional museums. One of his most successful shows was called “Inexpensive Objects.” Everything in it was chosen by museum staff members, who went to local department stores with instructions to purchase well-designed, machine-made objects costing between 10 and 50 cents [fig. 24]. The results were installed under a large sign that proclaimed: “Beauty has no relation to price, rarity or age.” (Note the Japanese print in the lower right corner). Here are more examples [fig. 25]. The point was that beauty was within reach of even poor households if they learned to recognize it.



fig. 24 Case of Inexpensive Objects costing 50 cents or less, Newark Museum, 1929



fig. 25 “Beauty has no relation to price, rarity or age
NO ARTICLE IN THIS CASE COST MORE THAN FIFTY CENTS”

In Dana's museum, beauty not only could be inexpensive and machine made, and it could also be produced by non-white peoples. The museum collected and displayed as art things that other museums considered "ethnographic artifacts," a category thought to have less aesthetic value and spiritual import than European "fine arts" [fig. 26]. These African rugs, for example, were treated as objects worthy of serious aesthetic attention, each one framed and isolated in its own compartment. The installation dates from 1930, but the museum had developed a modern, white-walled exhibition style many years before. Dana himself had designed the museum's simple glass cases in 1912.

During the many years that the Newark Museum was housed in the library building, Dana's energies went mostly into temporary exhibitions. The most ambitious ones were meant to demonstrate his idea for a new museum and, hopefully, to convince the men with money to fund a new building for it. Eventually, in 1926, after years of campaigning, one of the trustees came up with the money. A short walk from the Library, the building is a successful fusion of streamlined form and simplified volumes on the one hand, and echoes of classical arcades and entablatures on the other—a far cry from the factory structure Dana once proposed, but modern enough [fig. 27].

In planning the installation for it, Dana, bowing just a little to convention, set aside a room or two near the entrance and hung them with the kind of oil paintings that found favor among the trustees. His original idea had been to fill the entire museum with well-designed objects of utility, including machines and machine parts and striking examples of cartoons and advertising posters—like this poster from his Werkbund show of 1912 [fig. 22]. By now he accepted that the museum should exhibit and collect painting, but he insisted that it should be paintings, prints and drawings by living American artists, preferably artists living in or around the city—this at a time when rich Americans still hankered after European old masters and when fashionable critics looked down their noses at work they considered "provincial" or "regional." Dana argued that if a museum really wants to bring art into the lives of the majority, it must foster a robust market for artists living in the community so that the artists can earn a living from their art and produce

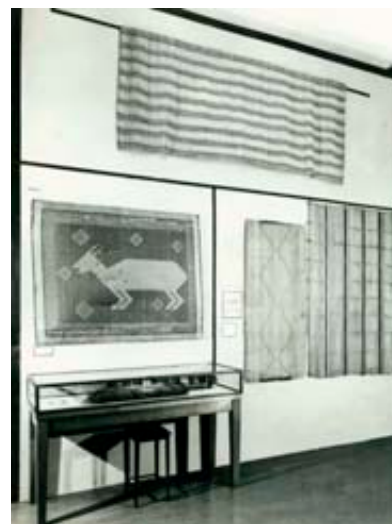


fig. 26 African rugs, in an exhibition of rugs and floor coverings, 1930



fig. 27 Newark Museum, 1926

things that ordinary people can afford. Dana, aware that he was a poor judge of modern art, delegated the job of curating it to someone who was. As a consequence, the Newark Museum amassed a remarkable collection of American art from the early 20th century.

When I began to research Dana and his museum, I wondered how he managed to avoid so much of the standard museum practices of his day and how he got away with being so irreverent. In time, I concluded that he got away with it largely because Newark was a city of the second tier. It was small potatoes. The men who extracted their fortunes from its industries and who sought status as fashionable art collectors could take their art money elsewhere if they did not like the doings of the Newark Museum.