



INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.



WHEN the Great Exhibition of 1851 was first put in motion, its promoters knew little of the probable success of such a display—of the extent to which it would be supported by exhibitors or visited by the public. They could only be encouraged by the records of certain exhibitions which had been merely national in character and design. They were fed upon statistics, more or less reliable, which sometimes led them to hope, sometimes to despair. They had to overcome the apathy of many supporters, and to check the wild enthusiasm of others. Their administrative mechanism—with the exception of the Society of Arts—was all new, and it creaked and occasionally stuck fast, until all the parts settled down in their appointed places, and were smoothed by action and hard work. They had set themselves a difficult and novel task. They wished to attract exhibitors from the remotest corners of the earth, and to provide a palace for them—a temple dedicated to the worship of trade—without the aid of a government grant. They met with assistance where they least expected it, and opposition where they expected assistance. They had to feel their way, step by step; to send out travelling commissioners to solicit aid in the great centres of industry; to appoint committees and then teach them their duties; and to do thousands of things, unfortified by precedents and in doubt as to results. The world was all before them where to choose, and they confined themselves to no nation and to no class. Never was such a broad appeal made to the trading instincts of mankind. It seemed as if the country, conscious of its own strength, was anxious to enter into an industrial contest with the whole world. Wherever any handicraft was practised, any package shipped, any bill of exchange drawn, the challenge was sent. Some thought the appeal was too broad, and even dangerous. The doctrine of free markets, notwithstanding the recent partial abolition of the corn-tax, was not as popular then as it is now, and our tariff, instead of being pared down to thirty-five articles, including varieties,

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was one of more than five hundred articles, excluding varieties. Those were the days when the Custom-house looked sharply after “*bonâ-fide* nutmegs,” and sweet-meats played an important part in the national finance. Public opinion, in its surly moods, accused the Exhibition promoters of giving up their country into the hands of invited savages. The memorable May-day of 1851 was looked forward to with dread by many honest people, who regarded it as the turning-point in England’s fate. They expected that London would be ravaged at will, and planted with many varieties of new disease. The tomahawk was looked for in Hyde Park, the stiletto in Cheapside, and dirt, strange costumes, and stranger manners everywhere. Unmanageable crowds were pictured assembling in the chief thoroughfares to make the Exhibition a stalking-horse for riot and plunder. Wild fears produced over-caution in the laying out of plans, and the police and army were concentrated as if for an internal war. When the statistics of 1851, however, came to be gathered together, it was found that there had been less crime, less disorder, and fewer accidents than the annual average.

The building of course was not free from panic-stricken criticism. Its lightness was regarded as an evident sign of weakness, and its size was held to increase the danger. Although its strength was tested in every mechanical way, a broad margin was left for doubts, and not one half of the numbers were at first carefully admitted who swarmed into it unchecked later in its brief life.

Like boys who have hesitated long on the bank of a clear stream, but who leaping in full of dread, are surprised to find how harmless and pleasant the water is, we can now afford to smile at our fears of twelve years ago. The Exhibition came and went. Strange nations were brought together, and learned to know each other better. Though all the good that was once expected from this gathering, in maintaining the peace of the world, cannot, with our painful after-knowledge, be claimed now, still we need not be ashamed of the Exhibition and its results. Unless friendly intercourse, hard work, and industrial rivalry are hollow mockeries, it is impossible that 1851 can have left no good mark upon the world.

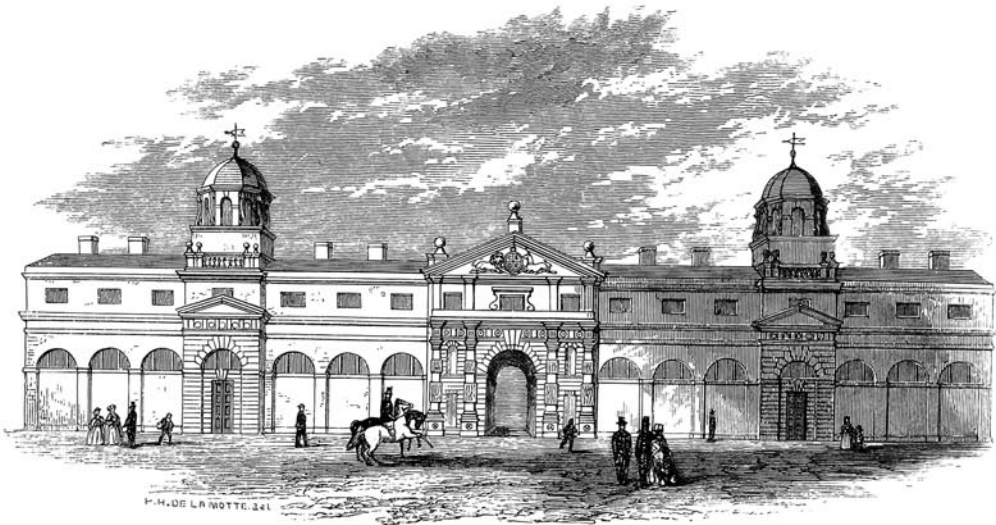


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ROYAL MEWS, CHARING CROSS, 1828.

CHAPTER II.

EARLY EXHIBITIONS.



NDUSTRIAL exhibitions, after a stormy existence of more than a century, have established a claim to the honours of history. In their early youth, in the dim old times, they may have been content with the pedler's pack, the travelling show-van, or a booth at a fair; but now they have grown rich and important, and have settled down into something like a permanent institution. At first, when they gave up their gipsy life, and started in regular business, they began as national, almost parochial, displays; and it was long before the growing free-trade spirit of the age allowed them to become international. Museums occasionally dabbled in the products of foreign industry, but with evident wonder and distrust. A catalogue of rarities exhibited at the Public Theatre of Leyden, in 1699, gives us a curious account of these early exhibitions. There was a Norway house, built of beams, without mortar or stone, side by side with a mermaid's hand, a crocodile, and several thunderbolts. There were a pair of Laplan's breeches and a pair of Polonian boots, mixed up with the chair of a midwife, and a model of a murdering knife found in England, "whereon was written, Kil the males, rost the females, and burn the whelps." There were a Roman lamp, "which burnes alwayes under ground," and a Persian tobacco-pipe, in companionship with the stomach of a man, and a mushroom said to be a hundred years old. Arabian jewels, East Indian coral trees, Egyptian linen, Chinese songs on Chinese paper, and a pot of China beer, had to be taken in connection with such delicacies as the snout of a sawfish, the skin of a woman, "prepared like leather," or the ears and tongue of a thief who had been hanged.

The Society of Arts may claim the credit of originating national exhibitions. The idea sprang naturally from the proceedings of a Society which was ostensibly founded to encourage arts, manufactures, and commerce. Amongst much that was weak, meddling, and even ridiculous, regarded by the light of our improved politico-economical knowledge, the Society succeeded in doing some good in its youth within the legitimate scope of its labours. In 1756—about the period when the Royal Academy first began its fine art exhibitions—it offered prizes for improvements in the manufacture of tapestry, carpets, porcelain, and other things, and exhibited the articles which were offered for competition. It also offered prizes for improvements in agricultural and other machines, and in 1761, a gentleman was paid to attend an exhibition of machinery in the Society's rooms, and to explain the models exhibited.

A few years after this, France came forward, most probably without any knowledge of the English exhibitions, and founded the first of that long and successful series of national expositions, which were only made international in France in 1855. The first French Exposition was opened in Paris, in 1797, by the Marquis d'Avèze, who originated the idea in the stormy days of the Directory, and lived to see it thriving under a Consul, an Emperor, and a King. The Exposition of 1798 remained open only three days, and the articles exhibited were of an aristocratic and costly, rather than of a popular character. The exhibitors numbered only one hundred and ten, and a jury of nine men was appointed to decide upon their merits. The second Exposition took place in 1801, when the exhibitors reached two hundred and twenty-nine. This display was considered so successful, and the preparation for it had been found so effective in keeping distressed work-people employed, that the third Exposition was fixed to take place in 1802, after the short period of one year. The exhibitors, notwithstanding this short breathing-time, had increased to five hundred and forty, and their productions showed an extraordinary improvement in every way. Mechanical science had made manufacture easier, and had reduced the price of all articles in popular demand.

The fourth French Exposition opened, after a longer interval, in 1806, supported by the largely increased number of one thousand four hundred and twenty-two exhibitors. The fifth Exposition took place in 1819, after an interval of thirteen years, and showed the moderately increased number of one thousand six hundred and sixty-two exhibitors. It displayed, however, a marked improvement in many branches of popular manufacture. The sixth Exposition, in 1823, showed a slight decrease in the exhibitors, who, from the former number, had fallen to one thousand six hundred and forty-eight. On the other hand, the jury rewards were increased from eight hundred and nine to one thousand and ninety-one.

The seventh Exposition, in 1827, had one thousand seven hundred and ninety-five exhibitors. Steam-power in manufacture now began to be felt; goods had improved; prices had diminished; and the foundation was laid of a large export trade. The eighth Exposition was held in 1834, when a steady progress was shown in every branch of industry, and the exhibitors had increased to two thousand four hundred and forty-seven. The ninth Exposition, in 1839, had three thousand two hundred and eighty-one exhibitors, and was remarkable for its display of raw produce and a purer taste in design. The tenth Exposition, in 1844, was

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supported by three thousand nine hundred and sixty exhibitors, of whom no less than three thousand two hundred and fifty-three were honourably recognized by the jury. The eleventh Exposition, in 1849—the last of the purely national displays in France before our Great International Exhibition of 1851—was supported by four thousand four hundred and ninety-four exhibitors; and its great and predominating attraction was machinery.

The progress of like exhibitions in England during the early part of this period was not by any means so marked and steady. Such industrial displays had to fight their way against a vast amount of apathy and prejudice. The first project set on foot for commencing an annual public exhibition of this kind was coldly received, and even denounced by the mouthpieces of public opinion.

This exhibition, however, was formed in 1828, under the patronage of King George IV., on the plan which had been found successful in France, the Netherlands, and the United States, and the place fixed upon for the display was a royal stable. The King's Mews at Charing Cross, which was pulled down in 1833, and which stood on the site of Trafalgar Square, was fitted up to receive the few productions sent in for exhibition, and the Committee of management, consisting of the Hon. G. Agar Ellis as chairman, and a number of distinguished men, issued the following manifesto:—"It appears to the Committee that it has long been a desideratum among our most intelligent merchants and manufacturers, that an Annual Exhibition of specimens of new and improved productions of our artisans and manufacturers, conducted on a scale that should command the attention of the British public resident in and annually visiting the metropolis, would be highly conducive to the interests of the foreign commerce as well as the internal trade of the United Kingdom. In the opinion of the Committee such an exhibition will not only prove a powerful stimulus in promoting the farther improvement of our already successful manufacturers, but will also bring into notice the latent talents of many skilful artisans and small manufacturers now labouring in obscurity, and sacrificing inventions valuable alike to the country and to themselves, from wanting such an opportunity of introducing them to the British public."

Public opinion professed to wish well to any plan having the promotion of English arts and manufactures, and the encouragement of English inventive talent for its object, but it doubted whether the proposed exhibition was not extremely at variance with the established tastes and habits of British artisans and manufacturers. In a spirit of narrow national pride, it thought that exhibitions of the kind were only suited to countries where the arts were still in a state of infancy, and where they stood in need of every sort of adventitious aid; but that people like the British, who had eclipsed all other nations in the variety and excellence of their manufactures, could get on very well without such stimulating projects. The Boltons, the Wedgwoods, the Strutts, the Arkwrights, and the Bramahs of the time were almost exhorted not to support such a scheme, and no labour was spared to nip this, our first really national exhibition, in the bud.

The promoters of the exhibition, notwithstanding this opposition, worked very energetically in carrying out their plan. This Committee, or Board, as it was called, consisted of the Hon. G. Agar Ellis, M.P., before mentioned; Dr. Birkbeck; Mr. John Hales Calcraft; John Earl of Clare; Mr. Henry Drummond; Hugh Viscount Ebrington, M.P.; the Hon. G. M. Fortescue, M.P.; George Granville

Earl Gower; Lord Francis L. Gower, M.P.; Mr. John Labouchere; George Viscount Morpeth, M.P.; the Hon. Granville Ryder; Dudley Viscount Sandon, M.P.; Mr. C. Baring Wall, M.P.; Mr. Alexander R. Warrand; and the Hon. J. Stuart Wortley, M.P. The Treasurer was Mr. J. Labouchere; Mr. T. S. Tull acted as Secretary, and Dr. Birkbeck was the chairman of the Committee of Inspection.

The exhibition was opened on Monday, June the twenty-third, 1828, and it was described by the following long title:—"The National Repository for the Exhibition of Specimens of New and Improved Productions of the Artisans and Manufacturers of the United Kingdom, Royal Mews, Charing Cross." The public never accept a long name for a book or a building, and much in the same fashion as the "Great International Exhibition of 1851" found itself re-named "The World's Fair," or the "Crystal Palace," this forerunner of industrial exhibitions found itself simply called the "National Repository."

The outline of plan put forward by the managing Committee consisted of the following divisions:—Under the "first class" were brought in any "entirely new and ingenious constructions where a new principle is discovered, or one before known, but never practically adopted, is brought into operation." Under the "second class" were arranged any "new adaptation of some known principle, but in a manner essentially different from all that has been done before in that line of manufacture or mechanical workmanship." Under the "third class" were brought in "all improvements upon a discovery already made, by which the preparation of any article is facilitated, or its utility increased." Permission was also given to exhibit in this class all objects which were highly finished, or which "distinguished themselves by exquisite taste; likewise every description of elaborate workmanship, such as would not find a place in an exhibition of arts."

The under-committees of inspection were five in number; one governed by a chairman who was by profession a civil engineer; another governed by a chairman well acquainted with chemistry and the chemical arts; a third governed by a chairman well acquainted with silk, cotton, and woollen manufactures; a fourth governed by a chairman who was a mathematical instrument maker; and the fifth governed by a chairman who was well acquainted with workmanship in all kinds of metals.

It was resolved that the decision of the under-committees, with regard to the selection of articles submitted to their inspection, as well as to the class to which they might belong, should be final when signed by the chairman of the General Committee of Inspection. It was also resolved that the Presidents, Vice-Presidents, and Secretaries of all the Mechanics' Institutions in the United Kingdom should be invited to take on them the office of Committee of Inspection, with power to add to their number in their respective districts, and with the same power of deciding upon the admission of articles as the London Under-Committees of Inspection.

No charge for space in the building was made on any articles approved of by the committees of inspection, but all specimens had to be left under the control of the board of management until the close of the exhibition; then they were returned to their owners, unless they had been sold by request, in which case the exhibitor received his money instead of his goods.

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When the building was thrown open on the appointed day, a great number of persons of all ranks hastened to inspect the articles exhibited. An extensive gallery, which ran from end to end of the King's Mews, had been neatly fitted up for the display, and various specimens of curious and highly-wrought manufactures, models of looms, bridges, &c., &c., and samples of useful and improved articles for domestic comfort or foreign commerce were arrayed with labels descriptive of the peculiar qualities which obtained them admission. A model of a chapel, and of a number of weavers in the act of weaving a piece of *Gros de Naples*, were also exhibited, to the great horror of a rather unfriendly critic. "If," he exclaimed, "the exhibition at Romani's cheap hosiery shop, Cheapside, of a stocking-weaver working at his loom is quackery, what is this?"

There were no "special correspondents" of newspapers—no graphic reporters, in 1828, and therefore the accounts we get of this exhibition are dry and business-like. We are told of "beautifully executed works in chasing and cutlery," of "weaving in silks of remarkable patterns," of "models of engines and machinery for many purposes," of "little-known manufactures," and of "a multitude of curiosities;" but no word-pictures of the display are attempted, and when the reporter enters into more minute details, it is generally in no very friendly spirit that he does so.

Public opinion, in one of its surly moods, rose up and called the "National Repository" a "toy-shop." As nicknames go a long way in an argument, this was considered to be a severe hit, and public opinion was encouraged to renew the attack. It walked round the unfortunate exhibition, selected all the weakest points, probed them without mercy and without judgment, knocked the exhibitors down, leaped upon their models, admitted the respectability of the managing committee while it accused them of being fools; and, in fact, behaved in that overbearing way too common with public opinion when asked to tolerate a novel experiment. It accused the exhibition of being paltry, and said if it was indeed national, the nation was never before shown in so contemptible a light. It affected to remember that such exhibitions were had recourse to in France and Holland, in order to excite a manufacturing spirit in the people of those countries, and to enable them to dispense with the wares of England. Bonaparte—the great bugbear—was held to have been at the bottom of it all,—striving to close the Continent against us, and to bring ruin on our trade and manufactures. Public opinion shook the British manufacturer by the hand, and congratulated him on the envied ascendancy he had maintained in spite of all his supposed rivals and enemies had done or could possibly do. It was not surprised that the English people should brood over these facts as they were called, and should frown on any attempt to introduce what it erroneously styled a foreign institution. It thought that no person could be so blind as not to see, that to foster such exhibitions would only be to adopt the stale device of an enemy. It boldly announced that France had turned her back at last upon these displays, and had resolved to hold no more, being convinced that they were more injurious than useful. The assertion was incorrect, and we may therefore regard the inference as unreliable. Public opinion is not always right, and in this case it was eminently wrong.

The "National Repository," thus hunted down by those who ought to have been its friends, could not boast of a very profitable existence. It struggled

through with some four exhibitions of decreasing merit, and, like an actor who persists in keeping the stage too long, its last appearance gave its enemies fair material for banter. It was called the “exotic thing,” and although its critics professed to have no desire to exult over the failure of good intentions, still they did exult considerably. The “exotic thing” was shown up in a good deal of the three-notes-of-admiration style of writing, and was broken on the arithmetical wheel. As it had only collected sixty specimens of industrial art for this fourth exhibition, and there were five hundred and fifty manufacturing towns in England, Scotland, and Ireland, it was easily shown that this only gave one invention to every nine towns. The keen-eyed critic was much shocked, on looking a little deeper into the exhibition, to find that at least eight of the sixty specimens exhibited were the production of foreigners; but he abstained from asking what the country was coming to. He was ungallantly severe upon certain “young misses of the Minorities and the Gravel Pits,” who had contributed “scissors-and-pencil work” to the exhibition—“pretty imitations of Nature,” as it was called in the catalogue. The shilling a head charged for admission was considered dear, and the “exotic thing” was consigned to oblivion as a fourth-rate bazaar.

When it left the “King’s Mews” in the following year (1833), and carried on its withered business for a short time at a room in Leicester Square, it was still followed by a few barking enemies. It was contrasted disadvantageously with the “National Gallery of Practical Science”—the “Adelaide Gallery” in the Strand—which started with the attraction of many electrical machines, a noisy steam gun, and an electrical eel, gradually sunk into a casino, and is now an echoing desert.



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SOCIETY OF ARTS' HOUSE.

CHAPTER III.

THE SOCIETY OF ARTS.

DURING this time the Society of Arts had kept the lamp burning. In 1829, the Secretary of the Society read papers on several of the leading industries of the country, and from this date specimens of raw materials, manufactures, and new inventions were frequently collected in the old rooms in the Adelphi, for the instruction of the members and the public. Then followed local Trade Exhibitions, held at Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Dublin, and other places; and the Exhibition of Manufactures at the Free-Trade Bazaar, held in Covent Garden Theatre, in 1845. In that year the Society of Arts tried to revive the idea of forming periodical exhibitions of industrial products in England on the plan of the French Expositions. A Committee of the Council of the Society was appointed to make the necessary inquiries as to the willingness of manufacturers to contribute their productions to such an exhibition, and a fund was subscribed for the purpose of meeting the preliminary expenses, but owing to the want of sympathy on the part of the manufacturers the project was not then proceeded with. The English people were then

very imperfectly acquainted with the value of such exhibitions. They required to be educated on this point, and education had to be provided.

The Society of Arts had been losing strength for many years, when it was aroused to a new course of life in 1846 by its Royal President. The Prince Consort advised its Council, that the action of the Society most likely to prove immediately beneficial to the public and itself, would be that which would encourage most efficiently the application of the Fine Arts to our Manufactures.

To carry out this idea, the Council at once established a Special Prize Fund, and offered premiums and medals for the production of manufactured articles of simple form—for colours to be used in porcelain, and capable of resisting the action of acids, but not then used in England, and for excellence in combined form and colour. The object of these prizes was to promote a love for the beautiful, by supplying articles of elegant form, made of cheap materials, and suited to the uses of every-day life. The first competitive designs were to be sent in to the Society on or before the fifteenth of May, 1846, and amongst the articles received at that date, was a tea-service in one colour, manufactured by the Messrs. Minton, to which the Society of Arts awarded its special prize. It might be said that the Great Exhibition of 1851 was founded on a teacup, for upon this tea-service, and the jugs, mugs, and other articles rewarded with prizes in 1846, the whole subsequent action of the Society relative to exhibitions was based.

The articles rewarded with prizes in 1846, together with those sent in for competition in 1847, formed the basis of the first exhibition of "Select Specimens of British Manufactures and Decorative Art," which was opened at the house of the Society of Arts in March, 1847. The introduction to the catalogue sets forth the object of the exhibition in the following words:—"The Exhibition of Select Specimens of British Manufactures and Decorative Art is the commencement of a series of annual exhibitions, by means of which the Society hopes to contribute essentially to the progress of those objects for the encouragement of which it was originally instituted." "The first step in the improvement of an art or manufacture is the knowledge of what has already been done in that art or manufacture." "To make improvements with advantage we should begin at the very summit of that perfection which has already been attained. It is for this reason that the Society of Arts have now thought it to be their duty to exhibit each year in some department of arts or manufactures, the degree of perfection that has already been attained."

"We have no doubt that after the eyes of the public are familiarized with specimens of the best decorative art, they will prefer them to subjects which are vulgar and gaudy; and that after a series of such annual exhibitions, no manufacturer will have to complain that his best productions are left on his hands, and his worst preferred."

Manufacturers were slow in agreeing with the Society of Arts about the value of these exhibitions. Very few competitors came forward in 1846, and it was with difficulty the judges could find subjects worthy of reward. The exhibition of 1847 would have been a total failure but for two individuals, who made it a point of personal favour with a few great manufacturers, to be permitted to select from their stores a sufficient number of articles to make a show. The result was highly satisfactory. Twenty thousand people visited the exhibition, and the Council arranged a third