Panel Session 10:
Wrought of Steel and Philanthropy: The Forging of Andrew Carnegie’s Cultural Legacy
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Speakers
Dr. Robert Gangewere, Editor, Carnegie Magazine
Dr. Abigail Van Slyck, Dir. of Architectural Studies, Connecticut College, author of Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture (U Chicago Press, 1995)
Ray Anne Lockard, Head Librarian, Frick Fine Arts Library, U Pittsburgh, introduction

The three papers of this session provided a rich, multi-faceted discussion of Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropy. Like three acts of a play, the papers built on one another – themes were repeated, but with different perspectives and new embellishments, providing in the end a complex, full account of Andrew Carnegie, his principles, and his giving. Robert Gangewere’s presentation focused on Carnegie’s family and work background and how it shaped his philanthropy. Abigail van Slyck examined Carnegie’s sponsorship of free libraries around the world to demonstrate his role in changing the philanthropic model, as well as the coincident change in library architecture. Kenneth Neal looked specifically at the Carnegie International both in terms of Carnegie’s philosophy and of Pittsburgh’s place in the collection and display of American art over the past century. The emphasis of these papers was Carnegie’s philanthropy, though there were references to the dichotomy to (and fuel of) his generosity evidenced in Carnegie’s high expectations of his workers in the form of long hours, strenuous labor, and low wages. The following synopsis can only hint at the breadth of discussion brought to the topic by each speaker.

Robert Gangewere
Carnegie, at twelve years old, arrived in Pittsburgh during the reconstruction of the city after the fire of 1845 and in the heyday of its industrial growth. His own father had been a laborer and labor activist in Scotland, a fact that is interesting in light of Carnegie’s move to the other side of the bargaining table later in life. Whether his work ethic was innate or instilled as a child, Carnegie was one to strive hard and to better himself through work. Embracing both change and challenge he rose quickly from messenger boy to telegrapher. His particular knack for understanding processes and efficiencies enabled him to excel in his work with the telegraph, which was vital to the smooth flow of rail traffic around Pittsburgh. During the Civil War he was in charge of all rail traffic between Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. His business acumen was in evidence early as he undertook several successful ventures, always with the insurance and financial backing of partners and trustees. Carnegie’s good fortune to be part of the railroad industry in the mid-decades of the nineteenth century was enriched by his ability to grasp the potential of the opportunity. Such successful ventures included the replacement of wood railroad bridges with iron bridges and the manufacture of all manner of railroad equipment for the expansion of railroads across the continent. His early adoption of the Bessemer process in his steel mills insured Carnegie Steel’s domination of the industry.

Owing to wise investments and shrewd business dealings, Carnegie became a wealthy man in seemingly no time. Though he was not particularly religious, his Calvinist background infused him with a strong sense of service. In 1881 his philanthropy began with the gift of a library to his birthplace, Dumferline, Scotland. While he gave much money to the creation of libraries around the world, as we learned from Dr. van Slyke, he focused much of his giving on Pittsburgh. The commission of the Carnegie Institute, combining an art museum, a music hall, a natural history museum, and a library, brought ninety-seven competing architects. The Institute was built on land donated by Mary Croghan Schenley, friend of Andrew Carnegie, who also donated the vast tract of land that became Schenley Park. The Institute was intended as a cultural center for all the citizens of Pittsburgh. Children filled the art galleries, making drawings from original artworks. A huge dinosaur was assembled, and specimens of scientific nature were collected. The Carnegie Library was a “gift to the people of Pittsburgh,” yet like his other library gifts, the promise of funding was provisional on the city levying a public tax for long term maintenance of the building and its services. In 1901 he sold Carnegie Steel and devoted himself entirely to his philanthropic work. The ideas behind his sense of moral duty to the less fortunate are found in his 1889 publication of the Gospel of Wealth in which he noted that “the duty of a
man of wealth is to set an example of modest, unostentatious living.”

(Though not mentioned by Gangewere, the following website may be of interest to those seeking further information: http://www.clpgh.org/ein/andrcarn/historyclp.html)

Abigail van Slyck
Two main themes ran through Abigail van Slyck’s paper; the changing nature of philanthropy and the changing form of the public library building in the early decades of the twentieth century. Libraries were the mechanism chosen by Carnegie to do the most good for society with his vast wealth. Van Slyck has studied the nearly 3,000 Carnegie libraries as a means to understand Carnegie’s philanthropy, as well as change in architectural form and meaning.

The “old” philanthropy was secular in orientation, local in scope and familial in nature, with the donor acting as the patriarch who was owed a debt in return for his generosity and patronage. The ideal behind giving was the promotion of individual development and cultural growth. As Carnegie increased his philanthropic activities, especially after 1889, his giving shifted to a new model. Van Slyck suggested that this was due in part to his own understanding of his obligations to society, and in part to the phenomenal scale of his gifts. Substituting a corporation for a family, this new model was contractual rather than familial in its structure and relationships. Carnegie’s gifts were not gifts outright, but required a commitment of ongoing maintenance from the community. In the old model the donor would often be personally involved in the manner of distribution of the gift. Carnegie removed himself from personal involvement in local decisions about the administration of the gift.

Carnegie’s choice to concentrate his philanthropy on the construction of libraries came at a time of dramatic change in the library profession as well as in middle class education. With the creation of over 2800 libraries around the English-speaking world, it could be argued that his giving had an impact on the way librarianship changed or at least on the way library buildings were able to respond to that change. Throughout the nineteenth century libraries were (almost always) neo-classical in style, symmetrical in plan, grand in scale, private in clientele, and the books were most certainly off-limits to the browsing reader. At the turn of the century, education and labor reform brought literacy and leisure time to the middle class. The influx of immigrants added diverse populations to that group, all of whom were spurred on by the dream of rising in society through hard work and education. Carnegie’s free libraries responded to the need for information and resources by these groups. His hands off approach to the local issues of planning and construction meant that there were only schematized requirements for the buildings. There was no fixed style or elevation that had to be followed, other than responding to the functional needs of the library. In this, Carnegie was falling on the side of the librarians in their debate with architects regarding the importance of function over form and administration over aesthetics. The plans of the Carnegie libraries developed over the decades from the 1890’s through the 1910’s from a neo-classical, mostly symmetrical space with the reader separated from the books to a more organic, functional space in which the reader was given full access to the books. This change was simultaneous with the rapid increase in female librarians. The librarian was no longer sequestered in a back office, but now sat (or stood) at the delivery desk, a central position in sight of the entire library.

Kenneth Neal
By the late nineteenth century, America itself was no longer an artistic backwater, yet one could hardly suggest that Pittsburgh should be numbered among the cultural or artistic centers of the day. Carnegie sought both to fix this and to promote American art by establishing the Carnegie International, an annual show of contemporary American art. Neal questioned the judgment of Carnegie in following the “build and they will come” philosophy when it came to art and culture. Yet, Carnegie had a strong desire to bring art to the masses. Inspired by the writings of the English poet Matthew Arnold, Carnegie hoped “to contribute to the enlightenment and joys of the mind ... (and to bring) to the toilers of Pittsburgh sweetness and light.” Arnold had written that “sweetness and light” were primary characteristics (even requirements) of culture. Carnegie regarded himself as a disciple of Arnold and disagreed with Arnold only in his opinion of the United States, a culture that Arnold thought was vulgar. Carnegie took it upon himself to prove Arnold wrong by demonstrating not only that culture existed in the states but that it was worthy of promotion.

The first Carnegie International was held in 1895. It was fashioned after the Paris Salon, but included a smaller and
more select group of works, such that all the pictures were displayed at eye level. The paintings were hung over the permanent collection, which was temporarily covered with a rich, red drapery. Despite Carnegie’s conservative taste, the International was a relatively progressive exhibition. Carnegie did not want an historical collection, but instead hoped to provide a record of progress in art (especially American) from 1896 forward. John Wesley Batey, a local artist, appointed by Carnegie to direct the art gallery of the Institute, was the drive behind the selection of images. From the start the International was a great success. Nonetheless, owing to the tremendous strain on the rest of the collection and budget, not to mention his time, Batey hoped to cease the exhibition. Carnegie wouldn’t hear of this, enjoying both the international reputation the Institute was gaining and the chance to meet and mingle with famous artists year after year. Much of the work that has appeared in the International over the years, is now part of the museum’s permanent collection.

As those who attended the convocation know, the Carnegie International continues to this day. See http://www.carnegieinternational.org/html (linked from the Carnegie Museum of Art site, http://www.cmoa.org) for more information.

Questions and Answers:
Was any of his philanthropy directed to ethnic minorities?

RG: Carnegie was one of the first to support immigrants and ethnic minorities. He created technical schools, providing training for workers and tradespeople. He was also supportive of Black education.

AvS: RE: public libraries: Black leaders wrote to Carnegie saying they couldn’t get into libraries. He responded that it was a local issue. Nashville established “Colored Branches.” He also gave money to women’s and Black colleges.

RG: In that light, he also gave Princeton a lake, for the rowers, not the football players.

What about any peace activities and other good deeds?

RG: At one time he thought of buying the Philippines. International peace became very important at the end of his life. He knew Kaiser Wilhelm, Teddy Roosevelt, and the King of England and seemed comfortable as their equal (referring to Kaiser Wilhelm as Bill).

AvS: Carnegie invented cost accounting, but did not keep it secret. Instead he offered it to all to make business run better for all.

RG: He founded TIAA as well. He had asked a retired professor from Cornell and found that the professor made less than a steelworker. So, he put aside a fund for university professors’ and teachers’ retirements.

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