

# The Listener

## WHAT MUSEUMS MIGHT BE

Many people are convinced that our museums are not yet playing the important part that they might in our national cultural life. Yet 'Brighter Museums', in closer touch with current developments in art, literature, social life and education, are possible if we heed the advice given by such experts as Sir Henry Miers and Mr. S. F. Markham, who have in recent years visited every museum in the British Isles and Canada, and a great number in the United States, the Continent of Europe, Africa and India

### Introductory Note

By SIR HENRY MIERS, President, Museums Association

THE name 'Museum' is a forbidding one to many people on account of old associations. 'Give a dog a bad name and hang him'. In some towns it might have been said, not so long ago, 'Call a building a museum and burn it'. Those to whom the name merely revives a recollection of miscellaneous objects crowded in dusty glass cases do not know what a remarkable transformation has taken place in all the better museums in this country. Instead of mixed collections, exhibited with no definite purpose in buildings which are only storehouses, they are now (with some bad exceptions) becoming as real and vital an instrument of education as the public library. They send out collections to the schools; children visit them from the schools; they are bright and attractive; their exhibits are well displayed and are explained by interesting and instructive labels. It is a pity that some other word has not been invented to describe this new type of institution.

An admirable pamphlet has just been issued by the Board of Education (No. 87) entitled *Museums and the Schools*. This is really the first time that the Board has made an official pronouncement about the educational value of museums from the school point of view. Hitherto the connection between school and museum has been very much a matter of personal arrangement between curator and school-teacher.

Far too little is known of the wide-spread nature of this revolution and of the new and promising educational service which is growing up not only in England but in many countries. In America (which has led the way in this new development) there are a great number of museums mainly devoted to educational work. The famous 'German Museum' at Munich is the most conspicuous example of the new ideal.

The Museums Association of Great Britain, with the help of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, is now conducting a survey of all the museums and galleries of the British Empire, and it is already quite clear that even though in many places the

obsolete idea of the public museum still survives, the new spirit is beginning to manifest itself, and will, it may be hoped, shortly dominate the whole position. No publication, however, has yet appeared which presents a world survey of the new activities; the following article by Mr. Markham is perhaps the first attempt to convey some general idea of the situation in the various countries of the world. The interpretation to which this leads in terms of their intellectual development is, for the first time, brought out in an original fashion by Mr. Markham.

The museums and art galleries in Great Britain contain a vast amount of most valuable material; we have to see that really good use is made of it. For this purpose, all the modern facilities for bringing knowledge within the reach of the public should be utilised; in the forefront of these stand the resources of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

If our public collections have been employed too little for educational purposes in the past, let us make known as widely as possible what they can do now for those who are willing to use them. It is here that the aid of the British Broadcasting Corporation may be invoked. If the people interested in a given subject can learn through the B.B.C. what the museums in their neighbourhood possess that can help them, talks and lectures can be provided; and if the curators can, through the same medium, ascertain what lectures or classes are being held, special exhibits can, no doubt, be arranged. Better still, if a series of educational talks can be instituted by the Corporation over the whole country and sufficient notice given of them beforehand, the curators will be able, in every town where there is a museum or art gallery, to direct students to the appropriate exhibits and to arrange special displays to illustrate these talks. Some such scheme would be an immense educational force throughout the country, and would enable teachers and curators to co-operate in a manner which has never before been possible.

## Treasure Houses of the Nation

By S. F. MARKHAM, Secretary, Museums Association

DON'T bother to pay war debts to America, just hand over to us gradually the contents of your superb art galleries and museums!

That was the suggestion of a very bold American, who pointed out that if Germany could pay neither France nor Great Britain reparations and War debts, and if in consequence Great Britain could not pay America the £50,000,000 a year interest and principal which is due, then Great Britain should make an equivalent yearly sacrifice from the treasures of art and jewels in our galleries and museums. It was affirmed that the contents of two or three departments of the British Museum alone would be worth £50,000,000. Just one exhibit, or rather a series of exhibits, the Elgin Marbles, has been valued at £2,000,000 or £3,000,000, and there is no doubt that they would fetch this

sum if sold at a good period. They are, in fact, the finest remains of Greek sculpture anywhere in the world, and originally formed part of the Parthenon, or temple of the virgin goddess Athena, at Athens.

The treasures of the British Museum might satisfy this particular American for two or three years; other great national treasure houses, such as the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, etc., might keep him happy for another dozen years or so. Six pictures in the National Gallery alone are worth nearly £2,500,000; two that were bought by us only two years ago—the Cornaro Titian and the Wilton Diptych—would fetch over £200,000 in the open market. And then the rich galleries of Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, etc., would probably tide us over until 1960, and the