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Ohio State Engineer

Title: Concerning Liberal Arts

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Issue Date: May-1921

Publisher: Ohio State University, College of Engineering

Citation: Ohio State Engineer, vol. 4, no. 4 (May, 1921), 19.

URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/34133>

Appears in Collections: [Ohio State Engineer: Volume 4, no. 4 \(May, 1921\)](#)

Concerning Liberal Arts

By M. P. HALPERIN, '21

In these days of iron and steel, of newly-found physical relationships and experiments in new social orders, a cry is often heard of the aesthete who longs for the poetry of the bygone ages, and of the artist who bewails the indifference of the public. "What will become of Art," they ask, "in these days of Science?"

The engineer is the agent between science and man. It is due to him, mainly, that science has been incorporated so completely in our life, affording us thus so many material joys as to exclude some of the finely spiritual. The engineer therefore must make reply to these plaintive voices, and must sing the poem of his own work.

There is poetry to engineering; and certainly there is art in engineering. For art never was and never can be divorced from life. It was always a direct outgrowth of the needs of man, and concerned itself chiefly with satisfying these needs in a most direct way. It was to shelter the precious images of their deities that Greeks reared their monuments of stone, and in order to acquaint the masses with the biblical narratives the finest frescoes were painted. The spirit of the age was expressed in these works, but expressed unconsciously.

Unconsciously, too, the engineer gives expression to the spirit of the present. Behold, if you will, the skyscraper, exalting in its soaring height the power of man, and singing its virile song of triumph.

See the steamboat cutting the waves of the sea, no artist fashioned its bow, nor yet do the chimneys betray any trace of mouldings cut in classic profiles; yet what majesty does it express, what symphonic power in its fearless movement! Yonder factory chimney—where is there a shaft, most carefully fashioned after Vitruvius, that breathes a fraction of the vibrating energy that chimney breathes?

In these days of iron and steel, of newly-found physical relationships and experiments in new social orders, it would be well to listen to the song of the engineer, who fashions this iron and steel, who will use these new physical relationships, and who is the balancing lever of the new order. For the song of the engineer is the song of science, and the song of science—the song of nature, and nature is very much akin to the Almighty, who is, after all, the Chief Engineer.