

Bashford Dean

Art: Armor & Fish Man

Monday, Apr. 28, 1930

Though it is a well-established sport of the irreverent to poke fun at the policies and the purchases of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's painting department, there is one branch of the Metropolitan that needs to apologize to no one—the Department of Arms & Armor. Today the Metropolitan is fourth in importance in the world's armories. Ranking just after Vienna, Paris and Madrid it can elevate its ventail at Milan and the Tower of London. Last week the trustees of the Metropolitan unveiled a bronze tablet designed by Sculptor Daniel Chester French and dedicated a hall of armor to the memory of the man who, by giving the hall, made the Metropolitan armorially fourth —the late Bashford Dean, Curator of Arms & Armor at the Metropolitan from 1912 to 1927.

Bashford Dean was born in New York in 1867. Scion of frugal Dutch and English ancestors who had lived in the vicinity of Riverdale-on-the-Hudson since the 17th Century, it was his good fortune never to want for money. His wealth was lucky for him, for no one has ever yet made a fortune

from either of Bashford Dean's hobbies, ichthyology or armor.

As soon as he was big enough to turn the pinion wheels of a microscope, small and studious Bashford Dean began to study natural history. His interest in armor also began early. When he was six years old he visited the home of one Carlton Gates in Yonkers, stood for half an hour in rapt contemplation of a beautiful Maximilian helmet. Four years later Carlton Gates died, his effects were sold at auction. Ten-year-old Bashford Dean insisted on being taken to the auction, was heartbroken when the cherished helmet went for more money than he could afford. Clutched in his small and studious fists he did carry away from that sale two engraved daggers which became the nucleus of the Dean armor collection. It was typical of him that to the day of his death he never lost hope of finding the Gates helmet again, sometime, somewhere.

At the College of the City of New York and Columbia University he temporarily forsook the trappings of war to concentrate on fish. In 1886 he became a Tutor of Natural History, in 1896 Assistant Professor of Zoology. In 1890 he won his Ph.D. with a thesis: Pineal Fontanelle of Placaderm and Catfish. His interest in fish and his interest in armor remained parallel. In 1903 he was appointed Curator of Fishes & Reptiles at the Museum of Natural History. In 1906 he became Honorary Curator (without salary) of Arms &

Armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Almost the same time that he was obtaining the invaluable Riggs collection of armor for the Metropolitan, he was publishing through the Natural History Museum his magnum opus, a stupendous, three-volume Bibliography of Fishes.

In 1912 the trustees of the Metropolitan persuaded him to accept a salary for his work as curator of armor, but until his retirement in 1927 he made it a point of honor to present the museum every year with a piece of armor, a sword, or a helmet nearly as valuable as his total stipend. In 20 years he visited every important armory in the world, scoured every quarter of the globe for ancient weapons.

Almost as soon as War was declared, the War Department called for thin, small, dyspeptic Dr. Bashford Dean, made him a major, sent him to France to design body armor for U. S. troops. In France he slightly modified the saucer-shaped British trench helmet for U. S. use, then stood —a short, firm-jawed St. Sebastian in a suit of Dean's Body Armor, Light (9 lbs.) —while officers 10 ft. away fired automatic pistols at him. Dean's Body Armor, Heavy, withstood rifle fire at 50 yards, and though unwieldy was adopted by U. S. aviators.

Never robust, he died at Battle Creek Sanitarium in 1928. Apart from the panoplies which he bought, borrowed, persuaded art patrons to give to the Metropolitan, he left in

his Riverdale home one of the three finest private collections of armor in the world, a collection appraised at over \$650,000. The cream of this collection appeared last week in the Metropolitan's Bashford Dean Memorial Hall.

Bashford Dean had an Italian bravo's love of fine armor. He felt that a suit of armor on a museum rack is as dead as a fish's skeleton. Fine armor is meant to be worn. Its beauty is not alone in the lines of the steel, the delicacy of the engraving, but in the play of light on the moving body, the way pauldron and cuisse move with the wearer. Several years ago he took motion pictures of museum attendants walking, riding, fighting in some of the museum's most valuable suits. This is now the most popular film the Metropolitan owns. Many times he begged the museum authorities to set aside certain days on which the public could see men-at-arms walking about the museum floor. Children in Riverdale loved him for the cool afternoons when he would dress himself in 60 lbs. of 17th Century harness and stride about the lawns of his Riverdale home for their benefit.