

Is Dean More Watching?

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When the University of Cincinnati moved in 1896 from its original campus on the side of Vine Street Hill to its current location in what was then still a part of Burnet Woods, its first Professor of Physics, Thomas French, was assigned space on the second floor of old Cunningham Hall at the south end of the original McMicken complex (figure 1). By the early 1930s

Basics Science Laboratory and the great fire of 1931 intervened.

The University of Cincinnati Basic Science Laboratory (figure 2) was founded in 1926 by Dean Herman Schneider of the Engineering School and placed under the direction of a brilliant young electrical engineer named George Sperti. Its mission was to apply the ba-



Figure 1. The original McMicken complex as it appeared in 1908. The original McMicken Hall is in the center, the original Hanna Hall is to the left and the original Cunningham Hall to the right. All three buildings occupied the same sites as their current successors. Physics was originally located on the second floor of Cunningham and the Basic Science Laboratory in its attic.

these facilities were badly outdated. Already in 1916 the Chemistry Department had moved from its originally assigned quarters in Hanna Hall in the north wing into a new building, and physics was more than overdue for a similar upgrade. However, as usual, lack of money and administrative incentive continued to maintain the status quo – at least until the coming of the

basic laws of science and the expertise of the university's faculty to the solution of problems of practical importance to industry, but with an eye to also filing patents that might prove financially lucrative to the school (1). The new laboratory was given space in the attic of Cunningham Hall directly above the Physics Department. What happened next has been described by a

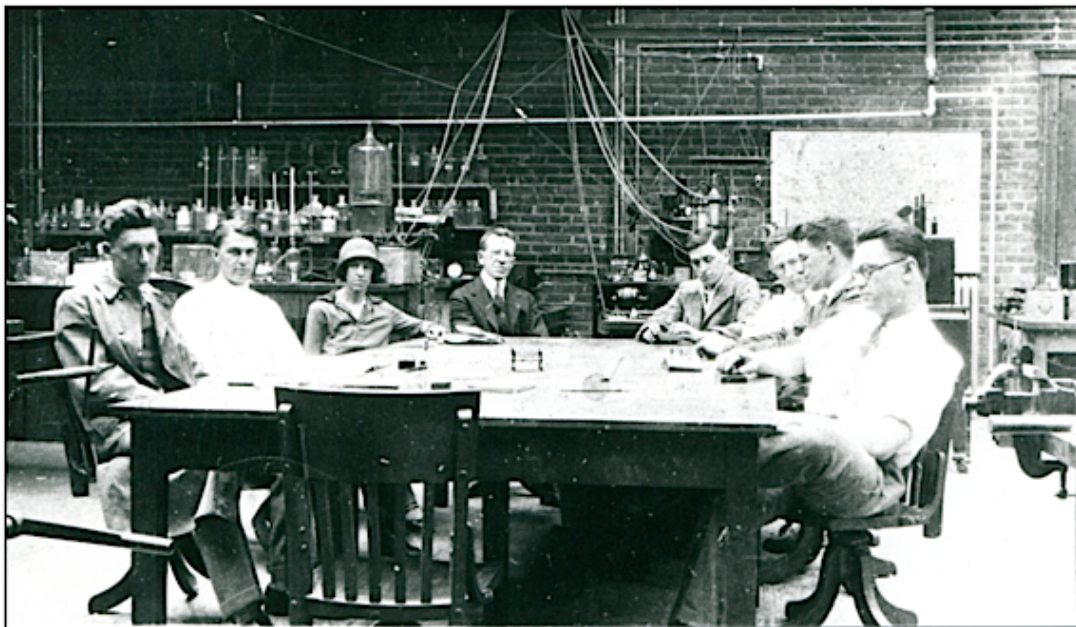


Figure 2. The Basic Science Laboratory and its staff as they looked before the great fire of 1931. Herman Schneider is at the far end of the table on the left and George Sperti is on the right.

past historian of the UC Physics Department, C. Harrison Dwight (2):

In the early morning of February 14, 1931, an overheated rheostat in the Basic Science Laboratory in the attic floor of old Cunningham Hall started a conflagration that gutted not only a major portion of the immediate structure [figure 3] but thoroughly wetted down the physics laboratories on the second floor. The department library, in the southwest corner of the building, fortunately escaped damage, not only from fire but, due to the watchful eyes of some faculty members, from a too enthusiastic application of the fire hoses.

Thus did necessity step in and accomplish, in short order, what years of administrative indifference had failed to do and, within nine months of the fire, the architectural firm of Crowe and Schulte had generated the necessary drawings and blue prints for a new state-of-the-art physics building (figure 4) (3). These were translated into brick and mortar the next year at a total cost of \$361,000 plus another \$39,000 for laboratory equipment and office furnishings (4).

The Symbolic Mysteries of Art Deco

The exterior and entrance foyer of the new building were done in a muted art deco style typical of the late 1920s and early 1930s and similar to that used for the Blegan Library, which had been completed in 1930 (5).

Both buildings sported numerous decorative bas-reliefs. In the case of the new physics building, these included a set of sculpted reliefs placed immediately over the upper windows above the front entrance (figure 5), as well as a series of six octagonal medallions commemorating famous physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers (figure 6), and two large quotation plaques (figure 7), all of which were arranged below the front cornice of the building.

The selection of names for the octagonal medallions included Pythagoras, Plato, Archimedes, Newton, Faraday, and Planck. I think most historians of physics would agree that this selection is highly eccentric. Py-

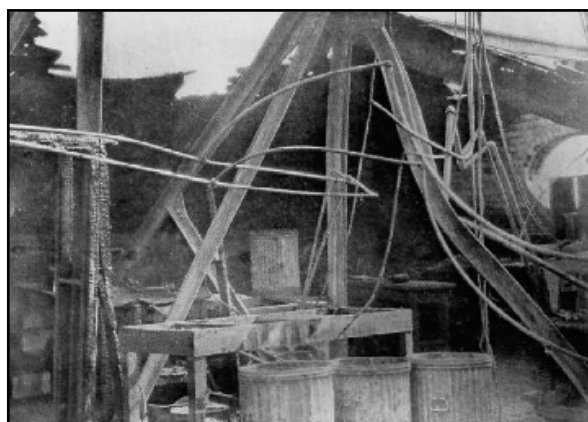


Figure 3. The Basic Science Laboratory as it looked after the great fire of 1931.

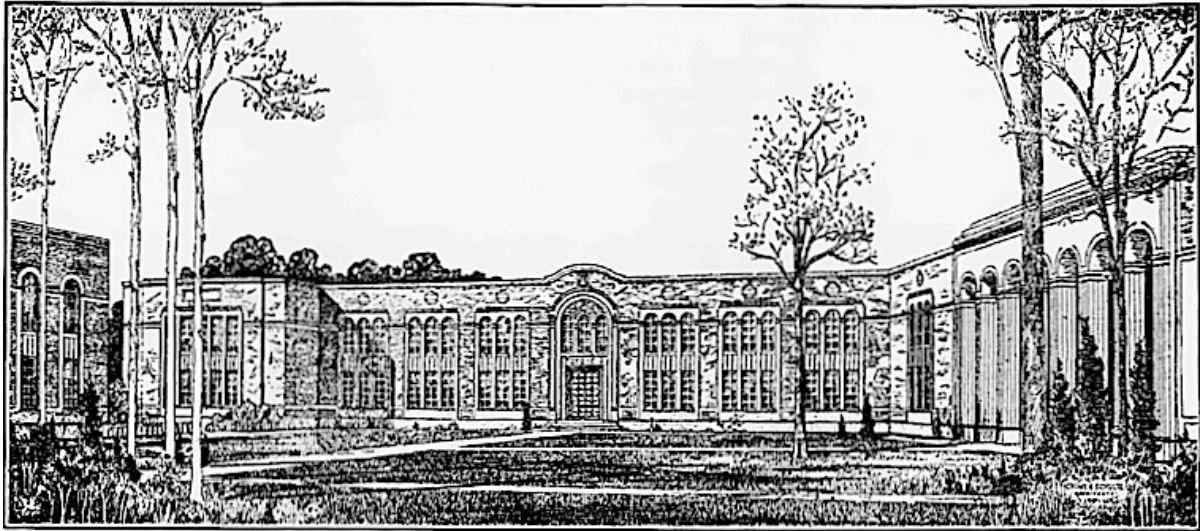


Figure 4. The architects' original, circa 1931, vision for the new physics building, which, though recognizable, differs in several ways from the version that was finally built.

thagoras and Plato are certainly unusual choices for a physics building and may have been included because the original plans called for an east wing to house the math department, though another 25 years would pass before this was completed “at a cost almost three times that of the original structure” (2). Conspicuously ab-



Figure 5. The front entrance to the 1932 UC physics building showing the reliefs above the upper windows.



Figure 6. One of the six octagonal medallions that decorate the cornice of the 1932 UC physics building.

sent are such names as Maxwell, Kelvin, and Boltzmann, who might have reasonably been included as the founding fathers of electromagnetism, thermodynamics, and statistical mechanics. The only physicist in the list who was alive at the time was Max Planck, the founding father of quantum theory. On the other hand, Einstein, who was also very much alive at the time, was passed over. Legend has it that a local high school student eventually wrote Planck a letter notifying him of the great honor that the University of Cincinnati had bestowed upon him.

The sources of the quotations on the two plaques

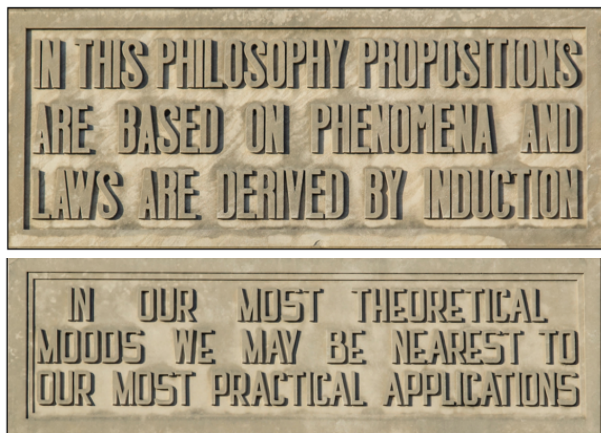


Figure 7. The two quotation plaques that decorate the cornice of the 1932 UC physics building.

are not included on the plaques themselves, though Dwight claimed that they were due to Sir Isaac Newton (2). While this is almost certainly the case with the upper most quote in figure 7, it seems an improbable source for the lower quote, which sounds more like Faraday.

Even more mysterious are the figures and symbolism for the large relief over the windows above the front entrance (figure 8). Both period articles describing the new building (3, 4) and Dwight’s 1969 history of the UC Physics Department (2) are silent on this

subject, though a more recent coffee-table book on UC architecture has speculated that it represents “Christopher Columbus demonstrating that the world is not flat” (5). This is almost certainly wrong, since, if true, it would represent an even more inappropriate choice for a physics building than some of the names on the octagonal medallions. In fact, the so-called globe in the center is not a globe of the earth but of the starry heavens and the figure to its immediate left, lifting the vial, is dressed in early 18th-century garb, complete with knickers, and is clutching a telescope in his left hand – a device that would have been unknown to Columbus in the 15th century. Ignoring the fact that it is a refracting rather than a reflecting telescope, this figure almost certainly represents Sir Isaac Newton revealing the true universe to the bearded figure on the immediate right. Though this figure looks more Biblical than Greek, it may represent Aristotle, whose world view was overthrown by Newton. The flames at its feet and the various wavy lines forming the background, which change as one moves from the bottom to the top of the relief, may represent the four Aristotelean elements of fire, earth, water and air. The bearded figure in the cloak, crouching on the far right and clutching the hour glass, is almost certainly father time, though he is missing his usual scythe. The female figure crouching on the far left, however, remains unidentified.



Figure 8. Closeup of the relief immediately above the windows over the front entrance of the 1932 UC physics building, whose meaning and intended symbolism are uncertain.



Figure 9. Closeup of the figure at the very top of the building. According to physics department mythology, this is supposed to represent Louis Trenchard More watching over his new domain.

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The final mystery is the square relief at the very top of the building, just above the arch over the front entrance (figures 5 and 9). At least when viewed from the ground, the face of the figure in this relief appears to have a passing resemblance to that of Louis Trenchard More (figure 10), who was Dean of the UC Graduate School from 1912-1940 and Chair of the UC Physics Department during the period when the 1932 building was being designed and built. Indeed, this identification has become part of the mythology of the physics department and younger faculty are told that the figure is in fact More watching over all who dare enter his new domain (6).

The University's first Professor of Physics, Thomas French, had been forced to resign during President Howard Ayers' notorious faculty purge of 1900 and More, with a freshly minted Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins, was Ayers' handpicked choice as French's successor (7). As events turned out, More's career as an experimental physicist, despite Ayers' expectations, proved to be lackluster. In compensation, however, More did attain a respectable reputation for his work in the fields of the philosophy and history of science, and especially for his published biographical studies of Sir Isaac Newton (8) and Robert Boyle (9), both of which were considered definitive in their day.

More had a very strong personality. He insisted that he always be addressed, even by the reviewers of his books, by the title of Dean rather than Professor

and, upon his retirement in 1940, was granted the title of Dean Emeritus rather than Professor Emeritus. His views on the nature and proper function of science, and of physics, in particular, were equally definite. As revealed in his first book, *The Limitations of Science*, he was a strict positivist who eschewed all attempts to theoretically rationalize the underlying mechanisms behind the laws of nature. Such attempts were, in his opinion, pure speculation and, as such, belonged to the sphere of metaphysics rather than to science proper.

More left the details of designing the teaching and research facilities in the new physics building to Professor Lowell Alexander (2). Nevertheless, given the nature of his personality and his strong interest in the philosophy and history of physics, it is difficult to believe that More didn't at least take an interest in the design of the building's decorative aesthetics. Certainly the quote from Newton on the western most plaque is totally in keeping with More's positivistic philosophy which grounded physics in experiment rather than mathematical speculation. And the absence of a commemorative medallion for Einstein may be equally explained by the fact that, in his first book, More had singled out Einstein's theory of relativity for special criticism as an example of mathematical speculation gone awry.

But what of the myth that the figure in the square relief is More? Alas, though it may resemble him when viewed from ground-level with the human

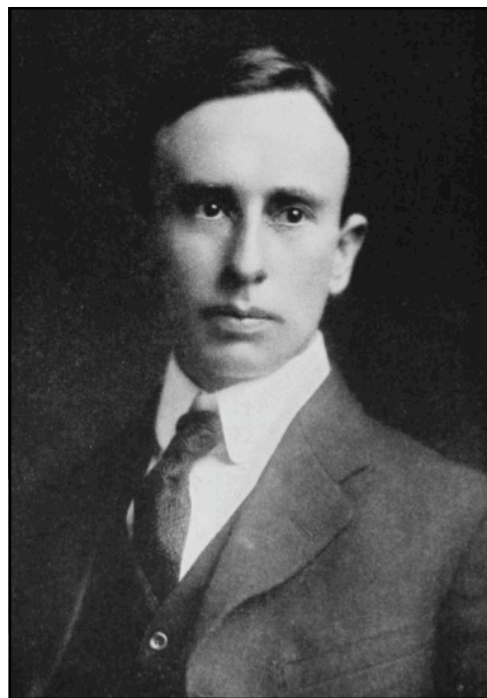


Figure 10. Louis Trenchard More (1870-1944).

eye, a camera with a telescopic lens casts severe doubts on this identification as it reveals what actually appears to be a female figure in graduation robes and a standard mortarboard cap clutching the book of knowledge in one hand and the torch of truth in the other. I, for one, am sorry to discover this, since the myth that it is Louis Trenchard More surveying his domain is far more charming and interesting than the apparent reality. But then, as has often been observed, this is true of all myths.

As for the 1932 structure itself, it has since been renamed Braunstein Hall after John R. Braunstein, a local medical doctor with a strong interest in biophysics and presumably a generous donor to the university. The building still serves the UC Physics Department, though it has been extensively remodeled inside and has had several additions made to the rear of the building – the most recent in 1987.

References and Notes

1. For background on the Basic Science Laboratory, see C. W. Park, *Ambassador to Industry: The Idea and Life of Herman Schneider*, Bobbs-Merrill: Indianapolis, 1943, pp. 228-304.
2. C. H. Dwight, *The First Seventy-Five Years of the Physics Department (1883-1958)*, University of Cincinnati: Cincinnati, OH, 1969, pp. 30-31, 37-39.
3. R. C. Gowdy, "The New Physics Building," *The Cooperative Engineer*, **1932** (January), 5, 26. Apparently the architect's plans were also published in the October 1931 issue of the *Cincinnati Alumnus*, but the library is missing this issue.
4. L. M. Alexander, "The Physics Laboratory at the University of Cincinnati," *Amer. Phys. Teach.*, **1935**, 3 (Sept.), 123-125.
5. J. Merkel, K. Grace, *The University of Cincinnati: Architectural Transformation, Tradition and Innovation*, RAF Press: Cincinnati, OH, 2007, pp. 112-115.
6. This legend was first brought to my attention by Professor Henry Fenichel of the UC Physics Department.
7. For background on More and his career, see W. B. Jensen, "Critiquing Einstein and Darwin: The Humanism of Louis Trenchard More," W. B. Jensen website.
8. L. T. More, *Isaac Newton: A Biography*, Scribner: New York, NY, 1934.
9. L. T. More, *The Life and Works of the Honorable Robert Boyle*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1944.
10. L. T. More, *The Limitations of Science*, Holt: New York, NY, 1915.