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Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Society of Arts records



Collection Identifier: **AC-0011**

[Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Libraries. Department of Distinctive Collections](#) | [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Society of Arts records](#)

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Scope and Contents of the Collection

The records consist of minutes of meetings of the Society of Arts of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the minutes of the Society's Executive Committee, by-laws, accounts, correspondence, and other papers generated by its officers. Some records documenting the work of the Society can be found among the records of the MIT Corporation since the two bodies once shared the same officers and by-laws. Records of the Executive Committee of the Society of Arts were bound with the minutes of the Society until 1878, when they were collected separately (see box 10).

The bulk of the collection consists of nine volumes of minutes of meetings of the Society. These volumes include accounts of both the "ordinary" or business meetings and the "meetings of the Institute as a Society of Arts." The ordinary meetings generally included reports of the Executive Committee or officers and committees of the Society. Before 1870 ordinary meetings of the Society often included discussions of Institute finances, Institute facilities and goals, land acquisitions, building plans, and the relations between the Institute and the Commonwealth. When the School of Industrial Science was established in 1865, ordinary meetings occasionally

Collection organization

included discussions of the curriculum and faculty of the school. After 1870, ordinary meetings were devoted to Society rather than Institute business, such as membership regulations, by-law revisions, elections of officers, and proposed lecture topics.

Records of meetings also include abstracts or transcripts of lectures, demonstrations, and exhibitions presented before the Society. The speakers were mainly New England scientists, professors, and inventors. Often they were on the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but not exclusively. They spoke on a wide range of topics including geology, public works, naval architecture, chemistry, biology, economics, education, steam, mechanical and civil engineering, mining, metallurgy, and specific inventions.

This collection also includes the records of the Society's Executive Committee from its founding until 1902. The Executive Committee continued to meet, apparently, until at least 1907; thus some Executive Committee minutes were either not recorded or are missing from this collection.

The records include correspondence dated 1886-1901. This correspondence principally concerns membership, dues payment, and arrangements for lectures. The collection also includes two early membership lists, an alphabetical card file of members, and notes on a few lectures.

Dates

- 1862 - 1941
- Majority of material found within 1863 - 1908

Creator

- [Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Society of Arts](#) (Organization)

Access note

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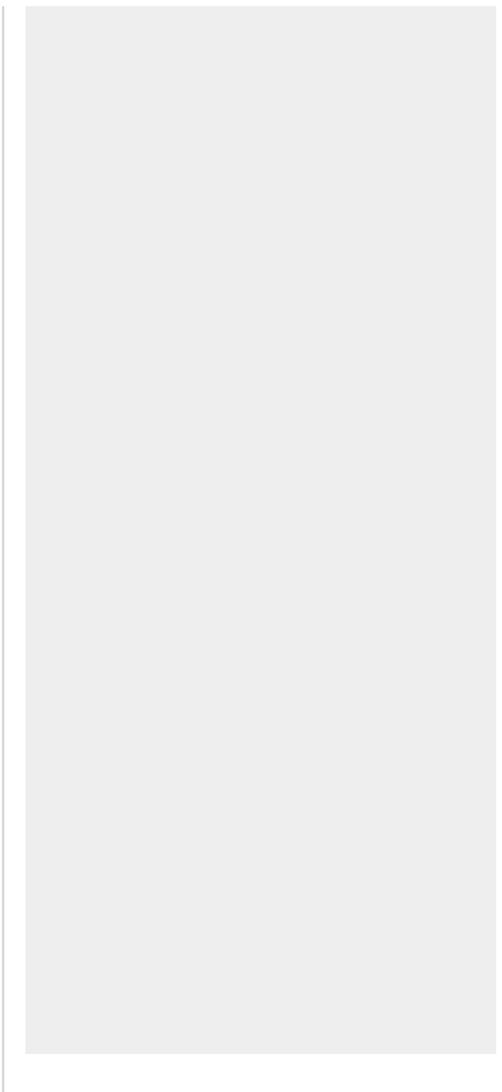
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Historical note

1862-1865

In 1862, William Barton Rogers issued a notice for the first meeting of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Seventeen persons responded to the notice and the meeting was convened on April 8 at the rooms of the Boston Board of Trade. The Act of Incorporation of M.I.T. was read and the first By-Laws of the Institute were enacted. The group thus convened referred to themselves as a Society of Arts. William Barton Rogers envisioned that the Society would be only one of three elements of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The other elements would be a school and a museum. Between 1862 and 1865, however, the Society of Arts



was the only element of Massachusetts Institute of Technology extant.

Section II of the 1862 By-Laws described the Government of the Institute:

"The general direction, management, and control of the Institute shall be vested in a body to be called the 'Government of the Institute,' to consist of the President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, and the Chairs of the several Committees of Arts hereinafter mentioned, together with the members of Committees on the Museum, on Instruction, on Publication and on Finance. The Government shall have power to institute from time to time such standing rules and orders, not inconsistent with the By-Laws, for regulating the action of the several Committees, the choice of subjects for investigation and discussion and reports on the same, as it may deem expedient; and shall have the power to fill all vacancies occurring in its own body during the current year, except those of Chairs of the Committee of Arts."⁽¹⁾

Section V of the By-Laws established a Nominating Committee to nominate Officers of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and noted that the membership would elect such officers at their annual meeting.⁽²⁾ During the first meeting, the Nominating Committee was formed and nominated officers. William Barton Rogers was unanimously elected president.

During a recess in the April 8th meeting, the newly elected officers convened a separate meeting of the "Government of the Institute," a rather small group since only the members of the committees on Instruction, Museum, Publication and Finance had been elected. This was the first meeting of the Government, later called the Corporation, of MIT.

From 1862 to 1865, membership in the Society rapidly expanded. The meetings of the Society generally consisted of discussions of Institute business led by the president or other members of the Government followed by a lecture on a scientific or technical topic. As the agenda grew, the business meetings were held separately and referred to as "ordinary meetings" of the Society. Only a few of the Committees on Arts as proposed in the 1862 By-Laws were formed, so the Government remained small. President Rogers expressed his concern about this problem during his annual reports to the Society given at the May meetings.

In June 1864, Rogers asked the Society of Arts to authorize the Committee on Instruction to open the School of Industrial Science. According to the 1862 By-Laws, the Committee on Instruction was charged with "... the supervision of the School of Industrial Science, both as to its organization and its business affairs; subject to the direction of the Government."⁽³⁾

The Society of Arts granted Rogers's request, and the School was organized on February 20, 1865.

The expansion of the responsibilities of the Government and the creation of a distinct School raised questions affecting the By-Laws and the respective roles of the Society of Arts, the Government and the Committee on Instruction. As early as February 10, 1864, the Government had appointed a Committee on Revisions of the By-Laws chaired by the president. Since that date several minor changes had been made in the By-Laws, but at their meeting on January 20, 1865, the Government decided that a revision of the By-Laws should be presented to the Society of Arts which, according to the 1862 By-Laws, was the only body empowered to change them.

1865-1870

On February 24, 1865, E. B. Bigelow, a member of the Government's Committee on Revisions of the By-Laws, presented recommendations of the Committee to the Society of Arts, and the By-Law revision was adopted by the Society of Arts during their April 6, 1865, meeting. The statement that the membership of the Society of Arts would elect officers was dropped, implying that the officers would be elected by the Government itself in the future. In the annual report of the secretary presented to the Society of Arts on May 25, 1866, it was noted that

"The meetings of the Government during this year were held under the new By-Laws, by which the choice of the officers and standing committees evolved upon the Government, and the Society of Arts elects its own Executive Committee. For reasons thus indicated, the former direct connection between the 'ordinary meetings of the Institute' or 'meetings as a Society of Arts' and the proceedings of the Government no longer exist...."(4)

In 1870, however, a complication arose which was explained to the membership in a circular written by the secretary:

"The old By-Laws were illegal, inasmuch as it required legislative authority to give the governing power and control of the Institute to the Government, as the Society of Arts years ago voted to do; an Act was therefore drawn up by Hon. Geo. T. Bigelow, accepted by the Government, and the Society of Arts (at a special meeting held Feb. 13, 1869), and presented for the approval of the legislature of 1868-69. This Act was passed March 20, 1869, and adopted by the Government, and the Institute (at a special meeting held March 23, 1896)."(5)

New By-Laws were unanimously adopted at a meeting of the Corporation held July 23, 1870. These By-Laws were entitled "By-Laws of the Corporation of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology," though they also concerned the Society of Arts. The Society was defined by the 1870 By-Laws:

"A Society of Arts, for the Advancement of the industrial arts and sciences, and the diffusion of useful facts and discoveries relating to them by means of researches, essays, discussions and publications."(6)

As newly defined by the 1870 Corporation By-Laws, the Society of Arts was only one of three elements which constituted the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The other two elements were a School of Industrial Science and a Museum of Technology. The planned Museum of Technology was never organized.

The 1870 Corporation By-Laws made it clear that the affairs of all of the elements constituting the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were to be conducted henceforth by the Corporation. The Standing Committees of the Society of Arts on Museum and Finance became Committees of the Corporation. The Committee on Instruction, formerly a Society standing committee, was renamed the Committee on the School of Industrial Science and its duties were more clearly defined. The By-Laws stated that the Society of Arts in the future was to be governed by a Committee on the Society of Arts defined as a Committee of ten members

"...who shall have the general charge and supervision of the organization and proceedings of the Society, subject to the approval of the Corporation. It shall be their duty, in connection with a duly chosen Committee of the same number of members of the Society, to form from time to time By-Laws for the government of the Society, which shall take effect when approved by the Corporation and adopted by the Society."(7)

The Society of Arts adopted its new By-Laws at its meeting of December 15, 1870. The objects of the Society were written into its preamble:

"Inasmuch as the change in the government of the Institute by Act of the Legislature requires a re-organization for the Society of Arts, it is proper to state, first, that the object of this Society is to awaken and maintain an active interest in the application of science to the useful arts, and also to give scientific studies their proper position among business and intellectual pursuits. ...it will give every facility to those who wish to discuss the principles and intentions of their own machines or inventions, and will endeavor at its meetings, or through properly constituted committees, to show how far any communications made to it are likely to prove of real service to the community."(8)

According to the 1870 Society By-Laws, the Society of Arts elected officers who served as members of the Executive Committee of the Society of Arts. Henceforth the only direct link between the Society of Arts and the Corporation was that the secretary of the Institute was ex officio the secretary of both of these bodies. Four Society standing committees were established on Publication, Communication, Membership and Finance. The members of these committees met together as a Council which was to "receive and act upon all communication from the above named Committees, and report, through their Executive Committee, to the Corporation of the Institute, through its Committee on the Society of Arts, such plans, propositions, and changes as they may think best calculated to promote the interests and enlarge the usefulness of the Society."(9)

The Executive Committee of the Society of Arts conducted the business of the Society, appointed times for meetings and chairs for committees, reported annually to the Society of Arts and served as "the medium of communication between the Council and the Corporation, and between the Council and the Society of Arts."(10)

1870-1906

The 1870 Society By-Laws were not fully implemented but continued in effect until 1877. At its meeting on December 23, 1875, the Society raised the question of a By-Law revision and, on January 3, 1876, appointed a committee to consider it. This committee reported to the Society on January 27 that the existing By-Laws were "complicated and the duties are so subdivided and distributed among many Committees that there is a want of executive force. It is also very desirable that some pecuniary means should be at their disposal."(11)

The draft By-Laws prepared by the committee were discussed at Corporation meetings on November 10, November 17, December 13, 1876, and February 14, 1877, and at the Society of Arts meetings on November 23, 1876, March 8 and March 22, 1877. Discussions on the revision were prolonged as legal questions concerning the relationship between the Society of Arts and the Corporation were raised. On February 14, 1877, the Corporation convened a special meeting for the adoption of By-Laws relating to the Society:

"Whereas the Society of Arts of the Institute, through inadvertence, has failed to keep up its organization, insofar as it has omitted to hold regularly its annual meetings, and to choose its Council as provided in its By-Laws, although it has continued to hold its ordinary meetings as formerly; therefore, to remove any disability the Society may have incurred thereby, the Corporation adopts the following By-Laws: 1. The Society of Arts is hereby reinstated with all the rights and powers which it previously enjoyed under the Charter and By-Laws of the Corporation. 2. The Committee of the Corporation on the Society of Arts, together with the same number of members

of the Society of Arts duly chosen at an ordinary meeting, shall, in accordance with the By-Laws of the Corporation (paragraph 20), prepare a code of By-Laws for the government of the Society of Arts, to take effect when approved by the Corporation and adopted by the Society."(12)

The long deliberations were ended on April 11, 1877, when the Corporation "voted to approve the New By-Laws of the Society of Arts, which had already received the approval of the Society"(13) on February 27, 1877. The 1877 Society By-Laws dropped the concept of Council and regulated the disposition of funds received by the Society. The Executive Committee of the Society undertook responsibilities previously assigned to Council.

The By-Laws of the Society of Arts had included provisions for a Committee on Publication, but the committee did not become active until 1879 when they began to publish Abstracts and Proceedings of the Society of Arts. This publication printed minutes of the "ordinary meetings" of the Society and abstracts of lectures presented before the Society.

Another revision of the By-Laws was accepted by the Corporation on February 11, 1880, and by the Society on February 26, 1880. This revision clarified the responsibilities and changed the appointment procedure of the secretary of the Society. The secretary of the Society became an elected post rather than an ex officio duty of the secretary of the Institute. Minor revisions of the By-Laws were also made in November 1881 and October 1882, and discussion on the formation of Society sub-committees took place in October 1884. Dues regulations were clarified by a minor revision of the By-Laws accepted in June 1893.

These modifications and revisions were not, apparently, reflected in a new printing of the Society's By-Laws until October 1893 when the By-Laws were published in the Technology Quarterly.

The Technology Quarterly, a magazine published by MIT students, was established in September 1887. It included articles on scholarly subjects as well as articles about MIT and some papers presented before the Society of Arts. At its meeting on January 28, 1892, the Society of Arts voted "...that the President be authorized to appoint a committee of the Society to confer with a committee of the Corporation to consider the advisability of combining the publications of the Society of Arts and the Technology Quarterly."(15)

At the meeting of the Society of Arts held on April 29, 1892, a committee of the Society appointed to address the question reported that they and the Corporation committee were in favor of the consolidation of publications. The Society henceforth ceased to publish Abstracts and Proceedings of the Society of Arts and undertook the publication of the Quarterly through its Committee on Publications.

1907-1917

The mission of the Society of Arts--the diffusion of scientific and technical information--was one better suited to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth. In 1907, the Executive Committee noted the "advance in complexity and specialization of the various special societies and in the publication of journals devoted to narrow lines of science and industry."(16) The editor of the Technology Quarterly encountered difficulty in securing manuscripts for publication because "investigators generally desire to publish their results in journals devoted especially to the sciences or arts to which they appertain."(17)

Membership in the Society began to decline, and the secretary felt that the MIT faculty did not adequately support the Society.(18) In

the absence of a permanent president, the Executive Committee of the Society of Arts met infrequently and many responsibilities fell upon the secretary. By 1908, the Executive Committee of the Society of Arts reported:

"That the Society has not for a series of years fulfilled its purposed function has been only too manifest, and this condition of affairs has been an anxiety to those charged with the conduct of its affairs."(19)

The Executive Committee did not, apparently, have a solution for the problem, and they ceased to meet after 1909. The Technology Quarterly was a casualty of the decline. The Society replaced it with the less ambitious Bulletin from 1908 to 1910 and from 1910 to 1916 published Science Conspectus, planned to "contain a brief general survey of the field of science and its applications"(20) for the general public.

The decline of the Society of Arts continued until January 1917 when Richard C. Maclaurin, president of the Institute, considered disbanding it.(21) Legal questions concerning the charter were raised, and Maclaurin apparently decided to alter the mission of the Society rather than dissolve it. As Walter Humphreys recalled:

"The attendance at meetings of the Society of Arts at that time was dwindling and they seemed not worthwhile to maintain in that form. Dr. Maclaurin maintained that grown-ups were tired of popular lectures and chose other forms of relaxation and entertainment. Therefore - why not develop lectures that would be of interest to young people who have little knowledge of science... Dr. Maclaurin called me to his office one day, told me about this, and commissioned me to act as Secretary of the Society of Arts."(22)

Maclaurin invited high school principals and superintendents to a conference at MIT after his meeting with Humphreys and received their endorsement of the plan.(23) The first such lecture was delivered in February 1917. The lectures were called Free Popular Experimental Science Lectures and they were so popular that they were opened to the general public as well as students in 1921. Since there was no longer an Executive Committee of the Society of Arts, Maclaurin had simply made an informal arrangement with Humphreys and started the lectures; he gave an account of his activities to the Corporation at their meeting on March 4, 1917.

1917-1962

The Society of Arts existed from 1917 to 1953 in this form. In 1953 budget constraints led to a reduction in lectures from four to two annually. By 1962, only one lecture was offered and the question of disbanding the Society of Arts was again raised. Malcolm Kispert was asked by President Julius A. Stratton to investigate the possibility. Since no objections were raised by Institute counsel, the Executive Committee of the Corporation voted on December 2, 1962, to discontinue the Society. On December 13, Kispert informed the secretary of the Society of this decision:

"Today I talked with Professor Avery Ashdown, Secretary of the Society of Arts, and reported to him the decision of the Academic Council and the Executive Committee of the Corporation to discontinue the Society of Arts lectures as of the next academic year. ...Professor Ashdown agreed that the many varied activities of our Admission Office, our participation in the WGBH Channel 2 program and our many public lectures very adequately cover our responsibilities to secondary schools and their students in informing them of our activities and our general participation in the fields of technology and science."(24)

NOTES

1. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Society of Arts Records, 1862-1941, AC 11 (hereafter cited as Society of Arts Records), Minutes vol. I, April 8, 1862, p. 7.
2. Ibid., p. 12.
3. Ibid., p. 10.
4. Society of Arts Records, Minutes vol. II, May 25, 1866, p. 239a.
5. Samuel Kneeland, Secretary, "Circular," October 1870. In Society of Arts Records, folder 1.
6. By-Laws of the Corporation of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, [MIT 1870], p. 3.
7. Ibid., p. 6.
8. By-Laws of the Society of Arts of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, December 1870, p. 1.
9. Ibid., p. 3.
10. Ibid., p. 4.
11. Report of the Committee on the Revision of the By-Laws, Society of Arts Records, Minutes vol. V, February 24, 1876, p. 14.
12. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Corporation, Minutes of meetings, AC 278, Series I. vol. III, February 14, 1877, p. 74.
13. Ibid., April 11, 1877, p. 79.
14. By-Laws [of the Society of Arts], [October 1893], *TECHNOLOGY QUARTERLY*, vol. 6 (1893), p. iii.
15. "Proceedings of the Society of Arts, January 28, 1892," *TECHNOLOGY QUARTERLY*, vol. 5 (1892), p. 3.
16. "Report of the Executive Committee of the Society of Arts for the Year 1906-1907," *TECHNOLOGY QUARTERLY*, vol. 20 (1907), p. 255.
17. Ibid., p. 256.
18. I[ssac] W. Litchfield to Richard C. Maclaurin, June 21, 1913, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Office of the President Records, 1897-1932, AC 13, folder 539.
19. "Report of the Executive Committee of the Society of Arts," *TECHNOLOGY QUARTERLY*, vol. 21 (1908), p. 229.

20. "Report of the Secretary of the Society of Arts," *REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT*, 1909-1910, [MIT], p. 129.

21 Richard C. Maclaurin to Frederick Fish, January 11, 1917, MIT Office of the President Records, 1897-1932, AC 13, folder 212.

22. Walter Humphreys to Avery Ashdown, December 4, 1947, MIT Office of the President Records 1957-1966, AC 134, subject file "Society of Arts."

23. "Report of the Secretary of the Society of Arts," *REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT*, January 1918, [MIT], p. 102.

24. Malcolm Kispert to Julius A. Stratton, December 13, 1962. MIT Office of the President Records, 1957-1966, AC 134, subject file "Society of Arts."

Extent

4 Cubic Feet (11 manuscript boxes including 10 volumes, 2 small boxes)

Language of Materials

English

Additional Description

Abstract

The Society of Arts of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) was formed in 1862. It consisted of seventeen people who met to read the 1861 Act of Incorporation of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and enact the first by-laws of the Institute. The Society was to be one component of MIT, the others being a school and a museum. Between 1862 and 1865, however, the Society of Arts was the only element of Massachusetts Institute of Technology extant. Meetings consisted of discussions of Institute business followed by a lecture on a scientific or technical topic. After the school opened in 1865, and the Society was no longer responsible for governing the Institute, its meetings focused on lectures on a wide range of subjects and demonstrations of inventions. Records in the collection include the minutes of meetings of the Society, which include the reports of the Executive Committee and officers, and abstracts or transcripts of lectures, demonstrations, and exhibits presented before the Society.

Related Archival Materials

William Barton Rogers Papers, 1804-1911 (MC 1)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Records of the Secretary of the Corporation (AC 131, Series 1, 1862-1874)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Records of the Office of the President, 1897-1930 (AC 13)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Record of the Office of the President, 1957-1966 (AC 134)

ABSTRACTS OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARTS, MIT, 1879-1884; ABSTRACTS OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARTS, MIT, 1884-1888; ABSTRACTS OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARTS, MIT, 1888-1891. MIT Libraries, T1.A27

Subjects

- [Massachusetts Institute of Technology -- History](#) **Subject Source:** Library of Congress Subject Headings
- [Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Society of Arts](#)
- [Science](#) **Subject Source:** Library of Congress Subject Headings
- [scientific societies](#) **Subject Source:** Thesaurus For Use In College And University Archives

Related Names

Creator

- [Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Society of Arts](#) (Organization)

Finding Aid & Administrative Information

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