

The intangible investor

Written by
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Fathers of invention

A portrait of 19 important 19th century inventors that hangs in the neo-classical former US Patent and Trademark Office, now the National Portrait Gallery, foretells the future as much as it documents the past

If necessity is the mother of invention, then ego is the likely father. The US industrial revolution spawned an innovation age prior to the Civil War that helped to transform the United States from a wannabe nation to one of greatness. In 1857 the inventor of a coal-burning stove, Jordan Mott, commissioned Alsace-born portraitist Christian Schussele to paint a group portrait of 19 US scientists and inventors who “had altered the course of contemporary civilization”.

The painting, *Men of Progress* (1862), is a quietly remarkable achievement. It took five years to complete and did not mark an actual event, but was designed to honour the accomplishments of US industry. Like a photograph, *Men of Progress* captures a moment in time – only in this case it never really existed. Those depicted in the portrait had never met as a group. The artist sketched studies of each subject individually before putting them all into his final, formal composition. Photoshop would have made it easier, but that was some 140 years in the future.

Men of Progress is a document of US economic growth in the early part of the 19th century and an expression of its meaning. It celebrates the manufacturing inventions pioneered by men such as Cyrus McCormick, Charles Goodyear, Samuel Colt, Samuel Morse, Elias Howe and 14 others. The painting is an achievement for what it represents and how it was created. The group portrait is now displayed in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, a grand 1831 neo-classical structure that took 31 years to build and in fact housed the US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) from 1867 to 1932. No other nation at the time took such pains to get its invention priorities right. Both the building and the portrait are revealing about the history and future

of innovation, with the former reflecting the grandeur of ancient Greece and providing an idea of the respect commanded by important US inventions and inventors.

It is worth pointing out that the great men depicted are not looking at each other – perhaps a testament to their singular vision or their competitive nature. Hanging in the background is a portrait within the portrait: it is of Benjamin Franklin, the father of the father of US inventors, and a truly great one.

To see the portrait and the full list of the 19 inventors and their accomplishments, visit IPCloseUp.com.

Perspective on history

Men of Progress is a perspective of history that foretells the future. It reminds observers that invention, a largely solitary pursuit in the 19th century, is less so today. A similar gathering would be virtually impossible now because the nature of inventing has changed. The smartphone was not conceived by an individual; nor was the PC or Internet (my apologies to Al Gore).

Leading inventors today would likely include Jobs, Gates, Bezos, Brin, Page and Ellison, rather than people such as Torvalds, Berners-Lee or Noyce. The former are all great innovators in their own right, but are foremost business visionaries. Rather than visionary inventors, modern men of progress (and with few exceptions, they are still men) are more adept at improving products and building companies. The equivalent gathering today would include financial and marketing experts and their names would likely be associated with a significant numbers of inventions, even if they were not the primary source. Bright ideas today seem to be as much about packaging products and creating business models as they are about coming up with technological breakthroughs.

If you have occasion to be in Washington, I urge you to visit the National Portrait Gallery, a magnificent, recently restored building, and stare at the portrait of the industrial age inventors (admission is free). Their images are something to behold and the collective spirit will touch you.

Invention rights are no longer the same powerful symbol that they once were. Many of the great machines of the industrial age replaced manual labour or rudimentary machines developed over centuries. They did not challenge patented inventions that preceded them. The South, we should remember, had resisted industrialisation because until slavery ended, and possibly after it was outlawed, it thought that it had sufficient cheap labour.

Children of progress

Some US businesses have come to fear the boldest inventors – people with truly disruptive ideas which cannot be readily controlled. This may be why, for all of its ideas and products, the San Francisco Bay Area looks more like Detroit of the 1950s than Silicon Valley of the 1990s. San Francisco and environs is a company town which employs armies of mostly loyal workers and retains many vendors, including law firms, concerned that too much of the wrong type of innovation may be bad for the future.

The main difference between today’s men of progress and yesterday’s is that the essence of successful 21st century innovators is rooted more in business acumen than in inventive genius. While Gates and Jobs may have their names on a number of patents, they were never hands-on inventors. Today’s fathers of invention are those with business expertise. It remains to be seen how the new fathers of invention affect progress. I expect that Photoshop Release 1,682, a century from now, will permit the depiction of alternate realities difficult for us to imagine today. It might convey a hologram of Steve Jobs’ brain as it hit upon the iPhone – or, better still, reacting to Jony Ive’s idea for the iPhone – a eureka moment for sure, but one perhaps less specifically inventive than perfectly timed and brilliantly nurtured.

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