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The Trans-Mississippi and International Expositions of 1898–1899: Art, Anthropology, and Popular Culture at the Fin de Siècle

Wendy Jean Katz, ed.

with contributions by Tracey Jean Boisseau, Danielle B. Crawford, Emily Godbey, Stacy L. Kamehiro, Bonnie M. Miller, Sarah J. Moore, Nancy J. Parezo, Akim Reinhardt, Robert W. Rydell, and Timothy Schaffert

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Studies of expositions run the gamut of formats, including exhibition catalogues, monographs, and multi-author scholarly compilations such as this one, *The Trans-Mississippi and International Expositions of 1898–1899: Art, Anthropology, and Popular Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. The book

focuses on the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898, and its short-lived successor, the Greater America Exposition of 1899, both held in Omaha, Nebraska.

Anthologies create special challenges for both contributors and editors; while a multiplicity of voices and points of view vastly enrich such a volume, it is counterbalanced by the need for a unifying thread that binds them together, whether it is simply the topic or the approaches to it. Anthologies also present specific questions and rewards for the reader: what are anthologies for and how should they be consumed? Should they be approached as narrative progressions, to be read in sequence and in total, or as reference works, to be consulted selectively for topics of interest? Since time is usually at a premium—and for the purposes of classroom assignments—the latter is often the case. For this reason, each essay must be able to stand alone, so basic facts and salient elements often appear and reappear throughout. Yet, some keenly interested (and greatly appreciated) parties will read the book in its entirety; therefore, a thoughtful sequence and links between essays will reward the



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reader with cumulative insights. This volume balances the many demands of the anthology format, covers a range of topics, and explores the myriad ways in which United States imperialism played a central role at the two fairs.

Since fairs offer a dizzying array of possibilities for study and one cannot hope to capture the breadth of experiences and ideas that visitors encountered, parameters must be set and lines must be drawn. This volume sheds light on previously neglected voices at the fair, taking as its touchstone Robert Rydell's foundational work on the 1898 exhibition in his 1984 book *All the World's a Fair*, which identified American imperialist ambitions of the period as the ideological driver behind many of the exhibition's displays.¹ Indeed, Rydell's interest in the impulse toward colonizing and racial "ordering" at world's fairs has defined the study of these exhibitions for a generation. Rydell opens this volume with a genial introduction, "America's Jewel in the Crown," that forms a useful preface to the essays. He introduces the two fairs and the key players, placing them in their local and national context against the backdrop of turn-of-the-century political and economic uncertainty. He describes the interest in ethnology that led to the much-discussed Indian Congress and Midway sideshows and creates a vivid picture of the sensory experience of these fairs. Finally, Rydell lays a methodological foundation that reverberates strongly throughout the other essays; namely, the emphasis on imperialism, colonialism, and the creation of racial hierarchies that justified the actions of the United States in the Spanish-American War, which began just a few months before the 1898 fair opened.



Fig. 1. William Henry Jackson, for the Detroit Publishing Co., *Trans-Mississippi Exposition, Grand Court, Mississipp, Omaha, Neb.*, c. 1898. Photochromatic print, courtesy Library of Congress

If one reads the book in sequence, the first essay, "The Great American Desert Is No More," by Sarah J. Moore, allows readers to continue their experience of the 1898 fair, a process that Rydell began in the introduction through his sensory description. Moore offers a literal overview of the fair through a discussion of maps and images of the exposition and explains how such imagery glorified the United States progress in organizing, rationalizing, and civilizing the West. A history of mapping and textual descriptions of the West is followed by accounts of preparing the grounds, the fair's layout and its significance, official photography, and prints after paintings of key vistas there (fig. 1). In keeping with the volume's emphasis on imperialism, Moore positions the United States Government Building as an expression of the fair's dual construction of empire inside and outside of the country, especially in the War Department's exhibit of Spanish-American War artifacts. This essay orients the reader, in terms of the physical arena of the exposition and the ideological undercurrents that shaped fairgoers' perceptions of the space, both in Omaha and throughout the West.



Fig. 2. Bicolor essay for the Trans-Mississippi two dollar stamp, Wikipedia Image Commons

Bonnie M. Miller's essay on the exposition's commemorative stamp issue (fig. 2) describes the use of postage stamps as advertising for investment and settlement in the Trans-Mississippi region, through images that evoked nostalgia for early pioneers and inspired a vision of the increasingly refined "New West." Her well-researched essay offers a new (for this author) avenue of visual culture for investigation and makes connections with retail sales, stamp collecting, and the ideological power of images on stamps, as well as the logistics, the politics, and the process of choosing images. She traces sources of and reactions to various images and fleshes out possible meanings, noting that the government and many commercial exhibitors offered spaces for visitors to write and send postcards using these stamps, adding weight to their encoded messages. A brief section on the fair's fine arts display and the overall architectural program offers a glance at topics that might merit further study.

The third essay, "Women and Art in the Passing Show," by Wendy Jean Katz, sheds light on the growing cultural authority that women held in the region and beyond. Katz weaves together the welter of religious, political, class, and gender issues that shaped women's involvement in organizing the exhibition during a period of growing—though still contested—freedoms in the public sphere. In Katz's narrative, women emerge as writers commenting on the 1898 and 1899 fairs, particularly in response to the Native American presence at the exposition and the sensation over a painting of a female nude depicting Trilby, a character in a popular novel. The essay brings much-needed attention to understudied female critical voices and contemporary disputes over critical standards.

Emily Godbey's lively chapter, "Trilby Goes Naked and Native on the Midway," identifies a controversial nude painting by Astley D. M. Cooper, based on Georges du Maurier's wildly popular novel *Trilby*, as an emblem of the fair's spectacle, illusion, and fakery. Writing about a painting for which no image exists is a delicate task, and Godbey successfully evokes the work and its context. She highlights how, as one of the main attractions on the 1898 fair's carnivalesque Midway, the work struck a precarious balance between education and entertainment. She traces the painting's previous history touring the country, its installation in an ersatz "temple," and critical and public responses to it, alongside marketing efforts, protests, and even vandalism against "official" allegorical female nudes ornamenting fair buildings, raising questions about the nude as art and morality on fairgrounds. As Godbey shows, the painting pitted values of aestheticism against verisimilitude in an implicit judgment on the "judges" (in this case, the fairgoers), since responses to the nude have long been considered a barometer of public sophistication.

Tracey Jean Boisseau's fascinating study, "Condensed Loveliness," introduces composite portraiture, a technique that blends multiple photographs into one image and was thought to produce anthropological insights about the group photographed. It was utilized to create an official souvenir coin for the 1898 exposition that was intended to encapsulate the ideal of white womanhood within this country (fig. 3). The author describes how a "beauty contest" was organized in order to generate photographs of exemplary women from each state who embodied beauty and virtue. In all, forty-three photographs from twenty-two states were submitted. Boisseau compares this archive of beauty with images of nonwhite

women who were excluded from participation in the contest, such as Katherine Antoine, a delegate of the Indian Congress (fig. 4). She explores how such women were associated with savagery and barbarism, rather than progress, and examines the relationship between the ideal and the anomalous evident in the Midway “freak shows.”



Figs. 3, 3. Left: Official Souvenir Coin, Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, brass. Obverse: Composite type of Trans-Mississippi Womanhood, designed by photographer George G. Rockwood of New York. Image from Collectors.com. Right: F. A. Rinehart and Adolph F. Muhr, *Katherine Antoine, Flathead (Salish)*, front and profile, Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Omaha, 1898. Courtesy Omaha Public Library/University of Nebraska-Lincoln

In “Indigenous Identities in the Imperialist Imagination,” Akim Reinhardt identifies stereotypes of Native Americans made manifest at the fair; namely, the opposition between the formerly bloodthirsty and now noble and disappearing savage Indian, and the progressive Indian attempting to assimilate and ascend the ladder of civilization. He describes how these tropes were inflected by imperialist imagery at the fair, as the Indian Congress devolved into a “wild west show” and “pow wow,” to the outrage of the federal Office of Indian Affairs (fig. 5). On the other hand, the progressivist display in the United States Government Building offered a competing narrative with evidence of assimilation. However, the sensationalism of the Indian Congress and its glorification of the savage Indian stereotype garnered far more attention in the press and popular writing of the period.

In chapter seven, Nancy Parezo delivers a thorough account of the creation of the Indian Congress and accompanying displays in the United States Government Building (fig. 6). She traces the process of planning and organizing for the Indian Congress and building, developing the structure and obtaining financing. She also highlights the many difficulties that are common to world’s fairs, as the organizers’ grand and idealized plans met with the messy realities of competing agendas, personalities, politics, and a lack of time and funding. The Indian Congress became a popular attraction and a commercial success, as it purported to present a “last” view of authentically indigenous peoples. In contrast, the exhibitions in the United States Government Building, organized by the Smithsonian Institution and built upon its work for past world’s fairs, provided disappointed progressives with more scholarly displays on Native American life. Parezo includes a detailed description of the exhibits and systems for display and interpretation in the building, making this chapter a useful reference. The combined exhibitions met with mixed success; a few voices praised the more

scholarly exhibition in the United States Government Building, while most of the publicity was lavished on the Indian Congress and its stereotyping.



Figs. 4, 6. Left: F. A. Rinehart and Adolph F. Muhr, *Sham Battle*, Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Omaha, 1898. Courtesy Omaha Public Library/University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Right: F. A. Rinehart, Omaha, *Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Omaha, Neb: US Govt. Bldg.*, c. 1898. Photograph, courtesy Library of Congress

The final essay, coauthored by Stacy L. Kamehiro and Danielle B. Crawford, contrasts the agendas of those involved in developing the Hawaiian and Philippine exhibitions during a period when both archipelagos were being discussed as candidates for annexation by the United States. At the Omaha Expositions, Hawaiians and Filipinos were portrayed differently in relation to their perceived levels of civilization and potential for self-government, presaging their prospective outcomes, as Hawaii eventually became a state and the Philippines remained a US territory for decades afterward. Kamehiro posits that the 1898 Hawaiian exhibition served as a bid for annexation; as a white settler-dominated republic (after its native royal family was deposed), Hawaii was portrayed in displays as already settled and relatively “Americanized” (fig. 7). In contrast, its indigenous people and a royalist vision of the islands could be found in the Hawaiian Village on the Midway at the



Fig. 7. F. A. Rinehart and Adolph F. Muhr, *Interior of International Hall. Hawaii Exhibit*, Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Omaha, 1898. Courtesy Omaha Public Library/University of Nebraska-Lincoln

1899 Greater America Exposition. Likewise, Crawford places the Philippines exhibition during a period between two consequential wars, when the country went from being virtually unknown to being a central site of the United States empire in the Pacific. While the 1898 exhibition glorified US military actions in the Philippines and ignored Filipino resistance to American rule and its brutal repression, by 1899, the Philippine Village on the Midway presented the Filipinos as a primitive people in need of American “colonial tutelage” (418).

The volume ends with a meditation by historian Timothy Schaffert on his work researching and writing a historical novel based in 1898 Omaha. His approach complements and illuminates the essays; as the other authors do, he uses

souvenirs and ephemera to tell his story and recognizes how the purposeful focus and individual interpretation that are inherent in his hybrid of fact and fiction shape scholarly writing as well. He notes that “History must be bent to serve the story. . . . I must narrow the novel’s vision” (444). The façade of the exhibition, as we know, is itself a carefully crafted fiction, and our work as scholars is also inevitably shaped by our own conscious goals and unconscious biases.

The introduction, afterword, and eight essays that compose *The Trans-Mississippi and International Expositions of 1898–1899: Art, Anthropology, and Popular Culture at the Fin de Siècle* represent a laudable step forward in recovering the lesser-known history of international fairs and expositions, and they add to the encouraging progress being made in marking out the place of the Midwest within United States cultural history. It bears repeating that fairs are impossible to completely describe; the focus on imperialism and colonialism, anthropology, and popular culture of this volume may well plant seeds for future topics of study. While art historians might wish for more emphasis on the “art” in the title, the essays that address the history, visual culture, and material culture of the fair offer fascinating insights that extend beyond this event alone. The anthology contributes fruitfully to the growing body of scholarship on popular culture that informs and enriches our understanding of the “fine arts” of the period.

Notes

¹ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).