

Expositions

Since the mid 19th century cities around the world have regularly played host to huge fairs drawing participation from many different countries, as well as private business and industrial interests and often various non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations. Various called 'great exhibitions', *expositions universelles*, and 'world's fairs' in Great Britain, France, and the United States, the three countries that for many years were the most frequent hosts, these gatherings normatively created vast mini-cities in or near their host metropolises. These international expositions have drawn, in many cases, millions of visitors over the course of several months or more, attracted to grandly scaled national and private-enterprise pavilions, re-creations of exotic locales, examples of the latest technologies and popular entertainments. Over the past two decades these great exhibitions have increasingly attracted historians' attention as a transnational phenomenon, as evidenced by the excellent *Historical dictionary of world's fairs and expositions, 1851–1988*, edited in 1990 by John Findling and Kimberly Pelle.

International expositions fall broadly into two categories. The first is the more familiar multithemed fair, which includes displays and pavilions on a wide variety of arts, sciences, manufactures, culture, and the like, mounted by participating countries and organizations. The second is more tightly focused on a single theme or several related themes. For example, in 2006–07 Thailand hosted an International Horticultural Exposition that featured contributions by 30 countries from Asia, Europe, North and South America, and Africa. Moreover, while the majority of expositions have sought to achieve a global scope, drawing on participants from all over the world, some have been regionally focused (such as the various Pan-American Expositions held in the US during the first quarter of the 20th century). But the rubric is a broad one: the Bureau of International Exhibitions, an intergovernmental organization which oversees the planning and holding of these events, defines a fair in its Convention as international 'when more than one state takes part in it'.

The international exposition as it developed from the mid 19th until the mid 20th centuries was a product, indeed an avatar of modernity. The phenomenon developed

within the context of mass industrialization, 19th–20th-century intensification of exchanges and connections, and its paradoxical consort, nationalism. From the vantage point of the early 21st century, the international exposition in its heyday might seem at once quaintly naïve and sinister. However, the history of these expositions and their offspring embodies many of the most dramatic and contentious elements of international history over the past two centuries, with many ongoing tensions: nationalism versus internationalism; racism and a sense of cultural superiority versus a genuine desire for intercultural awareness; a concomitant cultural imperialism and hybridization/creolization; edification versus commercialism; and spurring tourism for some while satisfying wanderlust for many without leaving one's home country or even city.

World's fairs and expositions revelled in the civilization-altering potential of industry, science, technology and engineering as they provided a venue for advertising national or regional wares (the German left-wing cultural theorist Walter Benjamin decried world's fairs as pilgrimage sites devoted to the commodity fetish). International expositions offered the opportunity for nations at the apex to trumpet their power and dominance, including over subject peoples, as well as for rising nations to seek to introduce themselves to the established powers and their peoples on their own terms.

Origins of expositions: market fairs

The international exposition has its deepest roots in the regularly scheduled market fairs of antiquity and the medieval period. The Egyptians, Greeks and Romans were among the many cultures that held fairs and festivals combining merchant activity and entertainment, two hallmarks of the modern world's fair. What would become France was a leading force in perpetuating trade fairs in the centuries following the decline of Rome. By the 15th century Parisian fairs had some international participation; in the 17th century French fairgoers could purchase such exotic products as chocolate and china ware.

The French Revolution brought to power a series of governments that saw the fairs' potential for propaganda and edification. The 1798 Paris Exposition Publique des Produits de l'Industrie Française, conceived by the French revolutionary regime, set the tone in crucial

ways for the world's fairs to come. It featured a mix of the martial and manufactures; it sang the praises of 'progress' as a universal aspiration; it was conceived and convened by the state for solemn, edifying purposes, but it could not keep out a strain of raucous revelry. While this fair and several subsequent ones in France during the early 19th century were purely Gallic in character, in the 1840s French planners originated the idea of mounting an international exposition with universal participation, which had an explicit element of Saint Simonian utopianism: one writer, an adherent of the philosophy, called for both *expositions universelles* and the construction of the Suez Canal in order to facilitate the free worldwide movement of goods. But it was the British who would first fully realize this grand ambition.

Fair revolution: the 'Crystal Palace Exhibition'

The British had been holding their own arts and industry exhibitions since the 18th century, a trend that befitted the world's first industrialized nation. The 1851 London 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations', often referred to as the 'Crystal Palace Exhibition' after the immense, iconic cast-iron and glass structure that housed the fair, is rightly considered the first true international exposition. Organized by a Royal Commission and with the strong official support of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's spouse (and the Commission's titular leader), the 1851 London Exhibition took the exposition to a new level, with the issuance of invitations to participate in 'the friendly competition' to all of the nations in existence at the time. No fewer than 34 sovereign countries accepted the invitation and implicit challenge; they combined with the subject states and regions of several imperial participants, not least of which Britain herself, to make the Crystal Palace Exhibition a truly worldwide convocation. In the middle of the 19th century Great Britain was the world's foremost economic and naval power, with a global scope and commitment to free trade. Unsurprisingly, a key focus of the Royal Commission organizers, who included active public servants such as Prime Minister Lord John Russell, was trade, with the confident expectation that foreign visitors would deem British goods best in side-by-side comparisons and buy them over the wares of other countries.

However, despite economic motives behind the fair, just as important was that the Crystal

Palace Exhibition established a template for dreams of global fraternity. In his 'First Address to the Delegates of the Human Race Met at the World's Fair in the Crystal Palace', the utopian socialist Robert Owen used the occasion of the exhibition to proclaim, 'For the delegates of the human race thus to meet ... is the first great step towards the everlasting peace of nations; it will prepare the world to understand and receive the principles of universal union, and to create the desire for universal brotherhood'. Many subsequent expositions would explore variants on this theme, even as they offered at the same time paeans to imperialism, Anglo-Saxon or Western racial dominance, and national and martial virtues of host countries and contributing guests. Modernity has been complicated, and the fairs have been a fair reflection of that complexity.

Expos and international organization

There have been over one hundred international expositions since the Crystal Palace Exhibition. Britain, France and the United States would be the foremost hosts. Nonetheless, these fairs have been held all over the world, for example from New York to Paris to Sydney to Guatemala City to Nanking (Nanjing) to Montréal to Osaka. As of this writing, Turkey is the first state to bid to host 'Expo 2015'. Until 1928, international expositions were organized on an ad hoc basis; any nation or indeed city could choose to play host, which sometimes led to unseemly struggles, such as the three-way battle among San Francisco, San Diego and New Orleans over where to hold an exposition in honour of the recently completed Panama Canal – eventually, San Francisco and San Diego worked out a compromise that gave a major fair to the former and a lesser but still impressive one to the latter, while New Orleans, lacking the deep pockets of the two West Coast cities, was forced to bow out altogether.

By the early 20th century states began discussions on a governing body; the first such conference took place in Germany in 1912, and a preliminary protocol was drafted. But World War I intervened, and the issue of establishing an appropriate bureaucracy did not arise again until well into the 1920s. The establishment in 1928 of the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), based in Paris, brought a measure of order to the scheduling of international expositions and the arbitration of disputes among contenders for hosting fairs. However, on occasion major

exhibitions such as the 1964–65 New York World's Fair were mounted without the sanction of the BIE, to the enduring annoyance of the organization – indeed, the BIE's website pointedly omits the 1964–65 New York fair from its official historical list of international exhibitions.

Beyond Britain: new hosts, ever grander spectacles

During most of the latter half of the 19th century, the main national rivalry on the world's fair turf was waged between Great Britain, pioneer of the international exhibition and of course the world's wealthiest and most imperially extensive state, and France, culturally pre-eminent but perennially envious and anxious about her status in relation to Britain. But 'smaller' countries also played ball. Belgium, flush with land, wealth and ambition as it gained control over the Congo and opened a major shipping facility in Antwerp, made a splash in 1885 with a large-scale exposition in that port city; Belgium would hold other exhibitions in later decades, including Liège in 1905 and Brussels in 1910, 1935 and again in 1958.

But Belgium's 1885 fair was dwarfed by the Brodingtonian Chicago Exhibition of 1893, in which the United States announced itself as a strong third force in the contest for grandest world's fairs. Henry Adams, staggered by the size and grandeur of the Chicago fair, succinctly posed the question about America's future development as 'How long and how far?'. Henceforth Britain would effectively recuse herself from the competition with a series of more modestly scaled exhibitions, leaving the French and the Americans to mount ever more stunning fairs in an ongoing display of one-upmanship. This competition lasted into the 1930s; only the advent of World War 2 ended the rivalry for good. While European world's fairs in the 19th and early 20th centuries were ordinarily held in capital cities, the seats of national power and culture, from an early point American fairs were held around the country by cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago and St Louis seeking to establish or reinforce their metropolitan status vis-à-vis other US cities. During the 20th century, the American site approach would become more common around the world, with many fairs held in non-national capitals, for example, in Barcelona in 1929, Osaka in 1970 and Brisbane in 1988.

The dark side of expos

Many scholars have properly stressed the role international expositions have played in justifying colonialism, codifying and encouraging racism, and stoking nationalism. For example, at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle the French set up a series of re-created villages drawn from around their empire, in which native Senegalese, Indochinese and New Caledonians, among others, were placed in *tableaux vivants* to go about their ostensible quotidian business before crowds of gawking visitors; the effect was that of a human zoo. Egyptian scholars visiting the Paris fair were angered and embarrassed at the Egypt exhibit, set up to resemble a chaotic Cairo bazaar, when they walked through the door of a building façade of a 'mosque', only to find themselves in a coffee house complete with dancing girls and whirling dervishes. These sorts of potted anthropology exhibit showed up in numerous fairs for decades; and indeed the British, the Belgians, and the French would devote entire expositions to empire and colonialism in 1924–25, 1930 and 1931 respectively (the US was among the colonial powers contributing to the Paris fair).

Nationalist chest-beating, an ongoing phenomenon at world's fairs, reached a crescendo with the German pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, designed by Hitler's architect Albert Speer: a stark neoclassicist rectangular structure, well over 50 metres tall, marble-clad and topped with a huge bronze swastika-bearing eagle. The pavilion was set directly across from that of Nazi Germany's arch-rival the USSR, which built its own bombastic structure; as war loomed in the near future, the fair's rather Panglossian stated objective as set forth in its programme pamphlet was 'to be a meeting place for harmony and peace by not only striving to promote economic exchange between peoples but also the exchange of ideas and friendship'. The 1958 Brussels exposition was a veritable festival of US–Soviet Cold War rivalry in which the central motif was the huge 'Atomium', a steel molecule over 100 metres tall, ostensibly meant to symbolize peaceful atomic energy but inadvertently driving home the omnipresent threat of superpower thermonuclear war and the destruction of human civilization.

Expos as agents of optimism, aesthetics and arrival

But to monofocus on colonialism, racism and nationalism is to miss the series of ingenuous attempts that many fair organizers and participants were making to come to grips with a world that was at once far smaller and more complex than in earlier human epochs. The 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, for example, was rife with exhibits infected with 'scientific' racism toward blacks and Amerindians; yet it was also the site of the first meeting of the World Congress of Religions, which brought together as at least nominal equals representatives from ten faith traditions, including Judaism, various Christian denominations, Islam, and Buddhism. One could properly decry the racial and ethnic hierarchies on display at the 1889 and 1900 Paris Universelles and the colonialism that undergirded them. Yet among the many visitors to the ethnographic displays, with their Oceanic and African arts and crafts, were Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse, who were captivated and transformed by the aesthetic power of what they viewed, and who in turn took Western art in a new and globalized direction. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, itself the site of two world's fairs, provides stark evidence of the cultural dialogue sparked by international expositions, in the form of Picasso's seminal 'Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)', two of whose visages have been transmogrified by the artist into African tribal masks. As one writer has put it, 'Without the African mask there might well have been no cubism; without imperialism there would have been no African masks for the cubists to look at' (Greenhalgh 1988, 221). Indeed, the fairs were spurs to the establishment of numerous lasting museums and displays, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, and the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris (recently incorporated into the new Musée du Quai Branly). And the very same 1937 Paris exposition that featured the duelling Nazi and Soviet pavilions as a prelude to renewed world war was also host to the World Documentation Congress, where representatives from 31 member nations of the International Institute for Documentation met to discuss the possibility of a global documentation network, at which author H. G. Wells, a key popularizer of the idea of a 'world brain' universal knowledge compendium, was the star speaker.

Additionally, non-Western countries that sought to establish their status as 'progressive' or modern, or as significant players on the world stage, saw a golden opportunity to make their case, both by contributing pavilions and exhibits to fairs and by hosting fairs themselves. For example, from even before the 1868 Meiji Restoration onward Japan has consistently been among the most enthusiastic participants in international expositions. With its fair pavilions and, later, hosted expositions, Japan sought, with variable success, to drive home an image of modernization, Westernization on Japanese terms, martial and imperial power, and after defeat in World War 2 and reconstruction, a commitment to peace, prosperity and better living through technology. The Japanese government placed the nation's first official exhibits on display at the 1867 Paris Exposition Universelle; with succeeding fairs Japan's pavilions became increasingly elaborate. At the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition, held in London to celebrate the strategic alliance between the two maritime powers, displays drove home Japan's recently consolidated status as a major, imperial power and a technologically modern society. In the late 1930s, a Japan at war in Asia depicted itself as both ultramodernist (at the 1937 Paris Exposition) and possessing a proud and ancient heritage (at the 1939 New York World's Fair). In the aftermath of Hiroshima and the US occupation, Japan's exhibits took on a tone of reassurance that the nation's considerable energy was being channelled toward benign ends, as exemplified by the Japanese pavilion at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, which offered up to visitors electron microscopes, ultra-high-speed motion-picture cameras, and a seemingly endless array of consumer goods, many actually for sale. And a half-decade later, the Japan World Exposition at Osaka dedicated itself explicitly to Progress and Harmony for Mankind, in case anyone had missed out on the message that the Land of the Rising Sun was now on the side of the angels.

Mexico was another of many non-Western states that saw world's fairs as attractive presentation venues. During Porfirio Díaz's rule from 1877 to 1910 Mexico contributed numerous displays to expositions, most notably at Paris in 1889, where the national pavilion aimed to overturn the rampant image of a lawless and violent country in favour of a rapidly modernizing and stable 'promised land', with an eye toward attracting

both international investment and large-scale immigration from Northern Europe – even as the pavilion’s design was an ersatz Aztec palace, itself a reflection of proud, non-European nationalism. Postrevolutionary Mexico would continue using world’s fairs to make public statements, stressing for example national renewal at Rio de Janeiro in 1922, in the wake of a decade of bloodshed, or defending the revolution’s accomplishments and legacy, currently under attack in some international quarters, at the 1929 Seville exposition. Much later, at the 1970 Osaka Exposition, the Mexican pavilion’s eleven visually stunning, huge, specially commissioned murals (measuring some 20 by 30 feet each) would proclaim the prowess of Mexico as a centre of modern artistic excellence. It is fair to ask how receptive audiences were to these sorts of attempts at international public relations and image making; but the central point is that the emerging states themselves perceived the value of world’s fairs and made use of them for their own purposes.

National and international progress and modernity and the technologies that enabled them were for over a century a central motif of international expositions. From the displays of huge steam engines and small but potent sewing machines at the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition to the first public demonstration of nuclear fusion at the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair, the wonders of the present and the promise of a better tomorrow were touted to exposition visitors. A certain tower designed by the French architect Gustave Eiffel, erected for the 1889 Paris exposition, demonstrated the very latest techniques in high-quality steel manufacture and precision-engineering tolerances that made possible the following century’s explosion of skyscraper architecture (a quarter-century later, the Eiffel Tower would serve once again as a literal beacon of modernity when it was used to transmit the first global wireless time synchronization signal). The telephone, the Ferris Wheel, and broadcast television are but a few of the marvels introduced at international expositions in the 19th and 20th centuries. Related to these technologies were icons of modernity, both permanent and ephemeral, constructed for various international expositions – for example the Eiffel Tower and the Seattle Space Needle versus the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair’s famous Trylon and Perisphere, with the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair’s Unisphere, still standing today but set in the midst of a

neglected public park, occupying a forlorn middle ground. Despite a brief life span, one of the most architecturally influential structures ever built for an exposition was the gracefully austere German pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona fair, designed by the visionary Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, which codified the International Modern aesthetic that would dominate building design for better or worse for decades to come.

Expos and the making of modern popular culture

One of the most important dimensions of the international exposition was its central role in the development of national and global popular culture, which ironically would in turn play an equally central role in the ultimate marginalization of the exposition concept. While the earliest exhibitions were intended first and foremost to edify and to spur trade, it was clear that the public was interested in being entertained as well – which would increase the likelihood of fairs recouping their operating costs. Belly dancers were among the notable attractions at the Paris 1889 and Chicago 1893 fairs, as well as Buffalo Bill Cody and his Hippodrome (officially at the Paris fair, next door to the Chicago fair). The Chicago Columbian Exposition’s ‘Midway Plaisance’, a congeries of popular entertainments and exhibits, provided the template for the modern American amusement park, for example Coney Island’s famed Luna Park which opened in 1904. For several decades the popular-culture elements were segregated from the higher-toned pavilions in the manner of Chicago’s Midway from the gleaming Beaux Arts ‘White City’. However, by the early 1900s, the wall of separation at world’s fairs between high- and popular-culture exhibits broke down, so that for example the 1904 St Louis (Missouri) exposition’s planners formally incorporated the Midway exhibits into the core of the exposition itself.

Unsurprisingly, American fairs became especially adept in weaving together the popular entertainment and edification aspects of expositions, as anyone could attest who rode the General Motors-sponsored Futurama ride at the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair, with its stunning glimpse ahead via elaborate miniatures of the world two decades hence. Rides like the Ferris Wheel and Futurama and national and ‘native’ pavilions would in turn provide much of the inspiration for Walter Elias Disney, who constructed his eponymous

theme parks first in Anaheim, California and, more elaborately, in Orlando, Florida (and subsequently in France, Japan and China). Disney's studio designed several pavilions and rides for the New York 1964–65 World's Fair, most enduringly, the Pepsi Pavilion's 'It's a Small World After All', which was then reopened at Disneyland, where it remains a popular attraction over four decades later. On a somewhat more modest scale, the international cultural influence of world's fair displays can be seen in, for example, the European theme parks that celebrate the American Wild West, such as Germany's Pullman City, which comes complete with bison, American Indians and Mexican mariachi bands; and Japan's proliferating theme parks which offer small-scale re-creations of European countries such as the Netherlands, Italy and Spain. And of course we must not forget Las Vegas, which offers up eye-popping, only slightly smaller-than-life versions of the New York City skyline, the Eiffel Tower, and the bell tower of Venice's Basilica of San Marco, as well as would-be competitor Macau, whose Venetian Macao Resort Hotel proudly boasts three canals versus only one at the Las Vegas Venetian.

The fate of the fair?

But with proliferating Disney Worlds, increased access to international communications and travel, and a widespread loss of the faith in 'progress' that had been so embedded in the rationale of the international exposition, the question of these fairs' continued relevance and utility arose, never to be satisfactorily addressed. If one could inexpensively fly to Orlando, Anaheim, Paris, Tokyo, Las Vegas or Macau at one's convenience to take in exposition-like exhibits and rides (and gamble to boot in the case of the latter two), why wait for the officially sanctioned fairs at multiyear intervals? To be sure, cities around the world still vie to serve as hosts, and urban planners and politicians still see potential benefits – Brisbane, for example, improved both its infrastructure and its international profile as the result of its 1988 fair. China clearly views its hosting of the 2010 Shanghai exposition, along with the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, as an important element in that country's recasting of its international image as a stable, prosperous, forwarding-looking land. The Bureau International des Expositions continues to field numerous host-city applications for future fairs. The international exposition, over a century and a half old at the time of this

writing, will doubtless persist into the distant future. Given the very different cultural, political and technological landscape from even fifty years ago, however, it is doubtful that the exposition will ever be able to recapture a large portion of its earlier transnational cultural and political significance.

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