Picturing “A City for a Single Summer”: Paintings of the World’s Columbian Exposition

Margaretta M. Lovell

Relatively few nineteenth-century American paintings picture and interpret urban space. The contemporary functions of art, the working methods of artists, the mechanisms of patronage, and a general anxiety concerning the meaning and character of American cities resulted in little of what we could call pictorial urban introspection or celebration. It is particularly important, therefore, to investigate such a notable exception as the campaign to picture the World’s Columbian Exposition by such artists as John H. Twachtman, Thomas Moran, Theodore Robinson, Childe Hassam, and Winslow Homer, artists whose reputations rest on their images of nature. Taken as a set, the seventy or so extant oils of the fair executed by the four dozen artists who undertook the subject reveal a remarkably uniform interpretation of its spaces, its forms, and its cultural meaning. 1

Paintings of the Exposition, held in Chicago’s lakeshore Jackson Park in 1893, describe it as if it were a city and in so doing collaborate in the larger project to imagine magnificent, almost magical, and deliberately ironic transformations: the pile of California oranges is an obelisk (both marking a spot and marking nothing), the daily parade of camels and tribal finery is a Cairo wedding procession (both celebrating the surrender of noble virginity and celebrating nothing), the staff-on-lath Court of Honor is grandly Roman, eternal urban public architecture (both historically resonant and pasteboard simulacrum). 2 The questions that this essay asks are: what is the nature of the transformation the painters achieve, and what is the image they create in recording select aspects of the fair for future retrospection? Put another way, if seen as material evidence of how the fair’s ideology was read by a group of visually acute professional observers, what can these works tell us about the cultural work that the fair and the medium of painting were called on to do? Through these images one can begin to understand the nature of the fair’s popular success and access whether the tale it told Americans (and others) about America in the language of material culture was regressive or progressive. By eliding markers of class, ownership, individualism, infrastructure, work, and entrepreneurial competition, the paintings and the fair they record map for us not only potential fin-de-siècle architectural and technological futures but also social visions. What they intend is celebration; what they achieve—by selection, by omission, by reiteration, by framing, and by point of view—is a curious commentary on the fair’s utopic ideology.

Focusing on what contemporaries would have understood to be the beautiful rather than the picturesque or technologically innovative aspects of the fair, the painters created images that we simultaneously understand to be of a city (a city has history, denizens, a future) and a memory (evoking those scenes experienced but no longer experienceable by the viewer). As such the paintings are both celebratory and nostalgic. The Exposition as a whole was, on its surface, an art project, although it was also a vehicle for novel technological prowess, reactionary ethnography, model urban social relations, and much else, and the paintings silently echo this surface-interior dualism.

This essay will investigate the nature of the pictorial order recorded by these images and will touch on their role as surviving material evidence of the Exposition within America’s fabricated cultural landscape. Just as the fair’s elaborate infrastructure, its coordinated planning, and its Roman vocabulary became active agents in modeling subsequent city planning in the United States, so these paintings participated in that long-range project, instructing Americans not only in what the Exposition buildings and grounds looked like but also in how they were to be perceived and understood, and incorporated (as idea if not as physical form) into a permanent future.

The Columbian Exposition was not only one of the most ambitious events of its type, it was also one of the most documented. The focus here is on paintings, both those representative of the vast majority in terms of subject, point of view, and tone, and a few that present themselves as exceptions, pointing up pictorial (and conceptual) possibilities overlooked or avoided by the rest. Unique images in oil on canvas or watercolor and gouache on paper constitute, of course, only a fraction of the images produced of and for the fair. Photographs, engravings, lithographs, souvenir handkerchiefs, expansive verbal descriptions pictured the project for
an eager national audience as well as for the twenty-seven million visitors seeking a record for future memory even as they relished their immediate Exposition experience. It would seem that these rather different media—one utilized in perhaps a hundred unique images painstakingly crafted by hand and purchasable by single patrons, and one resulting in thousands of impressions by mechanical reproduction for a broad popular audience—would represent technical, social, and pictorial polarities. The distinction in media, however, between images produced in unique examples (paintings) and those produced by mechanical reproduction (photography and graphic means) is not as clear as it might appear; some paintings were made primarily for reproduction (especially the monochromatic watercolor and gouache works on paper), and other paintings are known to have been executed utilizing such popular media as photographs. Moreover, the images discussed here were not all made on site as we might expect; they include projections of what will be, and retrospective images of what has been as well as documents of immediate visual experience. Hence the functional distinction between paintings and prints is ambiguous. Documentary, promotional, mnemonic, illustrative, instructive, elegiac—both categories of images functioned in diverse and overlapping ways for multiple audiences.

Yet there is a difference. While photographs document every recordable facet of the Exposition and prints focus on picturesque vignettes, the surviving paintings, especially those in oil on canvas, elide much of the Exposition project. They reiterate and celebrate, almost exclusively, the exterior architecture, primarily that of the fourteen buildings surrounding the Great Basin—also known as the Grand or Main Basin—the Grand or Main Court, or Court of Honor, and the Lagoon (Fig. 1). The Senate bill of 1889 had provided for “an international exhibition of arts, industries, manufactures and the products of the soil, mine, and sea,” yet it was the white Roman architectural packaging—the outward metaphorical expression of inward prowess—that more than any other aspect of the fair enjoyed “universal and heartily appreciation by the multitudes” and riveted the artists’ attention. As one commentator put it, “for once, the casket excited more admiration than the gems it was built to hold.”

Theodore Roosevelt spoke for many in his easy response when asked what had most impressed him at the Columbian Exposition: “the buildings, of course; or at least the buildings taken in connection with the general landscape effect.” The general landscape effect—including three miles of canals, extensive gardens, and ornamental plantings—was the creation of Frederick Law Olmsted, “conjured up like magic from the muddy, dreary marsh” at the edge of Lake Michigan six miles south of central Chicago. Characteristically, Hubert Howe Bancroft’s Book of the Fair opens with an image of the marsh in its preconstruction, pre-Columbian vacancy, and then, following the evolutionary ideology evident in every aspect of the fair’s design, exhibits, and texts, documents the stages of transformation and the triumphant culmination of the project. The principal buildings, the work of several architectural firms under the general supervision of Daniel H. Burnham as director of works, were marvels of instant creation and also mute actors in a drama understood to mark social goods (such as order, sobriety, knowledge) and evolutionary (perhaps divine) design, as well as aesthetic, economic, and technological achievement. Together, buildings and waterscape constituted a mixed metaphor of extraordinary power for late nineteenth-century American audiences—Rome synthesized with Venice and transplanted westward to Chicago.

Such paintings as Thomas Moran’s Chicago World’s Fair (Fig. 2) encapsulate this migration and the westward-course-of-empire national pride that it engendered. As one Midwesterner commented, the fair presented an anthropomorphic tableau vivant: “the heart-throb of modern Rome—America the young, the strong, the master of destiny, the unarmed and open-breasted conqueror of the world.” Moran has pictured the Administration Building—flanked by Machinery Hall on the left, and the Electricity, and Mines and Mining buildings on the right—at sunset as the golden orb of the sun backlights the girt dome of the fair’s anchoring structure, effecting west-pointing arrows of golden clouds above and molten wavelets in the basin at our feet. The westering of civilization, so amply signaled by the light effects in Moran’s painting, reiterates the basic message of the fair’s architecture: transplantation—by importation, immigration, and mimicry—of the grandest aspects of European experience (situated as chronologically and evolutionarily prior). The symmetry of these structures, their reiterated echoes of a common 60-foot cornice line and 25-foot module, their shared white palette and classical vocabulary are set in dialogue not with the marvels of machinery, electricity, and mining contained behind their Roman façades but with the black, eccentric curves of flitting Venetian gondolas—signals of intriguing but controlled and therefore harmless mystery and romance. The grandeur, clarity, and fixity of Rome’s whiteness are set off by the poetry of these diminutive black vessels. As that troublesome and noisy aspect of late nine-


4. For watercolor and gouache works made for reproduction, see, e.g., those included in Bancroft; for an oil painting based on a photograph, see Theodore Robinson’s World’s Columbian Exposition, 1894 (illustrated in American Paintings from the Manougian Collection, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1989, 153); and Bancroft, t. 392.


teenth-century urban life, vehicular traffic, was excluded from this utopia, the Venetianesque waterways (together with the encircling electric railroad) provided circulation, although of course, as in contemporary Venice, power launches served the many while gondolas served the few.\(^1\)

Moran has taken as his point of view that of the 65-foot-high gilt *Statue of the Republic* by Daniel Chester French (or as close as he can manage, namely the roof of the Grecian peristyle closing off the Basin from Lake Michigan). In doing so he figures us as worthy Olympian spectators of the gigantesque blond cityscape before us, chromatically enlivened by expressive and collaborating nature.

At night, it was not nature (as in Moran’s sunset image) that provided the chromatics marking American succession to Rome; instead, it was the novel power, electricity, elaborately deployed. Curiously few artists recorded the extraordinary, proto-Disneyland night illuminations that transfigured this Venetian-Roman Old World cityscape into what was to become a characteristically American spectacle.\(^2\) The exception is Charles C. Curran’s pyrotechnic *World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893*, which offers a revision of Moran’s nature-lit glory and of the chaste white Roman grandeur of most fair images (Fig. 3). As one commentator described this electric revision of ancient architectural forms:

Solomon in all his glory never saw such a sight as the plain people of this continent have had on illumination nights this summer. Innumerable incandescent lights sparkle along the cornices and pediments; the top of the wall

---

enclosing the grand basin is outlined in fire; search-lights from the top of the Liberal Arts building cut their wide swaths of light in gigantic circles.\(^\text{13}\)

These “swaths of light” illuminated the allegorical statues that terminated the quarter-mile-long basin at either end and surmounted the Agricultural Building south of it. Three evenings a week from eight until eleven o’clock a crowd of 100,000 witnessed this transformation of the fair’s central architectural ensemble, and the chromatic play of the Basin’s three fountains illuminated from within by successively white, rose, and azure lights.\(^\text{14}\) That this regal chromatic glory was understood to be for the benefit of “the plain people of this continent” is a point that is underscored by the commentators.

Most of the paintings of the fair make it difficult to imagine such a crowd and such theatrical chromatic activity. The tone in the majority of these images is one of Apollonian hauteur. Stable horizon lines and cool white forms balanced between blue sky and blue water are displayed with clarity and precision in the presence of a handful of scale-defining onlookers.\(^\text{15}\) Like Moran’s image, John Henry Twachtman’s _Court of Honor, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago_ (Fig. 4) and Thaddeus Welch’s _Architectural View, World’s Columbian Exposition_ (Fig. 5) are characteristic in their presentation of a broad vista and in their focus on Richard Morris Hunt’s 275-feet-high Administration Building, the octagonal centerpiece of the fair and the nerve center of its order and authority.

As though haunted by the memory of Thomas Cole’s _Consummation of Empire_ (New York Historical Society) painted a half century earlier and the popular phylogenetic concept of civilization that it embodies, these artists were careful to fix this moment in what they understood to be American historical progress. As in Cole’s work, the buildings are metaphors for a cultural state, the acme of political evolution, artistic sophistication, and economic dominance. Every aspect of the Columbian Exposition reiterated the thesis of “upward” human progress illustrated in material culture. From the language of individual awards for exhibits and the pyramidal forms of goods to the design of the entire architectural assemblage, the basic assumption of an ameliorative (and inevitable) chronological sequence was assumed and diagrammed.\(^\text{16}\) The Midway (extending westward from the Lagoon), for instance, was not simply the White City’s foil (popular, commercial, visually heterogeneous, multiethnic); it related to its blond neighbor as a cluster of architectural and cultural predecessors, an outgrowth of Charles Garnier’s History of Human Habitation in forty-four dwellings (from Stone Age to contemporary) at the Paris Exposition of 1889.\(^\text{17}\) That those who recorded the fair on canvas elected to focus on what they, along with the designers, judges, many exhibitors, and visitors, took to be the culmination of human achievement is not surprising. The bleached and uniform classicism of the White City’s forms stood not in contrast but at the evolutionary pinnacle of a development

---

11. Other premodern human-propelled types of boat, such as canoes and kayaks, made their appearance on the fair’s waterways but it was the gondolas that the painters and most writers memorialized. The role of these graceful Venetian vessels was to move visitors from place to place, but they were also present in the general display of vehicles of every description gathered, for the most part, in Louis Sullivan’s Transportation Building.

12. The first international exposition to be lighted and open at night—and the one that provided a model in many ways for the Chicago fair—was the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889. See Richard Guy Wilson, “Challenge and Response: Americans and the Architecture of the 1889 Exposition,” in Annette Blaugrund, ed., _Paris, 1889: American Artists at the Universal Exposition_, exh. cat., Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1989, 93–110. Wilson reports (106) that anhistorical design at that exposition was denigrated as “American” by some French critics such as J.-K. Huysmans.

13. Low, 510.


15. James Gilbert, _Perfect Cities and Chicago’s Utopias of 1893_, Chicago, 1991, 122, suggests—one on the basis of photographs—that the White City was actually empty (the vehicle of a cultural elite rejected by the people) while the Midway was jammed and popular. Contemporary commentary suggests that this was not the case and that the effect of vacancy observed by Gilbert is the result of photographers deliberately seeking a specific uncrowded effect, probably during early morning hours.

16. Characteristic of the language of prizes is that of the award to H. N. Rust for his archaeological exhibits: “corn-grinding stones, showing them from their rudest forms up to the most perfect” (San Marino, Huntington Library, ms R4996).

17. Gilbert (as in n.15), 95–130; and Wilson (as in n. 12), 100. It should be noted that the Midway included a 17th-century New England cabin and a model of St. Peter’s in Rome as well as the better-known non-European architectural and human exemplars (Bancroft, ii, 870, 961).
understood to subsume its chronological, geographic, and technological predecessors.

Perhaps the vision of history and of 1893 underlying the Exposition is captured most vividly in the popular theatrical entertainment America presented in Louis Sullivan's Auditorium Building in nearby downtown Chicago throughout the summer of 1893. Beginning with a prologue of Columbus's departure from Spain, his discovery, and his triumphal return, it included three acts: (1) Plymouth Plantations (featuring John Alden and Priscilla Mullens); (2) Washington Crossing the Delaware and the Surrender at Yorktown; (3) Grand Ballet of American Inventions (Franklin's Lightning Rod, McCormick's Reaper, Morse's Telegraph, Edison's Telephone, Phonograph, and Electric Light) and cameo scenes marking Pioneers of the Far West and the Close of the War of Secession.18 While there were, at times, as many as seven hundred people on stage, it was the allegorical figures—Progress, Liberty, Perseverance—that united and carried the tale. And it was these same abstractions that the façades and sculptural program of the White City were intended to enact, not to the exclusion of specific historical-theatrical ethnographic “acts” but to underline their abstract and presumably shared historical development and ultimate meaning. The tone of this combination of coloring-book history,

4 John Henry Twachtman, *Court of Honor, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago*, 1893, oil on canvas. Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Bequest of Frederick W. Schumacher (photo: Columbus Museum of Art)

allegorical kitsch, and classical grandeur is difficult for us—emerging from the other side of modernism—to grasp. But the painters, journalists, and many Exposition visitors actively admired it as a satisfactory history and an endorsable ideology, neatly and beautifully encapsulated in the shorthand of material culture.

However enthusiastically some embraced the vision and its physical metaphors, the staff-on-lath architecture in which the ideology of evolutionary progress was cloaked had its critics. The complaints that Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and other modernists hurled at the fair’s architecture early in the twentieth century were aimed at both its specific metaphorical language (neoclassicism representing both foreign and historic cultures) and at the use of metaphorical language itself (rather than language organic to materials and engineering). By violating Horatio Greenough’s dictum to build with Greco-Roman principles rather than Greco-Roman forms, the fair’s designers fell afoul of those who endorsed Greenough’s prescient remarks—“beauty is the promise of function” in design as in nature; and beauty follows “the principle of unf finching adaptation of forms to functions.” Nevertheless, the extraordinary popularity of the Exposition in its time suggests that the habit of metaphorical-allegorical condensation was integral to the culture. Nor was the classicizing language of the architecture the only set of transformative allusions in operation. In Welch’s painting (Fig. 5), horsepower and manpower are represented in figurative statues in front of the 40-acre Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building (briefly the largest roofed structure in the world). Repeated in front of Machinery Hall, these sculptures were not intended as ironic comments on the contents of the buildings behind them but as predecessor forms and figurative embodiments of novel, but here invisible, sources and uses of power. Metaphor and metonymy were the language of the fair’s external display and the artists embraced it.

Humans are, these images suggest, distracting in their particularity; their participation is implied as viewers, as eyes, but not as aspects of the surveyed subject, as integral contents of the Exposition. The individual human figure would draw the eye away from the realm of metaphor and declamation suggested in the vehicles of architecture and sculpture, while collections of people—crowds—could suggest only disorder, diversity, multiplicity of intent, and variant points of view. But while visually invisible in these views, people were central to the concerns of the fair’s organizers, the fair’s commentators, and the painters who interpreted the event for their contemporaries and for us. In terms of the painters’ construct and public understanding of the reiterated metaphors, the architecture stood in for the achievements of both the buildings’ technologically potent contents and the evolutionary achievement of human culture as a whole; hence the deletion of most anecdotal, incidental figures from the images.

Photographs of the fair (those that survive are, by and large, professional photographs) provide a much larger body of images and a much wider lexicon of image types. Yet those that are best known and most frequently reproduced follow the same conventions as those utilized by the painters Welch and Twachtman, picturing the vast and elegant expan ses of the Court of Honor as sparsely populated. These photographs were deliberately taken very early in the day when there were few visitors to interrupt or anecdotize the majestic forms and spaces. The intention, however, was not to exile people from this vision but to let the architectural forms stand in for the collective accomplishment of an artistic and technological vision.

Part of the business of the fair was to renovate the idea of the city in America as a place for people, as social context. By posing a new model of urban utopia, the Exposition seriously challenged both 1890s’ Chicago as urban reality and the model of Jeffersonian pastoralism as the locus of ameliorative social mythology. Most chroniclers of the fair collaborated in certain social aspects of this project, remarking repeatedly on the civility, good humor, sobriety, and honesty of the crowd, one in which, they assured their readers, even women and children were quite safe, suggesting that this behavior was remarkable in contemporary urban contexts and an applaudable evolutionary development. That these millions of individuals were simultaneously “plain” and civil was a point of distinction, an Americanness that the commentators eagerly embraced. That they were also the appropriate audience for imperial and technological display is the straightforward burden of most verbal comment but only implied in the images. Why this should be so reflects the conventions of these disparate media and audience expectations. Even photographs of the fair tend to position the implied viewer as the viewer of a diorama, enactment, or picturesque figure, responding to the immediacy of first-person visual experience, while the journalistic or epistolary narrators tend to position themselves as learners between the exhibit and the audience.

Virtually unpeopled, Welch’s and Twachtman’s cityscapes could be thought situated in a subjunctive time eternal, simultaneously Roman antiquity, Venetian republic, and American arrival at the peak of cultural evolution. It is a that-which-will-have-been as a summer’s event but also a that-which-shall-be as an urban possibility. In the end, then, the painters collaborate in this frank presentation of a stage set, a clean, finished artifice, at once a cultural index and a cultural agent, inhabited, by and large, in imagination rather than in reality. While common to world’s fairs in general, this effect of fully realized utopian urbanism was reinforced in
Chicago by the suggestion of unanimity and consensus in its uniformity of design.

While people were excluded from these paintings though known to be present at the Exposition in great numbers, animals (beyond those isolated on the Midway and in the segregated livestock exhibit on the fair’s southern periphery) were excluded in fact. One of the marvels of the 633-acre fair was the maintenance of transportation systems and urban services without the dangers, odors, noises, and difficulties of draft animals and their handlers. The symbolic representation of these creatures and the human labor involved in their management (such as the draft horse and teamster visible in the Welch painting), therefore, comments on the explicit absence of draft animals and teamsters in the White City and also on their future banishment from a visionary city powered by the novel technology exhibited within the very buildings embellished with these massive faux-marble frontispieces. Emphasizing the metonymic language in which the message of the fair was consistently written, both Twachtman and Welch comment on this prophetic absence by including these static sculptural memorials to a labor force that soon will-have-been.

Across the Grand Basin from the plater carthorses in front of the massive Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building pictured so prominently by Welch was a pair of equally massive bulls (these pairs were repeated in front of the east façade of the Machinery Hall and the west façade of the Agricultural Building on the South Canal). Heavily classicized, they are accompanied by an equally classicized Indian Girl, and make oblique reference to the thousands of steers in enormous stockyards and slaughterhouses in a very different neighborhood of Chicago. Wild creatures (elks and cougars) were also prominently displayed in sculptural ensembles, metaphors—together with the Indian Girl—for the continent’s recent “savage” past, now officially terminated with Frederick Jackson Turner’s watershed remarks at the Exposition concerning the epochal closing of the frontier, a conference paper published as “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”

While the principal buildings were generously garnished with elaborate sculptural programs, it was for the most part the overall urban ensemble that the painters recorded and celebrated. A panorama by Theodore Robinson typically displays the parade of buildings on the fair’s north-south axis from Louis Sullivan’s Transportation Building past the domes of the Horticulture Building on the west and the U.S. Government Building on the east, and past the central Wooded Island to the domed Illinois Building almost a mile away (Fig. 6).24 The effect from this vantage point is, as Charles Dudley Warner put it, “an ideal of Beauty never before created in a square mile of this earth,” and just as important, a paradigmatic “example of administrative ability, of order, of honesty, of cleanliness.” He concluded, “why cannot another city be as decently governed and have as sanitary conditions?”25 Welch’s and Robinson’s paintings figure this wish for order, cleanliness, and classically voiced “Beauty,” and to retain this emphasis on context, they portray only at a great distance or systematically exclude altogether “the men and women and children swarming there from every corner of our great country... authentic

6 Theodore Robinson, North Lagoon, World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, 1894, oil on canvas. Chicago Historical Society, Gift of Western Reserve Academy, Hudson, Ohio (photo: Chicago Historical Society, P&S—1943.0031)

World’s Fair, Cosmopolitan, xv, no. 5, Sept. 1893, 518.
24. The opposite view (looking southward down the same axis) by Theodore Robinson from the top of the Illinois building is in the Manoogian Collection: American Paintings from the Manoogian Collection (as in n. 4), no. 57.
25. Impressions of the World’s Fair, 334. See also Carl Smith, Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief, Chicago, 1994, 172-270, concerning authority and uniformity in utopian urban planning.
exponents of our physical, mental and moral development. Well-fed, well-dressed, bright, happy, inquisitive, bent upon seeing everything, swift-footed, tireless, they swept from building to building, a multitudinous embodiment of American energy.” However commendable in their deportment and intentions, the random forms of eager tourists were distanced or subtracted from the paintings in the interest of pictorial clarity.

The answer to Warner’s question concerning the elusiveness of such order and harmonized beauty in American cities rests in the fact that a city is always “in progress”; it is the aggregate result of multiple wills and economic forces over time, while the fair was “finished,” the time-specific result of united, centralized, almost uncontested decision-making, an artifact, a piece of material culture with established authorship. That this origin might contest the very triumph of democratic principles which the fair was designed to celebrate did not trouble many at the time, least of all the artists whose omniscient eyes and elevated points of view echoed the tropes of architectural grandeur and administrative authority which they recorded. It was the intention of the fair to defend the culture that transplanted Europeans had created in a New World “discovered” by Columbus in terms of European categories of knowledge, power, and aesthetic achievement, and the artists’ vision was consistent with this goal.

In a few exceptional works, however, artists allowed human figures to rival their architectural context, and in doing so they offered somewhat different, more particularized readings of the fair. These include Frank Russell Green’s Golden Doorway of the Transportation Building; Frances Coates Jones’s Eastern Veranda of the Woman’s Building (Looking toward the Illinois Building), one of the few paintings of the fair by a woman artist; and Charles Yardley Turner’s Modeling the First Staff Ornaments, World’s Columbian Exposition, one of the very few painted scenes of labor at the fair (Figs. 7–9). As one might expect, pictures of the fair that include prominent figures immediately conjoint the problematics of class and gender with the more abstract ideologies encoded in the architectural context. These three paintings not only give prominence to human figures, they also position the viewer on an eye level with those figures and therefore engage, with personal and anecdotal abruptness, the question of how the fair should be interpreted. In these works the viewer is not

just seeing the fair, she or he is seeing and interpreting the experience of other viewers within the fair and within the image. These three painters not only took on the traditional and difficult artistic problem of the expressive human form; they also had to relate those figures in a meaningful way to each other and to architectural forms familiar to their audience. Recognizable figures draw us either by our curiosity concerning their “otherness,” or they stand in for the viewer and model “our” behavior within the fictional context. By costume, complexion, and body language, the figures within these paintings refer to specific genders, specific ethnic backgrounds, and specific classes. Ideological constructs implied in the broader views (such as the linear evolution of technology, politics, and power relations) and generic concepts (such as order, safety, cleanliness, and artisanal knowledge) are given particularity.

Green’s Golden Doorway is notable in its ground-level perspective, its inclusion of an unusual number of (mostly male) figures, and its focus on the building which, above all, broke ranks with the Greco-Roman costuming of the central Exposition buildings—Louis Sullivan’s Transportation Building. The polychromatic exuberance of this façade (rivaling the night illuminations of the Grand Basin) evoked, especially in its Golden Door and its eschewal of columnar...
vocabulary, the slightly dangerous realm of exotic Middle Eastern architectures, cultures, and peoples. Green has deflected this threat and domesticated the potentially wild elk in the foreground with his phalanx of Euro-American businessmen, their uniform costuming and deportment insuring inoculation against the “Turkish” temptations of Sulli-
van’s façade.

While Green uses his figures as a foil to the architectural action, as an assurance that bourgeois regularity is being observed, Jones uses them for a somewhat different purpose. Her painting shows visitors—mainly women—enjoying a prospect of the northern portion of the fair from the balustraded walkway high on the front of the Woman’s Building. Neatly attired, they observe the landscape while we observe them through the eyes of Frances Jones. Appropriately enough, this canvas memorializes the multifaceted project to design, build, and house a substantial exhibition devoted to the professional work of women. Unlike the other central White City structures, the Woman’s Building con-
tained exhibits of the products of some marginalized, colo-
nized, and other non-Western peoples alongside the prod-
ucts of Americans and Europeans. While the issue of categories of exclusion and inclusion were by no means resolved by this policy, it suggested important alternative models for categorization.⁷⁷ Although some amateur work was presented (Queen Victoria sent a group of her watercol-
sors), the emphasis was on high-profile professionals. Promi-
nent among them were painter Mary Cassatt, designer Candace Wheeler, and the newcomer, twenty-one-year-old Sophia Hayden of Boston, who was the architect of the stately structure which Jones takes for her subject.

In the realization of this structure and its contents, the fair organizers were recognizing woman as an ethnologic cat-
estory that deserved singular attention; but it was an unusual category in that it subsumed cultural difference, impossible in the world of men. This policy of ascribing to women a separate (but in many ways parallel) sphere as empowered actors on the world’s stage was contradicted by the official sculptural program of the fair, in which women figured primarily as symbolic vehicles for such male-only enterprises as the Republic (French’s Statue of the Republic anchoring the Grand Basin), Agriculture (Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s gilt Diana surmounting the Agriculture Building), and Colum-
bus’s voyage of discovery conflated with the ship of state (“Columbia” and “Fame” on Frederick MacMonnies’s promi-
nent Columbian Fountain). Jones’s painting quietly but nota-
bly celebrates the first and omits the second of these public roles for women. Clothed, individuated, active, and bound in communities of two or three, her women propose a very different role for their sex than the generic, voluptuous allegorical goddesses that preside so prominently elsewhere at the Exposition.

Jones’s painting shows us a particular slice of the fair in its midsummer glory, with clusters of visitors visually consuming its wonders. The painting, like the Exposition as a whole, thematizes sight and surface, in what one might call the good confidence game. The suspension of disbelief in which the visitors to the fair and the artists participated focused on a faux-marble pasteboard classicism they praised and painted as an apt metaphor for post-Columbian achievement on the American continent. Its artificiality was understood but suppressed in most visual documents except photographs (which include a careful record of the building process). The majority of oil paintings, watercolors, and etchings cele-
brated the Exposition as an achieved entity and treated it as Jones treated it—a built environment of seemingly perma-
nent materials on an imperial scale. One of the very few paintings to record the White City’s façadism and the process of its becoming is Turner’s Modeling the First Staff Ornaments, World’s Columbian Exposition, which, unlike Jones’s Eastern Veranda, exposes the architecture as illusion and uses figures to underline the trickiness of sight (Fig. 9). Its subject is the process of fabrication of a (harmless and productive) de-
ception.

Turner’s workers are dwarfed by the scale of the acanthus scrolls they are creating; two have to stand precariously on makeshift sawhorse scaffolding to address their task. The scene is set in a vast, casually treated, roughly constructed space, which starkly contrasts with the elegantly crafted architectural language that the workers mimic. Enormous easels hold the work (both the soon-to-be-covered structural backing and the soon-to-be attached scrolls), echoing the situation of Turner’s easel-set painting while he replicated the scene. As assistant director of decorations at the Exposi-
tion, Turner was in a position to see and oversee the activities he here records.²⁸ Two of the men wear long smocks and scribe curves with their respective instruments. Two others, with rolled shirtsleeves and leather aprons, define bound-
aries or prepare materials. The second from the right is dif-
ferrntiated in the otherwise gray-brown painting by the saturated primary hues of his blue apron, red cap, and “Italian” (in this context, Columbian) features. Turner sug-
gests by these costumes that there are two classes of activity and two classes of men at work here, each subcategorized by activity, demeanor, and placement as artist (smocked and seated) and artist’s assistant (smocked and standing), aproned workman/craftsman (center) and aproned workman’s assis-
tant (in the shadows). Yet they are mutually dependent, mutually confident collaborators in an enormously scaled project, miming in this single architectural phrase the operatic effort of the producers of the fair at large. Orderly, knowledgeable, and productive, they unite in a gargantuan architectural scene-painting endeavor.

The product of the teamwork visible in Turner’s image is long gone, and yet his account of its creation executed in the more permanent medium of oil on canvas remains—as Turner knew it would—capturing for enframement in gold a momentary point in the fabrication of a disposable frieze for

²⁷. Ellen M. Henrotin, “An Outsider’s View of the Woman’s Exhibit,” Cosmopolitan, xvi, no. 15, Sept. 1893, 560–61. While the African exhibits were set into an ethnological context, the artwork of Siamese, Ceylonese, Mexican, and Japanese women was placed near that of British, Norwegian, Swedish, French, Italian, Spanish, Austrian, Belgian, and German contributors. See also Jeanne M. Weimann, The Fair Women: The Story of the Woman’s Building, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893, Chicago, 1981.

²⁸. Turner’s painting may have been executed on the site of the construc-
tion he records, but it appears to have been closely based on a photograph (perhaps one he ordered and choreographed) by Charles Dudley Arnold,
a disposable city. The artistic comment verges on a visual oxymoron: the thousand-year longevity of classical architecture is evoked in the creation of what one viewer aptly called “a city for a single summer,” while Turner’s informal record of its ephemeral construction persists as a firmer record of thought and cultural practice to our own time.29 As the Turner, Jones, and Green paintings make clear, the introduction of figures into the urban image complicates the tableau with issues of gender and class and introduces the concept of agency in a world that might otherwise seem simply inevitable. These individuated figures remind us of the decision-making and hierarchy that govern the orderly array of architectural and sculptural metaphors so grandly deployed by the Exposition’s designers, so feelingly admired by the crowds, and so enthusiastically celebrated by the majority of painters.

The scrolls under production in Turner’s image are artifice—board-thin graphic representations of pseudo-marble sculptural reliefs, visual deceits which were both recognized as artifice and admired as utopian urban fabric. The project of pleasurable illusion, of course, verges on the project of fraudulence, and there is a thin line between pleasure at being fooled (where the stakes are low and distanced from the self) and anger at being deceived (when the stakes are high and personal). It is no accident that the cultural climate that fostered acclaim for the fair as a synthetic metaphorical “fairylant,” a “dream” of ancient architectural and political values in plaster also responded with enthusiasm to trompe-l’oeil painting. Jacob Atkinson’s Souvenir of the Columbian Exposition (Fig. 10) memorializes the former within the conventions of the latter. Shallow picture space, one-to-one scale, invisible brushwork, non-frame frames, and multiplicity of textures represented contribute to the ability of such a painting to fool the eye of the beholder. And yet it is its quality as a “hand-made,” specifically a painted, thing on which its value turns. Put another way, this is the one mode that necessarily has no counterpart in other media. Unlike the Turner painting, which includes a comment on the human fabrication of “deceptive” acanthus leaves, Atkinson’s erases agency completely. Ephemera—stamps, handwritten correspondence, money, and other engraved documents—executed so cleverly that their true medium is ambiguous, are standard features of this art. Familiar and quickly recognized, these seemingly random items of daily life frequently compose in trompe-l’oeil painting linked patterns of meaning as artfully crafted as the painstaking simulations of the individual, seemingly valueless elements themselves. In this case the common thread in the simulacrum is Columbus and the Columbian Exposition.

Atkinson’s terse narrative begins with an envelope mailed October 4, 1893, its franked stamp bearing the “1492–1892” notation of the anniversary of Columbus’s voyage. It continues with a visit recorded on an “Official Souvenir Postal,” marked October 24, by someone, presumably a correspon-

---

10 Jacob Atkinson, Souvenir of the Columbian Exposition, 1893, oil on canvas. Indianapolis Museum of Art, James E. Roberts and Martha Delzell Memorial Funds (photo: © Indianapolis Museum of Art)

---


structures) casts the title in an ironic light; these “souvenirs” are discards, disposable commercial and personal messages, yesterday’s news, and not valued keepsakes intended to excite happy memory. The antithesis of the vast majority of Exposition images, such as the compositions of Moran, Robinson, Twachtman, and Welch, which present the ephemeral city as a reality, as a fixed applaudable entity worthy of permanent regard and embodying a worthy ideology, Atkinson’s Souvenir of the Columbian Exposition presents it as ephemera, as a fabricated collection of disposable symbols, structures, events that can appropriately and easily be discarded.

Yet that is not exactly true. Atkinson’s composition tracks the course of this national event with his reproduction of signs of public commemoration and his recapitulation of signs of private response, including the final decision to be done with it all. However, in telling his tale in the personage of Everyman John Smith and in the medium of oil paint, he reanimates and humanizes for successive future viewers of his picture the fact of the Exposition, its packaging, and its seeming impermanence in artifact and memory. Like Turner, he gives permanence to the ephemeral. It is his product and not the pictured objects fabricated for the event that is the real “souvenir” of the title.

While Atkinson embraces the fair in a counterfeit, Winslow Homer—better known as a champion of realism—embraces it as a counterfeit. The Fountains at Night, World’s Columbian Exposition (Fig. 11) is a nocturnal view full of action and artifice. Two gondoliers speed a dark, seated pair to an unknown assignation in the northern reaches of the fair while above, a burly rider appears to plunge toward them on one of a team of rearing horses with fishlike tails. Water jets upward, sprays in long arcs, and spills down successive tiered steps toward the rushing gondola. Homer has here taken a fragment of one of the most recognizable features of the fair—MacMonnie’s Columbian Fountain, a complex allegorical ship of state set in a 150-foot-diameter basin in which figurative groups such as these “seahorses” cavort—and defamiliarized its celebrated form. Theatrical in every sense, this painting with its blue-black palette renders mysterious the basic metaphor of the fair in condensed form: Rome (figured in the allegorical fountain) and Venice (referenced in the swift gondola), conflated and naturalized in heartland America on Lake Michigan.

It is worth noting that the gondolas and gondoliers (imported from Italy for the occasion) were the only aspect of the quaint, exotic, premodern globe given prominence in the Beaux Arts White City (with the possible exception of the Japanese building nestled among the trees on the Wooded Island). As one commentator expressed this fundamental cultural and spatial difference, “the Midway Plaisance is not far away with its turbaned, sandalled, greased, and befeathered inhabitants.”

Homer’s painting is about Venice and Rome and mystery, but it is also about water, and here he recognizes and represents the full vocabulary of water activity recorded so
vigorously by painters throughout the nineteenth century—falling water (in waterfalls), ascending water (in geysers), spraying water (in crashing surf), and calm water (in lakes and rivers). At the time of the Exposition Homer was producing his remarkable seascapes, in which water—in all its characteristic forms except horizontal—is the central actor. Indeed, Homer’s errand in Chicago related to the exhibition of his works, including seascapes. He must have been disappointed, since they were poorly hung. As one critic chastised the fair’s hanging committee: “Great pictures are often tucked away into obscure corners or surrounded by inferior and discordant works. . . . One finds a cut-and-dried boat-load of J. G. Brown’s puppets actually forced into juxtaposition with a fine sea thing by Winslow Homer; and. . . . [a] superb study of a nude Egyptian girl, by Sargent, is hung on the second floor where comparatively few visitors discover it, and almost all of Winslow Homer’s paintings—an admirable collection, including the best work he has done—meet the same fate.”

Arguably appropriate in this category of “best work,” *Fountains at Night* is a curious souvenir of the Exposition. Inverting the broad-prospect nighttime brightness of such artists as Welch, Twachtman, and Robinson, Homer has made his own “obscure corner” out of two of the fair’s signature artifacts. But to judge from this work, even this champion of realism, this reclusive sage of nature’s savage moods, embraced the mixed metaphors at the core of the White City.

As another artist commented on the cloying but successful visual cliché of a gondola ride in Chicago, “the pure blue water-way upon which our gondola so listlessly floats, is the crowning artifice of the project.” Homer, as so many of his fellow visitors, acknowledged the artificial, constructed aspect of the illusion and the contributions of the watery medium on which it floated to the overall effect. That he was able to translate the fair’s potentially bathetic elements into understated mystery is an index of his power as an artist.

In reviewing the capacity of artists to distill their experiences of the fair into permanent expression and interpretation, it is useful to note those aspects of the experience they avoided in their search for subjects. Crowds were generally excised, as was any overt reference to prizes and personal, industrial, or national competition. Although it is generously memorialized in photography and prints, the Midway does not appear in paintings except in those intended for reproduction (similarly, map makers of the Columbian Exposition usually only included the Midway’s entrance to the west of the Woman’s Building). Curiously, while the ethnographic program encoded in the Midway was seldom painted by the fair’s artists, the exhibition in the elaborate Fine Arts Palace anchoring the northern end of the complex contained a very high proportion of images which were understood to represent the socially premodern: peasant genre scenes and non-Western figure pieces. Also invisible in painted records of the Exposition is the Native American perspective on this event and its ideology of progress, a matter noted by some visitors (“the native Indian. . . . he is the American. He is the only one among us who had ancestors to be discovered. . . . the only one here with an hereditary right to the country we are celebrating.” There are no references to Chicago as a city, to its stockyards or to the productive wealth of the specific region. Raw materials, although present at the fair, are passed over in favor of the “cooked” and art-framed aspects of culture. The battleship *Illinois* so prominently simulated on the waterfront, munitions (including the 124-ton Krupp gun delivered by flatcar), the railroad depot, the “Intramural” rail line, and the uniformed civil guards were the subject of much comment but not of the artists’ endeavors. The ideology of progress made a curious bedfellow here with antimodernism. Examples of engineering prowess—so prominently displayed *inside* such structures as the 1,687-foot-long Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building—were consistently avoided by artists. The exterior of this building, however, appears often, as in John Henry Twachtman’s *World’s Fair* (Fig. 12). Nor was the dramatic Ferris wheel, a construction that dominated the skyline, sought out by painters. One small exception to this general avoidance of contemporary technology is Childe Hassam’s *Columbian Exposition, Chicago*, in which the naked metal truss of a small bridge is juxtaposed with the “fireproof” Beaux Arts U.S. Government Building (Fig. 13).

Overall, painters took specific structures and the architectural ensemble of the white, water-washed core buildings for their subject, expressing modernism primarily in the drama of gaintesque scale and uniformity of design. They embraced the fair’s central Venice-Rome conceit and willingly suspended disbelief, recording illusion as fact. That it was a pasteboard urban illusion they found untroubling. In the interior-exterior split twentieth-century Americans find so dissonant they found an appropriate metaphorical system of clear signs and clearer signifiers. The fair was not fraud but a certain kind of illusion-based play. The paintings suggest that the artists saw their mission as agents of public memory. In large part, theirs was a campaign to capture in more permanent media and render memorable that which was as ephemeral as the reflection of substance in water.

Perhaps the most striking dualism of the Exposition highlighted in its painterly interpretations is its construction of the modern as simultaneously the visible metaphor of an ideology of power (the fair is explicitly about European cultural birthright and Manifest Destiny) and the invisibility of infrastructure, work, energy, capital, and individual will. Most prominent in its design, in the commentators’ records, and in the painters’ views are the Roman architecture and the Venetian lagoon, recycling in these forms, in these discarded iconographies, New World appropriation of real power relations. Most obviously absent from the paintings (Turner’s excepted) is any sign of work or will, both evi-
enced so strongly in contemporary photographic images of nearby downtown Chicago (Fig. 14). Not only were draft animals and images of human labor and police regulation excluded, but also the confusion of electric and telephone lines that festooned America’s most progressive contemporary urban centers, and the horsecars and trolleys that moved workers to jobs and shoppers to emporia. Indeed, the White City as a pseudo-city had no residential districts buttressing linkage between class and locale. Similarly invisible were all those markers of money, commerce, individual initiative, marketing, and exchange that characterized turn-of-the-century urban America: narrow streets (resulting in spectacular vehicular melees), insistent signage (words proliferated on windows, awnings, and walls, and projected aggressively into the streetscape), and variety of building type, scale, finish, and style, all expressive of vigorous competition and the pressures of ground rents in real contemporary cities. And unlike contemporary downtowns, the White City displayed no visible power source for the enormous engines that appeared, as Henry Adams has so memorably noted in a related context, to generate energy by themselves. Discontinuity between cause and effect was everywhere evident and uniformly celebrated. Contemporary cities were marked by point-of-motion evidences of power: draft horses, smoke-stacks, mill runs, hod carriers, electric wires. The modernity of the White City was marked by a new invisible, seemingly magical relation between sources of power and their effects.

Of course, the development of abstract human, property, and material relations was, as William Cronon has demonstrated, equally important to Chicago’s preeminent position as a financial hub as its physical position as the entrepôt of the midcontinent’s very real natural resources. Also cloaked at the fair were contemporary human relations: the seemingly classless visitors—“well-fed, well-dressed, bright, happy, inquisitive . . . a multitudinous embodiment of American energy”—are only parenthetically suggested in these tableaux. The artists who captured so well the overt and covert messages of the Exposition were, as noted above, primarily landscape painters. Perhaps their practice in the realm of nature—where national concerns, philosophical speculation, and social realities were, in large part, also cloaked and commented on in the absence of human actors—contributed to their ability to capture the dominant metaphors of this very different, very urban project. Seemingly socially neutral, removed from issues of ownership, visible infrastructures, and issues of class, nature provided them with a training ground for understanding and interpreting the central concerns of the fair.

Together, these two languages, this dualism of the reiterative visible “Roman” and the artfully invisible infrastructure suggest a cultural fantasy of effortless achievement and benign cooperation, clarity, order, and unity. As one commentator put it, praising the designers, the fair was “a stage setting of an unexampled spectacle. They have realized in plaster . . . a painter’s dream of Roman architecture.” It was, of course, in the end the artists who realized, in the permanence of paint, the “Roman” dream of both the designers and of a public that ratified their efforts with applause.

The dominant interpretive structures employed by these artists include the tableau vivant, metonymic substitution, and introspective commentary on the uses of illusion. These
images are, like the fair they memorialize, about the purposes and uses of vision. And when one recalls Charles Dudley Warner’s admiring interrogative (“why cannot another city be as decently governed [and as beautiful]?”), one is tempted to see in these paintings—especially those with elevated points of view and broad cones of vision—a Foucauldian panoptic vision of surveillance.\textsuperscript{40} But other models closer to home propose themselves, insistent in the visual and verbal record. Above all, the Exposition was structured by an ideology of evolutionary development and orderly, visually embodied, visually measured classification systems. The narrative of Darwinian survival (figured at the fair as triumph)—itself recently emerged from decades of embittered controversy—dominated both micro and macro visions of the fair. Linking historic tropes with scientific theses and visual practices, the subtext of progressive and temporal development is everywhere evidenced. Even in those images in which only the final phase is pictured (and celebrated), the linear tale of becoming is implied. The answer to Warner’s question is “it can and it will” as—in the ideology of the day—the next phase of urbanism evolves to realization, not in a temporary utopic world’s fair but in the blooming cities of a seemingly promised and immanent future which is both forecast and remembered in these canvases.

Frequently Cited Sources


Margaretta M. Lovell is associate professor of history of art, University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of \textit{A Visitable Past: Views of Venice by American Artists, 1860–1915} (Chicago, 1989), and essays on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art and material culture [Department of History of Art, University of California, Berkeley, Calif. 94720–6020].

38. Cronon (as in n. 21, 97–147.