Overview of the Exposition

At the End of the Century: the World's Fair, Chicago, and America

Four hundred and one years after Christopher Columbus sailed from the Old World to the New, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago opened to the public to commemorate his voyage. The fair's planners believed that an event of such historical significance deserved a grand affair. Their understanding of history was that Columbus had done nothing less than bring "civilization," that is European, civilization to America. The opening sentence of The Book of the Fair by Hubert Howe Bancroft states that the fair's purpose was to be the greatest "among monuments marking the progress of civilization throughout the ages." [Hubert Hugh Bancroft, The Book of the Fair, Preface, 1893]

"'The Caravels [models of ships of Columbus] and La Rabida.' [building]. Color plate by Charles S. Graham from The World's Fair in Water Colors." See more images from the Field Museum Library flickr site.
The fair included life size replicas of Columbus’s three ships, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. The ships sailed into the official fair entrance from Lake Michigan.

But when it came time to choose a host city for the fair, Chicago’s bid was not at all secure. Could the “Hog Butcher for the World” as the poet Carl Sandburg dubbed Chicago in the early twentieth century, represent the “progress of civilization”? Many Americans, especially in Chicago’s rival, New York, were doubtful. In many ways, however, Chicago was the perfect venue to showcase the promise of American “progress” at the close of the nineteenth century. Arguably more than any other American city at the time, Chicago embodied many of the drastic transformations that the nation as a whole was experiencing.

In 1800, the then sixteen United States were still largely agricultural. Just four cities, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston had populations over 20,000, while the nationwide population was 5.3 million. By 1893, after the industrial and transportation revolutions, the growth of slavery, westward expansion, the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, the forty-five United States had drastically transformed to become a diverse population of nearly 76 million people. Over 100 cities had populations over 20,000, and three, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia had over one million people each. Chicago’s meteoric rise to become the second largest American city by 1890 made it the nation’s industrial nerve center, drawing hundreds of thousands of foreign immigrants and rural dwellers to the city. In the twenty years between 1870 and 1890, Chicago's population more than tripled, while over 40% of Chicago dwellers were born outside of the U.S. The city’s central location made it a major railroad hub, connecting the East with the West, and farmers and ranchers with consumers.
The rebuilding project in the aftermath of the Great Fire of 1871 demonstrated Chicagoans’ resilience and determination. Enterprising engineers reversed the course of the Chicago River and built the first steel framed ten-story skyscraper in 1885, even though Chicago has no bedrock foundation like New York. This determination to accomplish the seemingly impossible was reflected in the fair’s financiers’ ability to raise the necessary funds to stage the fair. Leading Chicago businessmen like Philip Armour, Gustavus Swift, Cyrus McCormick, George Pullman, and Marshall Field fought hard to win the fair by lobbying Congress. In the end, it was First National Bank President Lyman Gage’s ability to raise in just 24 hours an additional $5 million for the fair that sealed the deal. It was this kind of determination that allowed the fair planners including architects Daniel Burnham and John Root and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead to construct the “White City” as the World’s Columbian Exposition was called due to its white neoclassical main buildings.

The sheer immensity of what the fair planners and workers built in just three years time was staggering. At 633 acres, the Chicago World’s Fair was seven and a half times the size of Disneyland in California with about 400 buildings that had to be constructed. The Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building alone included over 40 acres of exhibition space, was over 230 feet tall, and at the time was the largest enclosed building ever built. The fair planners were proud to say that the Manufactures building was so large that it would have easily accommodated the Eiffel Tower (the centerpiece of the 1889 Paris Exposition) laid on its side. In fact, with a length of 1,687 feet, the Manufactures building could have even held Chicago’s landmark Sears Tower, which was completed in 1973 and remains the tallest skyscraper in the United States. In total it took over 40,000 workers, 18,000 tons of iron and steel, and 75 million board feet of lumber to construct the fair buildings. The “White City” transformed Jackson Park on the shore of Lake Michigan from a muddy
swamp to the ideal of civilization with lagoons, gorgeous landscapes, and awe-inspiring buildings that reportedly brought many visitors to tears.

For more about this image see Chicago Historical Society’s Exposition page

From May 1 to October 31, 1893, during the period of the worst financial panic Americans had yet experienced, the fair entertained 27 million people, hosting over 700,000 on “Chicago Day” alone. By comparison, in 2007 Disneyland welcomed 14.9 million visitors. Most arrived by train, and paid 50 cents for admission. The 14 main buildings provided 63 million square feet of space housing 65,000 exhibits. There were over 30 buildings showcasing the states and territories, and 19 foreign nations participated in the fair. Of course there was no way to see everything at the fair in one day, and visitors often returned. They could even stay safely after dark due to the Columbian Guard policing the fair and the 120,000 incandescent lights that illuminated the grounds like few other places in the nation.

How would the fair planners achieve their goal of demonstrating the “progress of civilization”? A key factor in the “progress” evident in the late nineteenth century was technological innovation, and the fair showcased many of these developments. Perhaps the most important new technology on display at the fair was electricity. 43 steam engines and 127 dynamos powered the fair. Visitors were awed by the exhibits,
grounds, and buildings, but electricity was behind many of the new inventions that they saw, including the fair’s elevated train, colored fountains, moving sidewalk, and incandescent lights. Electricity was the star of the fair’s Opening Day as President Cleveland officially opened the fair by pushing a golden telegraph that completed a circuit to start the 3,000 horsepower steam engine that powered many of the fair’s attractions. In the Electricity Building, visitors saw the introduction of the telephone, the phonograph, the typewriter, the elevator, electric lamps, sewing machines, laundry machines, and irons. These exhibits demonstrated how electricity could revolutionize both industry and the home. Technological innovation became and has remained a cornerstone of American identity.
As the ideal of the “White City” contrasted the dirty, industrial chaos of the city outside, it also contrasted the “primitive” cultures on display on the Midway Plaisance. In demonstrating the “progress of civilization” the White City was meant to educate visitors and lift them up to a cultural ideal. The Midway Plaisance, on the other hand, was a moneymaking, entertaining carnival, where visitors could explore exotic scenes from around the world and see cultures and peoples that they had never before seen. Particularly popular was the Streets of Cairo, where visitors could see artifacts from Ancient Egypt and the infamous “hootchy-kootchy” dancer. This small portion of the fair was a great financial success, generating $4 million in revenue.

The Midway Plaisance was a mile-long strip that ran perpendicular to the fair, bridging the White City to the chaotic city outside. The fair planners had wanted to follow the French example from the 1889 Paris Exposition of incorporating the budding field of Anthropology to provide fairgoers with glimpses of peoples and cultures from around the world. Chicago planners recruited the Harvard professor Frederic Ward Putnam to direct this educational effort. The Midway was even classified as part of the exposition’s Department of Ethnology. Even though Putnam was determined that that ethnological living museums of villages include "no exhibition of a degrading or derogatory character," he was even more deter-
minded that the exhibits be popular and did not object when the young theater promoter Sol Bloom was brought on board to take charge of the Midway exhibits. With Bloom in charge, the “living museum” turned into an outdoor carnival that equated foreign and native cultures with the entertainment. After these exciting and "exotic" experiences, visitors could take a ride on George Ferris’s new wheel.

Ferris Wheel Photo.

See more images from the Brooklyn Museum flickr site.

In attempting to demonstrate that America held the future to civilization’s "progress," the fair planners presented a picture of American identity as one of technological innovation and education. But as the issues raised here illustrate, the fair was a study in contrasts, and it remains a
rich site for historical investigation and interpretation.

Each lesson plan on this site focuses on the "experience" of the fair from different points of view. One plan examines the advent of electricity, another looks at the origins of Anthropology, and the last investigates the life of one of the Chinese Village concession promoters in the context of Chinese Exclusion laws. These lesson plans point to only three topics for exploration. Within the archive of primary sources, teachers, students, and researchers, will find ample fodder for many more historical questions and research.

For further reading about the World’s Columbian Exposition and Chicago, see historian Robert Rydell’s entry on the fair at the online Encyclopedia of Chicago.

Also see "The World’s Columbian Exposition: Idea, Experience, and Aftermath."