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## CENTENNIAL

In 1876 Philadelphia hosted an international exhibition dedicated to celebrating the centennial of America's independence from England. Attended by nine million visitors, the Centennial Exhibition became the primary site for launching the cultural reconstruction of the United States just when the period of political reconstruction that followed the Civil War was coming to an end.

Why did Philadelphia's cultural and political authorities determine to hold a world's fair to celebrate the centennial of American independence? The answer, ironically, is that they were inspired by British and European precedent. The world's fair movement began in London in 1851 when the British government, beset by fears of Chartism and the spread of socialism from the European revolutions of 1848, decided to organize the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, better known as the Crystal Palace Exhibition. Backed by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, the Crystal Palace Exhibition provided an enormous stimulus to British nationalism, helped define Victorianism, and left little doubt among the middle classes about the essential rightness of British imperialism. In its wake, other European powers, especially France, set out to improve upon the English example, and a series of world's fairs swept European capitals, including Paris and Vienna. A small-scale exhibition took place in New York City in 1853 and 1854, but, with America already dividing for war, this fair stood little chance of success. After the Civil War, however, as Americans began thinking about rebuilding the republic, the apparent success of European fairs in stimulating feelings of nationalism proved an irresistible example to American business, political, and cultural elites. They viewed the exhibition as a means to



**Cover of the catalog for the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, 1876.** © BETTMANN/CORBIS

overcome bitter memories of the Civil War and the present reality of mounting violence between social classes. The idea of holding a fair in Philadelphia to commemorate the centennial of American independence began to develop as early as 1866. The United States Congress endorsed the proposition, and President Ulysses S. Grant, in the company of Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil, officially opened the fair on 10 May 1876.

The immediate historical context of the fair is worth noting. From the vantage point of Americans living in 1876, the future seemed uncertain at best. True, the Civil War had been over for eleven years, but a nationwide financial panic in 1873 had set nerves on edge. Furthermore, the gathering storm clouds of violence between capital and labor made many Americans wonder if post-Civil War America stood on the precipice of class warfare on a scale that had recently characterized

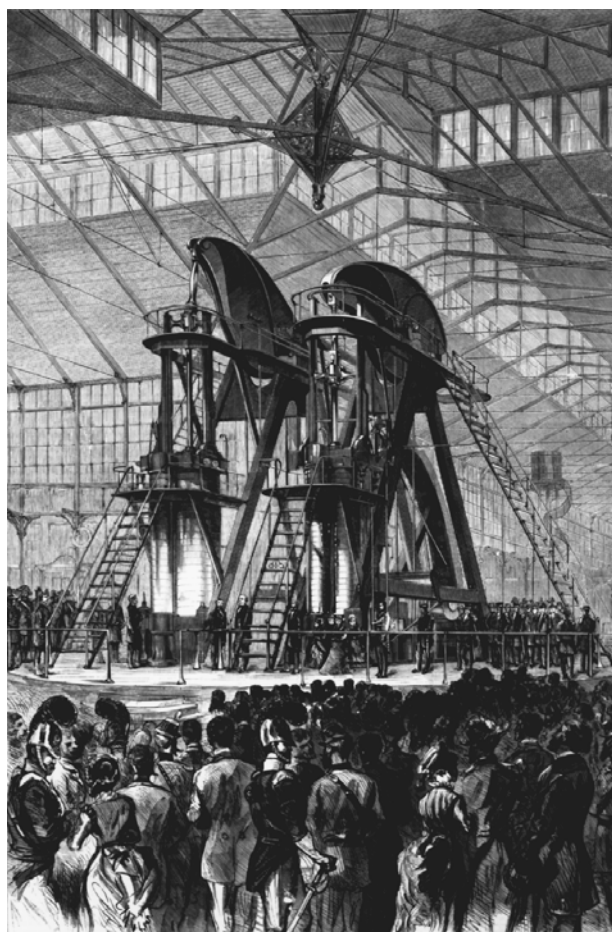
the Paris Commune of 1871. In addition to these concerns, there were others: the ongoing insurgency in the American West as Native Americans battled miners, farmers, and the U.S. military; the debate over extending political rights to women; and the continuing racial conflicts that were fueled by disputes over the citizenship rights of African Americans. Any one of these issues could give pause for thought. Together, they added up to a profound sense of unease that the Centennial Exhibition was intended to alleviate.

To help assuage anxieties and counter the critics of America's rapid industrialization, exhibition authorities developed a strategy that sidestepped troubling discussions about the maldistribution of wealth that flowed from America's industrial and agricultural productivity. Instead, the fair embraced a vision of America's future national progress that defined progress in terms of industrial expansion and racial advance. The exhibition grounds, carved out of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, were alive with exhibits dedicated to America's industrial prowess. The central icon of the fair was the 700-ton steam-driven engine built by George Henry Corliss (1817–1888) that supplied the power for driving hundreds of other machines on exhibit in Machinery Hall. Next door was the exhibition's Main Building, the largest building in the world, which contained exhibits from around the world. They were arranged according to a theory of racial hierarchy that gave the most "civilized" nations the most prominent display space and "other" nations less desirable space depending on their perceived backwardness. The racism that guided the fair's mental mapping resulted in the near exclusion of African American exhibits and in the representation of American Indians through ethnological collections from the Smithsonian Institution that suggested that Native Americans were best understood as anthropological specimens, not as human beings in their own right.

There was little doubt in the minds of contemporaries that the Centennial Exhibition was an important event. But what exactly was its significance? The answer was too crucial to leave entirely to the realm of chance opinion. From the beginning, exhibition planners sought to enlist leading literary figures from the North and South in opening-day ceremonies. It was hoped that these writers would attest to the importance of the fair and its attempt to renationalize the republic after the Civil War.

#### LITERARY NATIONALISM

Initially, exposition authorities turned to New England's Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to write an ode, Pennsylvania's Bayard Taylor to compose a hymn, and



**The Corliss Engine.** A much-lauded feature of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, the gigantic Corliss Engine symbolized American enthusiasm for the benefits of technological progress at the end of the nineteenth century. THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Georgia's Sidney Lanier to compose a cantata. Both Taylor and Lanier gladly accepted. Lanier (1842–1881) completed his composition in a matter of weeks and exulted: “I have tried to make it a genuine Song, at once full of fire and of large and artless simplicity befitting a young but already colossal land” (Lanier to Dudley Buck, 15 January 1876). Longfellow, however, declined to participate, leaving exposition planners in a dither about a literary representative from New England. They invited James Russell Lowell, William Cullen Bryant, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, but all pleaded a lack of time to do the occasion justice. With the help of Taylor (1825–1878), exposition authorities were able to prevail on the former abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892) to fill the breach, but only by reaching an agreement with

Whittier that he would work on the hymn instead of the ode. To accommodate this change, Taylor switched his efforts toward composing the ode, and its debut was deferred until the Fourth of July. In retrospect, it seems somewhat surprising that Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was not asked to take part in the festivities. But exhibition officials, as well as many literary authorities of the late 1800s, regarded Whitman as idiosyncratic at best and disreputable at worst. He was never given serious consideration for a place on the official program.

By opening day, Whittier and Lanier had hammered together ringing paucans to the reborn American nation-state. In his “Centennial Hymn,” Whittier seized the occasion to take dead aim at the contrast between Europe’s fading glory and America’s rising star. Invoking God’s blessing, he intoned:

Oh! make Thou us, through centuries long  
In peace secure, in justice strong:  
Around our gift of freedom draw  
The safeguards of Thy righteous law,  
And, cast in some diviner mold,  
Let the new cycle shame the old!

Not to be outdone, Lanier’s “Centennial Cantata” stepped back to the voyage of the *Mayflower* and the founding of Jamestown and concluded “with a man’s own song” touting a future where America’s “fame shall glow.”

Although he was not invited to participate in the opening ceremonies, Whitman, ever the democrat and nationalist, saw the fair as a wonderful opportunity to reflect on America’s history and future and to promote his own reputation. For the occasion of the fair, he reissued “Song of the Exposition,” written originally in 1871 for an industrial fair, and prepared a Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass*. To the extreme annoyance of Bayard Taylor, he also wrote “Walt Whitman’s Actual American Position,” an essay that seemed to blame his own poverty on the lack of attention from the American literary establishment.

Whitman was certainly captivated by the Centennial and in early July arrived on the fairgrounds in the company of another poet, Joaquin Miller (the penname of Cincinnatus Hiner Miller, 1839–1913), who was in the process of promoting himself as the bard of the American West. As Whitman approached the Corliss Engine, several reporters recognized him and asked him for his thoughts about the colossal machine. Whitman sat transfixed for a half-hour in absolute silence and then asked to be taken away. Whitman’s companion, Miller, was less reticent to comment on the meaning of the fair and in “Song of the Centennial” exulted:



Oh, wondrous the wealth, prodigious the powers!  
 Unbounded the dominion, and matchless the  
 love!  
 And this the inheritance! . . .  
 Then rise in your places. Rise up! Let us take a  
 great  
 Oath together as we gather us here,  
 At the end and beginning of an hundred year,  
 For the love of Freedom, for Liberty's sake—  
 To hand the Republic on down, undefiled.  
 As we have received it, from father to child.

Miller would never receive the national acclaim of the other poets who participated in the exhibition, but his presence attested to another flaw in the configuration of opening day literary representatives, namely the failure to include anyone from the American West.

Poets, of course, were not the only writers who incorporated the fair into the literary imagination. William Dean Howells (1837–1920), the influential editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, could not resist commenting on the fair's significance. In his essay "A Sennight of the Centennial," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells fell into line behind the opening-day poets and passed judgement on the "civilization" of the Old World as revealed in European and English art. English paintings, Howells observed, "were most delightful" (p. 94), while those from France were "horribly fascinating" (p. 95). German art he found "most disagreeable" (p. 93). All told, he concluded, the exhibit of European art "impressed one as that of pictures that had not succeeded at home" (p. 95). Seen in this light, American art came off rather well. "You felt that American art had made vast advances on the technical side," Howells declared, "but . . . that it was not poetical; that generally its subjects were seen, not deeply felt and thought; it wanted charm" (p. 95). Still, Howells assured his readers, "we had certainly no cause, considering all things, to be ashamed of the show of American paintings in comparison even with many of the English, and still less with those of other nations" (pp. 94–95). If art was the measure of civilization, America, it seemed, was on the right track.

#### AFFIRMATION AND DISSENT

At least that was the case as far as art was concerned. According to Howells, American women, another source of civilization in the eyes of American Victorians, had taken a decidedly wrong turn at the Centennial. The separate Women's Pavilion, Howells opined, left visitors "puzzled to know why the ladies wished to separate their work from that of the rest of the human race." One woman, suffrage leader Susan B.

Anthony, had an answer for him. In reciting the "Declaration of Rights for Women," delivered on the Fourth of July at a separate celebration from the fair's official Independence Day festivities, Anthony made clear that the Women's Pavilion was built on the assumption that women's issues deserved to be singled out for special notice. Women everywhere, she declared, still suffered the degradation of disfranchisement.

The author Marietta Holley (1836–1926) could not have agreed more, although she took a less serious tone in writing about the Centennial. Holley, who stood on the cusp of fame as "the female Mark Twain," found in the exhibition a perfect setting for telling a story about a rural family's visit to the fair and for expressing her strong support for women's rights. The result was her book *Josiah Allen's Wife as a P.A. and P.I.: Samantha at the Centennial* (1877). Before her death in 1926, Holley would sell about ten million books worldwide and gained a reputation as one of America's first female humorists. That the Centennial helped promote her career and that subsequent world's fairs helped sustain it underscores the centrality of these exhibitions to the history of American literature.

Among the women writers who traveled to the Centennial and incorporated its memories into their future work was Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909). In "The Flight of Betsey Lane," published in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1893, she had one of her characters recall:

Nobody in these United States has ever felt half grateful enough to the promoters of the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia. It was the first great national occasion of general interest and opportunity for cultivation; as a people we were untravelled and unconvinced of many things until we were given this glimpse of the treasures and customs of the world. Without it we should never have been ready for the more advanced lessons of the great Columbian fair at Chicago. (P. 221)

In a version of this story included in *A Native of Winby, and Other Tales*, she was more explicit: "I call the Centennial somethin' like the day o' judgment" (p. 207).

Many other writers were only too happy to pass judgement on the Centennial. Herman Melville traveled to the fair and left with a positive impression. "You will be much impressed with it; it is immense—a sort of Vanity Fair" (2:756), he recorded in his log. The aspiring novelist and future historian Henry Adams (1838–1918), who would later travel to other fairs and write about them as liminal moments in

human history, was less enraptured by the Centennial. "From my soul," he confided to his friend Charles Milnes Gaskell, "I hate and condemn these big shows—It is bigger, noisier, more crowded, and its contents more uniformly indifferent and vulgar than any of its predecessors" (Adams 2:292). Conceding that there were moments of pleasure to be found on the fairgrounds, he nonetheless confessed to having "registered an oath never to visit another of these vile displays" (p. 292). Mark Twain (1835–1910) was also drawn to the event. "I went there in July," he told his friend Howells, "and staid nearly a whole day; then I got discouraged and returned home. I became satisfied that it would take me two, or possibly three days to examine such an array of articles with anything like just care and deliberation."

Through their writings about the Centennial, American writers joined a distinguished group of European writers who also saw international expositions as profound reflections of their societies and roadmaps to the future. Literary reactions to world's fairs were mixed. Charles Dickens, for instance, endorsed the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition whereas Charles Baudelaire took aim at the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, seeing it as an example of the Americanization of Europe. Hans Christian Andersen appreciated the fanciful side to the 1867 fair and wrote a fairy tale, "The Wood Nymph," about it. Leo Tolstoy, although he never attended the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, felt moved to condemn it as "a striking example of imprudence and hypocrisy" (Tolstoy 1:323). Well into the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, writers such as E. L. Doctorow and Erik Larson continue to look into the mirrors held up by world's fairs and find in them sources of identity formation and adventure. There is, in short, a literary dimension to world's fairs—one that provides insight into the fairs themselves as well as the broader cultures in which they take place.

See also Science and Technology; St. Louis World's Fair; Women's Suffrage; World's Columbian Exposition

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## CENTURY MAGAZINE

Known primarily for its lavish wood engravings, extensive historical series, and innovative American fiction, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* was one of the most important periodicals during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.