REVIEW


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Women in International and Universal Exhibitions, 1876–1937 is an edited volume that examines the diverse participation of women with the goal of “move[ing] women from the margins of scholarship on the fairs” (p. 4). Funded by grants at the Université Paris Diderot (now Université Paris-Cité), this research project produced a conference on women and international expositions and subsequently this book. In their introduction, editors Myriam Boussahba-Bravard and Rebecca Rogers briefly rehearse the scholarship of international expositions. World’s fairs have long fascinated scholars, as evidenced by a copious body of scholarship since the 1980s, ranging from holistic accounts of individual fairs to works analyzing them as venues for celebrating industrial technology, promoting consumer goods, proclaiming both nationalism and internationalism, showcasing imperialism and colonialism, and revealing Western/white visions of ethnic and racial hierarchy. More recent literature has focused particularly on the power dynamics revealed in the politics and execution of exhibitions, but the editors assert that these have focused more fully on class and race than on gender. They also suggest that extant work on women and fairs has overemphasized their participation as consumers. In this volume they seek to demonstrate how a broader focus might “open new vistas both for women’s history and the history of world’s fairs” (p. 3). Referencing Tracey Jean Boisseau and Abigail Markwyn’s edited volume, Gendering the Fair (2010), which they call “an older sister’s companion to our volume” (p. 3), Boussahba-Bravard and Rogers set out to build on its focus on nationalism, women’s activism, and the experiences of fairgoers by exploring the “gendered consciousness” (p. 7) created by women’s participation.

The volume is divided into four broadly defined sections, each containing three essays, highlighting differing types of involvement in exhibitions. The authors come from a variety of disciplines, particularly history, women’s and gender studies, legal studies, and art history, and include specialists on Mexico, Portugal, the United States, France, and Australia. Their essays are firmly grounded in research into sources including private and public archives, manuscripts, exhibition records, pamphlets, fairgoers’ reports, newspapers, and periodicals.

The first section, “Exhibiting Women,” considers women artists, students, and collectors who exhibited at the fairs. Julie Verlaine begins with a look at art collectors and patrons of the arts. Drawing on their private archives, she argues that attendance at expositions influenced women such as Bertha Honoré Palmer, Gertrude Stein, and Phoebe Hearst to become active collectors, to sponsor women artists, and to create new organizations, thereby contributing to “the profound restructuring of the art world and artists’ careers” (p. 39). She suggests that this experience also

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Feminism
sparked in some of these women a broader dedication to the support of women’s rights. In the second essay, Ursula Tania Estrada turns to the impact of exhibiting on artists, in this case the first women students admitted to Mexico’s National School of Fine Arts. Five of these students were selected (by their male teachers) to have paintings exhibited in the Woman’s Building at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition (WCE) in Chicago, including Carlota Camacho’s self-portrait, *The Huntress*, which boldly “construct[ed] an image of empowered womanhood” (p. 55). Nevertheless, Estrada finds that this experience did not notably transform the artistic careers of those who exhibited. Camacho, whose painting garnered the most publicity, left the school after her marriage and referred to herself as just an “amateur artist” (p. 56). Only one of the five made a career of art, as a teacher and landscape artist; perhaps significantly, she never married. In the final essay in this section, Linda Kim examines the controversy over *The American Girl*, a gold statue paid for by Colorado mine owners and sculpted by Bessie Potter for display in the American exhibit at the 1900 Paris Universal and World Exhibition. The statue, for which actress Maude Adams modeled, represented a standard trope of the (white middle-class) New Woman of the era. The American commission rejected it as personal and commercial rather than national, however, and displayed a statue of Lafayette instead, relegating *The American Girl* to a commercial building outside the main exposition grounds. Kim suggests this reflected both the marginalization of women at the 1900 exhibition and a pushback against the more prominent roles women had gained through participation in previous fairs.

The second section turns to women who participated as professionals, workers, and intellectual organizers at expositions. In its first study, Gwen Jordan argues that women lawyers united with other women’s organizations to carve out a strong presence in Chicago in 1893 despite their exclusion from the organizing boards. They organized a meeting of women lawyers, participated in sessions such as the World’s Congress of Representative Women (WCRW), and presented papers at the Congress on Jurisprudence and Law Reform. In so doing, Jordan concludes, they created a long-term strategy for the advancement of women in the profession. Next, Teresa Pinto examines Portuguese female apprentices from industrial schools who exhibited their crafts (particularly lacework) at the WCE and the Paris (1900) and Rio de Janeiro (1908) fairs. She finds that, although their lace dominated the country’s artisanal displays and became a national symbol, the ongoing push for industrialization in Portugal led to the exclusion of women from industrial schools and the separation (and denigration) of women’s traditional crafts from the nation’s industrial progress. In the third essay, Anne R. Epstein argues that French women such as Anna Lampériere and Jeanne Weill created at the 1900 Paris Exhibition “a new public role for engaged French women . . . that of the professional organizer” (p. 127). They did so by organizing and promoting two congresses on social education, and although neither considered herself a feminist, they used these venues to promote the role of women in the social sciences and “potentially gender-inclusive approaches to civic education” (p. 141).

Part 3, “Staging Otherness,” turns to the participation of women marginalized not only by gender but by their race, religion, or colonial status. Claudine Raynaud leads off with an exploration of the ways Black women challenged the discrimination they faced from organizers of the WCE in seeking representation, and eventually won several positions. In her famous pamphlet *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*, Ida B. Wells publicized this discrimination and the nation’s horrific lynching statistics, as well as
Black achievements despite this oppression, and then distributed the pamphlet to foreigners visiting the fair. Black women, like many of their white counterparts, found their best avenue to participation was the many congresses held concurrently with the WCE, and many spoke at the Education, AME (African Methodist Episcopal Church), and Suffrage Congresses, as well as the WCRW. Raynaud argues that the Black women participants were not tokens but "enacted the very intersectionality of their experiences" (p. 166) before international audiences dominated by white women and thus developed strategies that Black women activists continued after the exposition. In the second essay, Christiane Demeulenaere-Douyère examines the participation of "exotic" female performers in colonial villages and commercial attractions, which straddled the line between education and entertainment. Examining Javanese dancers, Egyptian belly dancers, and Dahomeyan "Amazons" at the Parisian exhibitions of 1889 and 1900, she argues that their performances “construct[ed] a symbolic imaginary within the French public” (p. 177). Journalists depicted the ballet dancers from colonial Java as “keepers of a sacred and secret culture” (p. 180) and the belly dancers in the Streets of Cairo concession as both erotic and world-weary. The Black Dahomeyan women, allegedly including members of the royal "Amazon Battalion" that fought the French colonizers, most clearly conflicted with French gender and racial ideologies. Their performance featured drumming, shrieking, and foot stamping, and advertisements described them as “black female devils” (p. 184). In this gendered exhibit, presumably by design, Dahomeyan women performers symbolized to the French public the “savagery” of sub-Saharan African while the Dahomeyan men demonstrating crafts or learning French depicted the possibility of civilization. James Keating veers in a different direction in the final essay of the section, focusing on the goals of white Australian and Utah Mormon women who participated in the WCRW at the WCE in 1893. The Australian women, led by Margaret Windeyer, sought to demonstrate the potential for feminist activism Down Under, while the Utah women wanted to show that they were respectable Americans and worthy of statehood. He concludes that the Mormon women succeeded, in part because of strong funding and support from their territory, while the Australian feminists, lacking government sponsorship, remained marginalized and were unable to take advantage of their participation to strengthen their movement at home.

The final section of the book considers women’s efforts to use international exhibitions for feminist organizing. In the first essay Karen Offen contends that Marie-Joséphine Pégard’s 1893 La Statistique générale de la femme en France, a highlight of the WCE’s Woman’s Building for its comprehensive statistical delineation of the lives and work of French women, was “both a consequence of and a major step forward in feminist efforts to build a solid Franco-American women’s network” (p. 216). She suggests that this fair and the 1889 and 1900 French exhibitions provided platforms for French and American feminists’ outreach and organizing efforts, which led to the creation of the International Council of Women and increased French women’s participation in national and international feminist organizing. Next, Tracey Jean Boisseau searches for the transnational aspects of women’s organizing at international exhibitions. She defines transnationalism as a term used by feminist scholars “to describe women’s organizing” that “pose[s] challenges to nationally constituted identities and systems” (p. 235). She traces the development of such organizing from the nationalism of the US Centennial Exhibition (1876) to the internationalism of later American and European exhibitions, which she finds to be predominantly white, male, Western-centric, and imperialist in nature. She argues, however, that feminist organizations at these exhibitions produced to some extent “a specifically feminist
transnational consciousness that both participated in and resisted” (p. 234) masculinist and colonialist internationalisms. This was most fully developed, she claims, at Chicago’s Woman’s World Fairs in the 1920s, organized by journalist and businesswoman Helen Bennett, run by women, focused on the diversity of women’s work, and featuring prominent speakers including reformers, feminists, journalists, and businesswomen. Boisseau concludes that, despite the absence of radical analysis, these fairs evoked “a genuine transnational feminist identity, based on the valuation of women as workers the world over” (p. 247). The final essay in the section and the volume looks at the experience of French women at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition of Arts and Technology Applied to Modern Life. Siân Reynolds finds that this exhibition, occurring at a tumultuous political and economic time, constituted something of a step back, reinforcing French cultural gender ideologies in its coding of technology as male and fashion, social work, and consumerism as female. While women participated in some aspects of the design of key pavilions and exhibited their art with the Femmes Artistes Modernes, the fashion section sought them primarily as consumers. They did take a leading role in the Pavilion for Woman, Child, and Family, which sought to show national progress in social welfare and centered women as mothers; the modernization depicted was not feminist. Reynolds concludes, however, that this exhibition indicated not so much that French feminism had declined but that it had advanced to the point that women had better political and associational avenues for agitating for women’s rights than international exhibitions.

The essays in this volume clearly demonstrate that international exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided “potentially transformative experiences” (p. 17) for women participants and for feminist organizing. The essays tend to focus primarily on the World’s Columbian Exposition and the various Parisian exhibitions, presumably because of their prominence (and voluminous source materials). One could wish for more attention to women’s experiences in other expositions and other countries, and hope that this volume will encourage such work.

Most, but certainly not all, of the essays focus on the efforts of feminists to use international exhibitions to advance the cause of women’s rights. The editors assert, and this reviewer agrees, that the book “suggests the potential a focus on women offers to the development of international, global or transnational perspectives within the field of exposition studies” as well as the necessity of including in such studies the experiences of “women marked by geographic, political, national, social, racial, or age-related marginality” (p. 17). This volume is a step in the latter direction, although most contributors examine the participation of elite white women. Raynaud does delve into the motives and experiences of Black American women at the WCE, and Keating does the same for Australian feminists and Mormon women. We gain few insights into the Javanese, Egyptian, and Dahomeyan women performers discussed in Demeulemaere-Douyère’s fascinating essay, however; presumably the lack of extant sources limits her to analyzing the discourse about these women. Similarly, Pinto’s essay cannot tell us how Portuguese women apprentices felt about displaying their lacework at international fairs. This is meant less as a critique than as a lamentation of the dearth of sources on the lives and experiences of ordinary women.

In sum, this volume conclusively demonstrates that women were both “an integral part of the fair
narrative” and “participated in the writing of that narrative” (p. 18). It will be of interest to scholars of exposition studies or feminist organizing efforts at the turn of the twentieth century, and it should, as the editors hope, stimulate further scholarship into “the ways women . . . engaged with modern life within that quintessential modern space—the world’s fair” (p. 18).
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