

More Than Just a Show:
Using the Primitive to Highlight the Modern

James Burnes
April 21, 2015
AHI 5993
Dr. Fields

The opening of the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition followed an established tradition of highlighting American technological progress through the ages with displays of “empire building.” If you can separate displays of “Empire building” into its chief constituents progress and technology it becomes clear that the nature of the relationship between civilization and savagery is not largely racism for racism’s sake, nor were they ethnology for simply pedagogical reasons, but at the heart of the early hierarchies of race which were recycled back into the empire building narratives themselves. At the exposition in San Francisco it was no less than the eighth wonder of the world was the central focus. With the world’s first fully modern war underway in Europe, it was all the more important to showcase America’s might on the technological front. The completion of the Panama Canal linked the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and was the fulfilled Theodore Roosevelt’s dream of a united naval force on both coasts of the North American continent. In addition to allowing quick deployment of America’s “Great White Fleet,” the canal revolutionized merchant shipping and redrew the map of Central America.

If the Panama-Pacific Exposition was meant to thrust American technological progress into the world’s spotlight, what, then, are we to make of the primitive ethnographic congress exhibitions on display at the fair? Exhibits of Native Americans “living” in their primitive villages, making their simple tools, weapons, and baskets stood in direct contrast to the not only the engineering feat in Panama, but the scale model of that canal that was featured at the fair. I believe that the layout for the exposition was finely calculated architecture to not only show how primitive North America was before European settlement, but to also exaggerate the already disparate levels of technology

between the indigenous and the businessmen. The use of space in the “Exposition City” was constructed as much to display the technological advances of the country, as it was to reveal how far the United States had progressed toward a modern nation from so simple beginnings. The implicit narrative was that, had it not been for the settlement of the west and the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, the United States would have remained a loose confederation of the hunter-gatherer bands displayed at the exposition instead of the mighty technological powerhouse that literally reshaped the face of the earth by connecting oceans.

In order to understand how this narrative was constructed using physical space we must look at the history of the World’s Fair expositions, how they were arranged for their own purposes in the various cities of industry where they were held, and the specific paths through the exhibits that would have been recommended through the expositions program or visitor’s guides. Through these examples we will see that it was not only the specific focus of the fairs, as advertised or actively remembered, that provided the narrative of technological process. The inclusion of living exhibits of native peoples and their “primitive” existence were utilized not only for the burgeoning science of anthropology but were also important to the overall exhibits of progress.

The first World’s Fair held in the United States was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1876. The Centennial celebration featured 30,864 exhibits from 35 countries displayed around 71.4 acres. Nearly ten million visitors came through the gates to see the celebration of one hundred years of American progress. Even as the Indian Wars raged out west fairgoers in the east were able to marvel at Corliss’ steam engine, the telephone, and Edison’s quadruplex telegraph. Only 25 years after the Crystal Palace inaugural fair,

the World's fair was on its way to highlighting the advancements in technology of the countries in attendance. Not all countries were represented in every fair, and it was not long before smaller American Expositions emulated the progress narrative of the World's Fair in various industrial cities around the United States. As the technology progressed with ever-increasing speed it became necessary to maintain a baseline of primitiveness that all things could be compared too. The jump from the telegraph to the telephone may not seem like much progress, but the telegraph or the telephone compared to indigenous exhibits showing "primitive" tool making, as specialized as it was within a culture, heightens the idea of progress even more.¹

The first "midway" sprang up at the Centennial Exposition "as if by magic" and consisted of "restaurants, small hotels, beer-gardens, ice-cream saloons, and small shows" which stretched for nearly a mile along the official exposition grounds. This "Centennial City" also featured "museums" which featured "the wild men of Borneo, the wild children of Australia, the fat woman...heavy enough to entitle her to a place in Machinery Hall, and a collection of 'Feejees,' who were vouched for by the exhibitors as 'pure and unadulterated man-eaters.'² This shantytown was seen as a threat to the official course of the fair and was destroyed by exposition planners to clear out vendors ranging from apples and lemonade to pies and sausages.

Even as the ashes of Centennial City were smoldering, fair executives and investors were discussing means of brining the very same vendors into, and more

¹ Peta Moser. "Innovation without Patents: Evidence from World's Fairs." *Journal of Law and Economics*, Vol. 55, no. 1 (February 2012), 56.

² Robert Rydell. *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33-35.

importantly under the control of, the exposition itself. By the time the World Columbian Exposition opened, the midway exhibits of ethnologies and curiosities were firmly part of the visitors' experience. These displays were co-opted by several agencies that wished to take advantage of the fair beyond simple monetary gains. By 1898, James Mooney of the Bureau of American Ethnology was spending much time and energy in maintaining a professional grade exhibit of natural life of the Indians. He worked in contrast of the "howling wilderness of Midway fakes" in order to establish what Alfred Rice, reporter for *Cosmopolitan*, empathically described as "not a Wild West Show, but a serious ethnological exhibit."³ These serious ethnological exhibits also had a powerful place within the narratives of technological progress that were part of every world's fair or exposition from 1893 to 1915, and even beyond. The midway became the most important, if not contested, space within the fair's planning.

Progress and technology have always been the underlying and overarching themes of American World's Fairs and Expositions. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" was presented at a symposium held by the American Historical Association at the World's Columbian Exchange in 1893. It was here, at an exposition celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the new world, that Turner announced that the frontier, the safety valve of civilization, had been closed. While Turner's paper ignited no response to speak of, the idea that the frontier itself may not be relegated to geographical boundaries was certainly in the minds of businessmen who were facing uncertain futures following the depression of the 1890s. If the western frontier had closed, the new frontier—technological progress—was just opening. With the dawn of a

³Rydell. *All the World's a Fair*, 117.

new century, the direction for industry was forward and, progressively speaking, up. American merchants, engineers, and industrialists reached for these shores as surely, and with the same spirit as those who had traveled west.

The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition opened in Omaha on June 1, 1898 amid the American war with Spain. Sarah Moore accounts the “implications of empire building were unmistakable” in the “ideological assumptions, layout, and official as well as critical discourse” of the exposition. The very arrangement of the fair provided an implicit narrative that visitors were exposed to as they made their way through the winding exhibits. Here was some of the earliest use of space (and place) manipulation that held artifacts of the war in opposition to what Moore calls “negative analogue to the official displays,” which included “amusements, sideshows, ethnological displays, and curiosities.”⁴

In this “negative space” Exposition planners installed the Philippine Village. The village was a visual display of turn of the century racial hierarchy as well as the dichotomy between civilization and savagery. This exhibit in Omaha proved to be the standard that similar exhibits were modeled on in subsequent fairs. In addition to sustaining racial discourse, the juxtaposition between the savage Filipinos and the modernity of the American Navy was not only evident but also heightened. The fact that the 1898 exposition was reopened the following year provides evidence of the popularity of the layout and message of the fair. The fact that Admiral Dewey’s success in the Philippines and the rebranding of the Omaha exposition as the “Great America

⁴ Sarah J. Moore. *Empire on Display: San Francisco’s Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 19.

Exposition” showed that the general interest in empire, war, and technology are inseparable. It is here we must look more closely at Empire narrative and see how prominent the characters of technology and progress are to that story.

The march of progress shown in the sculptures on display was a microcosm for the physical arrangement of the fairgrounds. The popular Midway attractions featured the growing ethnological congress exhibits of the new “imperial gains” of the nation. The Philippines exhibit, which had been popular during the last two fairs, had expanded to cover eleven acres and contained more than 100 people and far surpassed the exhibits covering Cuba and Hawaii. Beyond the size, the midway had changed into a central thoroughfare through the fair and could be reached from almost any part of the fair. This layout made it almost impossible to miss the ethnological exhibits after leaving the shrines to progress that dotted the exposition’s grounds. Visitors were almost guaranteed to get at least a passing glance of the primitive savage while on their way between the technological marvels of civilization.

Buffalo, New York was the site for the following exposition that was built and managed around electricity and Niagara Falls. When the exposition opened “technological progress and modernity were overarching themes with Niagara Falls, literally and figuratively, offering the final authoritative word on progress as a willed national activity and stunning proof of the United States successful subjugation of the internal colony, in this case the American Wilderness.”⁵ The entire fairgrounds were draped in incandescent light bulbs literally highlighting the success of the hydroelectric power plant operating at the falls. Sculptures depicting *The Savage Age in the East* and

⁵ Moore, *Empire on Display*, 24.

The Savage Age of the West, both by John Boyle and Isidore Konti's *The Despotism Age* stood in stark contrast not only to Herbert Adams' *The Age of Enlightenment* but also to the modernity of the Electric Tower centerpiece of the Buffalo exposition.

In addition to lights and sculptures, the 1901 midway featured a vast array of ethnological villages. In addition to the popular Filipino villages this midway featured streets of Mexico. Beyond the mere display of another ethnic "other" the organizers, or concessionaires, "emphasized the potential for American investment in the Mexican economy, and stressed the inferiority of the Mexican people."⁶ These congresses and emphases exaggerated both the progress of America and the potential of Mexico as ripe for industrial exploitation. Commercial possibilities were as much part of the exhibits as and of the anthropological undertones.

The "Pax 1901" contained a special attraction, which linked the entirety of the ethnological congresses and the ideas of progress. "The Evolution of Man" exhibit "linked the variety of human types to the greater evolutionary lessons about progress as presented by the exposition as a whole."⁷ Esau, a well-trained chimpanzee, was presented as "the 'missing link' to Darwin's theory of evolution," and "only reinforced the lessons of racial hierarchy that saturated the artistic dimensions of the fair and the living ethnological shows."⁸ Race was as firmly tied to the narrative of progress as technology. Separate, both displays provided an interesting chain of natural events placing American settlers conquering most of the North American continent. When presented together, as at

⁶ Rydell. *All the World's a Fair*, 148

⁷ Rydell. *All the World's a Fair*, 149.

⁸ Rydell. *All the World's a Fair*, 150.

these expositions, they displayed the logical conclusion that Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine were the result of all forms of American Exceptionalism that would be the hallmark of the 20th century in the United States.

Electric Power and progress should have been the legacy of the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, but it was not to be. Amid the host of light bulbs, searchlights, and modernity, it was the scene of the first presidential assassination of the 20th century. The shooting of President McKinley, and his subsequent days of lingering health before his death, overshadowed the 75 feet tall the scale model of Niagara Falls and even the fair's beautiful Electric Tower. It is a painful irony that the president shot at the Buffalo Pan American Exposition had loved visiting the World's Fairs and summed up their role succinctly, calling them "the timekeepers of progress. They record the world's advancement."⁹

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition was held in St. Louis in 1904. All 1270 acres of the exposition was built around Thomas Jefferson's deal with Napoleon that doubled the landholdings of the United States. The ethnological congress exhibits also expanded as well. As before the Philippine exhibit was the largest with nearly 1200 Filipinos "living" on 47 acres. The major difference in this layout was the area was separated from the rest of the exhibits by Arrowhead Lake, and required crossing a bridge to visit the exhibit. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition, while still a monument to modern America,

⁹ Pan American Exposition: World's Fair As Historical Metaphor. <http://buffaloah.com/h/panam/goldman/> Accessed April 20, 2015.

was more a show of triumph over the American Wilderness than the march of technological progress that has been on display in Buffalo.¹⁰

Advances, if they can be called that, in the young science of anthropology during the earliest years of the 20th century provided more or less a scientific consensus on what the fairs were displaying. Technology was the direct result of enlightened men utilizing the natural resources of a land. The advance of technology was only half of the story at these expositions, the other half was the advance of culture, and that required living exhibits to be presented in the same manner as technological ones. Native and primitive people would be displayed and storied just as a steam engine. As early as 1899 W.J. McGee was categorizing non Europeans based on their technological prowess: “Classed in terms of blood, the peoples of the world may be grouped in several races; classed in terms of what they do rather than what they merely are, they are conveniently grouped in the four culture grades of savagery, barbarism, civilization, and enlightenment.”¹¹ The narrative of technological progress influenced the ideologies and categories of humanity’s progress as much as race and cultural studies influenced the displays of technology at the fairs.

James Gilbert’s analysis of the St. Louis exposition provides one of the most striking examples of the primitive used to describe technology. The St. Louis midway, called the “Pike” housed the ethnological congress exhibits of African warriors and Irish villages. Compared to the scantily clad Africans and the horse drawn Irish carts the

¹⁰ Moore, *Empire on Display*, 28.

¹¹ W.J. McGee, “The Trend in Human Progress,” *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 1 (July 1899): 401-47, 410-11 in Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 161.

“Palace of Machinery” and its utilitarian design revealed turbines, iron working machinery, and an overhead track crane that could lift with a capacity of 40 tons. Visitors leaving one and passing the other could not help but draw their own comparison. One of the first historians of the St. Louis Exposition described the arrangement perfectly: the classification system allowed the viewer to investigate ‘any branch of humanity’s progress of present condition’ and to ‘consider the whole series together, without mentally having to assemble them.’¹²

If St. Louis is the front gate to the West, then Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington represent the back gate(s). The Lewis and Clark Exposition was the first one held west of the Rocky Mountains and fell right in line with the Louisiana Purchase Exposition that saw St. Louis open the West. Portland also continued the westward push of the fairs in a manner that paralleled western exploration. This loose pairing of fairs would come into play again with the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco displayed the conclusion of Roosevelt’s promise of a Canal in Central America. The fairs themselves were marches of Empire just as the periods they were representing. The cyclical nature and mutual reinforcement that technological advancement and imperial ideology provided meant that living, native, and primitive, exhibits were more than a sideshow or pedagogical attraction, they were key to the narrative of why and, more importantly, how America came to dominate the world stage. The goals of both the

¹² James Gilbert. *Whose Fair? Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 177-78.

expositions in Portland and Seattle are summed up aptly by Robert Rydell as “to celebrate the past and to exploit the future.”¹³

Portland exhibits were more regional in scope than previous expositions. Where the expositions in New York, Nebraska, and Missouri contained exhibits as varied as player pianos to dental drills, it was the Forestry Building that drew most of the local fairgoers. The enormous log cabin structure was decorated with pinecone themes accessories, and heavily laden with samples of lumber, natural history dioramas of panther and elk as well as photographs taken by Edward Curtis. Others visited the miniature mountain to see a working scale model of a mine. Such exhibits were essential in displaying the natural resources and progress for the Pacific Northwest in general, and Portland in particular.¹⁴ The preparation for the exposition in Portland itself was as much part of the narrative of progress as anything within its exhibits.

That Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle, Washington was arranged in much the same way as its predecessors. The major difference in this specific venue was that in addition to building the exposition city, as had been the case in Chicago, Omaha, Buffalo, and St. Louis, the grounds had to be largely cut out of the heavily forested area around the University of Washington where the exposition was held. The building and exhibit arrangements followed the established choreographed architecture with the U.S. Government Building was centered among the smaller buildings which held exhibits showcasing the Philippines, Hawaii, and the Alaska Territory. This “hen and chicks”

¹³ Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 184.

¹⁴ Carl Abbot. *The Great Extravaganza: Portland and the Lewis and Clark Exposition* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 2004), 38-9.

arrangement evoked the protecting nature of the American empire as is stretched beyond Turner's closed frontier coastline and into the Pacific Ocean.

Progress, and the representations thereof, required overcoming nostalgia. The U.S. Forestry building at the Portland exposition was built to resemble a giant log cabin. This harkened back the earliest days of American settlement and survival. The following year the Forestry building was transformed into a "Temple of Timber" which "paid homage to the classicizing Beaux-Arts style of the principal palaces" which underscored "if unintentionally, the discourse of progress that informed the air as a whole: nature becomes natural resource as it succumbs to the effects of civilization."¹⁵

The same justification and planning went into displaying raw materials, as did primitive people. To the fair organizers both were "natural" resources. The main point was that without civilization, primitive people must live within their environment, it was the duty of the civilized to bend the environment, and the entire world, to fit civilization. This is why it remained so important that the ethnographic congress displays remain part of the fairs they were as much a part of the progress narrative as the canals and hydroelectric generators were. The midway of the 1909 exposition was dubbed the "Pay Streak" and described by Robert Rydell as "imperial vistas." The crown jewel of these vistas was the Igorotte Village that was easily located on the map and displayed "tribal life of a remarkable primitive wild people from the Philippine Islands."¹⁶ If Moore is correct in the use of Rydell's argument on international expositions as a means to

¹⁵ Moore. *Empire on Display*, 39.

¹⁶ Robert Rydell. "Visions of Empire: International Expositions in Portland and Seattle, 1905-1909." *Pacific Historical Review* 52, no. 1 (February 1983); pp 37-65, 54 in Moore, *Empire on Display*, 41.

“preserve the people’s faith in the idea of progress—with all its interlaced connotations of technological advance, material growth, racism, and imperialism—and to reshape that faith with particular reference to the challenges posed by domestic and international turmoil”¹⁷ then we must not only look at how each of those connotations supported the idea of progress separately, but also how they were arranged together within the grounds of the expositions that were exhibiting that progress.

Less than ten years after a devastating earthquake destroyed most of San Francisco the Panama-Pacific International Exposition opened.

How did the ethnological congress come to represent the obverse side of the technology coin? What happened in the years between the condemnation and burning of midway sideshows at the centennial exposition in Philadelphia and the full inclusion of the very same exhibits in Chicago in 1893? In short, it was the paring of industry and science. It was “the continuing involvement of experts from the Smithsonian Institution in providing exhibits, advice, and display classifications” that “confirmed the intermeshing of upper-class purpose and federal power.” Rydell explains that while scientist such as Otis Mason and Spencer Baird were not industrial capitalist but they, and others, were “its high priests” “immersed in the ethic of industrial capitalism.”¹⁸

Early anthropologists’ expertise with the cultural “other,” whether American Indian, Filipino, African, or Mexican, provided a broad background that exposition planners used to compare American technological advancement. The midways where the

¹⁷ Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1915*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 219 in Moore, *Empire on Display*, 42.

¹⁸ Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 235.

ethnographic congresses were held were far more than areas of entertainment. Their motives and choreography are not merely pedagogical either. These large, and popular, displays were the direct evidence needed to provide visitors with an unwritten narrative of the progress of technology, culture, and man.

For the full effect of the world's fair exhibits, both the technologically advanced and the culturally primitive must be presented together. If technology is displayed on its own the machines are just curiosities to all but the industrialist or entrepreneur. If the "living exhibits" are displayed on their own, they are mere curiosities of culture. In either case the visitors are just voyeurs into worlds they are not fully a part of, or possible even understand. When exhibited together, the technology provides the reference of industry that American people are a part of and the ethnological congresses provide the reference of primitive or savage that they are not a part of. The curiosity becomes quaint, and the otherness of the exhibit and its people are more powerful than the otherness of industry. To make American Industrial progress more human, it must be presented in stark contrast with humans without industry.

Works Cited

- Abbot, Carl. *The Great Extravaganza: Portland and the Lewis and Clark Exposition* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 2004).
- Gilbert, James. *Whose Fair? Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- McGee, W.J. "The Trend in Human Progress," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 1 (July 1899): 401-47.
- Moore, Sarah J. Moore. *Empire on Display: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013)
- Moser, Peta. "Innovation without Patents: Evidence from World's Fairs." *Journal of Law and Economics*, Vol. 55, no. 1 (February 2012).
- Rydell, Robert. *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984)
- Rydell, Robert. "Visions of Empire: International Expositions in Portland and Seattle, 1905-1909." *Pacific Historical Review* 52, no. 1 (February 1983); pp 37-65.
- Pan American Exposition: World's Fair As Historical Metaphor.
<http://buffaloah.com/h/panam/goldman/> Accessed April 20, 2015.