

***Whose Fair? Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition.*** By James Gilbert. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009; pp. 232, 20 illustrations. \$35.00 cloth.

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In 1993, James Gilbert's *Perfect Cities: Chicago's Utopias of 1893* (University of Chicago Press) was unique in considering that World's Fair in its wider social and cultural contexts. It is surprising that almost twenty years later, with few exceptions, historians remain committed to treating international expositions as self-contained events. Gilbert's new volume reassesses the history and historiography of turn-of-the-century fairs by examining the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held in St. Louis in 1904, as a pivotal moment in the history of American imperialism and popular culture. In the seven chapters of his book, Gilbert alternates between providing a straightforward history of the St. Louis Exposition and discussing the methodologies of history writing. He asks two related questions: First, who were these fairs for? Second, how did regular people understand them? Here, theatre becomes an important metaphor, as Gilbert's central historiographic shift is to recast the fair's audiences as actors operating on a preset stage with determined props, but nonetheless missing cues, improvising lines, and, at times, acting contrarily to established scripts (4).

In Chapter 1, "Fair Itineraries," Gilbert provides an overview of the exposition alongside other late nineteenth-century fairs. Millions of people visited these fairs, but historians assume homogeneity among visitors' responses. Gilbert places expositions in the important context of an American performative culture that has received scant scholarly attention. Of particular interest is his discussion of often-ignored local Mechanical Fairs, regional shows of machinery, livestock, and agriculture, which also included spaces for theatre, minstrel shows, and even—in one case—a zoo.

Chapters 2 and 3, "Making History" and "Making Memories," trace the ways that memory becomes history and vice versa. Gilbert examines the official documents of late nineteenth-century fairs, such as reports, guidebooks, and publicity materials. In this period, exposition officials filled media outlets with grand narratives casting the fairs as performative, documentary proofs of progress signaling the glory of American power. These two chapters track the efforts of the St. Louis Exposition's own Department of Press and Publicity to influence newspapers and magazines. Gilbert tracks how exposition propaganda made its way into the historical narrative, showing how historians were seduced by the scale and magnitude of the exposition, often copying information straight out of press releases even while critiquing the fair's ideology. At the same time, by contrasting these official histories with fairgoer memory, Gilbert contends that fairgoers may not have realized or been swayed by the vast ideologies fair organizers wished to impose on the exposition.

Images played an important role in capturing history and producing memories of the St. Louis Exposition. Gilbert begins to examine audience reception

directly in Chapter 4, “Making Images,” which surveys the fair’s rich visual culture. In comparing official and unofficial images, Gilbert discovers a fair at odds with itself. While official photos convey the majesty of the main exhibition buildings in vistas free of people, popular stereographs convey a different point of view. With titles such as “A Surging Sea of Humanity” and “Swarming Pike” (119), these stereographs indicate a preoccupation with crowds, suggesting that people were interested in using images to experience the fair as a living, social experience rather than to regard it as evidence of progress in a grand narrative of Western civilization.

Previous studies of expositions have assumed that all crowds uniformly subscribed to the ideology of the fairs, but Gilbert argues that fairgoer behavior often diverged from official expectations. However, one difficulty with putting the audience in the center of inquiry into a fair is that one is hard-pressed to find evidence that fairgoers actively resisted or challenged their prescribed narratives. In Chapter 5, “Mrs. Wilkins Dances,” Gilbert looks at a fascinating photograph, “Mrs. Wilkins, Teaching an Igorrote-Boy the Cake Walk,” to provide such proof. The photograph (which appears also on the book’s cover) features a middle-class woman who appears to be teaching a boy from the Philippine Reservation—a zoolike site where indigenous peoples were on display—to dance. In the photo the half-naked boy, partly attired in the gaudy trappings of a minstrel show, leads the proper-looking Mrs. Wilkins. Gilbert is right in claiming that this image is an exception to mainstream photos of the Reservation, which emphasize the almost savage otherness of indigenous peoples, but it is a leap to suggest that its playfulness “is plainly subversive to the project of Americanization and uplift” (130).

If fairgoers did not in fact visit the fair looking for grand, officially sanctioned celebrations of white, American culture, Gilbert asks in Chapters 6 and 7, “The Beholder’s Eye: Making Experience” and “Making Identities,” what they sought instead. Using the work of diarists of both genders drawn from a broad range of classes and ages, Gilbert suggests that a wider variety of responses exists than is indicated by guidebooks and histories. He argues that, in many ways, “individuals reconstructed the Louisiana Purchase Exposition to fit their own purposes, intents, and ideas” (182). At least for diarists, the fair was largely a place to affirm smaller-scale identities through club meetings, conferences, and reunions.

Not since Robert Rydell’s foundational *All the World’s a Fair* (University of Chicago Press, 1984) has there appeared a work with the potential to cause us to recast our thinking about these historical events. In *Whose Fair?*, Gilbert seeks to shift our approach to international expositions by turning our focus as closely as possible to fairgoer experience. The historical record of World’s Fairs comprises a bewildering number of sources, and the complexity of the St. Louis Exposition may extend beyond the horizon of our historical knowledge, but Gilbert’s work clearly demonstrates that the fair is a place offering possible, rather than dictated, meanings.