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Routledge Studies in the History of the Americas

LATIN AMERICA AND THE WORLD'S FAIRS, 1867–1939

Edited by
Paula Bruno and Sven Schuster



Latin America and the World's Fairs, 1867–1939

This book examines the World's Fairs that took place from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s, with a particular emphasis on Latin America.

It introduces the notion of “cultural world maps” to understand these events as reflections of the global landscape. The fairs played a crucial role in showcasing state and private endeavors, shaping identities, facilitating knowledge exchange, and disseminating objects and ideas. Through innovative approaches, the essays in *Latin America and the World's Fairs, 1867–1939* depart from conventional nation-centric accounts, drawing on insights from cultural history, global and comparative history, as well as exhibition studies.

This volume will be of value to students, scholars, as well as general readers interested in Latin American history and social and cultural history.

Paula Bruno is a researcher specializing in Latin America. She is co-author of *Embajadoras culturales. Mujeres latinoamericanas y vida diplomática, 1860–1960* (*Cultural Ambassadors. Latin American Women and Diplomatic Life, 1860–1960*) (2021) and author of *Martín García Mérou. Vida intelectual y diplomática en las Américas* (*Martín García Mérou. Intellectual and Diplomatic Life in the Americas*) (2018), among other publications.

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Introduction

The World's Fairs as Cultural World Maps

Paula Bruno

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As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, accessing information about the inhabitants, products, and customs of both nearby and distant regions has become relatively easy. With a simple keyword search on an internet-connected device, we can quickly find answers to questions about the population of Finland, the origins of a traditional Japanese dish, or the timeline of a nineteenth-century European military epic. This sense of having the world at our fingertips—though somewhat illusory—has become an integral part of our daily lives. For centuries, however, the firsthand exploration of foreign places driven by pure curiosity was a privilege reserved for a select few. Those unable to embark on adventurous voyages as explorers, scientists, or investors in search of unknown lands, products, or inspiration had to rely on alternative means to expand their understanding of the world. They turned to the chronicles, memoirs, scientific reports, maps, and illustrations produced by these intrepid travelers to satisfy their curiosity and broaden their horizons.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a third means of access to this knowledge of the world—or representation of it, to be more precise—became available. In 1851, what is considered to be the first World's Fair was held in London, and these exhibitions subsequently spread to various European and American cities. Yet the practice of exhibiting, displaying, and showcasing was at this point in time by no means a novelty, as cabinets of

curiosities and certain local or regional exhibitions of industrial and craft items were in fact already commonplace. However, the Great Exhibition of 1851 represented a paradigm shift in the sense that it brought together displays of arts, trade, and industry from diverse global locations, both near and far. Over the decades, the format of these exhibitions became increasingly extravagant, as their organizational structure became progressively standardized. The fairs provided an opportunity to approach the known world on a visitable scale, akin to a contemporary bazaar or department store, where curious visitors could wander around large areas, and depart with imagined perspectives of foreign geographical regions.¹ These events also brought about new forms of mobility, tourism, leisure, and socialization.²

They became spaces in which industry, science, the arts, and the entertainment industry could coexist alongside displays of curiosities and oddities, as well as forms of pilgrimage and entertainment. As such, these World's Fairs, as sites of convergence for various spheres, offer rich opportunities for focused research through a multidisciplinary approach.³

A number of European and American cities that played host to these international exhibitions were profoundly transformed by the experience. Visits from the general public, potential investors, and diplomatic representatives from across the globe fueled a desire to exhibit an image of progress and modernity, at least as it was perceived in Western societies in the nineteenth century.⁴ The host cities seized upon the opportunity to design new buildings, avenues, and monuments that, even to this day, form a part of the modern urban landscape. To this end, architects, sculptors, and investors participated in official competitions in a bid to have their professional projects and ambitions come to life. Some of the most successful fruits of these competitions include the Eiffel Tower, inaugurated during the Paris World's Fair of 1889, as well as the Grand Palais, the Petit Palais, and the current Musée d'Orsay, all of which were commissioned for the Paris World's Fair of 1900. Many other urban monuments, today often popular backdrops for selfies and tourist photographs, have also emerged from these international events, such as the Royal Exhibition Palace in Melbourne (1880); the Crystal Palace (1887) in Madrid's Retiro Park, which was inspired by the Crystal Palace in London and designed for the

Spanish Philippines Exhibition; the Palace of the Three Dragons; the Arc de Triomphe; the Columbus Monument (1888) and the Palau Nacional (1929) in Barcelona; and the Plaza de España and the Plaza de América in Seville (1929), among others.⁵

The fairs also set the scene for significant urban structural transformations. The 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, for example, led to the reconstruction of the layout and landscape of its host city—devastated by the great fire of 1871. It also offered an opportunity to establish a fresh image for the city through the international press following the tragic events surrounding the “Haymarket Martyrs” in 1886, whose participants’ activism and resistance in the name of labor rights is commemorated worldwide to this day on May 1. Other events of the twentieth century resulted in similar large-scale transformations, such as the Olympic Games in Barcelona and the Seville Expo, both of which took place in 1992. These two events have been studied as instruments for state public relations that significantly transformed their host cities.⁶ Urban layouts were redefined, and pavilions and monuments were designed that would later become iconic, and yet there was also a proliferation of temporary architectural structures serving a scenographic or decorative purpose. These events stood at a point of tension between the enduring materiality of an urban impact, the iconic potential of the monumental, and the fleeting nature of other structures built for the occasion—akin to a kind of film studio.⁷ Over the decades, each new host city strove to surpass its predecessor’s achievements, as events tied to the exhibitions emerged hoping to attract the fairs’ target audience, a phenomenon that nowadays might be referred to as “the sideshow.” This concurrence and overlap of celebratory events found its utmost expression in the shows that coincided with centenary celebrations or national anniversaries. Such was the case with the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, which coincided with the centenary of the United States Declaration of Independence; the Paris World's Fair of 1889, which commemorated the one hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution; and various exhibitions organized in conjunction with the centenary of Latin American independence, such as those held in Buenos Aires and Chile in 1910, as well as Rio de Janeiro in 1922. These staged a state of harmony and coexistence between nations, while

paradoxically each nation strove to reinforce its own identity traits and demonstrate superiority to and leadership over foreign territories.⁸

Over several years, these occasions took place against the backdrop of a global imperialist race. The so-called Golden Age of the World's Fairs occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rivalries between European nations for the control of territory in Asia and Africa, and the expansionist aims of the United States within the rest of the American continent, set the stage for real and staged global disputes.⁹ Alongside the reconfiguration of global geopolitics, several Western nations underwent a process of forming and re-enforcing their national identity within varying timeframes. In this way, the fairs also became sites for the enactment of disputes and rivalries between nations, which prompted the local, provincial, and national authorities of participating countries to carefully select the products and manufacturers for exhibition; commission notable books and works of art to showcase their nation's achievements; and design displays that would impress diplomats, onlookers, and investors from around the world. Participating countries implemented diverse strategies to showcase their customs and display their power through natural products; manufactured goods; as well as archaeological, artistic, and literary items, among many others.¹⁰

These strategies intensified in complexity when the fairs began to feature, alongside the arts and crafts pavilions, country-specific pavilions set up in large buildings to display the particular features of each country and their peculiarities.¹¹ As such, these events formed spaces where the capitalist industrial race, with its commercial and technological focus, was explicitly evident. Yet the design of national pavilions also proved a challenge for "new" countries, such as those of the Americas, as they simultaneously strove to exhibit themselves to their former metropolis and establish a distance.¹² With these goals in mind, it took months for each country to prepare for an exhibition, and the approval of extraordinary state budgets for this purpose generated much debate in parliamentary chambers, as well as controversy in the press. The respective governments called on writers, artists, and directors of national libraries, archives, and museums to produce books, images, reports, digests, cartographies, albums, and what today we might call leaflets, and to provide up-to-date information on current events

showcasing their country's potential. With these strategies, the fairs also generated opportunities through the use of images and words to express the supposed "souls" of each nation and to narrate a "myth of origin."¹³

At a time when the process of establishing and consolidating national identity was at its peak, the World's Fairs opened a space for the definition of each nation's identity. Printed material designed for the exhibitions were later circulated at the diplomatic offices of various countries for those requesting information on travel and investment¹⁴; they also found an "internal market" in schools, as reading books or almanacs for national anniversaries. National collections and canonical works of art, music, and literature were often exhibited at World's Fairs and then "consumed" within the respective countries. The energy and economic resources that each country invested in showcasing itself to the world at these fairs also proved useful in settings for national citizenship education, such as schools and museums.¹⁵

In addition to a space for countries to boast of their achievements and progress through veiled rivalries, the exhibitions were also an occasion for the celebration, reinforcement, and "invention" of new identities. This can be seen in the titles of many of these events; while "world," "international," or "universal" were the most commonly used titles, exhibitions were also presented as "International-Americanist," "International-Panamanian," "Ibero-American," and "Italian-American," among others. These titles evidence how representational spaces also supported the emergence of transnational or regional identities, such as Pan-American, Ibero-American, or Latin American ones. At the same time, certain nomenclatures revealed an intent to exhibit colonial empires and staged relations of oppression by European powers over other territories. Eurocentric notions of "civilization," "progress," and "backwardness" sometimes appeared in the form of exoticism and romanticism, and naturalized relations of domination and exploitation. This was clearly evident, for example, at the Colonial Exposition in Marseilles in 1906, and at the Universal Colonial Exposition in Paris in 1931, among others.¹⁶ Undoubtedly, the most radical expression of these hierarchical worldviews predating Darwinian and Spencerian ideas of evolution were the so-called "human zoos," with their own particular historical record.¹⁷ Some recent studies have shown, through the analysis of

art exhibitions, how imaginaries influenced by colonialism continue to operate in twentieth-century and current exhibitions.¹⁸

Other tensions and overlaps around identity were reinforced at events celebrating specific historical colonial processes—for example, at the exhibitions held between 1892 and 1893, on the occasion of the Fourth Centenary of Columbus' arrival on American soil, in Madrid, Genoa, and Chicago.¹⁹ In various ways, these exhibitions became the setting for the display of a glorious colonial past, yet were also sites where Latin American countries could demonstrate how they had overcome their colonial past, and expressed vibrant new national projects. In the aforementioned centenary events, this was evident in the celebration of the severance of colonial ties. Several exhibitions embodied tensions related to the figure of Christopher Columbus and, as such, processes of colonization and conquest. The appropriation of this controversial figure by Italians and Spaniards settled in the Americas remains, in fact, a matter of controversy to this day. Columbus Day celebrations in the United States, along with the varied titles used to mark October 12 across different regions, remain highly contested. For decades, the term “Day of the Race” was proposed as an alternative, and in 1992 it evolved to “Encounter of Two Worlds” in some areas, while other countries now recognize it as the “Day of Cultural Diversity.” However, in Spain, it continues to be celebrated as a national holiday.²⁰

Once the exhibitions became fertile ground for private investors, tourist routes associated with the events also began to emerge. The fact that mass audiences, eager for knowledge and to experience the attractions, had congregated encouraged ventures such as the organization and sale of excursions; the opening of gastronomic chains selling “local food”; the printing of tourist guides; the creation and improvement of hotel infrastructures; and increased production of memorabilia or souvenirs, such as postcards, photo albums, and coins and medals to mark the event (this volume includes illustrations of several of these coins and medals).²¹ In addition, the exhibitions provided a propitious environment for all kinds of visual spectacles, such as dioramas, panoramas, and cinematic displays, and these even became the main attraction at certain exhibitions.²² These activities and displays were attractive to the exhibitions' popular audience

and even began to capture the attention of a wider audience interested in specific aspects such as the exhibits with a futuristic focus, often displayed with a voracity comparable to science fiction stories.²³ Walter Benjamin's insightful observations over a number of decades proved helpful in studying the expressions of visual culture displayed at these exhibitions.²⁴ Accordingly, they have been studied as a mechanism of modernity as it was understood in the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and as a way of propagating the meaning and values imposed by imperial capitalism.²⁵ Other studies, while recognizing these features, have shown how different audiences appropriated them as active participants, and not simply as disciplined consumers.²⁶

Studies on Latin American participation, actors, and representations at the World's Fairs first appeared in the final decade of the twentieth century in a number of texts with both a general and broad focus.²⁷ As discussed in Boone's chapter and as noted in other contributions in this book, the studies that today are considered pioneering tended to focus on the analysis of a national case, such as Argentina,²⁸ Brazil,²⁹ Mexico,³⁰ or Peru.³¹ Some of these texts offered comparisons between two countries, the most common of which being Argentina and Brazil.³² In addition to individual contributions, the joint volume *Galerías del Progreso*, published in 2006, became a reference text in the field of cultural studies, since it brought together specialists offering a "rereading of Latin American modernity" through the analysis of how modernity was displayed in exhibitions, museums, celebrations, and printed media.³³ This book has been informed by these contributions and, at the same time, establishes a dialogue in progress with new research approaches.

A distinctive feature of the studies on exhibitions published in recent years is their emphasis on transnational perspectives. In order to analyze aspects of cultural, intellectual, and political life, these studies shift away from a focus on the national, and certain monographic publications and dossiers published in the last five years have already demonstrated the potential of these contributions. The following publications demonstrate the diversity of approaches that now coexist as well as their geographical scope: the special issue of the journal *Ricerche Storiche*, titled "Esposizioni Universali in Europa. Attori, pubblici, memorie tra metropoli e colonie,

1851–1939”³⁴; the monograph from the *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, titled “A Stage for Nations: Spain and Latin America on Display in the Twentieth Century”³⁵; and the dossier “Exposiciones y cultura visual en América Latina, siglos XIX y XX,” published in the journal *Iberoamericana*.³⁶ In line with these advances, this volume contributes to the growing body of studies on World’s Fairs, with a focus on Latin America. It includes diverse analyses of the participation and role of countries, actors, representations, and discourses in the region that circulated at these international events.

The contributions gathered here reflect the revisions that have taken place in the last decade and invite the reader to think beyond national historiographies, toward an exploration of the ties, exchanges, and interrelationships between various regions across the globe. To varying degrees, they draw on suggestions from Atlantic history, Connected Histories, and the agendas put forward by global and transnational history. These historiographical strands have shown, as Anne-Marie Thiesse has summarized, that the shaping of national identities is an international process, and it is therefore insufficient to stay within the confines of national historiographical parameters to analyze specific historical processes.³⁷

Following on from these proposals, this book considers the potential of transnational and multidisciplinary perspectives, while its contributions do not confine themselves to a strictly national level of analysis. For example, the chapters by Boone, Gluzman, and myself address connections between former metropolises and colonies as imagined by contemporary scholars and at the same time challenge these. In turn, the contributions by Schuster, Jarrín, and Dummer Scheel reveal how certain styles, forms of interaction, and political and ideological paradigms moved beyond strictly national parameters at the exhibitions studied. In a similar vein, the chapters by Murillo Sandoval, Jarrín, Gluzman, and Lois reveal how material culture (books, handicrafts, artworks, buildings, and souvenirs) carried discourses and narratives about what the national ought to be, reinforced the “local color” of the participating countries, or reproduced consensuses about the prevailing world order. Several contributions included here show how these efforts to crystallize conceptions of the world could be challenged by those

visiting the exhibitions, as is made clear in the analysis of Rubén Darío and Amado Nervo's observations in Uslenghi's chapter, and in the exploration of the experience of Spanish-American literary figures in my chapter. It is thus evident how, even as attempts were made to fix ideas, notions, and images of the world, observations of these representations continually "overflowed" official, national, or private intentions.

The tensions around identity exemplified these "overflows" and are another of the focal points for several of the contributions compiled here. The chapters by Boone, Schuster, Uslenghi, Gluzman, Lois, and myself reveal how identity struggles were performed between the national and the regional, the colonial and the metropolitan or imperial, the Latin American and the Pan-American, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, as well as Hispanism and the various "local hues" of Latin American national identities. The chapters by Schuster, Murillo Sandoval, Jarrín, Gluzman, Dummer Scheel, and Lois, in turn, show how these tensions were dealt with and challenged by representatives of state bureaucracies, by delegates and commissioners, by agents of diplomacy who were appointed to fulfill protocolary functions or assigned to work on the program of activities at the exhibitions, or by architects selected to build the pavilions and temporary buildings, among others. As Uslenghi's and my own chapter show, chroniclers, lecturers, travelers, visitors, scientists, and other figures who acted as cultural articulators or mediators also negotiated these tensions. As they visited the exhibitions and became "translators" of the lived experience for their home country and other parts of Latin America, thanks to the circulation of news reports and the publication of memoirs, they also proposed and challenged the "myths of origin" that were presented by the nation states as completed narratives. In several chapters, we see the performativity of those who expressed their discontent and non-conformity with the hegemonic narratives of the exhibitions. Finally, I should point out that the texts by Murillo Sandoval, Gluzman, and myself specifically highlight the agency of women in the exhibitions, besides attempting to identify potential agendas for further exploration in this area.³⁸

To summarize some of the issues addressed in this book, and others that are sure to be revealed in its reading, what is proposed here is the notion of "cultural world maps," which suggests that the World's Fairs were

representations of the world generated at specific moments, in response to dominant interests, worldviews, and geopolitical alignments. They were also events at which there were as many ways of presenting and exhibiting the known world as there were of challenging those orders. The idea of “cultural world maps” evolved, in part, from a number of references from the period in question. For example, Eva Canel (a writer discussed in my chapter) referred to exhibitions as “abbreviated worlds.” The notion is also inspired by contemporary ideas that have been challenged or conceptualized by academics in the field, among them, “totalizing miniatures,” “models of the world,” “models of the real,” “miniature worlds,” “global microcosms,” or “encapsulated worlds.” The notion of “cultural world maps” also alludes to the school activity that has persisted over time of arranging and attaching to a world map character figurines with traditional clothing, colorful flags, iconic food, or indigenous musical instruments from each country. This is an activity which, perhaps unintentionally, adheres to the essence of the exhibitions, since it attempts to organize the world in a synthetic way and reinforces stereotypical cultural traits.

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