Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide
a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Emily C. Burns

book review of

Expanding Nationalisms at World's Fairs: Identity, Diversity, and Exchange, 1851–1915 edited by David Raizman and Ethan Robey

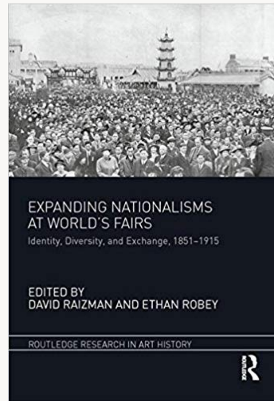
Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 19, no. 1 (Spring 2020)

Citation: Emily C. Burns, book review of *Expanding Nationalisms at World's Fairs: Identity, Diversity, and Exchange, 1851–1915* edited by David Raizman and Ethan Robey, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2020), https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2020.19.1.7.

Published by: Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art

Notes:
This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License Creative Commons License.



David Raizman and Ethan Robey, eds.,
Expanding Nationalisms at World's Fairs: Identity, Diversity, and Exchange, 1851–1915.
New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.
246 pp.; 90 b&w illus.; bibliography; index.
$155 (hardcover); $54.95 (e-book)
ISBN: 9781138501751 (hardcover)
ISBN: 9781315158747 (e-book)

Historian Yuval Noah Harari has recently argued that nationalism is one of the most ubiquitous stories humans have constructed about themselves in the modern world.[1] In *Expanding Nationalisms at World's Fairs: Identity, Diversity, and Exchange, 1851–1915*, editors David Raizman and Ethan Robey with a suite of ten authors explore how cultural products on view at world's fairs articulate and circulate ideas of nationalism. The central question here is how the production and negotiation of national identity are built through material culture in international contexts. In the process, the editors make the provocative claim that, akin to the role of print culture in Benedict Anderson's formulation of nations as "imagined communities," material culture is equally central to the shaping and constructing of political identities (6).[2] Building on a session at the College Art Association, the ten well-illustrated essays are chronologically organized and bookended by the Crystal Palace and Panama Pacific expositions.

The term "expanding" in the book's title covers many of its key contributions to scholarship, as the editors describe their "expanded field both materially and geographically" (8). First, its geographical reach expands beyond the traditional canons of world's fairs historiography, which have typically privileged France, Britain, and the United States. In the process of "working against models of center and periphery" (2), the editors underscore their goal to "deny the assumptions of a Eurocentric viewpoint, giving voice to alternative nationalisms and networks of international exchange in order to reveal a wealth of diverse strategies and intentions on the part of participating countries and manufacturers" (2). In this more global framing, which features case studies of the Arab-Islamic world, Egypt, Italo-Belgian exchange, Denmark, Japanese-US exchange, Finland, Hungary, China, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, the book joins a larger globalizing conversation in scholarship analyzing world's fairs beyond western Europe, and in nineteenth-century studies more broadly.[3]

The book is also expansive in the types of objects it explores. Authors analyze the built environment, including period rooms and national pavilions in world's fairs; decorative arts; and various industrial goods. The book belongs with other longstanding attempts to broaden the field of art history to comprise visual culture and the history of design. In linking the visual to the political, this text also pushes back against models of the history of design centered on modernist formalism (2–3). The historiography has sidelined world's fairs because of their complexity and diverse forms of expression that do not easily reinforce narratives of form and function or formalist history of design (3). In the process of refining the study of design history, the text tends to the relationships between free trade and globalism (3) as a current of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, analyzing the "interdependence of actors in an expanding global marketplace" (10). This attention to how markets shape art and design production aligns with current trends in the field to analyze the art market.[4]

But the title also raises a question: is nationalism itself always "expanding," or as contributor Debra Hanson describes for her case study, "emerging" (15)? Can nationalism also recede or implode? Certainly, it morphs and is in a constant state of flux. Its articulations are often ambivalent and inconsistent, more akin to Homi Bhabha's notion of "nation as narration" than to Anderson's building of the nation from the center.[5] The editors note their attention to "fairs as networks of exchange rather than as independent univocal displays" (7) and as "vehicles of communication" (1). These interactions operate more like the vectors of Michel Espagne's "cultural transfer" than models of reciprocal influence implied by the dialectics of transnationalism.[6] In this implication, "expanding" seems a misdirecting concept.

Another unanswered question here is the extent to which nations can operate as actors. The editors state that the essays' goals include "specifying the individuals who promote and guide the assembly of a national display and the varied audiences to whom these exhibitions speak," as well as questioning the idea of "unified 'national' style" (10). While many of the essays analyze the individuals who contribute to the construction of nationalism in each given context, at times slips of language personify the nation. Do countries have "intentions" (2)? Can "Italy . . . look at Belgium" (65)? Can Hungary "struggle to present itself" (148)? Relatedly, do nations have "ages" that mirror states of human development, as Daniela Prina suggests of Italy and Belgium (50)? How can scholars develop a language to unpack rather than naturalize such myths, such as how individuals build narratives about national past, presentness, or futurity?[7] This slippage also risks transforming the nation-state to anthropomorphized actor, getting at the ambivalence of nationalism that Bhabha articulates. Yet as Harari challenges us about personifying the nation in story-telling: "Can a nation really suffer? Has a nation eyes, hands, senses, affections, and passions? If you prick it, can it bleed? Obviously not. If it is defeated in war, loses a province, or even forfeits its independence, still it cannot experience pain, sadness, or any other kind of misery, for it has no body, no mind, and no feelings whatsoever. In truth, it is just a metaphor."[8] It is individuals who act, with the nation-state as the vehicle, and some of the essays do get to these actors with careful research and by tying the artistic production closely to the political milieu in which it was produced.

In "East Meets West: Re-Presenting the Islamic World at the Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs," Debra Hanson considers both the discursive construction of East-West divides, as well as the spaces for countering and negotiating that dialogue. Analyzing the 1851 Great Exhibition and subsequent fairs in Paris and Chicago, Hanson traces tensions of proximity and difference by analyzing the mapping of national displays within the fairs; Owen Jones's designs for the Crystal Palace interior; and Tunisia's shifting participation, as the nation transitions from independent to French colony. Through the latter, she effectively shows how an object—a Bedouin tent—operated both as a statement of Tunisian politics while also reinforcing Orientalist perceptions of nomadic culture (25).

In the following essay, "From London to Paris (via Cairo): The World Expositions and the Making of a Modern Architect, 1862–1867," Christian A. Hedrick offers a case study of Prussian architect Carl von Diebitsch. Hedrick traces the vicissitudes of meaning of Islamic style on display in world's fairs by following the architect's submission of a zinc vase with arabesque designs to the London Exposition in 1863 to his subsequent re-location to Cairo. From Cairo, he built a "Moorish Kiosk" which appeared as a Prussian structure for the Paris Exposition in 1867. While the latter structure built on the earlier design, Hedrick compellingly argues that the architect responded to his elite Egyptian patronage more than to European ideals, and that his architectural style framed "an international architecture appropriate for a global context" (43). Yet his articulation was reframed among many other Islamic structures with varying goals in the context of the Fair (45). Pushing beyond the Orientalist frame of power relationships between East and West, this essay reveals the subtlety of production and the translations that occurred in reception in Hedrick's suggestion that the concepts of "modern" and "Islamic" were not incompatible in the 1860s (46).

In "The Belgian Reception of Italy at the 1885 Antwerp World Exhibition: Converging Artistic, Economic, and Political Strategies on Display," Daniela N. Prina analyzes the dialogues between art and cultural production in Italy and Belgium within the discourse of both as "young nation-states," (50) with Belgian independence in 1830 and Italian unification in 1861. How did individuals from these nations participating in the Fair build a sense of heritage and history through the decorative arts, Prina asks.

The next essay, by Jørn Guldberg, "A Danish Spectacle: Balancing National Interests at the 1888 Nordic Exhibition of Industry, Agriculture and Art in Copenhagen," analyzes the construction of Danish identity at the Fair. Like the attempts of Belgian and Italian organizers to find a historical trajectory for aesthetics, Danish organizers sought "to identify a historical source for the renewal or reinvention of a genuine national and specifically *Nordic* style" (74) through wood architecture, hand-made ceramics, and industrially-produced goods in the context of continued anxiety about a loss of territory in 1864 to the Prussian-Austrian army (74).

In "A Neoclassical Translation: The Hôôden at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition," Hannah L. Sigur argues that the Japanese pavilion on an island in the Chicago Exposition contested the legacy of Western civilization with a "neoclassicism 'in Japanese'" (95). Through a careful analysis of the individuals involved and a layered historical context, she argues that

the structure "pointedly reinterpreted the Euro-centered biases of exposition dogma" (95).

Anca I. Lasc's essay, "Paris, 1900: The *Musée Centennal du Mobilier et de la Décoration* and the Formulation of a Nineteenth-Century National Design Identity," offers the only French-focused contribution in the book. It argues that the Centennial Museum of Furniture and Decoration in Paris in 1900 constructed a certain idea of the "recent past" and the burgeoning industry of spectacle within the world's fairs to design a trajectory for decorative art production in the present (109–10). This framed "an impression of aesthetic continuity under the guise of nationalism" (110). Lasc usefully puts these displays in dialogue with the anxieties about French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 (110) and "fears of degeneration" in the *fin-de-siècle* (119). The notion of a period room as an "immersive environment" (114) akin to entertainment spaces marks a key contribution of this study to wider scholarship.

The subsequent essay also focuses on the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900. In "'Our Country Has Never Been as Popular as It Is Now!': Finland at the 1900 Exposition Universelle," Bart Pushaw explores the projection of Finnish cultural independence while a part of the Russian Empire at the Fair through a Finnish pavilion (130). Yet, as Pushaw argues, the construction of a unified Finnish identity was "an artifice" (131), suggesting that "the ideals of the Aesthetic movement and the nationalism of world's fairs mask multi-ethnic conflict" (131). Pushaw considers debates about materials—wood versus stone—as the choice for the production for a "small Finnish church" as the pavilion. He also analyzes the dialogue across the fairgrounds, between the Finnish pavilion and Finnish paintings in the Palais des Beaux Arts, and finds threads of ambivalent and ambiguous discourses on race that reveal fissures in narratives of a singular Finnish identity.

In "'A Revelation of Grace and Pride': Cultural Memory and International Aspiration in Early Twentieth-Century Hungarian Design," Rebecca Houze reveals the malleable images of Hungarian culture projected in world's fairs in Paris (1900), Turin (1902), St. Louis (1904), and Milan (1906). The objects included in the Hungarian displays fluctuated between folk tradition and progressive modernity, or as Houze writes, "between vernacular and international visions of modernity" (147) in different contexts. Houze raises key questions about artistic and social agency by presenting examples of artists who have built their own "otherness" alongside those who have adopted international mainstream aesthetics (166). Like Pushaw, she finds fractures in any singular notion of Hungarian art and design. Houze's essay also suggests the continued need for comparative scholarship across national case studies; her presentation of the Hungarian artists' emphasis on the past and the modern echoes Anne Helmreich's findings about English projections of its rustic or industrial culture at contemporaneous fairs.[9] These parallel findings are intriguing, given that England's and Hungary's political experiences were very different in the *fin-de-siècle*. Might these cases be tied to anti-modernism?

In "When the Local is the Global: Case Studies in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Exposition Projects," Susan R. Fernsebner focuses on the individual actors who shaped ideas of China in world's fairs during a period of major reform in China (173). She argues that Chinese participation in the fairs, both in the 1910 Nanyang Exposition and those held

abroad between 1904 and 1915, served "to promote economic nationalism—and particularly an export-oriented, industrial economy" (173) through various forms of manufacture displayed, including soap, furniture, textiles, particularly in US markets from St. Louis in 1904 to San Francisco in 1915.

The final essay, "The 1910 Centenary Exhibition in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay: Manufacturing Fine Art and Cultural Diplomacy in South America," by M. Elizabeth Boone, transports the reader to South America, analyzing the paintings circulated by the United States in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay as a form of "cultural diplomacy" (196) that responded to political interest in rural identity and agriculture. Boone carefully traces the critical reception of the US policy of Pan-Americanism through political cartoons of the period, showing how at times national identity can be constructed dialectically.

In sum, the essays are based on a wealth of archival and object-based research and filled with nuanced analyses of the complex messages that art and material culture communicated in the international networks created by the world's fairs. Some messages were received, others missed, still others changed meaning in translation. Even as objects and structures traveled, some of the essays also underscore the mobility of artists, like Prussian architect Diebtisch in Cairo and Hungarian designer Pál Horti in the United States, and their adaptations to other national markets. The subtleties of the arguments reveal competing claims to modernity or tradition, tensions between the local and the global, and constant contestation of how ideas of the past are leveraged in the stories about nations fueled by these objects.

In addition to its manifold contributions to the understanding of culture as a part of identity-building, the book has particular relevance to the contemporary world. Because of unprecedented mobility and contact in the late nineteenth century, the culture of the period anticipates the conversations about globalization (and its discontents) in the late twentieth century. By analyzing the mechanisms of how nationalism operates through culture—what Sigur describes as "inconsistencies at the heart of the ideology of globalism" (96)—the essays offer critical reflections on the tensions between globalism and strident patriotism that resurface as (inter)nationalisms continue to clash.

Emily C. Burns
Associate Professor of Art History
Auburn University
emily.burns[at]auburn.edu

Notes

[1] Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Vintage, 2019), 129–36.

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

[3] See also Marta Filipová, *Cultures of International Exhibitions, 1840–1940: Great Exhibitions in the Margins* (London: Ashgate, 2015); and David O'Brien, ed., *Civilisation and Nineteenth-Century Art: A European Concept in a Global Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). The Eurocentric model is also questioned by some essays in Hollis Clayson and André Dombrowski, *Is*

Paris Still the Capital of the Nineteenth Century? Essays on Art and Modernity, 1850–1900 (London: Routledge, 2016), though the editors still affirm the centrality of Paris (4, 284–85).

[4] See, for instance, Frances Fowle, "Peripheral Impressionisms," in *Responses to 'Questionnaire on Impressionism and the Social History of Art'*, ed. Alexis Clark, *H-France Salon* 9, no. 14.2 (2017): 6; Morna O'Neill, "Moving Beyond 'Post T.J. Clark Ad-Hocism'," in ibid.: 11–12; and the commentaries solicited by Robin Veder and John Ott in *American Art* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 2–31.

[5] Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

[6] Michel Espagne, "La Notion de Transfert Culturel," *Revue Sciences/Lettres* 1 (2013): 2.

[7] On this conundrum in the US context, see Emily C. Burns, "Belatedness, Artlessness and American Culture in Fin-de-Siècle France." Colloquies, Americans in Paris, in *Arcade*, ed. Natalia Cecire, Stanford University, March 4, 2016, http://arcade.stanford.edu/.

[8] Harari, *21 Lessons*, 357.

[9] Anne Helmreich, "The Nation and the Garden: England and the World's Fairs at the Turn of the Century," in *Art, Culture, and National Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, eds. Michelle Facos and Sharon L. Hirsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39–64.