



That's Not Fair!

Conflicting Visions of Womanhood at the Columbian Exposition of 1893



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Materiality & Spectacle

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The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, also called the Chicago World's Fair, provided an opportunity for women of varying backgrounds to contribute their beliefs in how women should be viewed on a national and international scene. This moment in American history was one of great change, and also great tension. The Columbian Exposition of 1893 provides a glimpse into the conflicting aims of women of this era, who were navigating changing societal standards of what it meant to be a woman. By recognizing and analyzing the complexities between the two contrasting groups of women who fought to advance their agenda, it becomes possible to better understand the events and beliefs of the woman's movement of the late nineteenth century.

Background

In order to recognize the significance of the Columbian Exposition in 1893, it is imperative to address its precursor, the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. This Exposition, the earliest notable World's Fair hosted in the United States, was innovative in a variety of ways – including the fact that it had a Woman's Pavilion. The Woman's Pavilion came about through the work of the Women's Centennial Executive Committee, which was created as a means to help gather funds for the Exposition.¹ The initial plan was to have space set aside within the Main Exhibition Hall for the display of women's works. However, near the opening of the Exposition, the leader of the Women's Committee, Elizabeth Gillespie, was informed that there was no space reserved for them.² Unwilling to take accept defeat, the Women's Committee raised additional funds for the construction of a wooden pavilion to house their works. Yet, the Women's Pavilion was underwhelming, lacking in artistic quality and quantity due to its hasty preparation.³ This fact, along with the reading of "Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States" by Susan B. Anthony during the Exposition, created excitement for future

exhibitions of women's works. The Woman's Pavilion at the Centennial provided the foundation onto which future woman's buildings would form. Additionally, the controversy over the merits of such separate buildings existing at all would continue to cause tension amongst women.

The World's Columbian Exposition

Held in Chicago in 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition was a celebration of the anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. Like other World's Fairs, it was a platform to display some of the values and achievements of the home nation. While they may have gone about it differently, both the men and women involved with the creation of the Exposition were committed to expressing the progress of American society. From the start, the Columbian Exposition was different from the Centennial in a variety of ways. For one, there was a Board of Lady Managers sanctioned by Congress. It was established after lobbying by women including Susan B. Anthony and its mission was for women to have a say in how they were represented at the Exposition.⁴ The formation and implementation of this Board was not without conflict. Before Chicago was even chosen as the location of the Columbian Exposition, tension ensued between two groups of women with differing beliefs about the best way to represent women at the Fair. Their contrasting opinions are indicative of prevailing mindsets of the era in regards to the best way to advance women's rights.

The Women's Conservative Auxiliary

Made up of wealthy and prominent Chicago women, the Women's Auxiliary was one group of women who sought to influence the Columbian Exposition. Most of the women in the auxiliary had previous experience working with philanthropic and reform organizations and were already well known in Chicago.⁵ They were very well connected to men with influential

positions in the formation of the Exposition, and thus seemingly had an advantage in regards to being elected to the official Lady Board of Managers.⁶ They generally believed in more modest aims for women in the Exposition. Their mission included the creation of a separate Woman's Pavilion, continuing to lend their support for reform efforts, and selling stock for the fair.⁷ While they were fighting for rights for women, they justified their claims with a conception of *expanded* femininity, rather than a rejection of it.⁸ For this reason they tended to encourage women to pursue education, art, and reform movements, since they could be justified within the normative feminine virtues⁹. They rejected the belief that women are only fit for domestic duties, but they were not willing to advocate for women in professions that would go against their female sensibilities. In this way, their stance tended to be appealing to men at the time, who had an easier time accepting their requests, since they were grounded in traditional gender expectations.

The Isabella Association

In contrast, another organization of women who sought to use the Columbian Exposition to further their goals regarding changing ideals of womanhood were the Isabellas. The Isabella Association consisted of mostly professional women (as opposed to wealthy women), who were more concerned with gaining woman's suffrage rather than philanthropic endeavors.¹⁰ Additionally, the Isabella Association was spread out in other large cities, unlike the Auxiliary that was centered in Chicago. The Isabellas got their name from their support for Queen Isabella, who they wished to be recognized for her part in the discovery of the New World.¹¹ Part of their goal was to erect a statue of Isabella to be displayed at the Exposition. Even though they supported the creation of a Woman's Pavilion, they did not support the separation of men and woman's contributions to the fair, instead pushing for equal representation of women's works

right alongside men's.¹² But the most radical belief of the Isabella's was their rejection of the normative constraints of domestic ideals for women. Instead of the expectation that women are best suited for domestic pursuits within the home, the Isabellas urged women to pursue careers in the professional world.¹³ At the time, this was an extremely radical and controversial mentality which was not well received by a majority of both men and women. The longstanding traditions of domesticity as the ideal for women made it difficult for society to condone their involvement in public affairs without somehow linking it back to their feminine virtues. Clearly these two groups of women had contradictory plans for women in the Columbian Exposition. The stage was set for a struggle over control of the Exposition.

Board of Lady Managers

The Board of Lady Managers was the officially sanctioned group responsible for making choices about the way women were to be involved in the Columbian Exposition. The main reason why it existed at all was due to the lobbying efforts of women such as Susan B. Anthony and Myra Bradwell.¹⁴ While they arguably had less power than their male counterparts, the women who made up the Board of Lady Managers did have quite a bit of power. For this reason, the women of both the Women's Auxiliary and the Isabella Association sought to have their representatives appointed to the Board of Lady Managers. A contentious and political battle took place, ultimately ending with more power for the Women's Auxiliary cohorts.¹⁵ Bertha Palmer, a prominent Chicago woman and wife of a wealthy businessman, was voted President of the Board of Lady Managers. While she wasn't officially a member of the Auxiliary, her beliefs were much in line with theirs.¹⁶ She did support the vote for women, but opposed militant methods.¹⁷ Originally from Kentucky, Palmer subscribed to traditional southern standards of womanhood, including the belief that women should gain authority within the bounds of femininity and the

virtues of “tenderness, sympathy, and intuition.”¹⁸ Even though the Auxiliary members held most of the official power on the Board, Palmer still had quite a task ahead of her in trying to reconcile the differences between the competing factions of the Auxiliary and the Isabellas. The Board of Lady Managers consisted of two delegates from each state, eight members at large, and nine women from Chicago.¹⁹ Most of the women were either from the actual Women’s Auxiliary or were at least more sympathetic to their beliefs. While the Isabellas were happy that women had been chosen from all over the country rather than just from Chicago, most of the women who were appointed tended to be the most wealthy and prominent from their state, and thus more sympathetic to the Auxiliary women.²⁰ One example of such a woman is Sallie Southall Cotten, a representative from South Carolina. A woman of high social standing, her scrapbooks show the tension she felt between her perspectives on women’s rights. The medium of the scrapbook itself shows the strain between public work and private opinions, as well as a mechanism of establishing selfhood.²¹ On one hand, many of the articles pasted into Cotten’s scrapbooks describe her work on the Board of Lady Managers (and her other organizations she was a part of) as an extension of her feminine and southern virtues. One article in particular deems her a representation of “the ideal woman of the progressive new south” due to her womanly traits of charm and sympathy.²² However at the same time, there are moments in her scrapbook when it appears as though she is trying to subvert the way that the public saw her. Alongside articles about women’s domestic duties, Cotten included clippings detailing women’s accomplishments outside the home, including a photo of the “first female candidate for the position of Pres[ident of the] United States.”²³ Her scrapbooks provide a glimpse into the ways that women who entered the public sphere were able to balance their public persona with their private beliefs through the technique of scrapbooking. During this historical moment where so much of the

societal convictions were being called into question, scrapbooking provided a means for women to fashion themselves a sense of identity that was influenced both by the larger community as well as themselves.

A dramatic example that illustrates the tension within the Board of Lady Managers over conflicting views of womanhood appears in the clash between the President Bertha Palmer and the Secretary Phoebe Couzins. These two women represent the opposition between the Auxiliary and the Isabellas. Palmer sought to use the Columbian Exposition to expand women's rights but keep them grounded in their positions as wives and mothers. Conversely, Couzins was a member of the Isabella Association and thus an ardent suffragist and radical advocate for women's equality with men beyond of the bounds of domesticated femininity.²⁴ The tension between the two women erupted when Couzins was removed from her position and proceeded to sue to try to regain it.²⁵ The suit ended unsuccessfully for Couzins but was an incredible hassle and embarrassment for Palmer, who was trying to maintain the appearance of cohesion within the Board of Lady Managers.²⁶ These incidents are a prime example of the tenacity with which these women fought for their beliefs. Even though Couzins was outnumbered and held little influence within the Board of Lady Managers, her convictions were so strong that she ardently fought for her plans to be successful. While they may not have been in the short term, in the long term the beliefs of the Isabellas would prove more impactful.

The Exposition

By the time the Exposition actually opened to the public, Bertha Palmer had successfully consolidated her power and essentially won the battle against the Isabellas, nullifying their demands and practically erasing their contributions from the historic record.²⁷ Palmer's

conservative aims had been realized, as evidenced in her speech during the opening of the Woman's Building:

....men have asked many times whether the Board of Lady Managers thinks it well to promote a sentiment which may tend to destroy the home by encouraging occupations for women which take them out of it. We feel, therefore, obliged to state our belief that every woman, who is presiding over a happy home, is fulfilling her highest and truest function, and could not be lured from it by temptations offered by factories or studios.²⁸

This claim clearly elucidates the prevailing message of the Board of Lady Managers, that they were seeking to expand woman's rights – but not threatening the normative domestic ideals of woman's place in society. Perhaps this contributed to their successful dealings with the men in charge of the Exposition, who were more sympathetic to their conservative goals.

The Woman's Building

The prevailing conservative mindset of the Lady Board of Managers was evident in the Woman's Building of the exposition. The building was designed by Sophia Hayden, whose design was chosen amongst other women architects.²⁹ The building was designed in an Italian Renaissance style, and had rooms for a variety of purpose, including exhibition spaces, meeting rooms, offices, and parlors.³⁰ The building adhered to traditionally feminine design elements. Since Palmer was a champion of the arts, deeming art an appropriate feminine pursuit, she filled the building with a variety of art pieces, all created by women.³¹ The building was filled with an exorbitant amount of exhibitions, "Brimming with artwork, handicrafts, books, statistics, photographs, inventions, demonstrations, and exhibits on professions, the Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition showcased a variety of female accomplishments."³² Despite

all the apparent benefits of the Woman's Building, it is also important to note that by its very distinction as a gender segregated building, it had implications on the way that woman's contributions were viewed compared to men's. For example, the Isabellas were opposed to the separatist nature of a gender segregated space, claiming that by firmly differentiating between men's and women's contributions, the Board of Lady Managers was actually hindering the quest for gender equality.³³ Interestingly enough, within a relatively short time, the mindset of the Isabellas would become the more prevailing one. However, at the time they received much opposition for their stance on this issue. Nevertheless, the implications of the Woman's Building are immense and deserve to be recognized.

The Library

One component of the Woman's Building that has received some attention is the library that was found inside. In fact, in their piece, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, Sarah Wadsworth and Wayne A. Wiegand take an in-depth look at this library that was filled with books that were all written by women, and thus showed that women were in fact prolific writers.³⁴ The library also provided a foundation for anyone who wished to study female authors, having compiled a sizable collection of their books all in one place.³⁵ However, this library was more of an exhibition space as opposed to a working library, evidenced by its closed stacks, atypical categorization (arranged by the state that contributed the book) and the emphasis on elaborate decorations inside.³⁶ The library, like the Woman's Building as a whole, rejected the masculine architecture and decoration that was prominent elsewhere in the fair. Instead, the library was set up to feel cozy and homelike.³⁷ This emphasis on standardized conceptions of femininity appear in the library as a junction between private and public space. Although it was actually a public library open to anyone attending the Exposition, it was set up to feel like a parlor. This

juxtaposition of public and private added another level of complexity to the Woman's Building, and points to similar complexities throughout the entire woman's rights movement as a whole.

Conclusion

The second World's Fair to have a building completely devoted to women, the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was the zenith of this short lived tradition. Despite the tension between women with different ideological motivations for participating in the Exposition, women were able to use the event as a platform with which to continue their fight to change society's definition of womanhood. It is vital when looking at this era to not treat women as a monolithic category, but rather to compare and analyze the contrasting motivations and aims of the different groups of women who sought to accomplish varying goals. Even though the more conservative members of the Woman's Auxiliary may have been more successful in achieving their goals for the Exposition, American opinion was changing, and soon the ideas fostered by the Isabella Association would become more popular.³⁸ After the 1893 Exposition, women tended to abandon their separatist strategy, and instead pursue means of integrating women into all aspects of expositions, viewing them more as individuals and less as a unified group.³⁹ This shift was illustrative of the changes that were occurring throughout the entirety of the woman's movement in the United States. Nevertheless, the strategy that the Board of Lady Managers employed in 1893 certainly had positive results, and contributed to a momentous historical moment for women in America, which makes the Exposition a great glimpse into mentalities behind the woman's movement at the end of the nineteenth century.

Notes

- ¹ Jeanne Weimann. *The Fair Women*, 1.
- ² *Ibid.*, 2.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁵ Lauren Maxwell. "Constructions of Femininity", 9.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁷ Jeanne Weimann. *The Fair Women*, 28.
- ⁸ Lauren Maxwell. "Constructions of Femininity", 9.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹¹ Jeanne Weimann. *The Fair Women*, 28.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Lauren Maxwell. "Constructions of Femininity", 8.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ¹⁷ Wanda M. Corn. *Women Building History*, 201.
- ¹⁸ Jeanne Weimann. *The Fair Women*, 50.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ²⁰ Lauren Maxwell. "Constructions of Femininity", 13.
- ²¹ Ellen Garvey. *Writing With Scissors*, 173.
- ²² Sallie Cotten. Scrapbook Volume 1, Scan 19.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, Scan 9.
- ²⁴ Lauren Maxwell. "Constructions of Femininity", 17.
- ²⁵ Jeanne Weimann. *The Fair Women*, 101.
- ²⁶ Lauren Maxwell. "Constructions of Femininity", 22.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ²⁸ Bertha Palmer, "Opening Address", 26.
- ²⁹ Wanda M. Corn. *Women Building History*, 86.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 76.
- ³³ Jeanne Weimann. *The Fair Women*, 30.
- ³⁴ Sarah Wadsworth and Wayne A. Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, 203.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ³⁸ Lauren Maxwell. "Constructions of Femininity", 39.
- ³⁹ Sarah Wadsworth and Wayne A. Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books*, 211.

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