

How the chicago worlds fair reflected america

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During a time period known as the Gilded Age, one city set out to "secure America's place in the world" by constructing the "legendary 1893 World's Fair" (Larson 2003, back cover). Chicago's success in building the Fair proved to the rest of the world that America was a force to be reckoned with. It highlighted some of their greatest accomplishments and helped establish their role as a leading world power; however, "the greatest fair of all time" was not made possible without its fair share of flaws and setbacks (Larson 2003, 308). Despite the difficulties in creating and hosting the event, Chicago prevailed and not only changed America forever, but also reflected the country in various ways. The Chicago World's Fair didn't just portray social and economic aspects of America during the 1890s, but it was a reflection of America's global influence as well.

The Fair depicted two completely different sides of America at that time. On one hand, national pride made up the positive side of the social reflection. A number of cities craved the coveted bid to host the 1893 World's Fair and invite people from all over the world into their state, but it only made sense to give it to the city with the most pride: Chicago. "Nowhere was civic pride a more powerful force than in Chicago, where men spoke of the 'Chicago spirit' as if it were a tangible force and prided themselves on the speed with which they had rebuilt the city after the Great Fire of 1871" (Larson 2003, 16). After all, "they had not merely restored [the city]; they had turned it into the nation's leader in commerce, manufacturing, and architecture" (Larson 2003, 16). To go from the state of depression and ruin that resulted from the Fire to such a powerful city, Chicago demonstrated its ability and determination: the reason why they spent such a colossal amount of time,

effort and money to build the Fair after they won the bid. James Ellsworth, one of the board's directors of the Fair, "believed it imperative that the city protect its civic honor by producing the greatest such event in the world's history" and joined "one of the greatest artistic undertakings of the century" (Larson 2003, 49). The Fair was exactly what the people of Chicago needed because it gave them the opportunity to put their dignity and pride into an event that would reflect America as a whole. Failure was not an option.

Daniel Burnham, the lead designer of the event, knew that "if the fair failed, the nation's honor would be tarnished" (Larson 2003, 33). Consequently, they were able to show the world what America was capable of as a result of their fervent efforts. Overall, Chicago's pride had translated to the success of the entire country. On opening day of the Fair, "an American flag the size of a mainsail unfurled from the tallest flagpole in the Court of Honor" and "spontaneously, the throng began to sing 'My Country 'Tis of Thee'" (Larson 2003, 238-239). Additionally, Dedication Day "had been anticipated nationwide" and what is now referred to as the Pledge of Allegiance was created as a result of the anticipation leading up to that day (Larson 2003, 181). America's undeniable pride was evident throughout the entirety of the fair. Concluding with the Star-Spangled Banner at the closing ceremony, every last person who had experienced the world's greatest fair had also experienced American patriotism. However, the Fair didn't only reflect the positive social aspects of America during that time. It also depicted issues of racism. Chicago's Fair was known as the White City because it included an enormous amount of street lights and all the buildings that were a part of it were white, but there may have been another reason why that name in

particular was given to the exhibition celebrating the discovery of America. In "The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition," Ida B. Wells describes the racist underpinnings of the Fair and how African Americans were excluded from it. Outside the White City, the rest of Chicago which was characterized by pollution and destitution was referred to as the Black City - also a place where African Americans were more accepted. "Despite its incomplete exhibits, rutted paths, and stretches of unplanted ground, the exposition revealed to its early visitors a vision of what a city could be and ought to be. The Black City to the north lay steeped in smoke and garbage, but here in the White City of the fair visitors found clean public bathrooms, pure water, an ambulance service, electric streetlights, and a sewage-processing system that yielded acres of manure for farmers" (Larson 2003, 247). This passage from the book represents two completely different worlds that made up Chicago in the 1890s. American pride was a common feature across the nation and racism was prevalent in many states in that time period as well; therefore, they are reflections of America as a whole during the World's Fair.

In addition to portraying social conducts of the country, the Fair also served as a representation of the economic disproportion found in the United States in the course of that time period. Poverty was sweeping the nation and the unemployment was continuously increasing. "With the nation's economic depression growing ever more profound - banks failing, suicides multiplying," the Fair had days with such low attendance rates that Chicago's hopes of getting out of debt seemed nearly impossible (Larson 2003, 293). At the same time, the Fair was marked with such prosperity that even royalty from

foreign countries attended. The relationship between the Fair and the poverty surrounding it were evident when simply looking at how it was made possible in the first place. The Fair was such a magnificent and opulent event that people from all over the world came to be a part of it. It showcased not only Chicago, but featured America as an affluent and richly supplied nation. However, the workers that made it all possible were still poverty-stricken and their families destitute. The fact that America was able to top Paris's Eiffel Tower and be recognized as the best fair yet portrayed a wealthy mask of the event, while in reality, Burnham worried about being able to pay off the cost of it. Larson writes, "The early visitors returned to their homes and reported to friends and family that the fair, though incomplete, was far grander and more powerful than they have been led to expect" (Larson 2003, 255). In that same paragraph, he describes how families "in fields, dells, and hollows" were "terrified by what they read in the papers each day about the collapsing national economy" (Larson 2003, 255). Those families didn't even have homes, let alone access to electricity, while the Fair flaunted "lamps that laced every building" which "produced the most elaborate demonstration of electric illumination ever attempted and the first large-scale test of alternating current" (Larson 2003, 254). Exemplifying the extreme contrasts of society, the World's Fair was a pure reflection of America during the Gilded Age, which marked a period of extensive economic growth, but only for a few individuals and companies.

Finally, the Fair outlined America's success in proving that it was ready to be a leading world power. It created a more positive global reputation for the country with all the inventions and technological advances that they

produced for the event. " Within the fair's buildings visitors encountered devices and concepts new to them and to the world" (Larson 2003, 247). The list of these enticing new concepts included long-distance telephones, Edison's Kinetoscope, the first zipper, the first all-electric kitchen, Juicy Fruit gum, Cracker Jack popcorn and even a new beer called Pabst Blue Ribbon (Larson 2003, 247). The biggest of them all was the invention of the Ferris Wheel, which " quickly became the most popular attraction of the exposition" and is now found in amusement parks across the globe (Larson 2003, 287). The debut of these creations illustrated the Fair's magnitude and long-lasting influence on America as well as the entire world. As a result, the country received global recognition and the Fair helped pave the way for America to be considered a major world power.

Unquestionably, the 1893 Chicago World's Fair was a legendary event that reflected various aspects of America. Although it came with its reasonable share of setbacks and flaws, the end results were worth all of it. " The fair was so perfect, its grace and beauty like an assurance that for as long as it lasted nothing truly bad could happen to anyone, anywhere" (Larson 2003, 289). Demonstrating the Windy City's success in capturing America's essence during that time period, the Fair was one of the greatest sights of the 19th century, a staple subject of conversation throughout the entire world and a fascinating display of America as a whole.