

Book Review

Joep Leerssen & Eric Storm (eds.), *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities. International Exhibitions as Cultural Platforms, 1851–1958 (=National Cultivation of Culture, vol. 27)*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 94 illustrations. XIV+413 pp., ISSN 18765645

For a long time, the study of world fairs has enjoyed the interest of historians. The volume recently edited by the Dutch scholars Joep Leerssen and Eric Storm on *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities* opts for a specific perspective: It aims at fathoming the relevance of international exhibitions for the relationship between the evolution and propagation of national identities on the one hand and a basically international forum on the other hand. To what extent did world fairs offer the opportunity to nations, or rather to nation states, to expose their presumed national uniqueness within an international format whose mode of organization and presentation has remained relatively stable through the decades? And in how far can world fairs verify Storm's assumption 'that national identities themselves are to a large extent the product of globalization' (p. 53)? Although the volume focusses rather on cultural than on economic and political history, it tries to trace the nation state's development 'from its nineteenth-century positioning amidst neighbouring enemies towards being a competitor in a global, consumer-oriented trade and entertainment economy'. The fulfillment of this promise presented in the flap text is strived for through a comparative, transnational perspective. The period chosen is very well



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suited for such an approach: Ranging from the first world fair in London (1851), the so called 'Great Exhibition' in the Crystal Palace, to the 'Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles' of 1958, the period under review coincides with the heydays of various forms, and degrees of intensity, of nationalism, colonialism, imperialism, and partly with decolonization. Although international exhibitions still exist today, they are – as the editors point out in the introduction – no longer 'the central platform of global display culture' (p. 7) that they had been from 1851 to 1958. In this sense, the period chosen may be seen as the Global Age of world fairs.

This very particular historical phenomenon started in Europe and was strongly influenced from the beginning by European countries or empires as well as by the United States of America. However, it also involved, as participants or as hosts, non-European countries, both colonies and independent states. A number of case studies illustrate that international exhibitions provided an opportunity, not least for young nation states or empires, to display independence and alleged uniqueness in an international setting. This is true, for example, for Japan during the Meiji period (Taka Oshikiri), for Romania (Cosmin Minea) and Poland (Bartosz Dziewanowski-Stefańczyk) during the interwar period. To ethnic minorities or indigenous communities, by contrast, the world fairs hardly gave a chance to influence the presentation of the state in which they lived. In parallel with the basically globally oriented world fairs, many industrial or commercial exhibitions took place on a local, regional or national level. In their entirety, all these events may be considered as a specific cultural manifestation of industrial modernity, continuously accelerating telecommunication and thorough globalization of trade. In this context, world fairs played a specific role. They were a forum for displaying nations or nation states because it was national committees that prepared their country's exhibition and because, as a rule, each country was allocated its own pavilion where it

could present itself to the international public. At the same time, however, the national committees had to coordinate their plans with the host country, and from its founding in 1928 onwards, with the 'Bureau International des Expositions' (BIE). Thus, world fairs constituted a compromise between national ideas and international expectations and frameworks.

Regardless of the homogenous surface which world fairs tried to convey to their visitors, the study of international exhibitions reveals several fault lines. In some cases, there were heated discussions on the national level about whether to participate in a world fair at all, who was allowed to present themselves there, or which parts of the national history, industry, agriculture or commerce should be exhibited. Colombia, for example, presented in the volume by Sven Schuster as one of the 'peripheral states', fluctuated on the international exhibitions of 1892–3 (Chicago) and 1929–30 (Seville) between its indigenous past and its Hispanic legacy as the 'road to civilization'. At the 1939–40 New York world fair, which was held under the motto 'Building the World of Tomorrow', and with an art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Mexico's presentation also tried to strike a balance between 'a very unique tradition and indigenous past' on the one hand and 'a no less unique modern Mexican nation' on the other hand (p. 266), as Miriam Oesterreich explains in her contribution. And in Japan, which had been pursuing a comprehensive program of economic and political modernization since 1868, efforts to establish 'chanoyu', or the ritualized premodern form of the consumption of powdered green tea ('matcha'), in world fairs met with great difficulties because progressive government officials have long believed that the traditional indigenous culture of 'chanoyu' 'did not fit the idea of a modern state' (p. 201). Tensions between what was seen as national tradition on the one hand and political and economic modernity on the other hand are also evident in the way in which the newly independent Poland presented itself on

world fairs during the interwar period (Bartosz Dziewanowski-Stefańczyk).

Another fault line lies in the discrepancy between the self-image that nation states displayed at international exhibitions, and foreign perceptions. For example, the emphasis on a traditional 'Russian style' overshadowed tsarist Russia's simultaneous effort to showcase its tentative industrialization and modernization. As Anthony Swift demonstrates, the government in Moscow had great difficulty in overcoming the impression on the international stage that Russia was a backward empire and a country that could hardly compete or even cooperate with 'the West'. Its French counterpart had to experience that its own ideas did not necessarily coincide with the interests of the host country: Claire Hendren shows that the American organizers in Chicago (1892-3), Seattle (1909) and San Francisco (1915) gave preference to vanguard movements of French arts like impressionists and the Barbizon School, while the French national pavilion followed the more conservative taste advocated by the 'Société des Artistes Français' and the 'Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts'. Finally, Cosmin Minea proves that for smaller countries, external constraints resulting from requirements of the host country or from the international format that quickly emerged as mandatory for the organization of world fairs could be at odds with national self-perceptions. With regard to Romania (and to some degree to Bulgaria), he elaborates that some local intellectuals were highly dissatisfied with the fact that their country was primarily presented as 'exotic' or 'oriental' at the Parisian world fairs of the fin-de-siècle. From a postcolonial perspective, he concludes that peripheral states found themselves in a 'quasi-colonial or culturally subaltern position vis-à-vis Western Europe' (p. 145) because ultimately the concept of the French hosts prevailed over Romanian suggestions.

Two contributions of the volume are explicitly dedicated to supranational organizations. Jonathan Voges shows that, contrary to

original plans, the concept for the 1937 Paris world fair ‘increasingly turned away from internationalism and towards national self-representation’ (p. 362). While the political and military tensions in the international order were successively increasing during the preparations of the fair, the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation and several other international organizations (including the League of Nations) were allocated ten rooms in the ‘Musée d’art moderne’ which, by the way, had been built specifically for the world fair. Their program included congresses that would have been worth a little more explanation. Anastasia Remes, in her contribution on the Brussels Expo 1958, sketches the self-presentation and propagation of the newly established European institutions, in particular of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). According to some of the results of her PhD research, European participation in the Brussels world fair was aimed at strengthening interest in European integration within European states. The fact that around six million people visited the ECSC pavilion is considered a success in this respect. Furthermore, the ECSC raised the claim of European institutions to create ‘a new global community, spearheaded by Europe’ (p. 381). At the same time, just two years before the precipitated decolonization of the Congo, Belgium as the host country of the 1958 world fair tried to legitimize itself as a colonial power by perceiving and presenting itself as ‘ally, guide and advisor’ of non-European peoples ‘sur le chemin du progress et du bonheur’ (cited after *ibid.*).

With regard to supranational organizations, the ‘Bureau International des Expositions’ would have enriched the volume. In some of its contributions, the BIE that still exists today is mentioned occasionally, but remains blurred. This is all the more astonishing given that this organization has been the backbone of world fairs for nearly one hundred years. Hence it has been responsible for both continuity and variety between the individual international exhibitions in the twentieth

and beginning twenty-first centuries. Some of the questions which the book addresses may also be of interest with regard to the BIE. What was its composition in regional and social terms? Which were the modes of operation of this body both internal and in exchange with national committees or governments? How did its members view the relationship between nationalism and the international standards and objectives inherent in world fairs? Such questions are left for future research.

Ultimately, the book edited by Leerssen and Storm convincingly shows that to a certain degree 'the soft power of world fairs' (p. 323) contributed to nation building within nation states or empires. It also evidences that the 'seriality' and transnational standardization of the format, which according to Florian Groß began with the New York world fair of 1853–54, had repercussions on the self-perception within nation states or empires that presented themselves at world exhibitions. In this sense, world fairs reinforced both national and transnational processes of self-perception and perception by others, and the two processes were mutually interrelated. The contributors to the appropriately illustrated collective volume have convincingly demonstrated that international exhibitions have made their specific contribution to the global moulding of national identities. Therefore, it is justified to present world fairs as 'global platforms of exchange, where countries collectively learned how to give shape to their national identities' (p. 3). An appendix with a list of world fairs organized between 1851 and 1958 would have rounded off the inspiring volume.

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