

The Only Good Indian is a Show Indian:

Native American Depiction and Autonomy at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition

The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was a historic moment both the host city of Chicago and the American nation. Following a tradition of glamorous and advanced European World's Fairs in Paris and London, Chicagoans organized numerous displays of technological, artistic, and historical value to show off the wonderful civilization of The United States. The grand festival would be dedicated to celebrating the arrival of Christopher Columbus in America, the mythical event that began the civilizing of the New World. A fair dedicated to the discovery of the New World and emerging notions of civilization would naturally lead to thoughts on the aboriginal peoples of the Americas: the Native Americans, or Indians as they were called. There were numerous displays related to Native peoples at the Fair, most notably the Ethnological Display, the Midway Eskimo and Indian displays, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. While the exhibits were staffed and run by Native Americans from various tribes, many of these displays were organized by the white Fair officials. Thus, the depiction of Native Americans is of great interest, especially in the wake of the preceding year's Battle of Wounded Knee, a violent reaction towards the land appropriation built up by Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830. Did the whites treat the Natives as cultural equals, or did they firmly establish a hierarchy of civilization, with Natives on the bottom? In addition, questions arise as to how Native Americans viewed themselves and acted within the constraints of the Fair. Did they resign themselves to their cultural stereotypes and prescribed 'savagery', or did they fight against these notions and exert authority? This paper explores these questions in the context of the 1893 Columbian Exposition's Native displays. Dialectic comparisons between whites and Natives, attitudes and intentions separated from actions, and primary documents will drive a rigorous search for these answers. While there were attempts to view

Native Americans as equal human beings, the objectified and stereotypical nature of the exhibits reveals how the whites continued to treat the Native peoples and culture as primitive. Despite this, the Natives were able to use their inclusion to express their culture and commercial authority, successfully demanding human treatment at the fair.

Though in official writings we see whites trying to right wrong attitudes by equating Native culture with white culture, there is still an undercurrent of Native inferiority that pervades these writings. We start by examining white literature on the Natives, which gives us the ideal attitude whites held of Natives as they grapple with the histories of America. In understanding the “on paper” viewpoint, we can compare these ideals to actions and events that occurred at the fair and try to judge failure or success. Our main source is “Chicago Illustrated Martin’s World’s Fair Album - Atlas and Family Souvenir” published in 1894 by Ropp and Sons. This official souvenir book contains numerous descriptions, images, speeches, and most notably, a section dedicated to information on the “American Indian.”¹ Looking at some poems celebrating Christopher Columbus published in the book, we see a general lack of mention of Native Americans. This is especially stunning as the Columbus narrative seems to necessarily demand consideration of both the discovered land and peoples. Yet, the poets assume America is “their land of birth”² and “virgin soil,”³ allowing no mention or room for aboriginal inhabitants. The trend repeats in religious speeches given at the Fair, which continue to ignore the existence of the Natives.

¹ Chicago Illustrated Martin’s World’s Fair Album- Atlas and Family Souvenir, 1892. World’s Columbian Exposition. Records, Box 1, Folder 6, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. Note that in these primary sources, there are no page numbers, and therefore page numbers are omitted from citation.

² Honor to Whom Honor is Due, Thomas Clow. Reprinted in Chicago Illustrated Martin’s World’s Fair Album- Atlas and Family Souvenir, 1892.

³ Moral Results of Discovery, M. M. Mangasarian. Reprinted in Chicago Illustrated Martin’s World’s Fair Album- Atlas and Family Souvenir, 1892.

One notable exception is Reverend William Clark, who in a speech said, “the foreigners flocked to the new shores, and then commenced that history of brutalities to the natives of this country.”⁴ It appears whites are aware of their position in harming the Natives. The unknown writer of the “American Indian - History, Manners, and Customs of the People Columbus Found on This Continent” section supports this white-harms-Native historical narrative. “[There are] those who defend the Indian claim that nearly all his vices were obtained from the white man.” The author goes on to make comparisons between “foolish Native suspicions” and the “ridiculous and untenable...childish superstitions” of “our own race.” They go as far as to say “their religion in many respects was similar to that of the Jews.” Even allowing comparison between Native culture and white culture is indicative of at least treating the Natives as a human group of people, perhaps a small but definite advance from denying their existence. The author works to destroy the “wrong impression as to the character of the Indian...being that he is a blood-thirsty, treacherous being” and even that “to say Columbus discovered this country...carries with it a misleading impression.” Yet, pervading this attitude is still an image of the Native as savage or uncivilized. The same author writes “the American Indian...were at this time a semi-barbarous condition,” declaring them “unlike the more civilized nations of the Old World” and saying “considerable allowance should be made for the weaknesses and frailties of the red man. He was unsophisticated, unused to the wiles and deceptions of civilization, and all the more readily adopted the worst phases and rejected the better.” Damning statements, revealing a still racist and condescending view of Natives as below the white man. Every positive or revisionist statement, every attempt to elevate the Native to the level of the white man, comes packaged with a clarification of the less-civilized nature of the “Indian.”

⁴ Story of Columbus' Voyages, Rev William G Clark. Reprinted in Chicago Illustrated Martin's World's Fair Album-Atlas and Family Souvenir, 1892.

The physical displays at the Fair were more explicit in their stereotyping of the Natives as a primitive race, with fairgoers actively perpetuating and even demanding this exotic image. The main official exhibit featuring Native American peoples and goods was in the Anthropology Building. Organized by Frederic Putnam of Harvard, the exhibit was designed to show “a comparative approach”⁵ of civilization that would, in his words, “[teach] tourists more about human progress” by placing Natives “in the exact way their forefathers lived before the white man invaded their lands.”⁶ Again we see an apology for their invasion. Putnam goes on to say that “these ethnological villages” were to be used to show that “the progress of Western civilization could be measured by comparing 'less civilized' people to white Americans.”⁷ This strong desire to embalm the culture within its “primitive” roots, supported by “mandated construction of traditional stockade longhouse as well as ritualistic performances” with ancient tomahawks and feathered garments, indicates an apathy towards modern Native progress, 400 years removed from these “highly exaggerated”⁸ depictions. The achievement of the exhibit would be instead to proudly display the primitive nature of ancient Natives, placing these cultures as inferior to that of late 1800’s America. Furthering demonstrating this attitude, the Outdoors Living Exhibit had Natives “live in their primitive way and carry on their various ceremonies.”⁹ In the Youth’s Companion to the World’s Fair, it is noted that “the Indians, paddling about in their very various canoes, will add much to the picturesque effect of the Exposition.” Innocent at first glance, but with undertones of viewing these displays as entertainment or fancy imagery, degrading an educational display to simple cultural exhibitionism. Much more

⁵ Rinehart, Melissa. "To hell with the wigs! Native American representation and resistance at the World's Columbian Exposition." *The American Indian Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2012): 403-442. 405.

⁶ Rinehart, 408.

⁷ Harris, Neil, Wim De Wit, James Gilbert, and Robert W. Rydell. "Grand Illusions: Chicago's World's Fair of 1893." Chicago: Chicago Historical Society (1993). 188. Accessed at the Chicago History Museum Research Center.

⁸ Rinehart, 408

⁹ The Youth’s Companion World’s Fair Number, 1893. World's Columbian Exposition. Records, Box 2, Folder 5, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

forward were the displays on the Midway Plaisance, namely the Indian Village and Sitting Bull Cabin. While the Anthropological Building held more official air, the Midway exhibits tended to be less bashful about just entertaining. The two displays on the Midway were focused on “demonstrat[ing] various trades, dances, and songs” with the Indian Village also including “Wild West shows daily.”¹⁰ Though staffed by Natives, the displays were organized by white Chicago businessmen, who simply cared about revenue and not of accurately representing humane and respectful Natives. While Native accounts of their experiences are scarce, many reporters commented on these displays. One reported noted, “well-to-do civilized Indians have been hired to put on war paint and feathers to satisfy the gaze of a curiosity loving public”¹¹ while others noted that Sitting Bull “kindly relapsed into barbarism.”¹² These attitudes perfectly summarize the way these Villages depicted Native life. No attempts to right wrongs. These exhibits just gave audiences the antiquated cultural stereotype they demanded: The Native Savage on display.

The Eskimo Village not only continues this narrative, but demonstrates the Fair organizers’ inhumane treatment of the Native peoples. As America had recently annexed Alaska, there was considerable interest in the Inuit, the natives of the north. The Eskimo Village on the Midway imported from Labrador, Canada, many peoples who were “of the same race, and in garb, methods of hunting and mode of life” as the “Innuits.”¹³ The Youth’s Guide is rather kind to the Inuit, saying that “they are by no means lacking in intelligence, shrewdness, or even in humor...[they] are fellow-creatures, entitled to the courtesies of life.” However, the Eskimo Village has a rather troubled history. Though they were contracted and paid to arrive at the Columbian Exposition and “live out

¹⁰ Rinehart, 411-413.

¹¹ Moses, Lester George. *Wild west shows and the images of American Indians, 1883-1933*. UNM Press, 1999. 139.

¹² Rinehart, 413.

¹³ Youth’s Companion World’s Fair Number, The Eskimo Village.

their daily lives,” the “conditions for the Innuits grew worse” the longer they stayed at the Fair.¹⁴ When they complained of lack of food and being forced to wear their heavy fur clothes in the middle of the summer, “the manager of the village told the Innuits they were his ‘chattles’...[and] ordered the exposition police to arrest [them].” Though the Inuit were granted commercial rights¹⁵ and freedom to show what they wanted at the exhibit, they were ultimately oppressed economically and treated inhumanely. Comparisons between this exhibit and similar nation-based exhibits on the Midway may be made, but the Inuit’s treatment forced them to go as far as to seek legal action against the Fair. A sure sign that while officials may write of being respectful of the Native people’s human nature, their abusive actions speak a contradictory story.

Likely the most denigrating show at the Fair was the unofficial Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. Buffalo Bill, or William Cody, had been putting on a wildly popular travelling Wild West show since 1872. Their popularity even brought them to Europe, where they toured various nations and even performed for the Queen.¹⁶ The act featured “show Indians” and cowboys reenacting battles of the frontier, often depicting the Natives in full war paint and using bows and arrows, even though they had long since adopted gun technology. In these shows, Native culture is reduced to caricature for the purposes of entertainment. Advertisements for “wild rivalries of savage, barbarous, and civilized races”¹⁷ coupled with the image of the wild Native in full headdress and war paint make clear the demarcation of savage and civilized. With the battles always ending in favor of the American cowboys, this hierarchy of culture and civility is made extremely apparent. The Wild West show at the Columbian Exposition was no different. Despite Putnam’s and Native opposition to the Wild

¹⁴ Grand Illusions, 158.

¹⁵ Whiting G. Press, Vol 1. “Official Concession Stand Agreements for the Columbian Exposition.” No date.

¹⁶ Moses, 52.

¹⁷ Buffalo Bill Wild West Show Poster. Library of Congress. Accessed at <http://www.truewestmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/buffalo-bill-poster-1.jpg>.

West shows, who thought the show would be held “at the expense of the dignity and interest of the Indian Nations,”¹⁸ a Buffalo Bill show still unofficially operated at the edge of the Fair. The show made a huge profit, was wildly successful, and likely colored the fairgoer’s view of Natives, judging from the massive attendance numbers.¹⁹ The show is a good model of the attitude whites held towards the Natives. While there exists some level of white guilt, exemplified in Putnam’s aversion to officially hosting the show, the public viewed Native culture as an entertaining spectacle, commodifying and reducing Native culture to the stereotypical uncivilized savage.

Even within these pressures for ‘savage’ entertainment, Native Americans were able to exert a cultural and commercial autonomy in the displays, and tried to use the fair to formally promote their causes. Native Americans seemed to be aware of the previously described sentiment towards them, and moved well before the Fair to try to take control of their depiction at the Fair. Formal letters were drafted and sent to the organizers. One such letter, sent to the US commissioner of Indian affairs read, “We, American citizens of Indian blood, most earnestly and respectfully petition you to grant...some recognition as a race; some acknowledgement that we are still a part, however inferior, of America.”²⁰ They requested that they be given influence over Native exhibits, saying “with a Native American, or Indian exhibit in the hands of capable men of our own blood...[we] will show to both and all races alike, that our own advancement has been much greater than is usually supposed.” Other Natives chose an more cautious approach of opposition rather than unity. A letter to Putnam from 1892 read, “In the name of the Nations of the Indian Territory...permit us to extend to you the Assurance . . . [that] the perpetuation of any Wild West show at the expense of the dignity and interest of the Indian Nations will, by you, be neither encouraged nor

¹⁸ Rinehart, 5.

¹⁹ Moses, 103.

²⁰ Grand Illusions, 160.

countenanced."²¹ Certainly Natives were not content with just giving up and selling out their culture. Though they do acknowledge their inferiority, likely an accurate judgement at the time, there exists an effort to organize and demand power over the exhibition of their culture. Regardless of their success, the Native Americans did not quite hand over their culture to the white man.

In fact, the Natives were able to retain some cultural autonomy by upholding their rituals and even adapting them to the local fauna, showing cultural resilience. Though Fair organizers made clear to the Natives the caricatured performances expected out of them, this did not stop the Natives from expressing themselves. In the Eskimo Village, a measles outbreak prompted a special ritual performance from the Inuit. A journalist witnessed “an apprentice shaman who was conducting daily rituals to fight ‘the evil spirit.’”²² What is incredible about this ritual is that these Eskimo were supposedly stout Christians, having discarded their shamanic practices. Yet these Inuit “keep wisely silent” and run their rituals, showing a deep seeded belief in their cultural practices. While perhaps not expressed to the populace, this is evidence that they still very much value their culture and used the context of the World’s Fair to gather together and express themselves. An equally stunning example is that of the Kwakiutl tribe, at the Outdoors Living Exhibit. A *hamatsa* initiation ritual performed was “adapted by the men for their Chicago audience, including the usage of kelp and red-paint-filled clubs.”²³ “Through their performance, their cultural persistence and political defiance” was apparent, as they had gone “off-script” and “seized control of their representation.” Adapting these rituals kept their culture alive and relevant, and the open act of defiance against authority organizers struck a chord with the fairgoers. Other defiant acts included

²¹ Rinehart, 406.

²² Scott, Gertrude M. Village performance: villages at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, 1893. New York University, 1991. 318-319.

²³ Rinehart, 410.

“thr[owing] out the purchased wigs [and] opt[ing] to wear make-up, thereby enhancing appearance in the arena,”²⁴ and Inuit refusal to perform until they were given better treatment²⁵ The pressure to reduce their culture to a static, antiquated script was met with open resistance by some groups, with Natives using their position as living exhibits to come together and express themselves freely.

Natives were also able to express their autonomy through economic and legal channels, countering mistreatment and utilizing their value by demanding higher wages and contracts. Since all Natives were hired to work at the Fair as living exhibits, they were legally contracted employees of the exhibits. Many believed that this was the best work they could acquire, given their marginalization. Knowing that they provided vital labor to the exhibits, Natives were able to demand higher wages and better working conditions. Certain Natives such as the famous Rain In the Face from the Sitting Bull exhibit were able to choose from many exhibits, finally taking the best offer and joining the Sitting Bull.²⁶ Natives in the Wild West show were considered paid professionals, taking cuts out of profits, while Natives in other exhibits received revenue cuts, sold crafts, and posed for paid photographs.²⁷ Abuses of this commercial relationship did occur. As mentioned previously, the Inuit were mistreated and abused by their contractors. The Inuit, however, were able to use the legal channels of the American justice system to be released from their contracts, leading to Inuit seeking other employment or receiving better treatment from the organizers.²⁸ Though still forced under the American demand for their stereotypical culture, the cultural and commercial victories of the Natives were not uncommon and should not be underwritten.

²⁴ Rinehart, 422.

²⁵ Grand Illusions, 160.

²⁶ Rinehart, 424.

²⁷ Moses, 101.

²⁸ Grand Illusions, 160.

We have seen both the white attitudes towards the ‘uncivilized Indians’ and the Native response of resistance through cultural and commercial activities. While there appears to be a certain white man’s burden sense of guilt towards their treatment of Natives, this is hardly reflected in the exhibits, with assumed barbarity thrust upon the Native culture, turned into reduced form entertainment and a demand for savagery. Attempts at sympathetic writings equate whites and Natives, but still place Natives as uncivilized peoples. The Ethnological Displays and Midway exhibits inherently assumed Native culture as inferior, and fairgoers were quick to transform proud Native traditions into spectacles and amusement. The Wild West shows only enhanced this image, and the Eskimo Village perpetuated violent and inhumane treatment of Native peoples. Despite these overwhelming forces, the Natives were able to carve cultural progress and economic gains through their inclusion and valued employment in the Fair. They preserved and showed off their culture by updating rituals, denying demeaning scripts, throwing out offensive costumes, and striving for control over the exhibits. Economically, they fought for better wages, realized the potential for craft sales, and fought legally for their rights. Of course, it is difficult to generalize the whites into one group and the Natives into another. Reporters and exhibitors like William Cody can be genuinely sympathetic, just as some Natives were ready to completely commercialize their culture. A middle ground was perhaps found in the Bureau of Indian Affairs school exhibit. This exhibit focused on the Native American boarding schools that totally assimilate Native peoples into white education and values.²⁹ Arguments can be made for the exhibit as an exertion of force, of Natives creating and asserting assimilation as the answer to their debasement. One could easily argue the opposite, that the schools were a stark reminder of missionary conversion and ‘civilizing’ efforts thrust upon the Natives. It is difficult to pierce through the shroud, as most sources are not from

²⁹ Rinehart, 3.

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the Native point of view. These contradictions were powerful and pervasive at the Columbian Exposition. Native Americans can resist the dominant 'uncivilized' narrative that Americans held, but only through channels specified and controlled by the oppressive whites. Perhaps choosing not to participate in the Fair would be the most idealistic of protests. But given the rapidly declining power of the Native tribes, what choice did they have besides commercial and cultural participation? While most exhibits were progressive and celebratory, the treatment of the Native Americans at the Fair remains a red stain on the grandeur of the White City.