Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, by Wanda Corn.
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The first thing a reader must appreciate about histories of Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair is the enormous amount of primary source material available to scholars. Faced with a trove of news articles, photographs, and artwork, not to mention “written memories, souvenir mementoes and family anecdotes,” Wanda Corn produces a convincingly argued work that offers a fresh reading of art created by women for the Fair. Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition examines the contributions of female artists commissioned to help create the Woman’s Building, a space separate from the Fair’s “main” exhibition and event halls. Corn puts forth that these women appropriated contemporary imagery and symbolism toward creating a new visual language that represented, what she dubs, the “New Girl”: a transitional stage between the Victorian culture of “true womanhood” and the “New Woman” of the 1890s and early twentieth century. Corn situates the Exposition, and the Woman’s Building, within this historical context and gives an overview of late nineteenth-century public art conventions. She then offers a close visual analysis of select works from the Building, and the design of the Building itself, to illustrate her point. She concludes by describing the critical reception of the art and the ways these criticisms reinforced the restrictive cultural expectations of women. These expectations were in turn subverted, to varying degrees of subtlety, in much of the art itself. Corn’s argument is ultimately convincing, and she achieves this by thorough research and detailed, insightful interpretations of relevant imagery.

Though a professor emerita in art history at Stanford University, Corn writes clearly and without scholarly jargon. This book is intended for a wide audience, though some prior familiarity with women’s history, nineteenth-century western art, and/or the Columbian Exposition may help the reader better appreciate and evaluate Corn’s thesis. It is an apt companion piece to Robert Rydell’s work on the social history of world’s fairs and Jeanne Weimann’s The Fair Women.

Dispersed throughout the book are sidebars by Annelise Madsen that further illuminate historical topics—such as Paris mural painting and nineteenth-century female college enrollment—and enrich the reader’s understanding. At the work’s conclusion are twenty-eight short biographies by Charlene Garfinkle describing the life and work of women who contributed to the Woman’s Building.

While by no means a comprehensive history of art created by women for the Fair, Women Building History makes an excellent supplement to collections in American art and women’s studies. This is a hard-bound book, printed on high-quality paper. Included are 144 black-and-white illustrations and seven color plates, footnotes, a bibliography, image credits, and an index.

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