
The Panama-Pacific International Exposition (the PPIE) was held in San Francisco in 1915 as a celebration of two monumental American achievements: the completion of the Panama Canal and the rebuilding of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. Conceived in emulation of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, this first large-scale fair in California had the misfortune of opening in the midst of World War I, thus limiting international participation. Consequently, the PPIE has not received as much scholarly attention as other world’s fairs. Sarah J. Moore’s new book, Empire on Display, is one of the first monographs to consider this exposition as the visual manifestation of American imperialism, nationalism, tourism as spectacle, and gender ideology.

As an art historian, Moore excels at analyzing the symbolism behind the allegorical sculptures and buildings of the fairgrounds, and these descriptions are a welcome addition to scholarship of the PPIE. She also includes details about the fair’s construction, and extensive discussion of the “Gigantic Miniatures,” the actual entertainments in the fair’s amusement area, The Zone. As the book’s title makes clear, however, Moore has grander theoretical aims for her work. Her discursive chapters include a synopsis of turn-of-the-century world’s fairs in relation to Turnerian “frontier theory”; a history of the construction of the Panama Canal; the rebuilding of San Francisco; and the nationalistic fervor informing early tourism to the American West.

Moore overemphasizes her conceptual framework: “gender ideology” and a “masculinist metanarrative” in all of these events and, she argues, in the conception of the California fair. This gendered approach has become a standard trope for world’s fair scholarship, and Moore simply applies these well-worn arguments to this Californian example. Phrases such as “the erotic embrace of the seas” appear so often that the real content of the PPIE narrative sometimes gets lost in her unnecessary restatement of thesis. As her focus is on evidence of American imperialist attitudes and iconography, she also gives little consideration to the international participants at the fair. The book could also have used a good copy editor, as usage errors (“bellowing” for “billowing”) and missing words occur frequently.

Still, for its well-considered descriptions of the actual objects at this often overlooked exposition and her emphasis on the cultural context in which the PPIE functioned, the book should be in any library that is interested in American art, culture and visual culture studies. The volume includes a section of color plates, many (sometimes smudgy) black and white illustrations, and a useful bibliography.

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