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St. Louis In The Gilded Age. Forest Park History Museum,

Reviewed by Peg Wherry

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"St. Louis in the Gilded Age" is a major installation at the History Museum, Forest Park, St. Louis. Billed as "the largest exhibition the Missouri Historical Society has ever mounted," it will be in place through 1998. I spent part of an afternoon there recently and offer this report from a traveler's notebook (as distinct from a full-fledged museum review). <p> A sign at the entry to the exhibit (which fills three or four galleries) presents the Gilded Age as "a double-edged metaphor" for a time of "lavish ornamentation [over] a world of corruption and poverty." The brochure calls the Gilded Age "a time of glittering wealth and crushing poverty, of grand ambitions and grim inequity." <p> This double-edged approach indeed shapes the exhibit. Immediately inside the entrance is a display of a Victorian parlor, with what-not, sofa, a woman's dress, florid wallpaper, and plenty of bric-a-brac, including a large mirror in a gilt frame. In addition to exemplifying period decor, the mirror, by reflecting an image of the museum patron, puts the viewer directly into the scene. From another angle, the mirror ("lavish ornamentation") serves as a projection screen for slides presenting factoids ("crushing poverty" and "grim inequity") about Gilded Age St. Louis: the amount of manure generated each day (twenty-three tons), crime statistics for a particular year, etc. <p> Economic conditions, social class, and ethnicity serve as paradigms for the exhibit. In addition to featuring tools of various trades (including an early industrial time clock), the installation presents U.S. economic statistics. The same graph of unemployment from 1875-1900 is used several times, and significant space is devoted to the general strike of 1877. Text panels from Henry George and Andrew Carnegie are displayed side- by-side, and gritty street-level photos are juxtaposed with illustrations from Camille Dry's <cite>Pictorial St. Louis</cite>, a booster book dedicated to promoting St. Louis as "The Future Great" in competition with Chicago. <p> One powerful object--a massive engraved silver soup tureen--depicts economic divisions. (I imagine a curator seeing this thing and thinking, "Wow. This kind of says it all about the Gilded Age. Let's do a show.") The tureen is from the estate of James Paramore, whose major contribution to the St. Louis economy was to combine cotton processing and transportation into a single facility. The handle on the lid of the tureen is a replica of a railroad car loaded with cotton bales; the side facing the viewer is an engraving of a hydraulic cotton compress; the other side (out of view) is said to depict African-Americans picking cotton. Thus, says the accompanying text, this set of silver "unintentionally revealed how urban industrialism depended on exploitation of rural southern labor." <p> Not being a local, I didn't spend much time in the section on City Life, in favor of a closer look at the gallery on private life (the terminating cul-de-sac of the exhibit). This area includes quite detailed replicas of middle and upper-class parlors and a working class kitchen. The poor are represented by an immense

photo of rows of cots in a shelter for the homeless. Even granting that the poor may not have had many material artifacts to leave behind, this two-dimensional treatment of the lowest socio-economic class seems rather like an easy way out. <p> The brochure for the exhibit mentions the use of electronic media such as videotape and computer simulations. The videotape is on the construction of the Eads Bridge and suffers primarily from a lack of seating (three's a crowd). The computer simulation uses a touch-screen to match viewers with Gilded Age counterparts and is a pretty clever idea. You touch the screen to select your age and sex, touch again for class, and a screen pops up showing someone fitting those characteristics. The data base is the 1880 census, and the screen gives "your" name, ethnic background, occupation, and situations of your family members. Another touch of the screen brings up data (education level, ethnicity, occupation) on people living in that particular block. <p> So far so good, and I was dazzled--until my husband sat down. He entered his age, sixty, and got a dead-end screen reading only, "Average life expectancy for American men was under 50 years in 1880." So he tried fifty-nine and got the same message. He tried upper as well as middle class, and got the same dead-end. I tried the same thing for a woman and got the same message. Between us, we probably tried at least a half-dozen times to find a senior citizen in St. Louis in 1880, with no success. <p> We finally relinquished the screen to other viewers and left dissatisfied. Surely there is another way to convey the concept of life expectancy. (I now wish I had tried age two to see if I would be congratulated on surviving infancy--I rather doubt it.) It seems to me that special programming must have been required to quit matching people at an arbitrarily selected age, and I find it hard to imagine that there were whole city blocks without citizens aged fifty-nine or over. <p> This is a more serious flaw when seen against the museum's earnest commitment to make the exhibit as inclusive as possible. I imagine a grandparent and small child using this exhibit together and the child finally wondering aloud if they didn't have grandpas back then. (It also seems short-sighted to exclude museum patrons who are of an age to remember the museum in a will or trust, but perhaps I'm being over-sensitive.) <p> This disappointment aside, the exhibit is rich in both artifacts displayed and interpretation of them. While the emphasis on class and ethnicity becomes a little insistent, it enables the displays to be diverse and engaging without becoming politically correct from either end of the spectrum. The "double-edged metaphor" of the Gilded Age as a powerful shaping device probably is effective with the casual viewer; somewhere into my second hour it began to seem confining or reductive. <p> The History Museum, at Lindell and DeBaliviere in Forest Park, is open Tuesday through Sunday from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; there is no admission charge. The companion book, <cite>St. Louis in the Gilded Age</cite>, is by Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller. You can call for information at (312) 746-4599. <p>

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