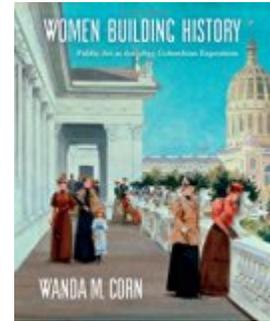


Wanda M. Corn, Charlene G. Garfinkle, Annelise K. Madsen. *Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. xi + 265 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24111-4.

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Envisioning the Post-Victorian Woman

In 1871 fire swept through the city of Chicago, reducing it to ashes. Twenty-two years later, an idealized, temporary city of monumental, gleaming white neoclassical buildings and grand public spaces filled with statuary, amusements, and the first Ferris wheel in the world rose from the ashes: the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Since opening day, the Chicago Exposition has produced a copious amount of literature and material culture, from tour guides to children's books, keepsakes and scholarship. Depending on what you read, the exposition was, among other things, a model of Parisian-influenced urban planning and public architecture of the City Beautiful movement, the pinnacle of industrial capitalism and frivolous consumption, or a Social Darwinian manifestation of racial and gender politics that reinforced notions of white supremacy and manhood. Art historian Wanda Corn joins this last debate in her close study of the art and architecture of the Woman's Building.[1]

The Woman's Building has sparked debate since its inception. Women artists were reluctant to contribute their talent and products to the building; they did not want to be stigmatized as "women artists," sequestered from the broader art world and fated to have their work understood through assumptions of gender difference and female inferiority rather than objectively, according to quality of the work. Instead, Bertha Palmer, the wealthy Chicago socialite and philanthropist whom Daniel Burnham chose to oversee the Woman's Building, stamped out efforts led by liberal feminists to see

their work integrated into displays throughout the fairgrounds and embraced separatism as the best way to celebrate and promote womanhood, women's accomplishments through time, and women's issues of the post-Victorian era. Scholarship has tended to side with the liberal feminists' point of view, arguing that isolating women and their work to a relatively small building sited on the edge of the way, and adjacent to the area where the world's "less civilized" cultures hosted their displays, marginalized women and reinforced their inferior status. Bertha Palmer's imperious demeanor and uncompromising control over content and imagery further stunted creativity and, perhaps, the pace of women's progress.[2]

Corn takes a different tack, moving beyond the arguments for and against separatism and beyond an emphasis on the marginalization and inferior status of women. She finds a common link between Bertha Palmer, Mary Cassatt, and most women associated with the Woman's Building: "They wanted to expand the meanings of 'feminine' and to make it embrace the clubwoman, artist, and writer, not just the daughter, wife, and mother. They wanted their sex to have more options without having to give up their feminine refinement and sophistication.... [Their idea of womanhood] was neither fully Victorian nor Progressive but rather a transitional stage.... Theirs was ... the post-Victorian stance" (p. 170). Corn proves her point beautifully, with close and often enviably lucid analysis of the Woman's Building and its decorations. Although the Woman's Building and its contents may

not have been as radical as some women of the 1890s—or today—may have wished, it gave public expression on an unprecedented scale to a female-centered view of the world, “a female gaze resisting and reforming a male one” (p. 9).

Eight artistic components comprised the Woman’s Building: the building itself (the architecture), designed by MIT graduate Sophia Hayden; the exterior sculptures and statuary, designed by California artist Alice Rideout; and six interior murals in the Hall of Honor, including two tympanum murals by Mary MacMonnies and Mary Cassatt and four side murals by Amanda Sewell, Lucia Fairchild, Lydia Field Emmet and her sister, Rosina Emmet Sherwood. The women artists worked within well-established male constructs to produce their vision and revision. Thus, each piece had to conform to the overarching themes of the fair: the history of Western civilization from “barbarism” to the present, the triumph of the modern present over the harsh past, and the freedoms of modern democracy. Men tended to celebrate industry and technology, humanity’s conquest over the wild, and the spread of Western imperial rule. The female figure factored significantly into the masculine version of these themes, but always as allegorical figures representing static, Victorian ideals of femininity—“refinement, beauty, virtuousness, and morality”—and forever young. Women, in contrast, also used allegorical figures, but emphasized liberation from the patriarchal past and presented a female-centered version of history. In this version, the subjects retained nineteenth-century virtues like charity, purity, religiosity, and maternalism, but also moved, exhibited internal consciousness through their forward-looking gazes, represented multiple generations, were depicted in outdoor settings, wore modern clothes, and engaged in new, extra-domestic activities, especially the pursuit of higher education. This post-Victorian feminine ideal may have put fear into the hearts of men, signaling the end of civilization as the West knew it, but as Corn writes, the women artists were hardly radical. “They heralded the coming generation’s move out of the home into school and studio, but they could not envision women practicing professional careers either alongside or separate from motherhood” (p. 129). The art and artists of the Woman’s Building captured a period of transition.

Corn extends her analysis of imagery to method, particularly in the field of painting. Here, Cassatt and her mural *Modern Woman* take center stage. By all accounts, including Corn’s, Cassatt’s mural failed as a decoration. Its bold color palette meant that the mural did not blend

into the building as decorations were supposed to. The size and detail of images were too small for the scale of the room, making them difficult to see. These two flaws resulted in a mural that did not hang in harmony with Mary MacMonnies’ companion piece, *Primitive Woman*, which hung at the opposite end of the hall. These characteristics of Cassatt’s mural, however, also rendered her work the most daring and subversive statement on the status of women. Cassatt’s subject matter did not differ significantly from her fellow artists, but her impressionist brush strokes were modern. Her use of bright colors made the painting pop out from the wall, lending it an air of autonomy. With her paint brush, Cassatt broke from tradition, declared independence, and anticipated the new womanhood of the Progressive Era.

As insightful and delightful to read as the chapters on the decorations are, the chapter on the architecture disappoints—at least it disappoints this architectural historian. Rather than inspiring the reader with her original insights, Corn largely leaves the commentary of the day to speak for itself. Critics commented that Hayden’s architecture was good enough as far as neoclassicism goes, but rather feminine, which was meant to be derogatory. But what does this mean? As Corn points out, the decorations were self-consciously about the history of womanhood (albeit from a decidedly Western perspective) and the building’s primary purpose was to showcase the arts, crafts, and literature of women from around the world, to host lectures on topics of interest to women, and to provide a space where women could drink tea. Of course the building was feminine. But the critics were not talking about function; they were talking about architecture. Perhaps they were they looking for bold monumentality, like Louis Sullivan’s grand entrance arch for the Transportation Building; the vibrant colors of Louis Christian Mullgardt’s intricate mosaics on the Fisheries Building; or the daring stylistic break from classicism exhibited by the Spanish colonial style of the California Building. In contrast to these buildings, one might describe the Woman’s Building as timid and passive, terms often associated with the feminine. Without some context and comparison, however, the reader will not be able to make such a leap and will not come away from the book knowing much more about Sophia Hayden than what has defined her legacy for decades: she was the first woman to earn a degree in architecture from MIT, she won the commission to design the Woman’s Building, and she subsequently suffered a career-ending breakdown that reinforced stereotypes of women as delicate in nature and ill fit to practice architecture. Here, Corn’s lack of engage-

ment with a growing body of literature about women, gender, and the built environment does stand out.[3]

Building Women's History includes thirteen sidebars, mostly authored by fellow art historian Annelise K. Madsen. Among the topics are the extensive archive of the Columbian Exposition, the mural movement in Paris, the Women's Pavilion at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, "The New Girl and the New Woman," a history of the skirt dance, and the feminization of the banjo. These sidebars anticipate scholars' calls to address historical and historiographical issues and they explain popular iconography of the late nineteenth century without interrupting the main narrative about the Woman's Building decorations and their significance. Along with a generous number of images and Charlene Garfinkle's extensive bibliography and biographies of women who contributed to the Woman's Building, the sidebars render the monograph an accessible and, dare I say, fun reference book. I loved it, and think readers, scholars, and teachers of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era will find a valuable addition to their collection.

Notes

[1]. Corn includes a fairly comprehensive bibliography, but a few notable titles that have shaped historiographical interpretation include Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); David F. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976); and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

[2]. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; Mary

Pepchinski, "The Woman's Building and the World Exhibitions: Exhibition Architecture and Conflicting Feminine Ideals at European and American World Exhibitions, 1873-1915" (2000), found at <http://www.tu-cottbus.de/theoriederarchitektur/Wolke/eng/Subjects/001/Pepchinski/pepchinski.htm> (accessed March 23, 2013), revised and reprinted as "Women's Buildings at European and American World's Fairs, 1893-1939," in *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World's Fairs*, ed. T. J. Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 187-207; Sarah Wadsworth and Wayne A. Wiegand, *Right Here I See My Own Books: The Woman's Building Library at the World's Columbian Exposition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women: the Story of the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[3]. Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870-1900* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2001); Marta Gutman, "On the Ground in Oakland: Women and Institution Building in an Industrial City," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000); Phoebe S. Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Paula Lupkin, *Manhood Factories: YMCA Architecture and the Making of Modern Urban Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

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