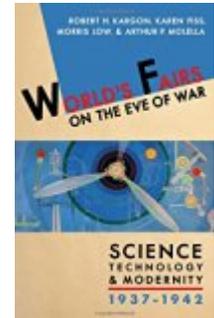


Robert H. Kargon, Karen Fiss, Morris Low, Arthur P. Molella. *World's Fairs on the Eve of War: Science, Technology, and Modernity, 1937-1942.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. Illustrations. 216 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4444-7.



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What does it mean to be “modern”? Who decides what modernity looks like? These questions lie at the core of *World's Fairs on the Eve of War*, a collaborative effort authored by Robert H. Kargon (Willis K. Shepard Professor of History of Science and Technology, Johns Hopkins University), Karen Fiss (professor of visual studies and design, California College of the Arts), Morris Low (associate professor of Japanese history, University of Queensland, Australia), and Arthur P. Molella (director emeritus, Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, Smithsonian Institution). Their book uses a series of world's fairs planned during the 1930s and early 1940s to analyze how five countries (France, Germany, the United States, Japan, and Italy) sought to project their image of the future to the international arena. The authors situate these fairs within the political and ideological struggles of World War II and argue that through the preparation and presentation of exhibits highlighting an individual nation's technological and scientific prowess, world's fairs served as important venues for

defining modernity. At the same time, they show how these events frequently revealed points of tension between a country's cultural identity and the visions of the future put forward by its scientists and political leaders.

The book is organized as a comparative study in seven chapters. These include an introductory summary on the significance of world's fairs during World War II, a concluding epilogue (focused on the 1958 Brussels Expo—the first postwar fair), and five central case studies each on a specific fair. Three of these cover the development and reception of fairs that actually took place (1937 Paris, 1937 Düsseldorf, and 1939 New York). The next chapters turn to two fairs that, though planned, never came to fruition (1940 Tokyo and 1942 Rome). This structure works nicely for two main reasons. First, devoting a chapter to each exposition provides sufficient space for the authors to describe the fair's layout and major attractions in some detail while also making it possible to orient the reader within the historical background and political thought of the host nation. Secondly,

giving attention to the individual displays designed by the countries featured in each of the book's chapters reveals the extent to which these fairs influenced one another. This helps reinforce the authors' claims that world's fairs acted as international battlegrounds through which nations could assert their mastery of science and technology as conceived within a specific political ideology.

Following the introduction, the book begins with a discussion of the 1937 Paris Exposition. This chapter emphasizes France's approach to modernity as grounded in technical education bridging American mass production with the country's tradition of fine craftsmanship. It in turn argues how this preference for a "middle way" extended to France's reception of the fascist and socialist ideologies of the period—a point nicely illustrated by a photograph from the exposition showing the Eiffel Tower positioned between the Soviet and German Pavilions (p. 29). Chapter 3 turns to the German case with a focus on the 1937 Schaffendes Volk Exhibition held in Düsseldorf. It connects Adolf Hitler's efforts to cultivate a collective "volk" consciousness with the creation of exhibits highlighting the need for German industrial and economic self-sufficiency—a central tenet of National Socialism. The authors present this as an example of "reactionary modernism," which they define in accordance with Jeffrey Herf (*Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* [1984]) as a response to Americanized notions of "progress." The next chapter problematizes what is meant by American progress by considering the debates between "soft" and "hard" New Dealers competing to present their image of the future at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. Whereas early Progressives conceived of the future in utopian terms, by the mid-1930s the emphasis shifted toward rebuilding the country using rational planning and urban development. America's impending entry into World War II similarly reoriented the fair's focus during its second

year from one devoted to "Building a World of Tomorrow" to a "Fair for Peace and Freedom" (p. 80). Chapter 5 returns to the topic of reactionary modernism by outlining the merger of Japanese traditionalism with its industrial and scientific expansion. This is exemplified by the planned but unrealized 1940 Grand International Exposition of Japan, to be held in Tokyo and Yokohama. Using architecture as a major point of analysis, the chapter conveys some of the dilemmas caused by the integration of Japanese style within European modernism and the resulting crisis of identity. The final case study analyzes another proposed fair seeking to blend the traditional with the modern: the Esposizione Universale di Roma (EUR). Developed under the guidance of Benito Mussolini, this fair sought to rebuild a modern Italy as a revival of the Roman Empire and used symbolic imagery (especially arches) to convey this message. Once again, war got in the way of the fair's actual execution, but EUR's archival documentation suggests that Italy, like Germany and Japan, also had firm plans to establish itself as a modern industrial power built within a specific ideology and national character. In lieu of a conclusion, the book ends with a brief epilogue highlighting the role of the Brussels 1958 Exposition as a Cold War battleground showcasing the political agendas of the United States and the Soviet Union. This example shows how the function of fairs established during the 1930s persisted even after the end of World War II.

This book is an important addition to a small but growing body of literature on the history of world's fairs. Its concise format and easy prose should appeal to scholars and fair enthusiasts alike. It is particularly well-suited for classroom use, as it synthesizes existing work on the featured fairs into digestible narratives and includes a helpful bibliography for those pursuing further research. That said, its short length leaves room for further analysis. Although the authors occasionally gesture toward analyzing other media displayed at the fairs, such as photography, fine

art, and film, their primary focus is on the architecture of individual pavilions and featured exhibits. Recent work by Sarah Nilsen (*Projecting America, 1958: Film and Cultural Diplomacy at the Brussels World's Fair* [2011]) on the use of film as an ideological tool for American diplomacy at the 1958 Brussels fair suggests that their arguments about “modernity on display” could be extended to other examples not fully explored in this text.

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