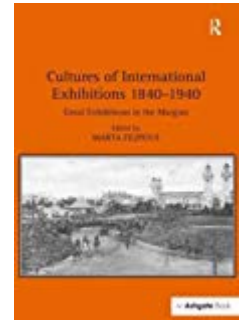


Marta Filipová. *Cultures of International Exhibitions 1840-1940: Great Exhibitions in the Margins.* Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015. Illustrations. xvi + 358 pp. \$130.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4724-3281-0.



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While the literature on the history of major international exhibitions between the 1850s and 1930s in the West is trendy and flourishing, there are scarce accounts on what preceded them and even less so on how they influenced similar developments in national and global contexts. The recently published collection of essays, *Cultures of International Exhibitions 1840-1940: Great Exhibitions in the Margins*, edited by Marta Filipová, is an important step in filling these gaps. Highlighted in the title, the two principle selection criteria—“international” and “margins”—are exercised rather generously in the volume. It includes fifteen case studies of wide-ranging exhibitions, which, having some regional significance or international ambitions, remained outside of mainstream scholarship in terms of chronology, geography, and cultural or political impact.

Anyone familiar with the subject area will notice the book’s surprising starting point of 1840. The scholarship normally insists that the truly international story began with the London Great Exhibition in 1851. That event launched a competi-

tion among the key Western colonial powers in hosting international displays, with the Paris Exposition Universelle (commencing with the 1855 show) eventually taking the leading role in the process. What preceded the groundbreaking event in London’s Hyde Park, however, were the national industrial exhibitions. Originating in postrevolutionary France, the nationwide industrial displays soon spread to other regions of Europe, and just like the future international exhibitions, they were designed to improve the quality of manufactory products and promote trade through public competition. In the *Cultures of International Exhibitions*, John Davis’s essay on the 1844 All-German Exhibition in Berlin is a gentle reminder of such developments that were taking place in the German-speaking world in the mid-nineteenth century. Davis argues that to overcome many political and logistical obstacles organizers succeeded in bringing together participants from the separate German states to the Prussian capital. It was a feat that could have inspired their British colleagues. Although one of the most coherent case studies in

the volume, Davis's essay is the only one to actually consider the situation before the explosion of international exhibitions, thus justifying the novel chronological framework for the book.

The volume itself is the outcome of the symposium *Great Exhibitions in the Margins* held in 2012 in the United Kingdom. This "conference" provenance apparently informed the book's strongest points as much as its limitations. The project certainly succeeded in providing the reader with an extensive list of international scholars, all of whom demonstrated how the International Exhibitions in London and the Exposition Universelles in Paris became paradigmatic, and how the emerged network of international exhibitions was surprisingly larger and more connected than current scholarship may suggest. The geographical scope is impressive: while several contributions consider local exhibitions in France (Nancy) and Britain (Edinburg, Wolverhampton), a sizable number of essays deal with the lesser-known regions of Europe (Barcelona, Bucharest, Budapest, Ghent, Helsinki, Liberec, Naples, Ústí), and with locations in such far away and diverse countries as Japan (Osaka), Australia (Launceston), New Zealand (Dunedin), and Brazil (Rio de Janeiro). Hosting these exhibitions in the politically marginal regions of Europe or on other continents, the organizers were constantly aware of Paris's or London's prototypes: the expositions featured similar emphasis on machinery displays, inclusion of entertainment elements, comparable architecture and design of pavilions, etc. Telling the story of such a minor common sculptural object as a fountain, for example, Anne Neale's study exposes how strong the dependence on the Parisian models was even in such remote areas as Australia. Yet, as the editor Filipová points out in the introduction, the "small, regional events in many cases did not simply copy the larger exhibitions but rather modified and adapted practices to suit local agendas" (p. 15). And this is perhaps the most significant and promising scholarly perspective introduced by the volume. Several contributions highlight how these

marginal international exhibitions were often used as effective means of constructing national identity in pursuit of political emancipation (for example, Miklós Székely examines Hungary's attempts to host Budapest Universal Exhibitions) or in arguing for national superiority in territorial disputes (for example, Tomáš Okurka's essay on the industrial exhibitions in the German-speaking regions of Bohemia). In some cases, the international displays were the part of strategic efforts of modernization, as is shown in Livia Rezende's essay on the 1922 International Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro; while in others, they were a triumphant manifestation of the already achieved industrial—and political—authority in the region, as examined in Jeffer Daykin's excellent interpretation of the Osaka 1903 Exposition.

However, what often works within a format of a conference does not always work well within a publication. Conferences usually have a fragmentary effect, as they largely deal with proposals available at a particular moment. At some point, it seems that the current volume was not approached as an opportunity to overcome that limitation of the conference genre. Geographically and historically very broad and disconnected, the case studies are arranged in a manner that does not emphasize any specific line of inquiry or possible conceptual framework and trends. There is indeed a visible effort to group texts under five thematic rubrics (with three essays in each section): "Exhibition as a Concept," "Constructing Identities," "Historicity and Modernity," "Art and Design," and "International Ambitions." But these are rather vague, arbitrary, and hardly suggestive conceptualizations. It does not take long for the reader to realize that almost all the contributions could be as easily placed under any other rubric mentioned. It seems that it happens because all the exhibitions were about "concepts," "identities," a mixture of "historicity and modernity," and improvement of "design" with the help of fine arts, and all had international ambitions. Such an arrangement of the essays apparently excludes the

importance of sometimes very much-needed historical contextualization, especially for the reader who is not familiar with the immediate political or cultural circumstances of all the regions considered—and especially for the volume that deals with no less than four continents and covers a period of one hundred years of European and colonial history. All of these factors narrow down the book's possible readership to specialists in the primarily industrial and entertainment aspects of international exhibitions, including ethnographic, colonial displays and historical reconstructions.

Such a largely industrial focus also makes the publication appear less immediately relevant for an art historian than one might anticipate from the title. For instance, even within the designated rubric "Art and Design," Rebecca Rice's piece on New Zealand's art at Dunedin's International Exhibitions in 1865 and 1889 is the only essay that engages directly with fine arts displays. This limited attention to the fine arts perhaps fairly reflects their rather marginal position even in Paris's and London's shows, where the primary focus was on achievements in all branches of industries. Still, several case studies could be excellent starting points for further examinations of the fine arts displays alongside industry, both serving as tools in constructing national identity or communicating the idea of modernity. Similarly, Giovanni Arena's contribution begs for a more critical exploration of artists' extensive involvement in the preparation of the Italian International Exhibition in Naples between 1938 and 1940, in the heyday of Mussolini's regime.

That is to say, "discovering" the new geographical regions of international exhibitions, examination of their similarities and specific *raison d'être*, is the strength of this volume. It certainly points toward a great number of potential avenues for additional problematizing of presented material. All contributions provide an up-to-date bibliography, which extends the volume's capacity to be an exceptional departure for more advanced studies.

There are many surprising ingredients and promising observations to be found throughout the essays, leading one to suspect that the international exhibitions set in the geographical and political margins could in fact become a significant scholarly trend, causing a reassessment of the established scholarship on the subject.

The superb printing quality and the layout of the volume is a recognizable trademark of Ashgate Publishing. Available as a hardback, relatively expensive (£80, \$133), the book is elegant in terms of design, paper, and printing, and each contribution is accompanied by a reasonable amount of black and white illustrations. Regretfully, the volume was one of the final products of Ashgate, which ceased to exist as a highly esteemed independent academic publisher in 2015.

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