

CTPA visit to  
**The Field Museum Exhibit on the World's Columbian Exposition**  
**Tuesday, November 12, 2013** (11/12/13!)

OPENING THE VAULTS: WONDERS OF THE 1893 WORLD'S FAIR

Friday, October 25, 2013 – Sunday, September 7, 2014

Once again, The Field Museum generously invited CTPA to visit a new exhibit of artifacts from the great Columbian Exposition held in Chicago, entitled “**Opening the Vaults: Wonders of the 1893 World's Fair.**” Interest was high and 41 members attended—the most ever!

**Remember this exhibition will be open until *September 7 next year!*** If you missed seeing the exhibit, take a look at the online information: <http://worldsfair.fieldmuseum.org/>.

As one of the CTPA's secretaries, I took notes when viewing the exhibit and browsed the internet for additional information. I found an excellent review from the NY Times, which was so thought provoking that I'm inclined to visit the exhibit again. (See this article at the end of this write-up.)

Of course, we're not from New York – we're Chicagoans, and the Columbian Exposition is something about which many CTPA guides are very familiar. Some of us give specialized tours of the old Fair grounds and talk at length about this famous part of Chicago history. Many have read “The Devil in the White City” and also know of the 1909 so-called “Burnham's Plan” of Chicago, and how the White City inspired the City Beautiful movement. We do tours which incorporate parts of the great Plan. Therefore, when we walk into the exhibit, we already know so much about the Fair, the exhibit may seem simplistic at first sight.

Quotes from Chicagoans (not identified – who were they?) appear in large lettering. Oversize images of very familiar pictures from the Fair are on the walls. Ragtime music plays. The exhibit has low lighting (to protect the artifacts or to enhance viewing of the videos?). Printed explanations are posted so high up on the glass cases in the exhibit that older people with progressive (bi or tri focal) lenses may have trouble reading them.

One of the most fascinating aspects are the gigantic screens displayed black and white “films” of Fair scenes, with people moving. I did not see any explanation of how this was possible, but someone nearby explained she'd read about how they're digitally enhanced, how people were filmed on a green screen and their images superimposed, so it appears as if we are watching moving pictures of the Fair itself. It was very cool to see old familiar photographs where the Ferris Wheel moves, the flags wave, the wind ripples the water. It helps one's imagination picture the Fair more realistically.

Here's something I did not know, but learned from large print paragraphs on a wall, that “the Field Museum was originally founded only to commemorate the Fair.” When incorporated in September 1893 it was called The Columbian Museum of Chicago, and artifacts were housed in the Fair's former Palace of Fine Arts.

After the fair, many of the temporary fair buildings were destroyed in fires, but the Palace, with a brick substructure under its plaster façade, survived. In 1905, the museum was renamed the Field Museum of Natural History, after Marshall Field who contributed \$1 million toward construction of a permanent home, which was needed because the old Palace was falling apart. Construction began in 1915, and six years and \$7 million later, in 1921, the Field Museum opened on its present site, a magnificent monument to neoclassical style designed by William Pierce Anderson, who had been associated with Daniel Burnham, and a partner of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White.

In the exhibit, a helpful timeline shows the Exposition was held at a time of rapid change. This timeline was repeated throughout the exhibit with apropos additions.

- 1859 Darwin's origin of the species
- 1869 First transcontinental railroad
- 1871 Chicago Fire
- 1876 Bell telephone patent
- 1879 Edison light bulb
- 1890 Chicago awarded Columbian Exposition (in part because we put up the most money)
- 1893 Worst financial panic in America
  - Exposition opens, from May 1 to October 30
  - September 16, Columbian Museum chartered with \$1 million Field contribution
- 1894 January and July fires, Palace of Fine Arts survives
  - June 2, Field Columbian Museum opens in former Palace of Fine Arts
- 1921 Museum "moves to South Loop site"

After the first room which introduces the fair—with a map of the grounds, the financial ledgers and sample tickets, etc.—there are three other areas. Moving through the exhibit, artifacts appear in areas entitled "Animals" and "Plants," "Mines and Mining." The timeline adds the appearance in 1892 of "taxidermist Carl Akeley" and the museum's first curator, Daniel Ellis who hires Akeley – the father of modern taxidermy – to embark on the first collecting trip to Africa. Akeley kills a leopard, and the skin is on display, together with stuffed creatures such as a squirrel, a bird, an antelope, a bobcat, and a lion. The exhibit reminds us that "our intense exploitation of the natural world created the need to preserve it."

(On the CTPA trip to Milwaukee, we learned that The Field hired Akeley from Milwaukee's Public Museum. Read more about Akeley at <http://fieldmuseum.org/about/carl-akeley>.)

The timeline introduces Charles Millspaugh, the museum's first botany curator, and in 1898 the appearance of Oliver Farrington who had prepared exhibits for the fair and hired the museum's first paleontologist, Elmer Riggs. Riggs was ordered to find a dinosaur for the museum's exhibition halls. Which he did! In 1900, Riggs discovered a brachiosaurus, and its femur is on display. The bone is one of the largest in the museum's collection, more than 6 feet long!

(Read more about this very discovery at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brachiosaurus>.)

In an area "Displaying Other Cultures: Issues and Challenges" we're advised right away that we realize now (in retrospect) that what during the Fair and in early museum exhibitions was not very cool. A large photograph of a family group is accompanied by the declaration "People on Exhibit Withdrew From the Fair." Sixty Labrador Inuit lived on the grounds as an anthropology exhibit! They were recruited with promises of "rations and a better life." They wised up and sued the organizers, left the exhibit area and camped out on the Midway or somewhere offsite where they charged people to see their "village."

(Read more about this common 19<sup>th</sup> century practice at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_zoo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_zoo).)

Frederick Putnam was appointed the lead curator and head of the anthropology department for the Fair in 1891. He spent much of the two years leading up to the exposition organizing and directing expeditions of over 100 anthropologists dispatched to all parts of the world to conduct research and gather natural history and ethnographic items for the exhibition. Nearby is a statement on the wall that "new approaches in anthropology ask community members to speak for themselves," near an exhibit of a beautiful contemporary painting on bark cloth created by a Samoan artist and purchased by the museum.

Signing off,  
Judith Randall, Co-Secretary, CTPA

For your reading pleasure, here's the review of the exhibit from the **NY Times**:

Exhibition Review

## **Assessing a Future From 120 Years Ago Field Museum Looks Back at Chicago's World's Fair**

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN, Published: November 1, 2013

CHICAGO — When it comes to spectacular displays of artifacts, could museums and world's fairs be more different? Museums are monumental; fairs are evanescent. Museums are substantial; fairs are amusements. Museums codify the past; fairs celebrate the future.

But there are also similarities. And if you want to see these modes of cultural celebration thoroughly intertwined, visit the new exhibition, "Opening the Vaults: Wonders of the 1893 World's Fair," at the Field Museum here. In taking on Chicago's immense, perception-shifting "World's Columbian Exposition," the Field — one of the nation's most important natural history museums — also ends up examining itself: Its origins are in the fair it surveys.

From May through October 1893, that fair commemorated the 400th anniversary of Columbus's New World landing by turning 633 acres on the city's South Side into a luminous "White City": a neo-Classical, Romanesque, Beaux-Arts, Venetian fantasyland of white-clad grandeur, a few miles from the nation's largest stockyards. It cost more than \$46 million to build, the equivalent of \$1.2 billion today — and it turned a profit. Lagoons and landscapes were designed by Frederick Law Olmsted; 65,000 exhibits in some 200 buildings displayed turbines, artworks and world cultures. The fair inspired the City Beautiful movement, Disneyland and 20th-century urban planning. It exposed 27 million visitors to new ideas, industries and distant peoples; it even led to the creation of Columbus Day and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Before the fair closed, the Columbian Museum of Chicago was established to give its sensations an enduring home. The museum opened in the Palace of Fine Arts, one of the fair's few buildings constructed with any hope of permanence. (It is now home to the Museum of Science and Industry.) The museum's supporters included fair benefactors like the department store magnate Marshall Field, who gave the museum his name, along with \$1 million (more than \$26 million today). Its curators were drawn from the fair. And the Field's collections began with fair artifacts, many put on display now for the first time.

But those artifacts are being given very different meanings. The fair, the exhibition tells us, was meant to celebrate "cultural and industrial progress" and provide "a snapshot of Western civilization at the time." At the Field, though, we see some skepticism about the progress and some misgivings about the nature of Western civilization. The Field even seems to define itself against the fair. This makes the show provocative, as well as absorbing — though, as we will see, its screws deserve yet another turn.

First, give the exhibition credit for its range and ambition. We see relics of the fair's material life — tickets, program books, an accounting ledger — along with a sampling of its dizzying variety: a stuffed bird of paradise used as a hat ornament, an enormous femur from a Brachiosaurus. There are two Peruvian mummy bundles, a Zulu warrior's club, and a kenong from a Javanese gamelan musical ensemble.

Period-style soundtracks accompany wall-size projections of vintage postcards deftly brought to animated life. And, taking a cue from the fair, museum souvenirs include Cracker Jack, which we are told was created for the fair, and images of the giant turning wheel invented by George Ferris to trump Paris's 1889 world's fair icon, the Eiffel Tower. The Ferris wheel didn't become a Chicago landmark, but is any skyline now complete without one?

But the exhibition distances itself from its origins. Some stuffed animals here were part of a fair exhibit titled "Magic Wonder in Fur," demonstrating the uses of animal hides. The botanical fossils were first presented as the remains of "plants thought to form coal." Chunks of quartz and tourmaline illustrated

“the U.S.’s mineral wealth.” Objects were presented to show their practical value, not to encourage conservation or illustrate scientific principles.

On the anthropological front, the exhibition’s criticism becomes more explicit. On the Midway Plaisance park in Chicago, natives of various cultures were displayed in mock villages. “Nearly all of the fair’s cultural exhibits are troubling to anthropologists today,” the exhibition notes. “Reconstructed villages often made native people seem ‘less advanced’ to reinforce a central message of the fair: the Western world was the most advanced civilization” — a view “offensive by today’s standards.”

Many historians have also identified these weaknesses: the fair’s celebration of industry and agriculture was a celebration of consumption; it ranked cultures in a hierarchy, topped by the achievements of the West, given pride of place in the great buildings of the White City. This view of civilization was also standard in the era’s natural history museums, which incorporated “primitive” peoples in its surveys of the natural world. In 1905, when the Field was transformed from a fair museum into a natural history museum, little shift may have been required in its orientation.

Now, the exhibition asserts, we know better. Instead of consumption, the museum features conservation; instead of cultural condescension, it proclaims equality. Once the museum did what it liked with acquisitions; now, we learn, “the Museum partners with groups like the Crow Nation to collect, study and record the diversity of our world.” From the heights of the enlightened present, the Field looks down on earlier notions of progress and superior insight while ultimately asserting its own.

But isn’t something being missed here? Visitors were left dumbstruck by the fair. Yes, nature could be harnessed to human purposes, but look: a shawl made from tree bark! Rotating magnets creating electricity! And Western superiority? Sure, but look at how various and complex the world is! See how people live in China or Egypt or Germany! Perhaps a quarter of the nation’s population made its way to Chicago in six months, returning home transformed.

The fair also presented almost 6,000 lectures that reached more than 700,000 listeners. In a “World’s Congress of Religions,” more than 4,000 representatives of the world’s faiths gathered for almost two months of papers and conversations. This is not condescension; it is expansion. Was any other culture as open to such explorations?

Why is it so difficult to see things whole? The most compelling history of the fair may be Erik Larson’s “The Devil in the White City,” which succeeds in incorporating both shadow and light . So while we may agree with the Field’s attention to the fair’s cultural condescension, while we may accommodate ourselves to aspects of its multiculturalism, the screw deserves another turn: for all the flaws and failings, there were wonders and possibilities on display. Such opposing strains run together in museums — as in fairs.

“Opening the Vaults: Wonders of the 1893 World’s Fair” **continues through Sept. 7, 2014**, at the Field Museum, 1400 South Lake Shore Drive, Chicago; 312-922-9410 [www.fieldmuseum.org](http://www.fieldmuseum.org).

### **How to position this Special Exhibition to a group prior to a visit?**

Some members who saw the exhibition commented that they were “underwhelmed” by it. I admit, I thought it was small and a bit boring the first time I saw it. I think the problem lies in the title: “opening the vaults” and “treasures”—it raises one’s expectations and leads one to expect surprising, wondrous things.

#### **So prior to your next visit with a group, try explaining the exhibit like this:**

...we are spoiled by the rich assortment of artifacts that we see in our shops and museums today. Take a ride back in time with me to see an assemblage of "exotic" items that wowed folks in 1893. The exhibit is divided into 4 parts--intro to the fair, taxidermy, fossils and ethnological (info about native peoples). These last three sections are the key areas of early accession/acquisition of artifacts for the museum. Seeing the items in this exhibit will help you understand how the world has changed and how far we have progressed since 1893!

*-Opinion offered by Donna Primas CTG*