

The American System of Awards: Order and Anxiety at the 1876 US Centennial Exhibition

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In the 20th century, the world's fair became a purveyor of images.¹ The archetype for this type of display was the American Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, designed by R. Buckminster Fuller. The 250-foot-diameter geodesic dome was a potent symbol of American technology, judging from the large number of people who waited in line to enter the building. What they found inside was a truly postmodern space, complex, full of ambiguity and with no real center, in which the cultural and technological displays were presented as analogous symbols of American life, Marilyn Monroe being on par with the lunar rover.

I remember the American Pavilion, having seen it as a child. I also remember the Russian and Chinese exhibits, which puzzled me with their emphasis on tractors and other products of heavy industry. These relatively inert exhibits were throwbacks to an earlier age, when the world's fair was still a collection of things, displayed in ways that were relatively artless and innocent. In the 19th century, there were national

1. Roland Marchand investigates this historical transformation in "Corporate Imagery and Popular Education: World's Fairs and Expositions in the United States, 1893-1940," in *Consumption and American Culture*, ed. David E. Nye and Carl Pedersen. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1991), 18-33.

I owe my original understanding of this transformation to Umberto Eco. In his essay, "A Theory of Expositions," Eco makes this observation: "In contemporary expositions a country no longer says, 'Look what I produce,' but 'Look how smart I am in presenting what I produce.'" In *Travels in Hyper Reality* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 296.

pavilions, of course, and even some small corporate buildings, but the most important structures were the large halls devoted to broad areas of material culture: machines and manufactures, the arts, agriculture and horticulture. These halls were crowded with the displays of many different countries, the goods arranged in distracting profusion.

In retrospect, it is the physicality of this environment that speaks most strongly, through photographs, engraved views, and, in a few cases, extant structures. We cannot forget, however, that the main function of the world's fair was the systematic evaluation of goods. As the *Journal of the Franklin Institute* reminded its readers in 1876, shortly after the closing of the US Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, "throughout those miles of passages every object on display was there, not alone for admiration, but for comparison, for selection."² In other words, the fair was more than a collection of things; it was a vast apparatus of distinction, a carefully designed system for working out the relative value of commodities in a global economy.

At the Centennial Exhibition, the centrality of evaluation was expressed by the location of Judges' Hall. Designed by the Chief Engineer of the Grounds, Herman J. Schwarzmann, this building was the symbolic heart of the exhibition, located at the head of the "grand plaza," on axis with the main gate on Elm Avenue. The primary economic functions of production and consumption were symbolized by the two largest structures, Machinery Hall and the Main Exhibition Building, which were situated on either side of the plaza.

Judges' Hall was tiny by comparison to its two great neighbors, but it was no less important. Like most of the other smaller buildings, it was made of wood. The exterior walls were paneled and plastered to suggest half-timbering, while the porch, balconies, and belvedere were detailed in a structurally expressive manner. This was "modern architecture," according to the US Centennial Commission, the organization responsible for planning and administering the exhibition; for us, it is as an example of the Stick Style that had become fashionable after the Civil War, and was evident in the design of a number of other Centennial buildings.³

2. "The United States International Exhibition of 1876," *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 102 (Dec. 1876): 364.

3. United States Centennial Commission (USCC), *International Exhibition, 1876* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-84), vol. 9, 140.

The interior of Judges' Hall was "elegantly paneled and decorated," in keeping with the importance of the program. The hall itself was a large, truss-covered assembly room, where many of the exhibition's most important ceremonies took place. These included the final distribution of awards to exhibitors, as well as a daily round of meetings by "patriotic, scientific, industrial, and other associations." As Thomas J. Schlereth has observed, "World's fairs especially served the middle-class penchant for the associative life," and Judges' Hall appears to have been designed as a small convention center. Behind the assembly room, there was a meeting room for the Centennial Commission's Executive Committee; the walls between these two rooms could be removed to create a single, large space, 60 feet wide by 106 feet long – a surprisingly flexible arrangement for a building of this date. For their part, the judges gathered in small committee rooms on either side and in a chamber on the second floor. This was when they were not actually walking the floors of the exhibition halls, looking at the goods on display.⁴

The Jury System. In addition to securing a design for Judges' Hall, the organizers of the Centennial Exhibition had to devise a method for evaluating the goods on display. In this they faced the dilemma of whether or not to adopt some version of the existing jury system.⁵ This implied a large international body with hundreds of members, which was subdivided into specialized groups that examined the goods and made anonymous recommendations for graded awards – gold, silver and bronze medals, honorable mentions etc.⁶

The defects in this system were numerous. First, the juries tended to favor the countries with the most floor space, since these also appointed the largest number of jury members. Second, the most qualified candidates could often not afford to serve as members, since the positions were considered honorary and were therefore not paid. Third, the juries tended to shrink with time; since the positions were not paid, the members felt no compunction in quitting. Fourth, the juries tended to be

4. Julius Bien, *1776-1876. Album of the International Exhibition at Philadelphia*. (New York: Bien, 1875), n.p.; USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 2, 79, vol. 9, 139-140; Thomas J. Schlereth, "The Material Universe of American World Expositions, 1876-1915," in Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 283.

5. Patrick Geddes, *Industrial Exhibitions and Modern Progress* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1887), 37.

6. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 564, vol. 2, "Appendix," 68.

chauvinistic in spirit; the members felt it was their duty to secure as many medals as possible for their own countries⁷ Finally, the awards were made anonymously and without any explanation. "The medals, when distributed, were as silent as the verdicts," observed N. M. Beckwith, the Centennial Commissioner from New York, and US Commissioner-General at the 1867 *Exposition universelle* in Paris; "moral responsibility for the decisions attached to no one, and the awards thus made conveyed as little useful information, and carried as little weight, as anonymous work usually carries."⁸

Beckwith's concern for the exhibition as a source of "useful information" was typically American in its pragmatism, and recalled the charter of the American Philosophical Society, the Philadelphia-based institution founded in 1769 "for promoting useful knowledge."⁹ Beckwith's concern was shared by General Francis A. Walker, the chief of the Centennial Commission's Bureau of Awards.¹⁰ Walker put the problem in an explicitly commercial, if surprisingly metaphysical, context:

The radical defect of the medal system is that it conveys no practical information. The bronze medal, or the cross of the Legion of Honor, even if given with discrimination, merely signifies that the product awarded is good; but it does not answer the question with which Socrates was wont to confound his adversaries: Good for what? On the contrary, it may easily become the means of misleading the public and the body of purchasers, through the failure to state the uses to which the product may be best applied, or the conditions under which alone its use may be advantageous.¹¹

As an example of the ways in which the purchasing public could be misled, Walker provided the "familiar illustration" of the New England farmer comparing two prize-winning mowing machines: the "Triumph,"

7. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 2, "Appendix," 68; Francis A. Walker, "The Philadelphia Exhibition," pt. 1, *International Review* 4 (May 1877): 390.

8. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 2, "Appendix," 68.

9. Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 10.

10. Walker was a statistician, a veteran of the Civil War and, at the time of his appointment as chief of the Bureau of Awards, a Yale professor of economics and history. *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White, 1897), 401; USCC, *Journal of the Proceedings of the United States Centennial Commission at Philadelphia*, 8th session, May 1876 (n.p., n.d.), 27.

The Bureau of Awards was an executive department of the Centennial Commission. Its responsibilities included representing the commission to the judges, editing the judges' reports, and expediting their work. USCC *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 24.

11. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 2, "Appendix," 68; Walker, "Philadelphia Exhibition," pt. I, 387.

the recipient of a gold medal at the Paris fair; and the "Farmer's Pride," the recipient of a silver. On the basis of this information, the farmer orders the Triumph. "When it arrives, he finds it an instrument of a high perfection of parts, great reach, and rapidity of operation; but, to his sorrow, he also finds that it is unsuited to this rough, side-hill farm, all hummocks, stumps, and stones, and it is knocked to pieces in a month." Alternatively, if the jurors had all been from areas like New England, and given the gold to "Farmer's Pride," farmers in Illinois would have made similarly bad decisions, purchasing a machine that was poorly adapted to the soil or terrain of the prairie.¹²

Walker's anecdote helps to explain why the form of the jury system was so critical to the organizers of the Centennial, or of any other exhibition. The awards granted by the juries had an economic value; they helped to shape demand in a rapidly changing market that had become too large and complex for custom and common knowledge to serve as guides, much like our own *Consumer Reports*. In spite of all the piety about education, the organizers understood the exhibition in commercial terms, as a form of advertising that provided direct physical access to a large and diverse group of potential customers.¹³ This was at time when the instruments of mass marketing were just beginning to develop; the market was national, but the media were still largely local, and the basic forms of advertising – broadsides, trade cards, and classified advertising – had remained unchanged since before the Civil War.

Small trade cards, for example, had been used in the United States since the late 18th century. They had always been illustrated, but they acquired a unique visual appeal in the 1860s, with the advent of color lithography.¹⁴ Exhibitors at a world's fair could distribute trade cards directly to their visitors, who consumed the fair in the form of a souvenir, as tourists are wont to do. In this way, they assumed the role of collector,

12. Walker, "Philadelphia Exhibition," pt. I, 387-388.

13. Joseph R. Hawley, the president of the Centennial Commission, concluded that, "to use a commercial expression, we [Americans] have been exceedingly well advertised." USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 149.

14. Clarence P. Hornung and Fridolf Johnson, *Two Hundred Years of American Graphic Art: A Retrospective Survey of the Printing Arts and Advertising since the Colonial Period* (New York: George Braziller, 1976), 71, 99; Robert Jay, *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 1.

imaginatively reconstructing the experience of the exhibition in the space of their own scrapbooks. Prize-winning exhibitors could also incorporate the images of awards into the design of cards and product labels, where they functioned as signs of value and quality, as determined in an international context and under expert circumstances. Campbell's Soup was until recently the most familiar example of this practice, which dates back to the time of the Great Exhibition, at least. John McCann Irish Oatmeal still uses pictures of medals and facsimiles of awards to make an anachronistically detailed statement of how its excellence was established at world's fairs in London, Philadelphia and Chicago.

In the dissemination of useful information as a form of advertising, we see the commercial edge of what Jiirgen Habermas called "the unfinished project of modernity." In the 18th century, the unitary body knowledge that had existed before the Enlightenment was rationalized into specialized realms, according to Habermas. These realms were institutionalized in the form of expert professions that mediated between the world of knowledge and the everyday life of the public. The international exhibition was a case in point: it represented a market-oriented form of knowledge, embodied in goods and metastasizing in ever more specialized realms. These were institutionalized in the form of a jury, which rendered expert judgments that were expected to inform the everyday life of the consumer.¹⁵

The American System of Awards. Habermas called modernity an unfinished project because everyday life has not been transformed by critical reason, at least not as anticipated by 18th-century philosophers. Whether the specific project of the world's fair was similarly unfinished is a good question; certainly the organizers of the Centennial Exhibition believed that there was room for improvement in the jury system. In their search for an alternative, they consulted people with experience of previous world's fairs, whether as exhibitors, commissioners or members of the jury.¹⁶

The organizers learned that the defects in the jury system had become known as early as 1851, at the Great Exhibition in London. By 1855,

15. Jiirgen Habermas, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 103.

16. USCC, Journal, 6th session, May 1875, "Appendix," 39.

when the French held their first world's fair in Paris, the system had become such a contentious issue that the president of the fair recommended the abolition of both juries and awards. His proposal was ignored, with similar systems adopted at the 1862 London and 1867 Paris fairs. After the closing of the Paris fair, a number of commissioners published a report recommending that awards be replaced by signed reports. In a sense, this was the policy adopted at the annual exhibitions held between 1871 and 1874 in London. However, the organizers of the 1873 *Weltausstellung* in Vienna reverted to a system of graduated medals, while abandoning the principle of international competition. The main building at the Vienna fair consisted of a series of courts opening off a long central nave, with each country mounting its own separate exhibit, which was evaluated by its own national jury. The result was much criticized by Goshorn and others who visited the fair.¹⁷

The system adopted by the Centennial Commission was a conscious reaction to this history. It was, in Walker's words, "intended to substitute for the anonymous verdict of a jury the personal decision of a responsible Judge, and for the vague language of gold, silver, and bronze medals, and order of the first class or the second class, a full and precise statement of the merits of each exhibit."¹⁸ As outlined by the Executive Committee, the first article specified that the awards be granted on the basis of signed reports. The second called for a group of 200 expert judges, one half American and the other half foreign. The third article provided a stipend of \$1000 for each of the judges.¹⁹

The new system was supposed to be "judicial rather than representative," which meant that each country did not have to have judges in every group.²⁰ Great Britain, for example, was represented by judges in only 18 of 28 regular groups; Germany in 12; France in 14. As a result, the jury was supposed to be smaller and the process more equitable than had been the case at previous exhibitions.²¹ Nevertheless, the total number of judges had to be increased to 250, when it became apparent

17. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 10-11

18. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 564.

19. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, "Appendix," 56.

20. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, "Appendix," 69.

21. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 565.

that 200 would not be enough. This made it necessary to reduce the compensation of the American judges to \$600.²²

The fourth article required that reports and awards be made on the basis of "inherent and comparative merit," the criteria being "originality, invention, discovery, utility, quality, skill, workmanship, fitness for the purposes intended, adaptation to public wants, economy, and cost." The omission of aesthetics is telling, and suggests the awkward position of the art object in an international exhibition. The fifth article specified that completed reports be submitted to the Centennial Commission; the sixth, that the Commission makes the final decision on the award. This was to consist of a diploma, a standardized bronze medal, and a certified copy of the judges report. The seventh article guaranteed the exhibitor's right to reproduce the report, ostensibly as advertising, but preserved the commission's right to publish the report in an appropriate manner.²³

The Centennial Commission approved a design for a four-inch-diameter bronze medal, "very chaste in appearance, and the largest of the kind ever struck in the United States," according to James D. McCabe, the author of a popular history of the exhibition. Engraved by Henry Mitchell, a Boston artist, and struck at the US Mint in Philadelphia, the medal depicted a seated female figure representing the United States. Dressed in classical drapery and crowned with laurel, this figure held the Great Shield of the United States with one hand; with the other, she held a second laurel crown, which she bestowed on the symbols of art and industry that were crowded at her feet. This image was in turn surrounded by four small medallions, which contained figures representing America, Europe, Asia and Africa.²⁴

In the new system, this medal was "only a token," and its design was informed by conventional notions of art, honor, and patriotism. The "real award" was the judge's report, which helped to form consumer demand by disseminating useful information to both producers and consumers.²⁵

22. USCC Executive Committee, Report of the Executive Committee of the United States Centennial Commission (Philadelphia, [1876?]), 62-63. Because some judges declined to serve or resigned their positions, or because some countries neglected to appoint representatives, the final number was 233-115 American and 118 foreign, according to USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 567.

23. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 2, "Appendix," 56.

24. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 2, "Appendix," 15; James D. McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia: National Publishing, 1876), 843-845.

25. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 566.

As McCabe informed his readers, echoing Walker, "The medal simply declares that an article is good; the report tells what it is good for, and how good."²⁶ In addition to its commercial value, the report had a historical significance as the document of an "ephemeral vista," as one historian has put it.²⁷ The reports were meant to serve as a kind of time capsule, in which the fair and the world it represented could be preserved in literary form. Writing before the Centennial opened, the Executive Committee looked forward to "reports which will be a record of the industrial, artistic, educational, and social progress of the nations and will preserve to future times the Centennial Exhibition of the 'form and pressure' of the present age."²⁸

The Grouping for the Judges' Work. All in all, this was a radical departure from the old jury system, and Goshorn recalled that the judges responded with "lively discussion" when the new system was first presented to them.²⁹ The Executive Committee's account suggests that the situation was a little bit closer to open revolt:

The system of awards adopted by the Commission[,] being an innovation upon the usages of former Exhibitions, met with opposition on the part of a number of the foreign Judges After a conference of the Judges with a special committee of this body, and a full discussion of the subject, ... there was a general approval of what will hereafter be known as the American System of Awards.³⁰

This was obviously a reference to the American System of Manufactures, as it had been known since the 1850s, and as it was known to the organizers of the Centennial Exhibition.³¹ The system of awards and the

26. McCabe, *Illustrated History*, 906-907.

27. Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 1988).

28. USCC, Journal, 6th session, 6.

29. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 12.

30. USCC, Journal, 8th session, 27.

31. The report on an award made to the American Watch Co. of Waltham, Ma., begins with this passage: "The movements made by this company are constructed upon what is known as the 'American system,' with interchangeability of parts for the several grades manufactured, and by the use of machinery devised and perfected in their factory, and by them first brought into use for the purposes of watchmaking." USCC, International Exhibition, vol. 7, 161.

The derivation of the term, American System of Manufactures, is discussed in Eugene S. Ferguson, "History and Historiography," in *Yankee Enterprise: The Rise of the American System of Manufactures*, ed. Otto Mayr and Robert C. Post (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), 15, note #1; and in Merrit Roe Smith, "Military Entrepreneurship," in *Yankee Enterprise*, 95-96, note #3.

system of manufactures both implied a faith in the power of rationalization. Both systems relied on the introduction of more specialized components – new machines and skilled workers on one hand, expert judges on the other – and on the employment of more sophisticated forms of organization. Both were designed to create a more standardized product, whether it was a clock, a gun, or a bronze medal. Both were perceived to be characteristically American: echoing de Tocqueville, one French critic read the American System of Awards as a symptom of the American "love for uniformity, and the equality of

Finally, both American systems emerged in relation to a mass market of global dimensions. In the spectacle of the exhibition, this market was supposed to be revealed as a rationally known and consciously ordered place. The basis was a dual system of classification, which organized things according to geography and typology, that is, according to the object's place of origin and its affinity with like objects. As originally conceived, this system represented a progressive ideology and a hierarchical view of the world of goods; it was also decimal, having the potential to accommodate ten departments, 100 groups, and 1000 classes. The whole history of the Centennial can be seen as an attempt to reify this order in the exhibition. As with other early world's fairs, the organizers aimed to create a transparently organized, *classified* landscape of commodities, in which knowledge could be mapped and experienced in three dimensions. This ambitious project failed in many ways, and for one reason: inspired by an Enlightenment-era confidence in their ability to know and order the world, the organizers consistently underestimated the complexity of the exhibition and the reality it was supposed to represent. They had to revise the original system classification when it became apparent that the entire exhibition would not fit in a single, 40-acre building, as they had originally planned. Later, they had to replace even the revised system of classification with a new "Grouping for the Judges' Work," when the grouping failed as a serviceable guide to the evaluation of goods.

32. Brook Hindle and Steven Lubar, *Engines of Change: The American Industrial Revolution, 1790-1860* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 218; L. Simonin, *A French View of the Grand International Exposition of 1876* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Happelfinger, 1877), 19.

Dorsey Gardner, chief of the Publications Department and assistant secretary of the Centennial Commission, provided the only direct explanation for the adoption of the new grouping: "In the examination of objects for the distribution of awards by the Judges, it became necessary to associate exhibits classified in separate groups and installed in different buildings."³³ Apparently, the designers of the classification had again failed to describe the real order of things. The installation of displays was at odds with the evaluation of goods; products that needed to be examined by a single group of judges were not exhibited in proximity to each other. According to Walker, the commission was also to blame for approving an overly elaborate system:

The Commission appear [sic] to have taken somewhat too literally the injunction of the Act of 1871 – to prepare a complete plan for the classification of articles intended for exhibition. During the sessions of 1872-4 the subject received no small share of the attention of this body. The many discussions and the voluminous reports thereon finally issued in a system of classification of a wholly impracticable degree of minuteness and complexity.³⁴

Ostensibly, the new grouping represented a simplification and reorganization of the revised system. In place of the 7 departments, 52 groups and 739 potential classes of the revised system, the new grouping substituted 28 groups and 453 subgroups. The chief improvement seems to have been the recombination of some classes to form new constellation of goods, and the subdivision of others to form new and more specific categories. The most striking change was the regrouping of products with processes; cotton, linen and other fabrics, for example, with the machines used to make them. Apparently the organizers had come to realize that production and consumption were not really separate domains, as suggested by the map of the fairgrounds.

Even with these modifications, the Grouping for the Judges Work made it difficult to locate certain classes of goods. Some things still defied classification, while others could be classified in more than one way. A more striking defect was the exclusion of 30 classes that were present in the revised system. In some cases, this required the creation of

33. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 635.

34. Walker, "Philadelphia Exhibition," pt. I, 377.

new groups. For example, classes 700-712, "those relating to ornamental trees, shrubs, and flowers," were referred to a team of American judges in Group 29, Horticulture. In other cases, the missing classes were reassigned to surviving groups; Classes 345-349, "those relating to commercial systems and appliances; systems of government; institutions of benevolence, co-operative associations; religious organizations and systems, art and industrial exhibitions," were allocated to the judges in Group 28, Education and Science.³⁵

Ironically, it was this last series of classes, associated under the label of "Physical, Social, and Moral Condition of Man," which had been preminent in the original system of classification. Their neglect is significant, since it suggests an Anglo-American rejection of the social tradition of the French fairs. This tradition had emphasized "the ultimate products" of the industrial economy – what we might call social goods.³⁶ Walker explained that the Centennial Commission was reluctant "to deal with the profound and difficult questions in moral, social, and economical philosophy which they involve."³⁷ Apparently, the commission had become reluctant to judge these goods like commodities. Or else it had come to realize what a small and compromising part they had to play in an industrial exhibition.

Group XXVII. Judicial independence was an important principle of the American System, and both the Centennial Commission and the Bureau of Awards professed a hands-off approach to the judges. The decision to make an award rested with the commission, of course, but the judge's report was accepted or rejected in its entirety, with the exception of some editing by the bureau.³⁸ Once a group of judges had adjourned, their conclusions were considered final unless there was good reason to believe that an exhibit had been overlooked, or unless the group itself agreed to reconvene.³⁹

The judges were supposed to assemble on May 24, 1876, and submit

35. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 562-564.

36. Geddes, *Industrial Exhibitions*, 20.

37. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 563.

38. "Within the range of this exception fell all statements respecting the extent of production, the size of establishments, etc ..., and also all remarks which, whether so intended or not, bore the appearance of advertising the business of exhibitors," explained Walker. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 575.

39. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 575.

their reports to the Centennial Commission by July 31.⁴⁰ In reality, they continued to work until the middle of September.⁴¹ The exception was Group XXVII on the Fine Arts; the judges in this group began on May 25 and finished one month later, at which time most of them returned home. After receiving a complaint, the Bureau of Awards examined the records and discovered that the Committee on Painting had ignored the rules of the American System. According to Walker, the committee had decided to recommend awards on the basis of a majority vote, allowing each member to nominate one work. Furthermore, the committee had apparently limited the number of awards before seeing all the work. Having reached the limit, the committee had refused to consider any other work, even if it had not been examined. In response, Goshorn attempted to reconvene the committee in Philadelphia. A reduced number of judges met and added 128 names to the 85 originally recommended for awards.⁴²

A year later, this incident sparked a surprisingly sharp debate in the pages of the *Nation*, between the magazine and three correspondents: George Ward Nichols, the secretary of Group XXVII; Frank Hill Smith, one of the judges; and Francis Walker himself.⁴³ The magazine began by praising the American system, and describing its operation with an anecdote illustrating the significance of the awards as a form of advertising:

If three sewing-machines were selected for commendation, the judges would not say that one was the best, another the second best, and the other the third best, but would give an award to one because of its adaptability to the whole range of domestic work, to another (of high cost) as working perfectly in cambric, cloth, or leather, and to the third because, although less effective than either of the others for their special purposes, it was sufficiently good for ordinary family use, and could be furnished at a price within the reach of very poor people. So, through the whole range of the Exhibition, and in every department, the good qualities of the selected exhibits were to be authoritatively described, and this was supposed to constitute a value, especially for advertising purposes, far beyond the mere statement that an exhibit had received the 'first' prize – no reasons being stated.⁴⁴

40. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 79-80

41. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 570.

42. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 576, vol. 3, iv; George Ward Nichols to the editor, *Nation* 23 (12 Oct. 1876): 227.

43. Nichols was the husband of Maria Longworth, founder of Rookwood Pottery, and the author of two books, *Art Education Applied to Industry* (1877) and *Pottery: How It Is Made, Its Shape and Decoration* (1878).

44. "The Awards at the Centennial Exhibition," *Nation* 23 (23 Nov. 1876): 310.

The magazine concluded that the American System had been a success, with the exception of Group XXVII on the Fine Arts, whose judges had chosen to ignore their instructions. These allowed each group to set its own standard of quality, but required every object meeting this standard to receive an award. The article further reported that the judges had telegraphed the president of the Royal Academy in London, to suggest that the older members forego their medals in favor of younger, less established painters. As a result, the awards in the English department went to second-rate work, in spite of the fact that the department was reputed to contain the best paintings.⁴⁵

George Ward Nichols responded by recounting how the judges had come to the conclusion that the American System was inapplicable to painting and sculpture. "It was found," he wrote, "that no two of the judges could agree in all respects in a criticism of a work of art, while it was not difficult to agree as to its *general artistic character*." To paraphrase Walker, the judges could agree that a painting was good, but not what it was good *for*. As a result, the Committee on Painting had decided to make awards on the basis of a majority vote, the reports reading, simply, "For artistic excellence."⁴⁶

For his part, Frank Hill Smith explained that the judges on the Fine Arts had only limited the number of awards given to painting. He denied any official communication between the judges and the president of the Royal Academy, and he insisted that, if their actions had been subversive, it was because the system had forced them to evaluate a work of art like a sewing machine. Each individual reaction was subjective, he argued, and could therefore not be rationalized in a report approved by a majority of judges – what amounted to a form of criticism by committee.⁴⁷ The debate concluded with Nichols disavowing the general report of Group XVII as published, and accusing Walker of suppressing the judges' original report. Walker responded by accusing the group of submitting a 40-page manuscript, "of which not more than nine full pages, in the aggregate, were devoted to description or discussion of the Fine Arts Exhibition."⁴⁸

45. *Ibid.*, 310.

46. George Ward Nichols to the editor, *Nation* 23 (12 Oct. 1876): 227.

47. Frank Hill Smith to the editor, *Nation* 23 (7 Dec. 1876): 340.

48. George Ward Nichols to the editor and Francis A. Walker to the editor, *Nation* 25 (27 Dec. 1877): 393.

This whole argument may seem remarkably petty, but it is nonetheless significant for what it reveals about the status of the artifact and the character of the exhibition. In rejecting the American System of Awards, the judges in Group XXVII were attempting to secure a privileged position for their own area. This is what had been suggested by the original system of classification, in which "Plastic and Graphic Arts" had occupied the penultimate position, just below "Objects Illustrating Efforts for the Improvement of the Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Condition of Man," i.e. social goods. The sense of hierarchy among things was lost in the revised system of classification; in its place was an apparent attempt to express the character if not the status of the different departments in the architecture of the exhibition: agriculture in an aggrandized barn; horticulture in an exotic "Moorish" greenhouse; machinery and manufactures in factory-like sheds.

With the exception of photography, which overflowed into a separate building, the arts were displayed in the purpose-built museum of Memorial Hall. This had been designed as a permanent monument in a Neoclassical style, which should have been a source of some distinction, but Memorial Hall was only one of five thematic buildings at the Centennial, and a relatively small one at that. As a result, the landscape suggested an equivalency between the areas of the exhibition; a lack of hierarchy in which English painting was as important and worthy of attention as processed foods; as a specimen palm, a sample of wrought-iron tubing, or a Renaissance Revival bedroom suite. The sameness of all these things was stressed by the organizers' attempts to classify, install and evaluate them according to a single comprehensive system.

In this situation, the authenticity and authority of the work of art, what Walter Benjamin called its *aura*, was in danger. The threat came not so much from the process of mechanical reproduction as from an environment and a system that celebrated this process.⁴⁹ The Centennial was, after all, an *industrial* exhibition; the work of art displayed in the hushed atmosphere of Memorial Hall was ultimately embedded in a larger context devoted to the factory and mechanized production. The fact that the exhibits in Memorial Hall contained both original works of

49. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 220-221.

art and mechanical reproductions only made the situation of the original that more precarious, even if we admit that the reproduction enjoyed more legitimacy in the 19th century than it does now.

The behavior of the judges in Group XXVII can be seen, then, as an attempt to protect the aura of the art object; to secure its position in a culture whose values were becoming more and more commercial. Like the Centennial Commissioners, who declined to evaluate social goods like industrial products, the judges were drawing a line on commodification. They were attempting to define the boundaries of a process that threatened to draw everything into the market, and by doing so threatened to make everything the same. This is of course a problem that we still struggle with today.

The Committee on Appeals. In addition to the rebellion of the judges on the Fine Arts, there was one other significant breakdown in the American System of Awards. The Centennial Commission was forced to establish a special Committee on Appeals to consider complaints from exhibitors whose products had been overlooked, or who felt otherwise wronged.⁵⁰ The five members of this committee nearly succeeded in subverting the entire system of awards, as recounted by the *Nation*: "At the 11th hour – after the better members of Commission had gone finally to their homes, and after the judges had dispersed to the four quarters of the globe – these persons succeeded in reopening the whole question and in securing certain rulings, which, but for the firmness and the honest indignation of Gen. Walker, Chief of the Bureau of Awards, and of Mr. Goshorn, the Director-General, would have defeated the whole scheme." As an example of what brought about this intervention, the magazine related the committee's success in securing an award for a particular Western vintner, notwithstanding the conclusion of the regular judges, "that the California product was not wine, or at least not such wine as could be properly recommended for public consumption."⁵¹

This behavior threatened the legitimacy of the American System of Awards. To restore some accountability to the process, the Centennial Commission was forced to appoint a second Group of Judges on Appeal

50. The original members were C. P. Kimball of New York, chair; D. J. Morrell of Pennsylvania; George H. Corliss of Rhode Island; J. McNeil of Missouri; and A. J. Dufur of Oregon. John Wasson of Arizona was a later addition. [USCC Committee on Appeals, Report]. (n.p., n.d.), 1.

51. "Awards at the Centennial Exhibition," 310.

to regulate the actions of the Committee on Appeals.⁵² The new arrangement called for the committee to serve as a clearinghouse, examining and referring cases to the judges, who would make the actual recommendations for awards.⁵³ In spite of this arrangement, the appeals process resulted in 628 additional citations, many going to exhibitors whose products had already been rejected by the regular judges.⁵⁴

For Walker, the appeals process was the single, most important scandal of the exhibition. He allowed that the regular judges may have made some mistakes, but he insisted that the system of awards was basically fair, and he estimated that there were no more than a dozen exhibitors who, through no fault of their own, had not been visited by the judges.⁵⁵ Worst of all, the Committee on Appeals had ignored its own policy of not accepting the cases of exhibitors whose products had already been fairly examined. Walker observed that "the Committee referred cases by the hundreds to the Judges on Appeals, without either consulting the Bureau of Awards or searching the records of the original groups to ascertain whether due examination had been made of the submitted; and, in some more flagrant instances, the Judges on Appeals were directed to take up cases where the Committee were distinctly advised by the Bureau of Awards that the products had been rejected for want of merit by the former groups."⁵⁶

Walker also objected to the total number of awards, which had exploded to more than 13,000 as a result of the Centennial Commission's decision not to restrict the goods submitted for evaluation; this was out of a total of some 40,000 exhibitors.⁵⁷ The commission's decision meant that the judges were forced to consider what Walker called "petty exhibits" - "a can of maple syrup," "a pint of beans," "an embroidered

52. The appointees were John Fritz, Gen. Hector Tyndale, Prof. Henry H. Smith, Frank Thomson, Coleman Sellers, and James L. Claghorn, all of Pennsylvania; Charles Staples of Maine; Prof. Spencer F. Baird of Washington DC; Benjamin F. Britton of New York; M. Wilkins of Oregon; Gen. Henry K. Oliver of Massachusetts. Tyndale and Thompson decline to serve. [USCC Committee on Appeals, *Report*], 2.

Baird was assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Robert A. Trennert, Jr., "A Grand Failure: The Centennial Indian Exhibition of 1876," *Prologue* 6 (Summer 1974): 118.

53. [USCC Committee on Appeals, *Report*], 2-3.

54. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 571.

55. Walker, "Philadelphia Exhibition," pt. I, 394.

56. *Ibid.*, 395.

57. The exact number of awards was 13,104, with American exhibitors taking home 5,302. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 569-570; Sellers, "System of Awards," 14.

bookmark” – what we would expect to see at a county fair. In the competitive environment of an industrial exhibition, these things were as compromised as a work of art, as Walker explained:

Now, it appears to me that a watch-maker, ... who with great care fashions with his own hands two or three watches – to be displayed in an Exhibition – of a kind perhaps which he does not ordinarily make, ... is not entitled to the same kind and degree of commendation as an [e]stablishment which turns out 200 watches a day, with absolute interchangeability of parts, and which ships its goods to every quarter of the globe.⁵⁸

This remark, which contains an oblique reference to the American System of *Manufactures*, is significant because it indicates an early privileging of the typical over the exceptional; the standardized over the singular; the products of the factory over those of the farm, house and shop. It is also significant because it calls for a policy of discrimination among things, and it was a comparable *lack* of discrimination that so upset the judges in Group XXVII.

Reactions to the American System. The explosion in the number of awards produced a concomitant swelling in the size of the collected judges' reports; the six volumes of the 1880 edition ran to 4322 pages, not counting a 101-page index. Each group followed a standard format, consisting of a list of the judges assigned to that area; an excerpt from the Grouping on the Judges' Work explaining the order of things for evaluation; a general report summarizing the development of that area in the exhibition; the specific reports for each product receiving an award; another list of judges with the reports they had written; and a supplement describing the awards granted on appeal. Some of the general reports were quite short; others were major surveys, running to hundreds of pages, and providing a historically valuable statement of progress in that class. Some were illustrated with precise technical engravings. Most of the specific reports on award were terse, single-sentence descriptions, not very different from the ones provided by the judges in Group XXVII; in a few cases, the judges in other groups were inspired to write a more extended justification.

An early edition of these reports was published in 1877-78 by J. B. Lippincott of Philadelphia. The company made them available by mail, at

58. Walker, "PhiladelphiaExhibition," pt. 1, 393; USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 569-570

prices ranging from \$.25 to \$1.50 for each group. A complete set could be had for \$20, with discounts of 10-30% provided to those who ordered in quantity; there was even a convenient order form.⁵⁹ The success of this venture is difficult to measure, since Lippincott's records burned in an 1899 fire.⁶⁰ But demand was sufficient to justify the later edition, published by the Government Printing Office, and a quick search of the library catalogs (RLIN and OCLC) shows a surprisingly wide distribution of both issues: 111 locations in 27 states. Clearly, the reports were an important reference, something to be acquired by any major library, but it is difficult to imagine who actually read them.⁶¹ The average person could turn to livelier accounts in popular magazines, histories and catalogs, which leaves an audience of specialists, and suggests that the Centennial was to some degree an "incomplete" project, at least as far as its direct impact on everyday life was concerned.

The evident shortcomings of the judges' reports helps to explain the mixed reactions to the American System of Awards. Walker considered it a success, of course, but the Franklin Institute *Journal* regretted the abandonment of a system of graduated medals to recognize products of "special merit." As far as the *Journal* was concerned, "It is a prize and not a commendation that all competitors seek."⁶² This controversy continued to play out in the design of future world's fairs. At the 1878 and 1889 fairs in Paris, the French reverted to a system of graduated awards and elaborate juries that was little changed from their earlier experiments.⁶³ In contrast, the American organizers of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago adopted what they explicitly referred to as the American System of Awards.⁶⁴ Ironically, they located the system within a noncompetitive English tradition, established in London

59. "Reports of the Judges of Awards," form dated 10 Nov. 1877.

60. J. Stuart Freeman, Jr., *Toward a Third Century of Excellence* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1992), vii.

61. Cf. note #66.

62. USCC, *International Exhibition*, vol. 1, 568; "United States International Exhibition," 363. The *Journal* later went on to state that the Centennial Commission had made a mistake "in attempting to substitute for the prizes for prominent or acknowledged excellence, usually distributed at the great Exhibitions, a system of awards, founded upon some universal standard of mediocrity ... judiciously qualified by numerous adjectives." "Motive Power," 1.

63. World's Columbian Commission, *Final Report of the Executive Committee of Awards* (Washington DC: John F. Sheiry, 1895), 17.

64. *Ibid.*, 20.

at the 1851 Great Exhibition. There, "the system adopted was the comparison of exhibits with a standard approved by the jury, and not with each other."⁶⁵

In crafting their own version of the American System of Awards, the organizers of the Chicago fair made two significant changes. First, they incorporated the text of the award into the design of the certificate, suggesting that even the recipient could not be counted on to consult the reports.⁶⁶ Second, they allowed the exhibitors to declare their displays *hors concours*, i.e. out of competition.⁶⁷ This proved to be a mistake; once again, the American System provoked a revolt of the foreign commissioners, which was larger, more explicit, and ultimately more damaging than the one that occurred at the Centennial Exhibition. Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Russia made a formal statement of their preference for a more conventional system of juries and awards.⁶⁸ After the organizers affirmed their commitment to the American System, 17 different countries, comprising most of the industrialized world, withdrew their exhibits from competition, and refused to participate in the work of the juries. After making some unspecified concessions, the organizers of the Chicago fair were able to lure most of these countries back into the system, but France and Norway maintained their boycott.⁶⁹ The president of the Chicago fair's board of directors summarized this sorry history in terms both global and local:

The experience of expositions is that the subject of awards is not susceptible of dignified and satisfactory treatment. Persons familiar with great expositions have expressed the hope that a day may come when there shall be no more judges, awards, medals, or diplomas. Whether this is the solution of the problem, or whether the feature of awards will some day attain to a better a status, we can not [sic] tell. Two years after

65. *Ibid.*, 10.

66. "The provision for inscribing the text of the report ... on the face of the diploma itself instead of putting it in the final reports of the exposition merely, as was done in 1876, was clearly a modification in the interest of the exhibitor. It gave to a fortunate producer the double advantage of having the excellencies of his product displayed to the world, first, upon the beautiful parchment so conveniently made visible, ... and secondly, in the series of elegant volumes, destined to occupy a prominent place in the leading libraries of all nations." World's Columbian Commission, *Final Report*, 36.

67. *Ibid.*, 24.

68. *Ibid.*, 37.

69. The countries that withdrew their exhibits were Austria, Belgium, Brazil, British Guiana, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Siam, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. World's Columbian Commission, *Final Report*, 38.

the close of the World's Columbian Exposition the medals had not been distributed nor the reports of the judges compiled. Should these reports be properly published by the Government, and should they be found intelligent and impartial, they may constitute a valuable landmark in the development of science and industry. Otherwise nothing will have occurred in this branch of the World's Columbian Exposition to give the subject of awards a better position than it has hitherto occupied.⁷⁰

The Sameness of Things. In addressing the tedium of the Centennial reports, Coleman Sellers, one of the Judges on Appeals, admitted that the judges had undoubtedly "been compelled to use the same language in commenting on many similar objects, but in so doing they simply say that these exhibits are of equal value."⁷¹ Whether he realized it or not, Sellers was admitting the exhibition's power to disable difference, not only between goods of the same class, but also between different classes of goods. In part, this was simply an aspect of commodification; as Benjamin later declared, "the price makes the commodity identical to all those which are sold at the same price."⁷² But it was also an inherent feature of a universalizing project like a world's fair, in which everything was present and accounted for in the same way. In such a collection, there were really no masterpieces, in spite of the claims of a famous illustrated catalog of the Centennial.⁷³

So it is that the world's fair was at cross purposes with itself; it was an enemy of cultural distinction, of the kind that it was set up to make, as well as of the kind that the Judges in Group XXVII took for granted. But it was also an enemy of national distinction, which formed the ultimate basis of any world's fair, whatever the design. Looking back on the

70. Higginbotham, *Report of the President*, 295.

71. Charles Coleman Sellers, "System of Awards at the United States International Exhibition of 1876," *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 103 (Jan. 1877): 16.

72. Benjamin, 3 Feb. 1939, *Briefe*, vol. 2, 805-809, in Shierry M. Weber, "Walter Benjamin: Commodity Fetishism, the Modern, and the Experience of History," in *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism since Lenin*, ed. Dick Howard and Karl E. Klare (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 267.

My interpretation and choice of words is also influenced by Larry D. Lutchmansingh. He observes: "It was, therefore, their constitution as commodities in an expanding world market that disabled the differences between otherwise radically unrelated objects in the interest of an abstract and universal law of exchange. In the milieu of the international exhibition, differences of ethnic and artistic character, tradition and custom, function, skill, and conditions of production were converted by the sorcery of the international market into a new kind of commensurability. This, as Marx pointed out, is the disguise of the *fetish*" Lutchmansingh, "Commodity Exhibitionism at the London Great Exhibition of 1851," *Annals of Scholarship* 7 (1990): 208

73. *The Masterpieces of the Centennial International Exhibition* (Philadelphia: Gebbie & Barrie, 1876).

Centennial, Walker observed that "international exhibitions are doing a work in which good is not accomplished I refer to the leveling influence exercised by the close juxtaposition and comparison of the products of different countries."⁷⁴

This perception of a "leveling influence" suggests a contrarian explanation for the dramatic expansion of American art that took place in the late 19th century. The Centennial has long been considered an instrument of this expansion, which resulted in the foundation of so many new museums, schools, and art associations.⁷⁵ There is some truth to this perception; the exhibition was associated with the establishment of the Museum of Art in Philadelphia, and with the expansion of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. But it is easier to document the idea of the Centennial as being somehow instrumental, than it is to convincingly demonstrate its larger impact on American culture and society.

The best that can be said is that these institutions were related elements of what one 1877 source called a "vast system of eye education."⁷⁶ This was recognized in the classification, which put museums and world's fairs in the same class of "social goods." In the museum, the status of the art object as a commodity is obscured; acquisition suggests a kind of apotheosis, in which the object passes beyond the realm of the market, its value established and its circulation discontinued, even though we know that it continues to exercise an influence over other objects, and that it may return to the market at some future date. In the exhibition, where consumption was deferred but not denied, and the status of everything

74. Walker, "The Late World's Fair," pt. 3, "The Display," *International Review* 4 (Sep. 1877): 685.

75. John Allwood, *The Great Exhibitions* (London: Studio Vista, 1977), 56; Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1970), 17-18; George B. Tatum, *Penn's Great Town* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 102; Holger Cahill, introduction to Erwin Ottomar Christensen, *The Index of American Design*, (New York: Macmillan, 1950), ix; Diana Korzenik, *Drawn to Art* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1985), 221ff; George F. Kunz, "Management and Uses of Expositions," *North American Review* 175 (September 1902): 411, 417; Kenneth W. Luckhurst, *The Story of Exhibitions* (London: The Studio Publications, 1951), 52; Russell Lynes, *The Art-Makers* (New York: Dover, 1982), 278; H. Barbara Weinberg, introduction to S. G. W. Benjamin, *Our American Artists* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 2, 3.

76. International Exhibition Co., *Official Bulletin of the International Exhibition* no. 4 (Philadelphia, 1877), 14. Tony Bennett has provided a theoretical formulation of this relationship in "The Exhibitory Complex," *New Formations* 4 (1988): 73-102.

flickered back and forth between commodity and object lesson, the situation of the art object was more volatile.

It is this volatility that the organizers of the Centennial were trying to suppress with their classification, and that the judges in Group XXVII were attempting to oppose with their rebellion against the American System of Awards. In the same sense, it is possible to interpret the new art institutions of this period as a bid to stabilize the value of a specialized realm of knowledge, to state its meaning in terms at once public and concrete, in an environment where the art object was in constant danger of losing its aura and becoming just another commodity. Given this interpretation, these institutions can be seen, not as signs of cultural maturity, as they have been presented by some art historians of this period, but as symptoms of a deep cultural anxiety about the value of things in the modern world.

The swelling size of the collected reports, what the *Journal* called "this threatened series of volumes," was caused by the Centennial Commission's unexpected generosity in handing out honors. The commission had granted a total of 13,104 awards, out of which American exhibitors took home 5,302.⁷⁷ Coleman Sellers defended the results, noting that less than 30% of the 40,000 exhibitors would receive awards.⁷⁸ But the *Journal* criticized both the number and kind of awards, regretting the abandonment of a system of graduated medals to recognize products of "special merit." As far as the *Journal* was concerned, "It is a prize and not a commendation that all competitors seek."⁷⁹

How to evaluate the impact of the American System? Was it used in the future?

The exhibition represented a global economy in which everything had its price. Ironically, it turned out to be a mechanism both for establishing distinctions between goods of the same class, i.e. between watches of the same type, and for disabling distinctions between classes of goods, i.e. between a painting and a can of beans.

77. USCC, *International Exhibition* vol. 1, 572-573.

78. Sellers, "System of Awards," 14-15.

79. "United States International Exhibition," 363. The *Journal* later stated that the Centennial Commission had made a mistake, "in attempting to substitute for the prizes for prominent or acknowledged excellence, usually distributed at the great Exhibitions, a system of awards, founded upon some universal standard of mediocrity ('based on inherent comparative merit,') judiciously qualified by numerous adjectives." "Motive Power," 1.