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THE GREAT EXHIBITIONS

An Introduction

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London, 1851



As so often in the record of civilising amenities, France can lay claim to priority for the introduction of large scale exhibitions. Starting in the Napoleonic era, a series of large fairs were held to display national products with the object of reviving confidence in the arts. While these were not a totally new concept, they can be seen as the immediate lineal precursors of the great exhibitions of the nineteenth century.

It was not until 1851 in London that there was a truly International Exhibition. The enthusiasm of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, as President of the Society of Arts ensured not only that the project was well planned, but also that other European countries were interested in taking part.

Not least among the factors which ensured the success of the Great Exhibition was the remarkable building designed for its use. Known as the Crystal Palace, a name first bestowed upon it by *Punch* in November 1850, it was primarily the work of Joseph Paxton. Paxton, a gardener, had earlier built a greenhouse to contain the giant water-lily *Victoria Regina* basing his design on the rib structure of the plant itself. From this he elaborated the general concept of the Crystal Palace with advice from engineers such as W.H. Barlow and George Stephenson (of railway fame).

Despite the initial antagonism of professional doomsters, there was an almost relig-

ious fervour in the public response. This reaction was to both the building and the proposed exhibits which ranged from the inspired to the bizarre. Exotic items from such far corners of the earth as Australia and New Zealand were spiced with many examples of voluptuous nude statuary such as Hiram Power's famous "Greek Slave" in the American section. Yet the emphasis of the Exhibition was on industrial achievements. It showed a remarkable cross-section of Victorian prowess in engineering.

Production of the official catalogues was itself a printing epic. Working a twelve hour day with 40% extra pay for night work, an army of compositors and printers struggled with the enormous mass of material to be used in the thirty or so official publications. Four days before the opening the Shilling Catalogues occupied 368 pages of type, still unclassified and with new copy arriving continually. About midnight on the 30th April printing actually commenced, and the next morning, 1 May, ten thousand copies were delivered punctually for the Opening. Royal presentation copies, elegantly bound in morocco, had been prepared in six hours! Understandably the catalogue was full of errors, and with new exhibits arriving late, it required much overhauling. In fact, it was not until the sixth edition appeared, four days before the close of the Exhibition in October, that the Shilling Catalogue achieved a correct account.

During the next six months more than six million visitors, many of whom had never even seen a big city before passed through its doors. When the Exhibition was finally closed it showed a profit of 186,437 pounds.

The Crystal Palace building itself had been intended as only a temporary structure. It was dismantled after the end of the Exhibition and sold to the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway. It was re-erected at Sydenham where it stood in neglected splendour until destroyed by fire in 1936.

Excluding the different metals in which individual medals relating to the Exhibition were struck, there were over fifty commemorative medals struck. In addition, official medals were struck for officials, judges, exhibitors etc.

Dublin, 1853

The impetus given by London's success in 1851 lasted for the next half-century. All of the ensuing displays were valuable in communal terms, providing technical and cultural interchange as well as public entertainment. However, very few proved financially rewarding for their sponsors.

Dublin was quick to follow on London's lead. In 1853 their Exhibition of Art-Industry was financed by the railway magnate William Dargan. The Exhibition was housed in a building designed by John Benson along similar lines to the Crystal Palace. He improved on the original in the use of green glass which muted the harmful effect of excessive light on brightly coloured fabrics and pictures. At the Dublin 1853 Exhibition Europeans were given their first display of Japanese arts and crafts (shortly before Commodore Perry forced Japan into trade with the West). Financially, the Exhibition was not a success despite the re-appearance of "The Greek Slave" and her associated pieces. It was perhaps too sophisticated for general support in Ireland, although a more likely reason was the high entrance charge, 5/-. The loss to Mr. Dargan was twenty thousand pounds.

A commemorative medal was struck for the Dublin Exhibition along with numerous small advertising pieces. The latter are considered by British collectors as "advertisement tickets" and tend to be excluded from medal catalogues.

New York, 1853

In the same year as Dublin, New York too was the setting for a major Exhibition. There too the building was inspired by the Crystal Palace. It also suffered the same fate, burning down in 1858 within the space of half an hour. Like Dublin, the New York Exhibition was a financial failure, despite general public acclaim and assistance from P.T. Barnum.

Commemorative medals depicting the New York Crystal Palace and George Washington

were struck in a variety of metals including silver, bronze and tin. In addition prize medals featuring an allegorical scene were struck at the Philadelphia Mint. The medals were produced in silver (125 struck) and bronze (1150 struck).

Paris, 1855



Both the Melbourne Exhibition of 1854 and the Products of New South Wales Exhibition of the same year occurred to facilitate selection of specimens of industry and natural produce for the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1855. The buildings for this cost over half a million pounds sterling and an equal sum was spent on other expenses. The total receipts were 130 thousand pounds!

For the 1855 Exposition the Emperor Napoleon III himself took charge, declaring that arts were as important as industry. So it was that Britain's Pre-Raphaelites appeared on the walls of the *Palais des Beau-Arts* and received unstinted praise from Delacroix and Ingres. One novel section of this Exhibition displaying "articles of domestic and sanitary economy" presaged the Idea Homes Exhibitions of the 20th century.

Medals were produced in a variety of forms, prize, for services, commemoratives etc., for this exhibition and in gold as well as the metals earlier exhibitions had employed. Because of the increased Australian involvement, medals awarded at Paris in 1855 often appear with added local interest.

London, 1862

The 1851 Exhibition had been seen as the first of a series of exhibitions to be held in London every ten years. The second should have been in 1861 but was held in 1862. The untimely death of Prince Albert overshadowed the opening and internationally, Civil War

raged throughout the United States. Even the weather seemed against the success of the Exhibition, it was an exceedingly wet summer, and without even an interesting public controversy, the exhibition resulted in a big financial loss.

The utilitarian building designed for the occasion by Captain Fowke of the Royal Engineers was generally condemned by comparison with the Crystal Palace, although it was larger, and was demolished in 1864.

Nevertheless, the displays were not without significance. Since 1851 there had been signs of momentous change: steam was in use everywhere in industry and agriculture; electricity was proving its usefulness in communication; photography was no longer just a scientific novelty; and the Arts and Crafts movement was beginning to undermine the typical Victorian obsession with decoration.

In particular, foreign exhibits aroused great artistic interest and influenced the development of the Aesthetic Movement and orientalism in design. Even more inspiring in a different way was the enormous gold obelisk, 70 feet high, representing over 800 tons of gold found in Victoria in the preceding ten years.

Over 45 different historical medals were produced in association with this exhibition.

Sydney, 1879



The impact in Australia and New Zealand of these far distant exhibitions was considerable. Displays, mostly of agricultural produce and natural resources were prepared for Paris in 1855, London in 1862 and so on. Often a local exhibition was held the year before the international one to select the Australian contributions. As already noted the in Sydney and

Melbourne 1854 exhibitions served this function for Paris in 1855.

The year 1866 saw the opening of the first true Australian Inter-Colonial Exhibition, it was staged in Melbourne. The prize and service medallions were produced by the new technique of electro-forming rather than the traditional striking. Later others inter-colonial exhibitions were held in Sydney in 1870, to commemorate the Centenary of the landing of Captain Cook, and Melbourne in 1873.

In 1879 the first Australian International Exhibition opened in Sydney. It was housed in the ornate Garden Palace designed by James Barnet and specially erected on the inner Domain. Considering the distances involved and the small population of Australia, the number of European, American and Asian exhibitors might seem surprisingly large, but gold had placed Australia firmly on the map of world trade.

In addition to prize medals, some 25 different commemorative medals were issued in association with the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879.

Melbourne, 1880



The Exhibition Buildings completed in Melbourne in 1880, designed by the architects Reed and Barnes, was the city's proudest achievement of the period. It made an admirable setting for the second Australian International Exhibition which opened in October of that year.

The holding of such an affair in a city which had existed for less than fifty years was a striking project. The Premier, Graham Berry, was widely criticised for extravagance as little was left to chance. The secretary of the Exhibition

spent a successful year travelling through North America and Europe persuading nations and individuals to take part.

The British art collection which had been sent out for the Sydney 1879 Exhibition now continued on to Melbourne for 1880 (and later travelled to other colonies). Many of the works on show were for sale and while some found permanent homes in Australian public Galleries others found different homes. Most famed of these is probably the nude study "Chloe" which can still be admired in the less formal setting of Young and Jackson's pub.

The displays of industrial technology from overseas had a marked effect in promoting confidence and innovation among local manufacturers and helped to bring about the very high attendance record. Other important outcomes of the Exhibition included the opening of direct trade routes with Europe and America including the start of regular steam ship services. French banks were also encouraged to open branches in Melbourne and Sydney.

In some respects there are surprisingly few commemorative medals recorded for the Melbourne 1880 Exhibition (which continued into 1881 with the result that some medals bear the date in the form 1880-81). Only about twenty types have been recorded, but they do occur in quite a variety of metals including gold. Prize and For Services medals were struck in Bronze, silver and gold. The Museum of Victoria holds patterns from a medal design competition for this Exhibition.

Melbourne, 1888



In 1888 Australia celebrated the centenary of the First white settlement at Port Jackson.

Unfortunately Sydney's Garden Palace had suffered the time honoured fate of nineteenth century exhibition buildings, it burnt down in 1882. Some said the fire was deliberately lit to destroy the convict records stored in it. Thus it was that the Australian Centennial Exhibition was held inappropriately in Melbourne.

The Exhibition had an attendance, between August 1888 and March 1889, of 1,963,436. It was held in the building constructed for the 1880 Exhibition.

Prize and For Services medals were struck in gold (482), silver (1456) and bronze (1273). In addition three special gold medals were struck, two (each weighing 14 ozs.) struck with the three inch diameter dies intended for the bronze medals, one for Queen Victoria and the other for the Prince of Wales, and one struck with the two inch diameter dies intended for the silver medals which was presented to Sir Henry Loch. This last medal, and the ceremonial key used to open the Exhibition were acquired by the Museum of Victoria in 1975.

Some twenty commemorative medals and medallions are associated with the 1888 Centennial International Exhibition. In addition there were metal tickets and checks.

Adelaide, Perth, Dunedin and Brisbane

A French born Sydney merchant, Jules Joubert, played a big part in the organising a number of colonial exhibitions at that time. However, finding himself out of favour with official organisers in 1879, he continued as a free-lance to mount exhibitions in Adelaide, Perth, Dunedin and Calcutta. By the end of the century, he died in 1907, he had been involved in over 50 exhibitions culminating in the Queensland International Exhibition of 1897.

Europe and America 1870s to 1890s

Meanwhile the exhibition epidemic had been spreading throughout the world; Vienna 1873, Philadelphia 1876, Cape Town 1877, Amsterdam 1883, Antwerp 1885 and Brussels 1888 to name but a few.

Paris was the scene of two further notable exhibitions before the end of the century. That of 1878 was a brave effort to revive national moral in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian



war. Despite a loss of 32 million francs, the government felt that the effort had been justified. Unlike previous displays, the emphasis was on large-scale business enterprise rather than individual effort. Again, many Australian firms exhibited in Paris.

In 1889 the Paris *Exhibition Universelle* was intended to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution and there was a nervous reaction for foreign governments. However it turned out to be one of the financial successes.

As in 1851 buildings helped to attract public interest. Cotamin's *Palais des Machines* was an engineering masterpiece whose beauty and ingenuity we know only by repute as it was demolished in 1910 in an act of artistic sadism. Eiffel's Tower still stands, the most durable symbol in modern Europe. Despite being bitterly attacked on aesthetic grounds, its 984 foot presence dominated the interest of visitors. Electricity for the first time came into its own, providing memorable public displays. Edison's phonograph and telephone were also shown here.

Despite the natural French insistence on the importance of fine arts, there was none of the welcome for innovation that industry was receiving; official exclusion of the Impressionists ensured that this festival of republicanism took a backwards view and the paintings

shown were generally inept and tedious. Indeed it would have seemed at this time that France was losing supremacy in art, just as Britain no longer had an unrivalled lead in engineering skills.

Already Europe was yielding place to the United States of America in the march to the future. In the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, some of the more bizarre aspects of that future could be glimpsed. Commemorating the discovery of America by Columbus, 400 years before, it added the Ferris Wheel to the human landscape, introduced Egyptian belly-dancing to an outraged but intrigued American public and exhibited a life size elephant made of walnuts!

Ending on this unedifying note is unjust to the exhibition phenomenon. In truth 1851 was a year of great significance, and even though by the end of the century the movement had lost impetus, the achievements by the way of cross-cultural insemination were undeniable. Now we are technologically one world, and the advent of the modern Olympic Games may be seen as having assumed some of the functions of the Great Exhibitions in providing venues for international co-operation and non co-operation by way of public spectacles.