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From Satire to Struggle: An Analysis of Changing American Identity Using Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition

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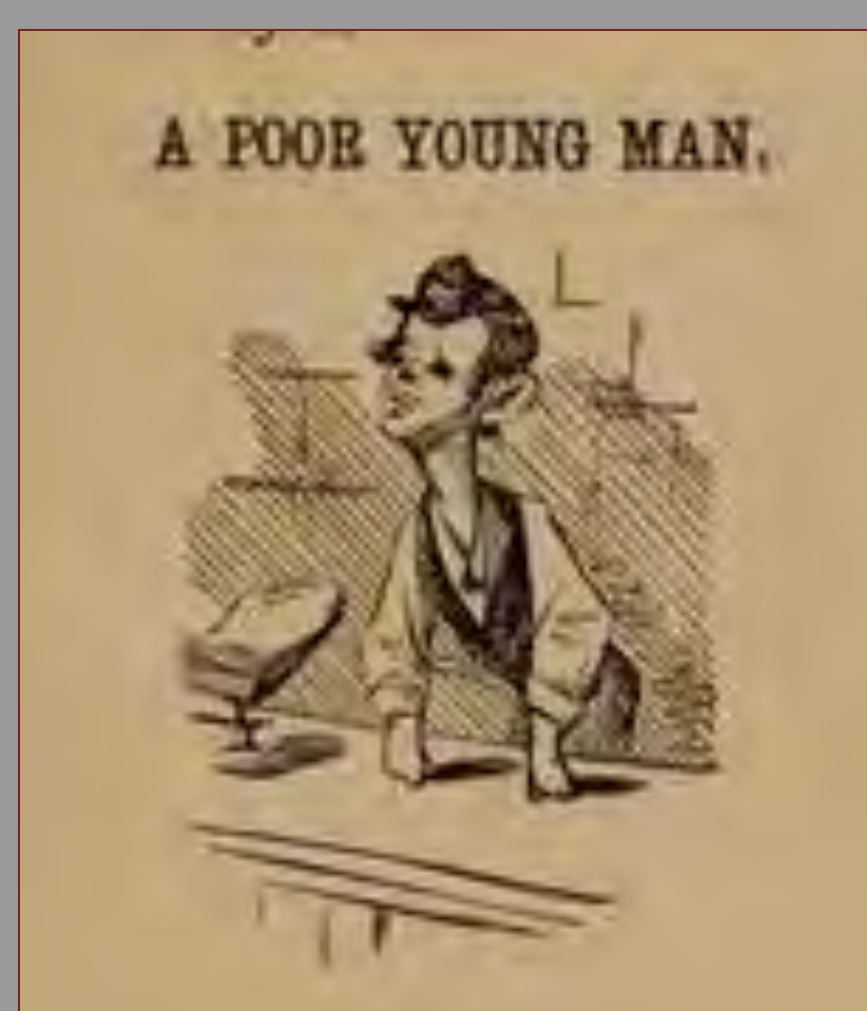
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Our Show's pages contained stories of members of the Women's Centennial Executive Committee wooing young delivery boys, architects bringing buildings to the United States from Rome, and inventive machines that could make men fly.

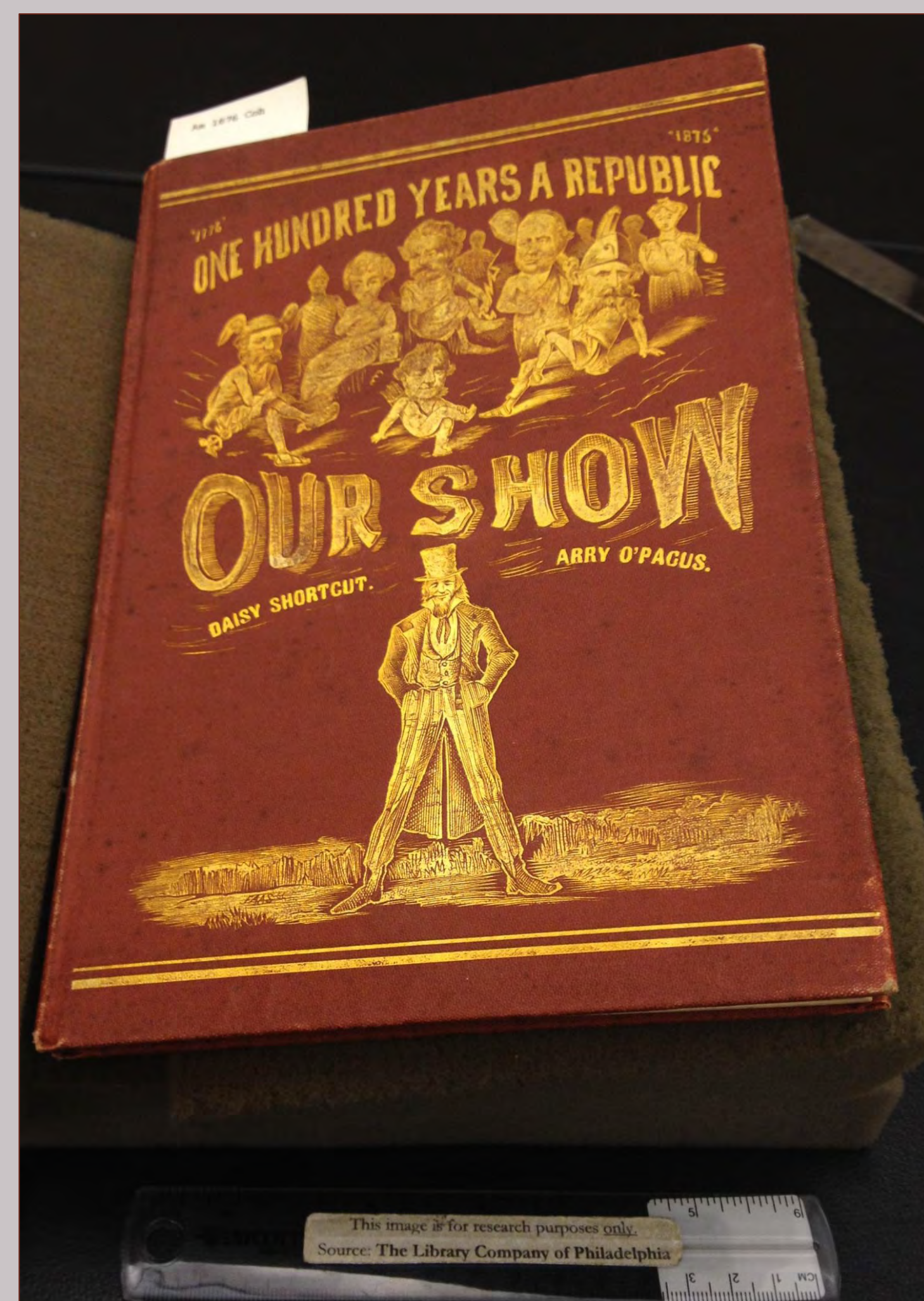


Rather than taking a firm stance on the issue of gender, Cohen and Sommer used humor and ambiguity to discuss women's place in society. From appearing extremely supportive of women, by praising their hard work, to mocking their lack of control, by reminding readers that men still had the most say in matters regarding the Exhibition, the authors invited readers to form their own opinions in the matter.

From Satire to Struggle

An Analysis of Changing American Identity Using *Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition*

by Hope Hancock
Advised by Dr. Jeanne Petit
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Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition



A depiction of one of the Exhibition ceremonies from *Our Show*.

Abstract

In 1876, Philadelphia hosted the Centennial Exhibition to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The Exhibition operated as a platform for the United States to showcase all of its innovations and demonstrate how far the young nation had come in 100 years. The Exhibition quickly gained international popularity and attracted 10 million visitors over the span of the six months it was open. However, not all Americans took the Exhibition so seriously. *Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition*, co-written by Philadelphians David Solis Cohen and Harry B. Sommer, is a satirical book that was published in 1875, prior to the opening of the Exhibition. In *Our Show*, Cohen and Sommer poked fun at everything from the building materials used to the members to the Centennial Board. The authors used *Our Show* to provide a platform for Americans to grapple with the fluctuating identity of the United States. Relying on ambiguity and wit, Cohen and Sommer discuss ways that United States' society was changing in terms of women's roles in society, the rise of industrialization, and the growth of an excessive culture. This paper explores how historians can use humorous and satirical publications to understand the impact of social change in American society.

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Using a variety of examples, Cohen and Sommer revealed how this movement towards a materialistic culture of excess was underway by the time of the Exhibition. The authors demonstrated through cartoons, such as this one of Columbus pointing towards the Exhibition.



The text further explains that “if the Christopher Columbus, Esq., could have foreseen, as an indirect result of his little excursion in 1492, the infliction of the following pages upon posterity, Mr. Columbus, very likely, would have stayed at home.”