The 1876 Centennial Exposed: How Souvenir Publications Reveal Contrasting Attitudes of Race and Gender in the Post-bellum United States

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Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/mellon/1
March 2, 2014.

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The reverence and solemnity surrounding Francesco Pezzicar’s “The Freed Slave” resonates in this etching. The illustration recognizes the importance of remembering the history of slavery as seen in the way the mother shows her children the statue.

From Leslie’s Register

This illustration depicts an African American working along white crewmen at the Exhibition, supporting the idea that African Americans were involved on work crews, though this type of participation was likely minimal.

From Leslie’s Register

This is an etching of the painting “A Kentucky Home” by Eastman Johnson. In the background of the painting, a white woman is timidly entering the scene symbolizing the trepidation and fear felt by white’s upon entering an unfamiliar culture.

From McCabe’s History

This image shows an African American young man pushing a cart with luggage for a white man. This picture displays the side of American society that still saw African Americans as unequal to white citizens.

From McCabe’s History

Some images of women in Leslie’s Register do not appear to be significant. Within the context of American society at the time, however, the incorporation of so many pictures of women is fascinating. The inclusion of women in the images exemplifies their expanding role in society, a role that embraced the innovative spirit of America to make a stand for female equality.

From Leslie’s Register

An etching of the women’s committee at work.

From Leslie’s Register

By demonstrating Kindergarten at the Exhibition, Leslie states that the Women’s Committee may have caused schools to “introduce the system where it [was presently] unknown.”

From Leslie’s Register

In four months’ time, the women’s committee raised $30,000 to build the Women’s Pavilion, which stood in Fairmount Park west of the Horticulture building.

From Leslie’s Register

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The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 celebrated not only the 100-year anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence but the industrial innovation and reuniting of the United States after the Civil War. Frank Leslie, a Northern publisher, and James Dabney McCabe, Jr., a former Confederate soldier, recorded all aspects of the Exhibition in their publications, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition, 1876 and McCabe’s The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition. A close analysis of these souvenir publications, which have not been previously compared and contrasted with one another, reveals two distinctly important views of American society – not only the differing perceptions of women’s suffrage but the conflicting views of the North and South regarding race. Contrary to scholars’ claim, such as that of David Blight, that African Americans were not at all involved at the Exhibition, this project asserts that although African American involvement was minimal, as discussed by scholars Mitch Kachun and Philip Foner, they did indeed participate, though it often went unrecognized. For instance, Leslie illustrates African Americans working on the construction of the Exhibition and overall provides an inclusive portrayal of African Americans reflecting Northern attitudes supporting equality for African Americans. Likewise, Leslie includes many illustrations of women and their participation in the Exhibition. McCabe, however, largely excludes women and African Americans in his discussion of the Exhibition. Readers reach an understanding of these opposing views by examining the historical context of the Exhibition, the authors’ backgrounds, and a close analysis of key text and images within each book.