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

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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.