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Writing History with Artifacts: Columbus at the 1893 Chicago Fair

KARAL ANN MARLING

THE WORD OUT OF HOLLYWOOD in late 1990 was that Columbus would be “big box-office” in 1992. Two crews were racing to complete cinematic tributes in time for the 500th anniversary of his voyage. *Christopher Columbus*, shooting on location from a script by Mario Puzo, claimed exclusive access “to Spain’s full-size re-creations of the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María*, now under construction” while an untitled opus in development by an international production team insisted its film would “go beyond the history books” to tell “the truth about the man and what happened.”¹

Both impulses—the artifactual and the revelatory—have ample precedents in the observances held to honor the Columbus quadricentenary in the late nineteenth century. But new sensibilities have come to bear on the commemoration of the Columbus voyage in the intervening century—sharply different views of the meaning of the arrival of Europeans, for instance (see the guest editor’s introduction to this special issue). And new electronic media, like movies and television, have made a profound difference in the methods by which historical events are reconstructed and understood. In 1892 (or 1893, when Chicago’s great Columbian Exposition finally opened), movies were still primitive peep-shows. In 1892 and 1893 public history, the ceremonial commemoration of mighty deeds in a public

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1. “Columbus films scheduled to capitalize on anniversary in ’92,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, November 20, 1990, p. 11E.

context, meant a fair full of pageantry, statuary, and atmosphere, an exposition crammed with historical relics stressing the human dimensions of the hero through their intimate association with his very person.

That was the way in which the nation's centenary had been celebrated in Philadelphia in 1876, with a glorious international conclave of arts and industries in Fairmount Park. The site was strewn with statues of the founding fathers, replicas of colonial houses, and genuine antiquities, including the suit of clothes George Washington had worn when he surrendered his commission at Annapolis and the dishes and blankets he took to war from his Mount Vernon home.² Seeing them, wrote "Samantha," the fair's self-appointed crackerbarrel humorist, was even better than gazing upon one of the "relics" of the True Cross for sale in the amusement precinct:

Oh! what feelings did I feel as I see that coat and vest that George had buttoned up so many times over true patriotism. . . . When I see the bed he had slept on, the little round table he had eat on . . . why, they all roused up my mind so, that I told Josiah I must see Independence Hall before I slept or I wouldn't answer for the consequences.³

Samantha's commentary hints at the physical arrangement of the Washington artifacts in a dramatic, roomlike setting, as if the absent general could be expected back any moment to resume his seat at the "little round table." This was the domestic hero, a person just like those who came to marvel at his tableware and rumpled garments. Directed at the emotions and the senses, the manner of display all but dispensed with the need for labels, guides, or textual explanations of the slice of history on view.

G. Brown Goode, the Smithsonian Institution's chief consultant to the Columbian Exposition, recognized that, in keeping with a "fundamental cognitive shift" in nineteenth-century sensibilities, the modern fairgoer was most easily swayed by what she or he saw. "To see," he wrote, "is to know."⁴ Harriet Monroe's toplofty *Columbian Ode* of 1893 fell on deaf ears. Novels about Queen Isabella and her navigator sold poorly, too.⁵ What could be seen for oneself, touched, and inspected at close range won the hearts of historically minded Americans instead. So, following the example of its successful predecessor in Philadelphia, the Chicago Fair would teach Americans about Columbus through a vast and colorful mo-

2. For a bibliography of recent, secondary sources on nineteenth-century fairs, see, e.g., Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. chap. 2. For a preliminary treatment of how souvenirs, like those issued at World's Fairs, serve as socio-historical texts, see Karal Ann Marling, "Minnesota Souvenirs: The Large and the Small of It," *Prospects* 11, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 283-300.

3. Josiah Allen's Wife [Marietta Holley], *Samantha at the Centennial* (Hartford: American Publishing, 1879), 535-36.

4. Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 44.

5. Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 39, 217.

saic of visual devices: pictures—engraved, painted, printed; massive statues, and sculptured reliefs no larger than a coin or the handle of a spoon; collections of objects associated with the great Genoese explorer and his descendants; photographs of the places he visited; models and full-scale reproductions of his ships and the monastery from which he set sail to find a western route to Cathay; and *tableaux vivants* in which costumed Chicagoans brought Columbus back to life by impersonating his every epochal action.

Nothing, in fact, so clearly reflects the propensities of a material age as the decision to memorialize Columbus with an exposition of things gathered from every point between Palos and Cathay, strange and lovely and provocative things, calculated to dazzle the eye and set the imagination aflame. The guidebooks and the souvenir albums that preserved the appearance of the 1876 centenary were heavily textual in character, enlivened at infrequent intervals with murky wood engravings of its marvels. By contrast, the Columbian Exposition of 1893 spawned scores of giant albums of photo-engravings, reproducing buildings, exhibits, and attractions in minute and convincing detail.⁶ The shift in media is a function of technological change, to be sure, but it also demonstrates the potency of G. Brown Goode's dictum. To see *was* to know in the new, mass society of the late nineteenth century.

The lack of common language skills devalued literature as a repository of shared values: immigration enhanced the usefulness of spectacle and symbol in teaching historical lessons. When timeclocks were to be punched, and tourism limited to after-work hours, both the professional and the working classes preferred their information in forms that were readily assimilated at a glance. In bustling, *fin de siècle* Chicago, a picture—or a pageant or a working model of the *Santa María*—was indeed worth a thousand words. And imagery was democratic—accessible to all, seemingly nonpartisan and nonjudgmental, and only occasionally open to question. “Now the only thing I’ve got to grumble about,” declared “Uncle Jeremiah,” Chicago’s version of Samantha, “is what’s models and what’s facts”:

Over there in the Transportation Building I seen what it says was the boat Columbus sailed in; but after all, Fanny said it was a model. . . .

That’s what I don’t like about this White City [Note: The buildings at the 1893 Fair were made of white, imitation marble; hence this epithet]. So much of it is so and so much of it ain’t so that I can never tell what is so.⁷

Imagery—specifically, the image of a prosperous and booming metropolis—was connected from the outset with the very notion of a Columbian Fair, and cities vied for the honor of having proposed such a

6. E.g., *The Columbian Gallery: A Portfolio of Photographs from the World’s Fair* (Chicago: Werner Co., 1894).

7. [Charles McClellan Stevens], *The Adventures of Uncle Jeremiah and Family at the Great Fair: Their Observations and Triumphs* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1893), 82, 93.

richly visual kind of observance first. Late in 1884, according to Chicago partisans, a fair honoring the discovery of America was openly discussed in the pages of the *New York Herald* by a booster from the Windy City who had already spent four years and \$33,000 to promote the cause. A Chicago doctor would later insist that he had issued a circular in June of that year inviting foreign ministers to participate in the planning. A Chicago dentist testily cited his letter to the *Tribune* of February 16, 1882, as the real genesis of the fair scheme.⁸ Despite Chicago's self-created chronology, however, it is clear that by the mid-80s, a number of American cities were actively lobbying Congress for the prestige of hosting an international fair in 1892. By 1889, only two real contenders had survived the long tussle: Chicago and New York (which a newspaper in the former city called "a partially civilized hog"). Although neither locale had any real historical claim on Columbus—New York had Dutch and English beginnings, Robert Rydell notes, while Chicago was more than a thousand miles from the sea—the case for New York was weakened by political infighting among civic leaders.⁹ Taking advantage of momentary confusion in its rival's ranks, Chicago sent a delegation east to work on Congress for five full weeks before the final vote was taken—and carried the day.¹⁰

For Chicago, capturing the Columbian Fair was an important confirmation of its rebirth from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1871, a proof of its renewed vigor.¹¹ The victory of a new, western city over the venerable New York also seemed to assert the hegemony of the New World over the Old, of America—the land Columbus found—over foreign nations. The concept of American superiority (and the related idea that the modern present was superior to the past) found expression in the one ceremonial function that New York did manage to retain in the face of the Chicago triumph. This was a series of naval parades, held in New York Harbor beginning on Tuesday, October 11, 1892.¹² The climax of the largest such

8. *The Official Directory of the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: W. B. Conkey, 1893), 25–26.

9. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 41. Because of national hard times, competing cities also had to make financial guarantees to Congress. New York, for example, came to the table with \$15 million in pledges.

10. John Allwood, *The Great Exhibitions* (London: Studio Vista, 1977), 81.

11. Ross Miller, *American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 195 ff.

12. *Report of the Board of General Managers of the Exhibit of the State of New York at the World's Columbian Exposition* (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1894), 42–43. New York City's Columbian celebration, October 10–12, 1892, occupied the period officially fixed by Congress to observe the anniversary. New York persuaded Chicago to delay dedication of the fair buildings (unfinished, in any case) until October 21 (the date of Columbus's landing according to the old Julian calendar) so as not to have its own celebration "diminished by simultaneity."

Other American cities, especially those with large Catholic and Southern European populations, also mounted events during this period. See, e.g., *A Memorial of Christopher Columbus from the City of Boston in Honor of His Discovery of America* (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1893).

procession at sea, in the spring of 1893, was the appearance of Columbus's caravels, escorted by a flotilla of American warships. "These frail-looking craft, flying the ancient banner of red and white which once symbolized the might of Castile and Aragon," read the official record of the event, "formed a striking contrast to the modern ships which represented every phase of naval engineering."¹³ Replicas of the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*, by their very precariousness and fragility, underscored the awesome power of the ironclad American armada of 1893 and the global ambitions of the American merchant fleet. Bobbing in the wake of these giant modern vessels, the tiny ships of yesterday illustrated the fact that the luster of Aragon and Castile now devolved upon the United States of America.

William Eleroy Curtis, a State Department expert on Spanish and Latin American affairs later appointed chief of the Latin-American Bureau of the fair, hatched the scheme to recreate the original Columbian fleet and anchor it off Jackson Park during the run of the exposition as an object lesson in technological progress. At the urging of Secretary Blaine, Congress approved the project and put the navy in charge. But naval experts soon realized that it would be impossible to build fifteenth-century European vessels without foreign advice. Operations moved to Spain, where the Minister of Marine assembled a team of archaeologists and agreed to construct the *Santa María* on behalf of his government if the United States would pay for the other two vessels. Since funding was not yet forthcoming from Washington, the Board of the Chicago Fair underwrote expenses and the little fleet was finished in time for waterside rites held in Huelva, Spain, on October 12, 1892, with the royal family in attendance. Four months later, commanded by officers of the Spanish and the U.S. Navy, respectively, the ships left Cádiz for Havana, under the escort of the *Bennington*, a modern man-of-war.¹⁴

Although news stories fudged the details, noting only that the tiny craft had been "brought safely across the Atlantic over the same route Columbus pursued" (at a cost of \$80,000), the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María* had been ingloriously towed for much of the distance to Havana, where all pretense of actually sailing the balky ships was dropped.¹⁵ They cruised into New York Harbor tethered to escorts and proceeded through the Great Lakes to Chicago in much the same fashion, inverting history as they went, since the integrity of the past now hinged directly on the technological expertise of the modern age. Once in position, berthed at the east end of the Agriculture Building, near the ceremonial Water Gate that symbolized the entry of Columbus into the fairgrounds, the ships

13. *Report of the Board of General Managers*, 70.

14. William Eleroy Curtis, *The Relics of Columbus* (Washington: William H. Lowdermilk, 1893), 48.

15. J.W. Buel, *The Magic City* (St. Louis: Historical Publishing Co., 1894), unpaginated.

proved a popular attraction with the public, as they had at ports of call all along the route from Spain.¹⁶

Their diminutive size (the *Santa María* measured only sixty-three feet from stem to stern) invited admiration for the bravery of Columbus, to be sure, but the primitivism of the ships more often elicited tributes to progress, scientific advances, and better navigational equipment. A humorous incident, widely publicized at the time, drove the point home. One afternoon in October of 1893, a party of highly placed merrymakers from Chicago's Argo Club (including Frank D. Millet, one of the fair's artistic directors) took the *Santa María* for a cruise on Lake Michigan. As spectators waved handkerchiefs from the portal of La Rabida, the recreated Spanish monastery, the *Santa María* lurched from its berth and collided sharply and repeatedly with a nearby pier. Once underway, matters deteriorated further, until the crew was forced to abandon ship at the foot of Van Buren Street, to the vast amusement of the *Chicago Tribune*. "No wonder Columbus discovered America!" exclaimed a wet and shaken Millet. "Because a man could discover anything in such a craft as the *Santa María*. There's no telling what direction it would carry him!"¹⁷

In one sense, then, the Columbian ships functioned in a manner analogous to the ethnological villages of native peoples—Russian, Japanese, Philippine, Turkish, and so forth—that were the principal attractions of the Midway district at the Chicago Fair. Such compounds showed provincial Americans a world they never knew, a curious place of strange artifacts and customs. Like the wooden caravels, the villages were quaint and fascinating, but they also presented occasions for self-congratulation, for ill-concealed gratitude that progress had delivered Americans from huts and yurts and rickety sailing ships, for confirmation of America's manifest destiny to dominate the unprogressive and the old-fashioned. The convent of La Rabida, with its collection of Columbus pictures and relics, was dubbed "the cornerstone of American history" by fair organizers.¹⁸ In practice, however, it too served as another exotic, ethnographic village, Spanish rather than Kurdish or Javanese in flavor.

La Rabida was the Franciscan monastery where Columbus had fetched up in 1484 or 1485 with his young son, en route to the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. Because "the Admiral of the Ocean Sea" had been sheltered and encouraged in his mission by the good fathers, the old convent acquired status as a quasi-religious Columbian icon in 1893 thanks to the efforts of Curtis, who sold the Fair Board on his plan to replicate the ancient structure from photos and measured drawings obtained in Spain.¹⁹ But

16. *The Columbian Gallery: A Portfolio of Photographs from the World's Fair* (Chicago: Werner Co., 1894), unpaginated.

17. "Caravel Under Sail: The Santa Maria is Almost Grounded on a Reef," *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 1893, p. 1; "Barry Gets Santa María Back," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1893, p. 1.

18. Curtis, *Relics of Columbus*, 5. Most "exotics" on exhibit at the fair were persons of color.

19. Curtis, *Relics*, 5–6.

unlike the caravels, which suited the system of lagoons and lakefront piers around which the exposition had been arranged (and were easy to hide, too), La Rabida was a full-scale building, weather-beaten in appearance and stylistically at odds with the imperial, spit-and-polish classicism of the rest of the great public structures at the heart of the Chicago Fair. Furthermore, in his quest for authenticity, Curtis insisted that the convent stand on an artificial “promontory in imitation of the original that overlooks Palos and the sea” and that the grounds be planted with “such vegetation as clings to the sterile soil” of the original.²⁰ Until the fair finally opened and the paying customers flocked to the site to tour a varied display of documents, prints, paintings (including one by the eminent French Romantic, Eugene Delacroix, showing Columbus arriving at La Rabida), and the like, many harbored reservations about the wisdom of spending \$50,000 on an “almost exact” facsimile of a building patently inharmonious with the pristine splendor of the White City around it.²¹

Taken in conjunction with the multicolored “Moorish arcade” that housed the Spanish products displayed inside the Manufactures Building, La Rabida brought a touch of variety to the otherwise uniform core of the fair. It also suggested great age—the ago-ness of history—in contrast to the futuristic perfection of its neighbors. But the basic forms of the convent and its decoration were not entirely foreign to American eyes, in the way that the odder tribal villages were. In the 1850s and 60s, for example, houses in the “Moorish manner” were something of a rage in the United States. Longwood, the octagonal villa in Mississippi cotton country left unfinished by the outbreak of the Civil War is, perhaps, the best known example of the Moorish type, but dwellings tricked out in horseshoe arches, domes, and minarets were also to be found in the respectable confines of Brooklyn and Bridgeport and came highly recommended in manuals for builders.²² The Spanish or Moorish style was another welcome option in an age of eclectic taste. It alluded to the increased volume of writing on the discovery of the New World at mid-century, books which had made the names of the Alhambra, Seville, and Granada as familiar to educated readers as the story of Columbus himself. But thirty years later, in Chicago, the Spanish style hinted at another sea-change in the national psyche: the erosion of the white, Protestant, New England-based account of American history, the monolithic genesis story that had always begun with the Pilgrim Fathers and with Plymouth Rock.

The reconstruction of La Rabida, according to Susan Prendergast Schoelwer, represents a broadening of the accepted definition of Amer-

20. Buel, *Magic City*, unpaginated.

21. For Delacroix’s Columbus paintings, see, e.g., Phoebe Pool, *Delacroix* (New York: Paul Hamlyn, 1969), 35.

22. Wayne Andrews, *Architecture, Ambitions, and Americans*, rev. ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 137–38. One of the most famous Moorish follies was “Iranistan,” P.T. Barnum’s house outside Bridgeport, Conn.; it burned down in 1858.

ica's colonial origins.²³ Before the 1893 fair, a gathering Colonial Revival had centered on the dwellings and furnishings of the eastern colonies, from Peregrine White's cradle to the houses in which George Washington once slept.²⁴ But for the Columbian Exposition, at least four states—from the South and West—chose headquarters influenced by the Spanish colonial tradition. California described its headquarters as a composite of "the old Mission style" with allusions to surviving mission compounds at Santa Barbara, San Luis Rey, and San Diego. The Texas pavilion showed "early Spanish influences" thanks to windows modeled after a San Antonio mission. The Colorado building, in the grander Spanish Renaissance style, aimed to recall the "Spanish-Mooresque influences" on the state's first settlements.²⁵ Eschewing such vague approximations, Florida came up with a ½-scale reproduction of the 1620 San Juan de Piños in St. Augustine.²⁶ Just as the Chicago Fair as a whole attested to the vigor and distinctive modernity of the West, so the buildings of the younger states beyond the boundaries of the old thirteen colonies bespoke a separate collective identity for the West, at odds with the accepted New England myths. The Spanish Colonial style of 1893 argued for historical pluralism, the acknowledgment of regional differences, an admission that tradition and antiquity were not the singular attributes of the Atlantic seaboard.

The contents of La Rabida proved fascinating mainly on the grounds of their associations with Columbus, and with the nobles and potentates who lent them to the Exposition (including the Pope and the Duke of Veragua, "whose name is Christopher Columbus").²⁷ Although samples of the hero's own handwriting excited some interest, individual relics were, for the most part, subordinate to the general impression of age and high romance created by the collection as a whole. "Upon everything," wrote the author of a souvenir book, "were the stamp, the air, the remembrance of feudal times, the age of chivalry, and the achievements of Columbus."²⁸ Only the portrait gallery came in for closer scrutiny. By William Curtis's own admission—he found "no evidence that the features of Columbus were ever painted . . . during his life"—all the purported likenesses failed the test of authenticity: there were instead types or groups of Columbus pictures, descended from woodcuts and engravings published in early accounts of his voyages. But that did not prevent Curtis from hanging a so-called "Iconografia Columbina," consisting of "every available portrait" of

23. Susan Prendergast Schoelwer, "Curious Relics and Quaint Scenes: The Colonial Revival at Chicago's Great Fair," in Alan Axelrod, ed., *The Colonial Revival in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 205.

24. Marling, *George Washington Slept Here*, 53–84.

25. Schoelwer, "Curious Relics," 206.

26. By 1904, at the next great American fair, the Western state buildings had become almost uniformly Spanish or "mission" in style; see *The Greatest of Expositions* (St. Louis: Official Photographic Company of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1904), 86, 93, 100, 114, 116, 120, 123.

27. *The Dream City* (St. Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1893), unpaginated.

28. Buel, *Magic City*, unpaginated.

the navigator and a group of more modern works relating to his life and adventures.²⁹

In so doing, Curtis was responding to a cultural imperative that demanded accurate representations of heroes. In an age of photography, a period awash in mass-produced pictorial material of all kinds, the public declined to put much credence in things that could not be seen. So, throughout the 1870s and 80s, in the aftermath of the centenary, scholars had labored to reconstruct the physical likeness of American heroes like Washington through comparative analysis of all known portraits of them.³⁰ It was during the centennial epoch, for instance, that the oval-shaped Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington known as the “Athenaeum” came to be accepted as definitive largely because it had been painted from life under circumstances well-documented in the historical record and because it was consistent in appearance with the main features of other, less skillful renderings. Although the catalogues sold in La Rabida conferred sanction on no comparable Columbian picture, a generic Christopher Columbus image emerged nonetheless. Found in newspaper ads for sales at “The Columbus—the Model Dry Goods Store of Chicago” and in the large numbers of heroic statues that adorned every corner of the fairgrounds, the Columbus of 1893 was a beardless, square-faced man in his middle years, with straight hair cropped at the jawline, often bareheaded but sometimes wearing a distinctive hat, with a slashed and upturned brim.³¹

The proliferation of Columbus statuary at the fair testifies to the mass appeal of visual representation, comprehensible alike to newcomers and illiterates, socialites, old Americans, and foreign visitors. The size of most of the statues—and they were very large indeed—matched the prevailing hyperbole of the exposition as a whole, as vast in scale as the aspirations that engendered it. The Gorham Manufacturing Company thus sent a Columbus in solid silver, weighing more than 30,000 Troy ounces.³² A German plant specializing in heavy machinery sent a gigantic Columbus of iron, emblazoned with an advertisement for the firm. A Parisian maker of statuary bronzes sent a towering Columbus as a sample of its craftsmanship.³³

These commercial figures (most of which showed Columbus at the tiller of his ship) were more than matched in bulk by the official, commissioned

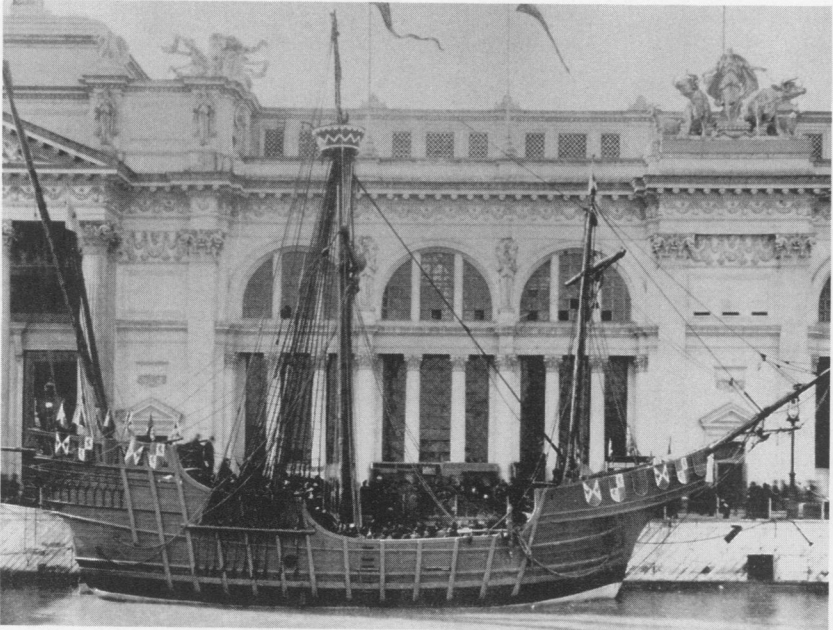
29. The exhibition was first assembled for a Spanish exposition in Madrid and later moved to Chicago. See *Report of the United States Commission to the Columbian Historical Exposition of Madrid, 1892–1893* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895) and William Eleroy Curtis, *Christopher Columbus, His Portraits and His Monuments: A Descriptive Catalogue*, Part II (Chicago: W. H. Lowdermilk, 1893).

30. E.g., W. S. Baker, *The Engraved Portraits of Washington* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Baker, 1880). In 1877, Jane Stuart, Gilbert Stuart’s daughter, also published important accounts of the circumstances under which his Washington portraits had been painted. See Marling, *George Washington Slept Here*, 395 and *passim*.

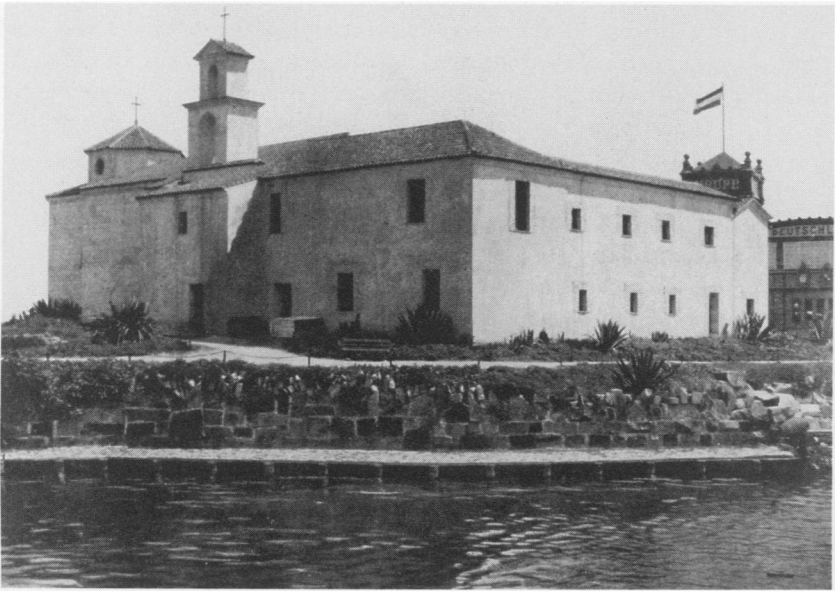
31. See ad, *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1893, p. 40.

32. *Report of the Board of General Managers*, 87.

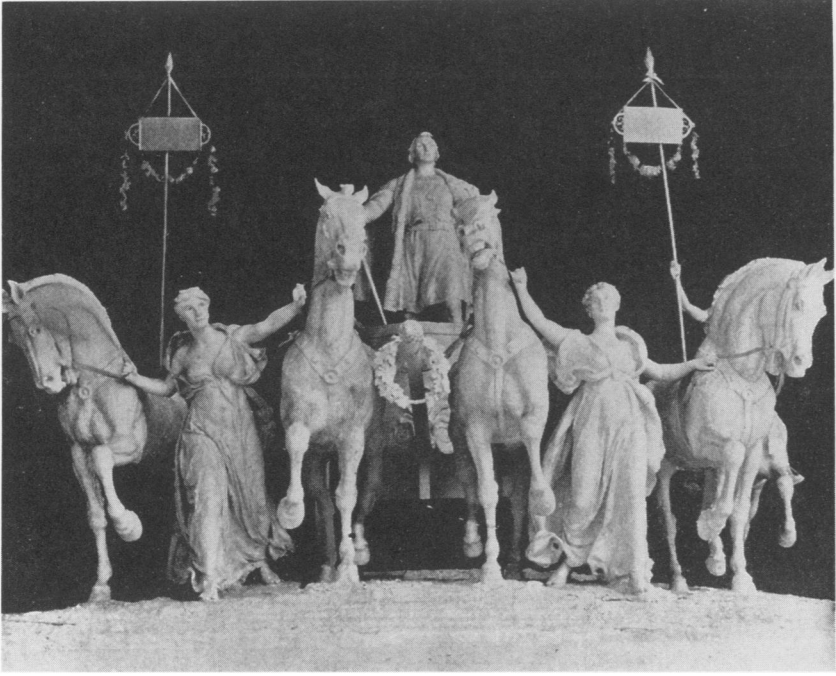
33. *Columbian Gallery*, unpaginated.



Tourists visiting the *Santa María* replica berthed at the 1893 World's Fair. (*The Dream City* [St. Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1893], unpaginated.)



A reproduction of La Rabida, which helped to inspire a revival in Spanish Colonial architecture. (*The Dream City* [St. Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1893] unpaginated.)



The Columbus Quadriga by French and Potter, an awkward blend of allegory and realism. (*The Dream City* [St. Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1893], unpaginated.)



Miss Mary T. Lawrence's definitive Columbus, outside the Administration Building. Bitter's puzzling water allegories stand at the far left and right. (*The Dream City* [St. Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1893], unpaginated.)

sculptures designed to enrich and enhance specific architectural settings. Like the buildings themselves, the outdoor statues were blindingly white in color and were made from a material called “staff,” a combination of plaster and straw or other binding agents. Unlike the usual recalcitrant media in which artists worked, staff was readily molded or modeled into any shape imaginable and in practice, participating sculptors made small models which were turned over to technicians for enlargement and fabrication. In theory, then, with little physical difficulty, any given statue could be as large as good taste or an empty niche dictated, and in practice, the process seems to have encouraged a kind of grandiosity not always supported by the form and content of the piece in question. But they were impressively large and exceedingly numerous.

The most prominent of the big, white Columbi was the centerpiece of the Columbus Quadriga perched atop the central arch of the colonnade or peristyle that framed a view of Lake Michigan. Designed by Daniel Chester French and the animal sculptor, Edward C. Potter, the group depicted the standard, beardless Columbus in an allegorical setting, composed of a Roman chariot, four horses, and attendant figures in classical drapery. An allusion to the triumphal return of Columbus to Spain (and to similar monuments, such as Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate), the quadriga also marked the point at which the spirit of the great explorer metaphorically entered the fairgrounds from the waters of the lake. The difficulty of seeing a work mounted high in the air, well above normal sight lines, meant that the Columbus Quadriga was known to the public mainly through photographs, taken while the various parts were still being assembled in the Forestry Building. And, although some guidebooks lamented the placement—and even wished the quadriga had been much bigger, to compensate for the long-distance view—the obscurity of the symbolism diminished its effectiveness as public sculpture, comprehensible to all.³⁴ Fairgoers, by and large, preferred a real, honest-to-gosh Columbus, busily finding the New World.

The most popular Columbus at the fair was engaged in no obscure intercourse with imaginary creatures. Instead, he stood bold and forthright, under the East Portal of the Administration Building, a naked sword in his right hand, the standard of Spain in his left, taking possession of America once again. Like a page from a history book suddenly come to life, the gesture of the statue sketched its own context: the long voyage, land sighted at last, the weary crew stumbling ashore, Columbus acknowledging his duty to Church and sovereign from atop a great square pedestal that elevated his act to universal significance. Acclaimed for its narrative clarity and boldness, the statue undoubtedly benefited from proximity to

34. *Dream City*, unpaginated, contains the best account of the \$15,000 piece, its manufacture, and its effect on the public. For a helpful discussion of the problem of allegory in the period, see Michele H. Bogart, *Public Sculpture and the Civic Ideal in New York City, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

a pair of allegories by Karl Bitter, entitled “Water: Controlled” and “Water: Uncontrolled.” The Bitters presented such a “confused appearance of gigantic forms” that most “ordinary visitors found it hard to grasp [their] purpose and meaning.” The Columbus, by contrast, seemed refreshingly straightforward, documentary, real—and it was something of a curiosity, too, by virtue of the fact that the sculptor was Miss Mary T. Lawrence, a pupil of Augustus Saint-Gaudens.³⁵ “It is significant of woman’s future, as it is of her ability to rise to the noblest conceptions, and to create forms of her brilliant fancies, that a woman should design and execute this chief monumental figure at the Fair,” wrote one supportive male critic.³⁶

In fact, the fair’s women—the Board of Lady Managers—had divided sharply over the issue of how the Columbian anniversary ought to be represented and by whom. Although the socialites and moderate reformers who dominated the committee charged with coordinating women’s activities were determined to encourage the endeavors of Mary Lawrence and her sisters in the arts, incipient suffragettes scoffed at such tokenism. Instead, they laid plans to counter each Columbus with an image of Queen Isabella and to honor her as the “co-discoverer of America.” The projected centerpiece of their campaign was a statue of Isabella, frozen in the act of stepping down from her throne and handing over her jewels to finance the discovery of America. Harriet Hosmer, perhaps the best-known of the circle of American sculptresses then resident in Rome (where they were insulated from the disapproval of their countrymen), accepted the commission in 1891. An admiring San Francisco lady, who saw the finished product in 1894, described it in rapturous terms:

The Queen listens [to Columbus], the spicy breezes touch her brow, her poetic and spiritual nature are stirred, until heart, brain, and noble resolve crystallize into action, and *that* supreme moment you have placed before us!³⁷

But few visitors to the exposition actually caught sight of Isabella, hidden as she was in a peculiar grass structure appended to the rear of the California pavilion. In the end, the militants of the Queen Isabella Association had been outflanked by the moderates and Hosmer’s too-assertive statue was the first casualty of their defeat.³⁸

The Isabellas’ few victories were minor ones: Mrs. Potter Palmer, head of the Lady Managers, referred to Her Majesty in several speeches; the mint struck commemorative quarters bearing the monarch’s regal visage—quarters that sold poorly in the Women’s Building (at \$1 apiece). But the campaign to create a distaff equal to Columbus was doomed to failure as much by the familiarity of Columbian iconography as by resistance to femi-

35. *Report of the Board of General Managers*, 629.

36. Buel, *Magic City*, unpaginated.

37. Quoted in Cornelia Carr, ed., *Harriet Hosmer, Letters and Memories* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1912), 329–30.

38. Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 60–70.

nist ideology. The story of the discovery of America demanded a handful of pictorial ingredients—a seashore, a man with a banner and a sword, perhaps a distant ship, or a respectful Indian—already hallowed by usage and tradition. And the Catholic Queen of Spain was, at best, a grace note among them. The several early to mid-nineteenth century Columbus murals in the U.S. Capitol, copies of which were displayed in La Rabida, followed this attenuated formula, for example. When she appeared at all, Isabella was relegated to subsidiary scenes, along with other attendant figures, such as friars and members of the crew.³⁹ So deeply ingrained was the spare iconography of discovery that even foreign nationals clung to the accepted conventions. A *Landing of Columbus* submitted to the fair's art exhibition by J. Ayvasovsky, a Russian marine painter, was roundly praised, therefore, for its conformity to standard American practice. The novelty of the conception lay in the close study of the colors of the ocean and the action of the waves: the key figure, on the other hand, could have walked straight out of the recently issued "quatro-centennial postage stamp."⁴⁰

Easy recognition of historical figures through a restricted vocabulary of costume and gesture was also the key to the successful pageant, and in the 1890s, pageantry was the most significant of the art forms that brought history to the attention of a large public audience. The pageant was a sort of historical pantomime: while poetry and dialogue were read aloud, while music played, familiar scenes were enacted by silent performers, identified mainly through their distinctive clothing and actions. Queen Isabella was the lady in the crown and the jewels and the gorgeous dress; Columbus—the same Columbus whose picture sold dry goods in the newspapers—was the fellow with the sword and the flag and the plucky tilt of the head. A true mass spectacle, the pageant depended for its dramatic effect upon enormous casts and equally huge audiences. A profoundly democratic art form, the pageant, like the silent film that succeeded it in the affections of ordinary Americans, transcended all barriers of language, education, and class. Anybody could enjoy a kaleidoscope of simple pictures that moved.⁴¹

Given the popularity of pageantry and its proven ability to inculcate sound American values, the interest of the fair's planners in sponsoring a Columbian presentation is not surprising. Nor was the the choice of

39. Among these Columbian murals are the Brumidi frescoes of ca. 1859–60 and John Vanderlyn's *Landing of Columbus* of 1837–47 in the Rotunda; see *Compilation of Works of Art and Other Objects in the U.S. Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 116, 305, 320, 368. The same generalization holds true for the iconography of the famous Columbus doors to the Rotunda, by Randolph Rogers (1850).

40. *Fine Arts at the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1894), unpaginated. Albert Bierstadt's *Landing of Columbus* (along with its companion piece, *Yosemite*) was lent to the New York State Building for display but architectural peculiarities of the structure did not permit the picture to be hung.

41. Karal Ann Marling, "Parades, Pageantry, and the Colonial Revival: The Influence of Popular Culture on the Evolution of Style, 1876–1932," in Irving Lavin, ed., *World Art: Themes of Unity in Diversity*, Vol. III (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 690–91.



The Russian Columbus by J. Ayvasovsky. (*Fine Arts at the World's Columbian Exposition* [Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1894], unpaginated.)

Steele MacKaye to produce and direct an original musical extravaganza based on the life of Christopher Columbus. The impresario who brought Buffalo Bill's Wild West show to Madison Square Garden in 1886, MacKaye was also the leading pageant-master of his day. Regarding the Columbus show as the pinnacle of a long career in popular entertainment, he took to his Chicago assignment with characteristic energy.⁴² He hired Dvořák to write the score (later incorporated into the *New World Symphony*) and a cast of thousands to sew the costumes, find the props, and play the parts. And he built a 10,000-seat, \$550,000 outdoor arena—the Spectatorium—on the shores of Lake Michigan to house the show.

The Spectatorium had to be big, MacKaye said, to give a true picture of the staggering greatness of his hero. Inside the yawning oval, there were twenty-five moving stages mounted on miles of hidden railroad track and a moat large enough to accommodate Columbus's ships afloat. But *The World Finder* never opened. Although the public was eager to see what the master showman had wrought and MacKaye was lauded for innovations in stagecraft that resulted in numerous new patents, he simply ran out of money before the amphitheater was finished. The hulk stood, unoccupied, at the north end of the grounds until the fair was in full

42. David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 168.

swing. Then, in October of 1893, the Spectatorium was demolished for salvage: the \$2,250 realized from the sale of the iron support beams went straight to MacKaye's creditors.⁴³

Chicago did not want for a Columbus pageant, however. Downtown, in the beautiful Chicago Auditorium, Imre Kiralfy filled the gap with a new prologue to his *America*, a "grand historical spectacle" or stage pageant which had already toured the nation since 1891 with the Barnum and Bailey Circus. The revised version mounted in Chicago to run concurrently with the 1893 fair began with five additional scenes tracing the Spanish background of the usual Puritans-to-Civil-War saga. The Inquisition, the seaport of Huelva, the Atlantic Ocean, the landing at San Salvador, and the triumph of Columbus in Barcelona all afforded ample scope for the lush staging and dazzling crowd choreography Kiralfy loved.⁴⁴ The Columbian segment of *America* included, according to the lip-smacking prose of the ads, a "Picturesque Ballet of 300 beautiful Male and Female Dancers before the Moorish King in the Famed Palace of the Alhambra in Granada: A Most Entrancing Terpsichorean Interlude in the Magnificent Spectacle of Columbus!"⁴⁵

With Steele MacKaye out of the picture, Kiralfy soon became the fair's unofficial pageant-master, too, designing costumes and lending directorial acumen to the variety of amateur productions that filled the void left by the disappearance of *The World Finder*. The poshest of these was the series of *tableaux vivants* illustrating the Seven Ages of Columbus presented in the Womens' Building in the autumn of the year. Described as "one of the most important society events which have taken place on the World's Fair grounds," it was an invitation-only affair and the guest list of 2,400 notables included members of the Cabinet, visiting royalty, and Mrs. Grover Cleveland. Mrs. Potter Palmer, doyenne of the American West, presided over rehearsals in the New York State Building, where persons of high social standing struggled to impersonate lesser mortals, like common sailors and anonymous members of the Spanish court. Miss Olivia Slocum, for example, played the hero's mother in a scene entitled "The Boyhood of Columbus" and fourteen mama's darlings in golden wigs tossed colored balls to one another in the public square of Genoa in the crucial "Inspiration of Columbus" number.⁴⁶

But while high society did its bit for Columbus, the same seven scenes, plus a glorious apotheosis, were mounted on wagons, drawn by matched teams of horses in appropriate colors (black steeds for the "Death of Columbus" and so forth), and pulled through the fairgrounds at night, for

43. "Tearing Down the Spectatorium," *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1893, p. 4.

44. Imre Kiralfy, *Imre Kiralfy's Grand Historical Spectacle America* (Chicago: privately printed, 1893), 11–21.

45. Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 30.

46. "Crown for Columbus," *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1893, p. 2, and "Try the Tableaux," *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1893, p. 4. Harriet Monroe wrote the words spoken while the Death of Columbus, the last scene, was being mimed.

the edification of anyone who cared to watch. This so-called “night pageant” of slow-moving floats brought the *tableaux* to the audience in a highly dramatic manner, greatly enhanced by torches, gaslights, and other forms of nighttime illumination that added mystery, glitter, and theatrical élan to the passing spectacle. “The Court of Isabella” float, topped by a canopy of rippling purple silk, was especially effective after dark, when the play of light and shadow made ordinary metal shine like gold and turned glass into rubies and sapphires. It was “the most magnificent and expensive float in the entire procession,” read one report, “illustrious . . . that moment of supreme dramatic interest when Isabella decides to offer up her jewels. . . .”⁴⁷ The iconographic cachet that Isabella woefully lacked in the realm of the fine arts, she finally achieved in the darkened streets of the Columbian Exposition, where she glistened and gleamed like a bejeweled society lady, bound for an exclusive evening of pageantry in the Women’s Building.

The bright, spotlight illumination of the characters in the night parade helped to establish a direct connection between onlooker and historical figure: in the darkness that isolated one spectator from another, Columbus and Isabella spoke exclusively to the individual watcher, just as the singer standing in a pool of light on a darkened stage sings to you or me alone. The impression of intimacy was reinforced by the historical content of the parade: unlike the society *tableaux*, which began and ended with Columbus, the parade carried the American saga up to the present, with special attention to showy depictions of the Great Fire of 1871. This imagistic continuum linked the present with the distant past, the average Chicgoan with Columbus himself. It made history a fact of life in the modern world, resonant and pertinent. And it helps to explain the appeal of the souvenir spoons that tourists bore off by the thousands from the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

Credit for turning teaspoons into souvenirs by the addition of descriptive elements to handle and bowl usually goes to Daniel Low, who began to market “witch” spoons in Salem, Massachusetts in 1890: 1893 marked the frantic height of the craze.⁴⁸ As a memento of a trip, the spoon had the advantage of being small—easy to carry away in bag or pocket—useful back home, and intrinsically valuable. As an object of personal usage, however, the spoon also established a bond between the owner, the collector, and the event commemorated. It was an avowal of intimacy, familiarity, connectedness. And more than any other single keepsake of the Chicago Fair, be it photo album of artworks or Isabella quarter, the

47. “Chicago Day,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 9, 1893, pp. 1, 3. The fifth, or Landing Scene, used Indians borrowed for the night from Colonel Cody’s Wild West Show.

48. Marling, *George Washington Slept Here*, 160–61. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 246, comments on the feeling of intimacy with the past engendered by actual relics. I am suggesting that images (and souvenirs) function in the same way.



A Columbian souvenir spoon, with the hero on the handle. (Collection of the author.)

Columbian spoon serves as a reminder that the imagery directed at the fair-going masses in 1893 was a powerful agent of historical understanding on that intimate, one-on-one, teaspoon-in-hand level, helping to affirm a shared heritage and to unite a diverse people separated by barriers of class, gender, geography, and ethnicity.