

Cairo Street: The Persistence of the Egyptian Myth in the Age of World's Fairs

Josh Martin

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Dr. Jonathon Berkey

The late 19th century was marked by rapid change through modernization. Many Western countries strove to outdo one another in terms of technology, economy, and especially colonial land holdings. The world's fairs became one of the most important arenas of this kind of one-upmanship. World's fairs enabled countries to show off to one another in a very public manner through various types of exhibits. These fairs lasted for several months and saw tens of millions of visitors from around the world. New advancements in technology were unveiled to the world at these expositions, from the telegraph to the infant incubator. World's fairs were not only spaces for showcasing the advancements of this time period, but also for presenting the cultures of foreign nations. During this age of acute Western nationalism, non-Western nations were often seen as grossly inferior to the developed Western empires. It was through this nationalistic fervor that world's fairs became important spaces for cultural expression, for Western and non-Western countries alike. The world's fairs of the late 19th century had a profound impact on Western notions of Egypt. Through the "Cairo Street" exhibits at these fairs, Egyptian culture was presented in a performative and commercialized manner. As Western tourists flocked to these exhibits, the myth of Egypt as a strange and ancient land in a modern world persisted.

In the summer of 1889, a delegation of Egyptians visited the Exposition Universelle in Paris on their way to Sweden. The Exposition Universelle was one of the most impressive world's fairs to date and was dominated by the unveiling of an enormous, iron lattice tower designed by Gustave Eiffel. While exploring the fairgrounds they visited the Egyptian exhibit, the "Rue de Caire." They were alarmed to find that the exhibit was a winding and crowded street that resembled a chaotic marketplace. The delegation was surprised to see Frenchmen dressed as

Egyptians selling all sorts of concessions including rides on imported Egyptian donkeys.<sup>1</sup> When the delegation visited a building that appeared to be a mosque they found that it was a facade, one visitor commenting that “its external form as a mosque was all that there was. As for the interior, it had been set up as a coffee house, where Egyptian girls performed dances with young males, and dervishes whirled.”<sup>2</sup> While the Egyptian delegation was angered by the blatant commercialization of their culture, Western fairgoers were delighted to visit the exhibit advertised to be an authentic representation of Egypt.

The Cairo Street exhibit was one of many exhibits at the Exposition Universelle that claimed to showcase the culture of non-Western countries. Before the emergence of world’s fairs, the only means for Westerners to engage with foreign cultures was visual art or travel narratives.<sup>3</sup> There was a wave of European romanticism of eastern cultures that historians would later call “Orientalism.” David Roberts emerged as one of the preeminent Orientalist painters of his time. Ironically, David Roberts produced several famous paintings depicting scenes of Egypt before he had even traveled there.<sup>4</sup> Roberts would eventually travel throughout Egypt and continue to make paintings that emphasized the pharaonic age of Egypt, often depicting the ancient temples and pyramids that he saw during his travels. Roberts’ paintings contributed to the pervasive myth that Egypt was still an ancient and un-modern land. This stereotype was fueled by the rise of Western nationalism that characterized the age of world’s fairs. This nationalism led Europeans to other non-Western cultures. David Roberts othered Egyptian culture to a certain extent. After witnessing a slave market in Alexandria, he wrote that he was

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Mitchell, "Egypt at the Exhibition," In *Colonising Egypt: With a New Preface* (University of California Press, 1988), 1, accessed March 25, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Young, "From the Eiffel Tower to the Javanese Dancer: Envisioning Cultural Globalization at the 1889 Paris Exhibition," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 3 (2008): 354, accessed March 25, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Manu Samriti Chander, "Framing Difference: The Orientalist Aesthetics of David Roberts and Percy Shelley," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 60 (2011): 79, accessed April 4, 2020.

proud that he “belonged to a nation who had abolished slavery.”<sup>5</sup> Roberts’ attitude of Western superiority was shared by many other Europeans and was solidified in the environment of the world’s fairs.

The world’s fair held in 1893 in Chicago was named the Columbian Exposition in celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the New World. The Columbian Exposition marked the second world’s fair to be held in the United States and its organizers intended to surpass 1889 World’s Fair in every way. The Columbian Exposition consisted of two main areas: the White City and Midway Plaisance. The White City consisted of dozens of white-painted buildings which housed exhibits dedicated to subjects such as agriculture and technology. This area of the fairgrounds was meant to show off American ingenuity and superiority. While the White City’s purpose was to educate, the Midway Plaisance’s purpose was to entertain. This mile-long strip was chock full of tourist attractions from a Colorado Gold Mine to the first Ferris Wheel. Midway Plaisance featured many exhibits that aimed to present foreign cultures to Western tourists. These exhibits were organized in a Darwinian fashion with more “primitive” societies such as American Indians situated farthest away from the White City, the symbol of Western modernity. While there were official national displays sponsored by foreign governments in the central grounds of the fair, the displays in the Midway Plaisance “were set up as private enterprises on the basis of concessions granted to them.”<sup>6</sup> The purpose of these exhibits was to make a profit through the entertainment of its visitors.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>6</sup> István Ormos, “The Cairo Street at the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893,” in *L’Orientalisme architectural entre imaginaires et savoirs*, eds. Nabila Oulebsir and Mercedes Volait (Paris: OpenEdition Books, 2017): 5.

The Cairo Street exhibit at the Columbian Exposition was the brainchild of George Pangalo, a banker of mixed ancestry from Cairo. Upon hearing about the Columbian Exposition in 1890, Pangalo requested an audience with the Khedive, the ruler of Egypt, and earned his blessing for the project. Pangalo began to consult with Max Herz, a preeminent architect for the Egyptian government, as he made plans for the exhibit.<sup>7</sup> As the Columbian Exposition drew nearer, the Khedive expressed concerns about the project to Pangalo, citing the inauthenticity of the mosque in the Cairo Street exhibit of the prior world's fair in 1889. George Pangalo assured the Khedive that the mosque would be a place of prayer exclusively for Muslim fairgoers. Additionally, Pangalo asserted: "I can portray the Egyptian nation in its true light, and make my exhibit instructive as well as worthy of amusement seekers."<sup>8</sup> After solidifying the Khedive's endorsement, George Pangalo began to plan the meticulous organization of the exhibit. He began efforts to recruit local Egyptian men and women to be a part of the exhibit, spreading the word by handbills and word of mouth.

Pangalo also gathered materials needed to make the exhibit's buildings to look "authentically Egyptian." He sought after *mashrabiyyas*, closed balconies made of wood which had become a fixture of traditional Egyptian architecture. Ironically, by the late 19th century, *mashrabiyyas* in Egypt were rapidly being replaced by European-style glass windows.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, Pangalo purchased as many *mashrabiyyas* as he could to be incorporated in the exhibit's buildings. This decision suggests an attempt by Pangalo to present a more traditional, and thereby more recognizable, version of Egypt to the Western nationalist audience. In March 1893,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8

George Pangalo departed for Chicago on a steamboat along with “175 persons (men, women and children), plus baggage, goods, 7 camels, 20 donkeys, monkeys, snakes and provisions.”<sup>10</sup>

The Cairo Street exhibit at the Columbian Exposition consisted of 26 edifices including a working mosque modeled after an actual funerary mosque in Cairo.<sup>11</sup> Just like the exhibit in Paris, the Cairo Street in Chicago was teeming with activity. There were numerous attractions within the winding street, including staged marriage processions in the street, camel rides, and snake charmers. Nearly every attraction at the exhibit had a price and tourists were eager to pay for the endless entertainment that Cairo Street offered. In fact, the Cairo Street exhibit was more financially successful than the Ferris Wheel, grossing \$880,000 USD.<sup>12</sup> Fairgoers flocked to see the exhibit that was advertised to be the next best thing to visiting the real city Cairo in person. One catalog proclaimed: “The visitor to this concession will be able to experience all the delights of a visit to that world-famed city, with none of the attendant discomforts.”<sup>13</sup> Ironically, while Cairo Street was staffed by many Egyptian men and women recruited by George Pangalo, there were also Westerners in Egyptian costumes who worked at the exhibit. Describing the stores in Cairo Street one visitor wrote: “Pretty American girls have been engaged to help along business, and some have been induced to keep up the appearance. . . by attiring themselves in real Egyptian garb.”<sup>14</sup> Despite being presented as a genuine anthropological experience to visitors,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition*, (LINCOLN; LONDON: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 6, accessed March 25, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> World's Columbian Exposition, *The World's Columbian Exposition Illustrated*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, Ill.: Published by James B. Campbell, 189): *Smithsonian Collections Online*, 244 (accessed March 24, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Cummings Truman, *History of the World's Fair: Being a Complete and Authentic Description of the Columbian Exposition from Its Inception: by Major Ben. C. Truman; with Special Articles by Hon. Geo. R. Davis, Thos. W. Palmer, Mrs. Potter Palmer, Major Moses P. Handy, D. H. Burnham, John Thorpe, Thomas B. Bryan; and Numerous Other People Prominently Connected with the Exposition*. [s.l.]: [s.n.], 1893. *Smithsonian Collections Online*, 553, accessed March 24, 2020.

the Cairo Street exhibit seemed to be more focused on cashing out on flashy, attention-grabbing features that attracted paying customers.

Incorporating the traditional *mashrabiya*s in the buildings of the exhibit was not the only way in which George Pangalo played on Western conceptions of Egypt as a nation frozen in time. In addition to the outdated balconies that lined the buildings, the exhibit featured a replica of an ancient Pharaonic temple. Pangalo's decision to highlight Egypt's Pharaonic period can be understood to be an attempt to capitalize on its significance to the predominantly Christian audience.<sup>15</sup> Visitors could pay an entrance fee to enter the temple where they might view a staged procession in which "two priests of Isis, draped with leopard skins, stood erect in position, and the solemn Egyptian chants. . . were sung."<sup>16</sup> In addition viewing the elaborately recreated ancient ceremony, visitors could pay extra to tour a shrine of replica mummies and could also purchase souvenirs such as Columbian Exposition branded scarabs and miniature obelisks.<sup>17</sup> Just as the *mashrabiya*s did not reflect Cairo streets of this time period, the replica Pharaonic temple was more closely related to Western stereotypes of Egypt than true Egyptian culture. In reality, Egypt was much closer to modernity than the Cairo Street exhibit suggested. The emphasis on traditional architecture and pharaonic imagery presented Egypt to be a nation that was frozen in time. One guidebook's description of the Cairo Street exhibit at the Chicago fair stated: "there is nothing to remind you of the 19th century, save the costumes of the visitors who are there, like yourself, and whom you might wish elsewhere that you might enjoy your dream."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> István Ormos, "Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago: A New, Fresh Reading," in *Dialogues artistiques avec les passés de l'Égypte Une perspective transnationale et transmédiiale*, eds. Mercedes Volait and Emmanuelle Perrin, (Paris: OpenEdition Books, 2017), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Saffle, *Music and Culture in America, 1861-1918*, 273.

<sup>17</sup> Norm Bolotin and Christine Laing, *Chicago's Grand Midway: A Walk Around the World at the Columbian Exposition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017): 87.

<sup>18</sup> Christina Riggs, "Colonial Visions: Egyptian Antiquities and Contested Histories in the Cairo Museum," *Museum Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2013): 74.

The Cairo Street exhibits of the world's fairs in the late 19th century succeeded in attracting hordes of tourists who were eager to experience the many attractions found therein. While attractions such as the camel rides and the souvenir stores were lucrative, the most successful element of the Cairo Street exhibit in each world fair were the belly dancing performances. Belly dancing was a tradition in Egypt that predated Islam. Historically belly dancers performed on the streets, often during occasions such as a marriage. In 1834, however, the Egyptian government prohibited public displays of belly dancing and only allowed dancers to perform for private audiences.<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that belly dancing was becoming less prevalent in Egypt, it was a sensation among Westerners. Visitors flocked to the belly dancing performances in the Cairo Street exhibits. The belly dancing performances in the Cairo Street exhibit at the 1889 world's fair averaged a staggering two thousand attendants a day.<sup>20</sup> Although they were advertised as an "ethnographic" experience, these performances were often overly sexualized in the eyes of the Western viewers. After viewing a performance at the 1889 fair, one French writer commented: "For me, it would have been interesting danced by a nude woman."<sup>21</sup> This sort of fetishism was shared by many Westerners and made the performances so popular, despite that they did not accurately represent Egyptian culture.

The belly dancing performances in the 1893 Chicago world's fair were equally sensational. Americans were astounded by this style of dance which, due to the hypersexualization ascribed to the dance style, went against their contemporary morals.<sup>22</sup> The scandalous nature of this dancing inevitably brought in huge crowds of fairgoers who wanted to

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<sup>19</sup> Zeynep Çelik and Leila Kinney, "Ethnography and Exhibitionism at the Expositions Universelles," *Assemblage*, no. 13 (1990): 40, accessed April 4, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> István Ormos, "The Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893," 11.

see it for themselves. The performance theatre had such a great volume of visitors that it held continuous performances from 10 am until 10 pm.<sup>23</sup> One journalist called the belly dance “a dance that will deprive you of a peaceful night’s rest for months to come.”<sup>24</sup> Though the Cairo Street exhibit at the Columbian Exposition served as belly dancing’s introduction in America, performative belly dancing would go on to be popular in the United States after the 1893 world’s fair. The 1893 fair notably marked the beginning of the career of a famed mythical belly dancer known as “Little Egypt.” Although scholars claim that there are no handbills or advertisements from the Columbian Exposition that prove that there was a dancer by this moniker, her legacy continued well after the Exposition.<sup>25</sup> In 1894, there were four different belly dancers who regularly performed at Coney Island under the “Little Egypt” stage name.<sup>26</sup>

World’s fairs continued to play an important role in the presentation of foreign cultures to Western audiences into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1904, St. Louis hosted the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. The St. Louis world’s fair famously featured “human zoos”, exhibits that put non-Western people on display to be gawked at by fairgoers. This was a practice that began in 1889 when the organizers of the world’s fair in Paris created a display of indigenous people from its overseas colonies living in a primitive-looking village.<sup>27</sup> The St. Louis fair emphasized the observation of these “exotic” cultures and had an entire area called the Polyglot Pike that housed every cultural exhibit. The Polyglot Pike was created to be an even larger version of the Midway Plaisance and similarly featured many performative exhibits that often played on stereotypes and myths associated with the respective cultures. For example, the display for American Indians

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Saffle, *Music and Culture in America, 1861-1918*, 273.

<sup>24</sup> István Ormos, “The Cairo Street at the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893,” 12.

<sup>25</sup> Norm Bolotin and Christine Laing, *Chicago’s Grand Midway: A Walk Around the World at the Columbian Exposition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017): 84.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition*, 262.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

was reminiscent of the Wild West with choreographed performances depicting scenes such as surprise attacks on American wagons trains.<sup>28</sup>

The Cairo Street exhibit at the Polyglot Pike was equally performative and mythicized. Mirroring the past iterations of the Cairo Street exhibit, the exhibit in St. Louis featured native Egyptian people who were as much a part of the exhibit as the stylized buildings. They worked on the streets selling concessions such as camel rides through the busy street. However, belly dancing performances dominated the exhibit, just as they did in prior fairs. By 1904, Americans were more familiar with belly dancing and some famous dancers had nearly achieved celebrity status. The Cairo Street exhibit in St. Louis drew huge crowds by boasting performances by La Belle Fatima and La Belle Rose, two famous dancers of that time.<sup>29</sup> By the closing of the St. Louis fair, Western conceptions of Egyptian culture derived from these performances and exhibits had entered the mainstream through exposure in the world's fair circuit.

Through the Cairo Street exhibits, Western notions of Egypt were brought to the world stage. As fairgoers in Paris, Chicago, and St. Louis walked through the winding and chaotic street, they saw a culture that was decidedly strange and un-modern in comparison to their own. In Cairo Street, Egyptian culture was presented in the context of a show business that was run in a fashion similar to one of P. T. Barnum circuses. The profitable show that the exhibit provided to its visitors over-emphasized Egypt's ancient history and supposedly exotic practices, particularly belly dancing. The Egypt that was portrayed in Cairo Street solidified its otherness in the eyes of a Western audience. The impact of the Cairo Street exhibit is a testament to the profound influence of the world's fairs of this time period which were considered "encyclopedias

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 262.

of human knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> In this age of modern empires and Western nationalism, the Cairo Street exhibit served an authoritative guide to Egypt, for better or worse.

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<sup>30</sup> István Ormos, “The Cairo Street at the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893,” 2.

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