

“A New and Curious Route to Cairo” – World’s Fairs and the Stereotyping of the Middle East (1851–1893)

Holly O’Farrell, University of Limerick, Ireland

Abstract

This paper looks at the exhibiting of Middle Eastern cultures in the World’s Fairs of the nineteenth century, focusing mainly on the representation of the culture and people through staged scenes purportedly imitating real life. The Middle Eastern pavilions and streets at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, along with those of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, are looked at for their tendency to portray an image of the Middle East which was loaded with Orientalist stereotypes. Such stereotypes were often driven by imperialist and Western supremacist notions which were wrapped up in moralistic pretensions. The framing of the Middle East as a place which was in decline, barbaric and lacking the ethical makeup of Western Christianity became an important feature of these exhibitions. The presentation of Middle Eastern women at the World’s Fairs and the reactions to their performances reveals popular beliefs about the Orient which continued from traditional Orientalist texts and paintings. The portrayal of the region during these Fairs can be seen to have contributed to at least some of the stereotyping of the region which carries on into the twenty-first century.

Keywords: world’s fairs, Middle East, Orientalism, morality, gender, Imperialism

Introduction

While there had been travel between Europe and the Middle East for centuries, such expeditions were usually reserved for the privileged few. Most people's understanding of the region known as "The Orient" in the West came from travelogues, novels, and art. The World's Fairs of the nineteenth century were, for many, their first introduction to what was presented as an authentic view of the Middle East, its peoples, and cultures. Instead, the expositions more often promoted common stereotypes and continued to portray the Middle East in such a way as to "prove" the superiority of Western civilisation. This paper seeks to analyse the contribution of World's Fairs to nineteenth century perceptions of Middle Eastern culture in Western societies. As will be demonstrated, such perceptions continued into the twentieth century and can be seen to continue to be prevalent in contemporary Western discourse even today.

World's Fairs

The World's Fairs and Expositions Universelles were a phenomenon which began with the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. The intention behind such expositions was to display the progress, wealth and industry of the great nations of the Earth and their colonies (Flinn, 1893). Great halls, purpose built, were filled with the riches of various nations and industries who had been invited to take part in the exhibit.

The 1851 Great Exhibition began the trend for large scale displays and public attendance. Housed in the so-called Crystal Palace, this exhibition was both an achievement for its sheer size and for the many great inventions which were to be displayed over the five and a half months that the showcase was open. The Crystal Palace itself was a feat of engineering and architectural design; covering eighteen acres of ground, the building was constructed using an iron frame and sheets of glass (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019).

The success of the exhibition in not only displaying Britain's wealth, but also the glory of the many nations who took part, inspired a string of subsequent exhibitions of the same type in various cities around the world. These exhibitions became important institutions for the display of colonial territories, giving the Empire's citizens a glimpse of the far-flung reaches of their imperial domains. Between 1851 and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, nine exhibitions were held between the empires of Europe, the United States and the British colony of Australia. The style of the expositions changed in various ways over time, according to the trends for exhibiting, with large exhibition halls such as the Crystal Palace being replaced by smaller pavilions built to reflect the building's contents. This meant that certain industries created their own halls while the nations involved in the exposition built pavilions to reflect their cultures (Vegas & Mileto, 2013).

Although the expositions had begun mainly as sites where nations could demonstrate their industry, inventions and the spoils of their colonies, they eventually developed to include anthropological displays which had strong links to the colonial inclinations of Western nations of the day. Paul Greenhalgh writes:

Between 1889 and 1914, the exhibitions became a human showcase, when people from all over the world were brought to sites in order to be seen by others for their gratification and education. The normal method of display was to create a backdrop in a more or less authentic tableau-vivant fashion and situate the people

in it, going about what was thought to be their daily business. An audience would pay to come and stare. (Greenhalgh, 2000, p. 82)

Whole villages would be erected and native people from cultures perceived to be less developed than Western ruling powers were inserted into the mock communities to reside for the duration of the exhibition as living displays of colonial adventure and success. These human displays can arguably be linked back to the systems of taxonomy created by earlier scientists such as Carl Linnaeus (Fries, 2012; Pratt, 2008). The classification of the natural world eventually, and perhaps inevitably, led to the theory that some races and cultures were fundamentally less developed than others. Dividing species for display had been regular scientific practice since the Enlightenment with the foundation of the first curiosity cabinets and later museums. By the late nineteenth century, these modes of scientific classification were commonplace and racist evolutionary theories were popular with a public influenced by both science and religion (Mosse, 1985). As a result, the human displays were perceived as educational exhibits, presenting different cultures in a “sympathetic” anthropological manner.

Native villages became major attractions within the World’s Fairs, on the surface promoting an anthropological means for looking at other races. Underneath this, however, historians argue that the intentions were based on imperial concepts with the displays promoting such beliefs. Greenhalgh writes:

For the European nations who controlled an empire, the showing of native villages had several aims. It placed hitherto unrelated peoples of different parts of the empire together, physically and psychologically, and it centred the empire on the controlling imperial nation. The public could see at a glance the extent of the imperial pickings and feel in a real sense that it belonged to them. More importantly, it ‘revealed’ the apparently degenerate state the conquered peoples lived in, making the conquest not only more acceptable but necessary for their moral rescue. (Greenhalgh, 2000, p. 84)

An example of this was the “Negro Village” at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 which held 400 people and was a major attraction at the exhibition. The inhabitants had been transported from colonies to “live authentically” within the constructed village for the duration of the exhibition. These exhibits had a purpose of “promoting the benefits of colonialism and the superiority of European ways of life” (Rabinovitz, 1998, p. 60).

The presentation of non-Western nations, in opposition to Western nations became conventional practice in anthropological displays during the nineteenth century. Within the World’s Fairs displays, communities and cultures were put on show with differences to allegedly more advanced Western cultures highlighted and exaggerated for the benefit of paying customers. Although it was possible to enter the exhibits and walk streets designed to mimic those of far off civilisations, there was never any question of who, psychologically, the spectator was and who was on display. When visitors came from other parts of the world to attend the World’s Fairs, they often became part of the exhibits, their cultural differences depriving them of the privilege of spectatorship. Timothy Mitchell describes this phenomenon in his essay *Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order*, noting that, “as Europe consolidated its colonial power, non-European visitors found themselves continually being placed on exhibit or made the careful object of European curiosity” (Mitchell, 1998, p. 295). Mitchell describes instances in which Middle Eastern visitors to such exhibits felt as if they were the ones on display. The

urge to create a real world within the confines of the exhibition space led organisers to incorporate visitors from these regions into the display. Mitchell writes:

Even Middle Eastern monarchs who came in person to Europe were liable to be incorporated into its theatrical machinery. When the Khedive of Egypt visited Paris to attend the Exposition Universelle of 1867, he found that the Egyptian exhibit had been built to simulate medieval Cairo in the form of a royal palace. The Khedive stayed in the imitation palace during his visit and became a part of the exhibition, receiving visitors with medieval hospitality. (Mitchell, 1998, p. 296)

Although the Khedive may have relished the attention and willingly stayed in the palace, many of the other “human specimens” lived in less desirable settings with their lives a spectacle for the Western public to marvel at.

The various regions which historically made up the Orient had traditionally held the interest of and intrigued Western societies. Orientalist literature and art portrayed an exotic land filled with violence, luxury and illicit sexuality; a place brought to life in the pages of books such as *A Thousand and One Nights*. As a result, the Oriental pavilions and displays were to be among the favourites for visitors to the World’s Fairs (Barnett, 1933).

Considered the first of the World’s Fairs, the Great Exhibition of 1851, officially titled *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, was a massive success for London and the various nations that took part. The 1851 Exhibition brought together ideas of industry and nationalism. Badger Reid notes that “nationalism countered the inherent divisiveness and confusion of rabid change by offering a unifying principle which was not so abstract and beyond the popular understanding” (Badger, 1979, p. 4). Many of the exhibits focused on developments in the area of industry and invention with exhibitors coming from abroad to display the engineering and production of their nations. The focus of the 1851 Great Exhibition was less on anthropological displays yet the beginnings of the interest in the Orient at these fairs can be seen in the inclusion of exhibits by the Ottoman Empire and Egypt (Tenniel, 1851). Panoramas of the Holy Land and Egypt were popular features at the exhibit while a polyorama of Constantinople was also available to visitors wishing to see a vision of the exotic (Altick, 1978). For many visiting the Great Exhibition, these displays would be the closest they would come to seeing the Orient with their own eyes.

Later exhibitions became more motivated by the desire to create replicas of foreign lands and cultures and by the time of the Paris Exposition in 1889 the aim to recreate Oriental lands within the exhibition space was fully realised. Commentators on the exhibits write of “genuine Arabs”, “half nude” women, and boys riding donkeys as if they were catching a glimpse of a completely authentic scene from the Orient (*New York Times*, 1889). The Middle Eastern vistas were constructed in wood and filled with all the sights and sounds which the exhibition organisers felt could be seen in a typical Oriental street. Mock mosques were constructed, traditional dwellings along winding streets and the thoroughfares were filled with bazaars and donkeys, men and women producing crafts or practicing traditional music or dance. The work that went into creating an authentic scene was immense, but its authenticity must yet be questioned. The very nature of a representation is that it is the conception of those who create it rather than the authentic object. In this way, these displays will always bear the stamp of those who have produced them. The Oriental streets were not organic and included many sights to delight the Western viewer rather than to produce an authentic reproduction.

Mitchel describes one Middle Eastern visitor's reaction to the Exposition Universelle in Paris, 1889, recounting how the attempts to create a perfect copy of a street in medieval Cairo were so thorough that "even the paint on the buildings was made dirty" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 294). Every attempt was made to create a realistic Cairo street scene which reflected Western impressions of the Islamic world. The donkeys filling the streets, the belly dancers and the "Oriental" men selling their wares created a vision of the Orient which meant to satisfy Western imaginations but as Mitchell remarks, this can never be the reality. "The model, however realistic, always remained distinguishable from the reality it claimed to represent. Even though the paint was made dirty and the donkeys were brought from Cairo, the medieval Egyptian street at the Paris exhibition remained only a Parisian copy of the Oriental original". (Mitchell, 1998, p. 299).

Fernando Vegas and Camilla Mileto concur with this, maintaining that, "The least important part of this spectacle was its authenticity, an example of which was found at the 1894 San Francisco fair, where, since the local Japanese refused to pull rickshaws for the visitors, a group of Germans dressed in Oriental costumes did so instead." (Vegas & Mileto, 2013, p. 198). The questionable authenticity of the scenes at the World's Fairs did not seem to discourage visitors who flocked in their thousands each day to see the sights of the World's Fairs and Exposition Universelles. This type of exhibiting proved immensely popular and the World's Fairs were to have mock streets and living displays as part of the experience until the 1930s (Çelik, 1992).

Over the course of the nineteenth century the types of exhibits changed from industrial displays and scientific demonstrations to being concerned with a more fun and frivolous experience for visitors. By 1893 the World's fair in Chicago was to include experiences for fair goers such as the Ferris Wheel and pleasure boats. Included in the spectacles for visitors were again "native villages" in which visitors could safely explore other lands and have the experiences of real travel without the actual dangers associated with travelling to such exotic places. Behind these spectacles and the evident advantages of visiting a tailor-made native village, the imperial rationale and motivation on the part of exhibition organisers can be clearly viewed in the manner in which more vulnerable, less developed nations and groups of people are placed on display.

The moral stimulus for these exhibits can also be witnessed in the same methods which place those outside the West on opposite sides of an imaginary (or in the case of the World's Fairs, a physical) fence. The "us versus them" mentality had been in practice for hundreds of years before the advent of such expositions, but the development of scientific methods which categorise and group the natural world allowed for an interpretation of different groups of people which was to elevate some to positions of natural primacy over others. The promotion of exhibits of different cultures as being scientific displays attempted to make acceptable the interest of Western audiences in seeing the exotic and apparently primitive peoples. By the time of the 1893 Columbian exhibition, the lure of the exotic Middle East drew visitors who came to the Midway Plaisance to view the spectacles of the Street in Cairo, the Tunisian village and the notorious *danse du ventre*. An umbrella term' the *danse du ventre* or belly dance (English translation), was used to describe the dances traditionally performed throughout the Middle East. Witnesses were taken aback by the wild movements of the women who performed the dances and the displays quickly became news.

The Exposition Universelle, 1889 and the Rue du Caire

The Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 included many of the features which are seen as emblematic of nineteenth century World's Fairs. Its North African and Middle Eastern pavilions portrayed a much stylised view of the regions, motivated by imperialism and orientalist traditions. The *Rue du Caire* is probably the best example of Western stereotyping of the Orient during the 1889 exhibition. Constructed to imitate a street in the Egyptian city, the architecture was a mishmash of different styles from various regions and periods. Designed by Baron Alphonse Delort de Gléon, the space was hugely popular with visitors to the Fair who could take part in the imitated life of the city. The *Rue du Caire* and imitation dwellings in the History of Habitation exhibition further contributed to perceptions of the Middle East as a place of disorder and turmoil; a land outside history and incapable of moving forward into the modern day without outside aid. Each exhibit can be seen to have imperialistic intent in presenting European visitors with a vision of the region which played up to traditional stereotypes and promoted public support for Western intervention.

The Algerian Pavilion was one of many pavilions displaying the achievements of different nations. Algeria, as a French colony, needed to be celebrated for its cooperation in the colonial mission. Çelik writes that, architecturally, Algeria was represented as a “rich country, well integrated into the empire, whose culture enriched the dominating culture” and housed its displays within buildings of Islamic style even though, in reality the culture was being repressed at the time (Çelik, 1992, p. 8) While outwardly the pavilions celebrated the North African county, production of these facades alluded to the stagnation of the region and so reinforced the need for a French imperialist project.

The exhibition *History of Habitation* presented an Arab house, which was described in a publication based on the exhibit. The author of the book argued that “Mohammadism” had ensured that there was no development in construction styles of the home (Çelik, 1992). It was asserted that the Arab house had not changed through time and was similar to a nomadic tent. The suggestion that the style of dwelling had not progressed over time fit with the Western belief that the Orient was somehow outside of time and history; fixed and unchangeable. Frantz Jourdain echoes the sentiment that there had been no evolution in Arab architectural styles. Jourdain wrote in his coverage of the exhibition, that “the victor’s house touches that of the vanquished: the Arab, son of the Prophet, elbows the Byzantine, adorer of Christ” (Garnier & Jourdain, 1889, p. 15). The hierarchies of mankind are being clearly drawn within the Habitation exhibition.

The *History of Habitation* exhibition and the publication alongside it helped to promote this idea to the European public, thus boosting support for the imperial mission to raise other nations out of naivety and savagery. The Middle East, and especially North Africa, caught in a time-warp, would need the help of France in order to advance as a civilisation. The buildings of the *History of Habitation* supported these ideas and despite presenting the buildings as authentic they simply conformed to stereotypes about the region.

Elsewhere colonial pavilions were set up to represent the overseas territories. A photo book produced by the organisers of the Exposition Universelle in 1889 includes images of these pavilions relating to the various colonies of France. On the page featuring four drawings of the Tunisian and Algerian pavilions a fifth image is placed above the others. This picture shows the “*Palais de L’exposition D’hygiène*” (*Exposition Universelle et Paris*, 1889). Why this was placed among the images of the North African colonies is unclear but considering the efforts

organisers went to in order to show the degradation of the Orient and the need for a colonial presence, the placement of this picture can be seen to hint at a further lacking on the part of the colonies.

As mentioned earlier, the *Rue du Caire* went into great detail, having men with donkeys drafted in to give rides to visitors and traditional dancers popularised the *danse du ventre* in the performance halls (Patrimoines Partagés, 2019). All of this gave the visitor a sense that this was an authentic scene from Egypt. As Çelik points out, the architect of the street contended that “the Rue du Caire on the Champ de Mars was more authentic than the streets in Cairo itself, because, Gleon argued, it was impossible to find an untouched old street in Cairo” (Çelik, 1992, p. 76). The architect goes on to explain that the traditional houses have been broken up by modern abodes which he believes to be “in bad taste”. Evidently, the French architect knows better than the Cairene’s, how to create a street in the Egyptian capital. A reporter for the *Manchester Guardian* describes the authenticity of the Rue du Caire, stating that going through the fair visitors find themselves “in an exact reproduction of a street in Cairo, with overhanging moucharabis (traditional latticed wooden windows), a mosque, a minaret, cafes, bazaars, the whole peopled by fellahs and natives exercising various trades”. The reporter continues, writing that “in this corner everything is genuine” (*The Manchester Guardian*, 1889). The scenes witnessed on the *Rue de Caire* meant to replicate life in the city but in reality, they were similarly hodgepodge in their lumping together of different styles, customs and traditions. The scene seemed to have been set up, as much to point at the perceived failings of Middle Eastern cultures as it was celebrating them.

As Mitchell notes, the buildings and streets were dirtied in an attempt at authenticity. “The Egyptian exhibit had also been made carefully chaotic. In contrast to the orderliness of the rest of the exhibition, the imitation street was arranged in the haphazard manner of the bazaar” (Mitchell, 1989, p. 217). The sites on the street were hectic and added to the stereotype of the Middle East as a place of chaos with its people being viewed as somewhat lacking in the standards upheld by Western society. One observer for the *New York Times* writes about witnessing a “girl in half nude dress” dancing “in bare feet, outrageously painted with red and yellow” (*New York Times*, 1889). The author goes on describing seeing the “donkey boys and their patient animals. They truthfully represent the local colouring, and thus far the drivers behaved like so many devils” (*New York Times*, 1889). Another reporter describes the “donkey boys”, writing that “owing to the change in surroundings, to the atmosphere perhaps, they certainly look more devilish than under the uniformly blue Cairo sky, with pyramids as a background” (*New York Times*, 1889).

It was at the 1889 exhibition in Paris that the majority of the Western public first witnessed the *danse du ventre* performances within the Middle Eastern and North African pavilions. The *danse du ventre* exhibitions proved exceedingly popular as visitors were given a glimpse into Orientalist fantasies. The *Manchester Guardian* (1889) reports that “the dancing women are very beautiful, after the Oriental style, and very graceful in their movements”. It goes on to note that “this concert is one of the most amusingly exotic spots in the Exhibition, and it is therefore much frequented by the amateurs of coffee (...) and by those who delight in the garish spectacle of Oriental costume and patriarchal simplicity of manners and customs” (*The Manchester Guardian*, 1889). These displays affirmed traditional representations of the Orient as a place of sensuality, where women were willing captives, at the mercy of men. This idea had long been accepted in Europe, spurred on by the popular literature and painting on the subject. One correspondent for the *Irish Times* writes about the latticed windows on the buildings “no doubt, the gazelle-eyed beauties of Cairo are lurking behind them” (*The Irish Times*, 1889). Later in

this article, the author describes a visit to see the Egyptian dancers “The dance might have a character of its own, danced as it is danced on the banks of the Nile, but our feeling was one of disappointment and somewhat of disgust” (*The Irish Times*, 1889). These two emotions demonstrate the mixed expectations and reactions to these performances. The disgust that is described can be seen to relate to the moral anxieties felt around watching the routines. Evident also is that the realities of the performance did not live up to expectations and, as can be seen in the 1893 Exhibition, the women often came to be viewed as symbolic of the larger problems of the Orient.

The *Rue du Caire* provided much entertainment for visitors to the fair and it became one of the more popular displays. It can be argued that, through the fabricating of the street scene, the Orient had been tamed and sightseers felt safe and comfortable in a way they might not have should they visit Egypt. The Orient, a place traditionally characterised by mystery, sensuality and violence, had been packaged as a fun day out within the sheltered confines of the Parisian exhibition. This may be seen as a microcosm for the larger imperialist project as it suggests the domesticating of the Orient can only be achieved through the guidance of the French. While supposedly celebrating the cultures included in the exhibit, the 1889 exhibition did little to change European perceptions of the Orient but rather drew on long established stereotypes to support imperialist ventures in the region.

World’s Columbian Exposition, 1893 and the “Dancing Girls”

While reactions to the *danse du ventre* seemed to be mixed at the 1889 Exposition Universelle, American commentaries on The World’s Columbian Exhibition were more unified in their disgust. Coming four years after Paris, the Chicago exhibition seemed to be the World’s Fair at maturity. Chicago was to be the largest of World’s Fairs to date and the first fair to include an area dedicated to amusements and sideshow exhibits. This area was known as the Midway Plaisance. The Midway brought together some of the most exciting and innovative spectacles of the day which visitors could witness for a price. It is the Midway and more specifically the Middle Eastern exhibits on the Midway that are the focus of this paper. These Middle Eastern attractions which ranged from the Street in Cairo to the Persian theatre were to give many Americans their first real exposure to Middle Eastern culture and helped to form or cement opinions and beliefs regarding the morality of its people. It was within these sideshows to the main exposition that most Americans first witnessed the *danse du ventre* of the Orient on their own soil.

A major attraction of the fair were these Middle Eastern dancers, whose movement and clothing both created and supported stereotypes surrounding the cultures of the Middle East. What became known as the *danse du ventre* came to popularity in Europe in the decades before the Chicago World’s Fair. The *danse du ventre* label represented a number of different traditional dances from all over the Middle East. The first reports of such a dance had come from visitors to the Middle East region, such as authors Gustave Flaubert and George William Curtis, who described the dance in “careful, almost breathless, detail” (Shay, 2008, p. 131).

Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young describe the growing fascination, noting that:

Beginning in the eighteenth, and more intensely in the nineteenth century, belly dance was established in the popular imagination of the West through travellers’ accounts that together with spectacular archeological (sic) finds in Egypt, sparked western interest in the Orient. (Shay and Sellers-Young, 2005, p. 6)

The *danse du ventre* or belly dance was characterised by repetitive circling movements of the body. Traditionally these dances were performed by men or women, and by different social classes depending on the region. The dances and dancers went by a variety of different names governed by particular regions and cultures, for example the ‘awalim and ghawazi; terms for the groups of dancers in Egypt (Shay, 2008, pp. 133–134). Shay and Sellers-Young explain the development of the *danse du ventre* term in the West, writing that “once established in the public imagination,” the name “belly dance” was used to refer to a whole range of different dances which came from all over the Middle East region and included moves that engaged “the hips, torso, arms and hands in undulations, shimmies, circles, and spiral” (Shay and Sellers-Young, 2005, p. 1).

During the Chicago Fair, various different names were used for the same group of dances. Donna Carlton describes the dance’s various appellations:

In the Cairo Street theatre, performers most often called simply, ‘dancing girls’, produced a dance that was given many names by contemporary correspondents, among them, ‘contortion dance’, ‘oriental posture-dance’, ‘muscle dance’ and ‘danse du ventre’. (Carlton, 1994, p. 40)

The women who performed these dances were decorated in jewellery and dressed in outfits which were for the most part covering their bodies but often left openings so that their abdomen could be viewed (The Daily Inter Ocean, 1893, p. 5). Rumours of exotic Middle Eastern dances at the Exposition Universelle in Paris had spread to the United States where the public had heard reports of scantily clad women dancing suggestively to strange music. Alongside exposition events, accounts of plays such as Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, first performed in French in 1893, served to intensify the interest in these Orientalist displays (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019).

Orientalist painting, too, had a significant influence on how Middle Eastern women were visually represented in the West. Images of slave women or harems spread particular ideas about the lives of women in the Orient and became sources of fascination for a public hungry for representations of the Arabian Nights fantasy. These images served to endorse the image of Middle Eastern women as sexual play-things for men in the Orient along with Western men should they be able to access the women. The belly dancing exhibits provided such access.

Amy Taipale Canfield, in her dissertation on women’s performance at the fair suggests that by 1893 publicity surrounding the *danse du ventre* had led to its reputation as being immoral, noting that “Americans first had the opportunity to see this dance at the Philadelphia Exposition in 1876. During that fair, police raided a performance of the *danse du ventre* at the Turkish Coffee House because the dance was ‘immodest in character’” (Canfield, 2002, p. 142).

By the time the Chicago Fair opened, the rumours regarding the *danse du ventre* were well known in American society and the fair organisers knew that the shows on the Midway would be popular. Sol Bloom, the manager of the Midway concessions commented on the dance in his 1948 autobiography, stating that “when the public learned that the literal translation was ‘belly dance’ they delightedly concluded that it must be salacious and immoral. The crowds poured in. I had a gold mine.” (Bloom, 1948, p. 135)

The majority of catalogues, both official and non-official made mention of the “dancing girls” but few did more than that. This may have been because many of the publications were written before the actual opening of the fair so their authors were perhaps unaware of the scandal to be

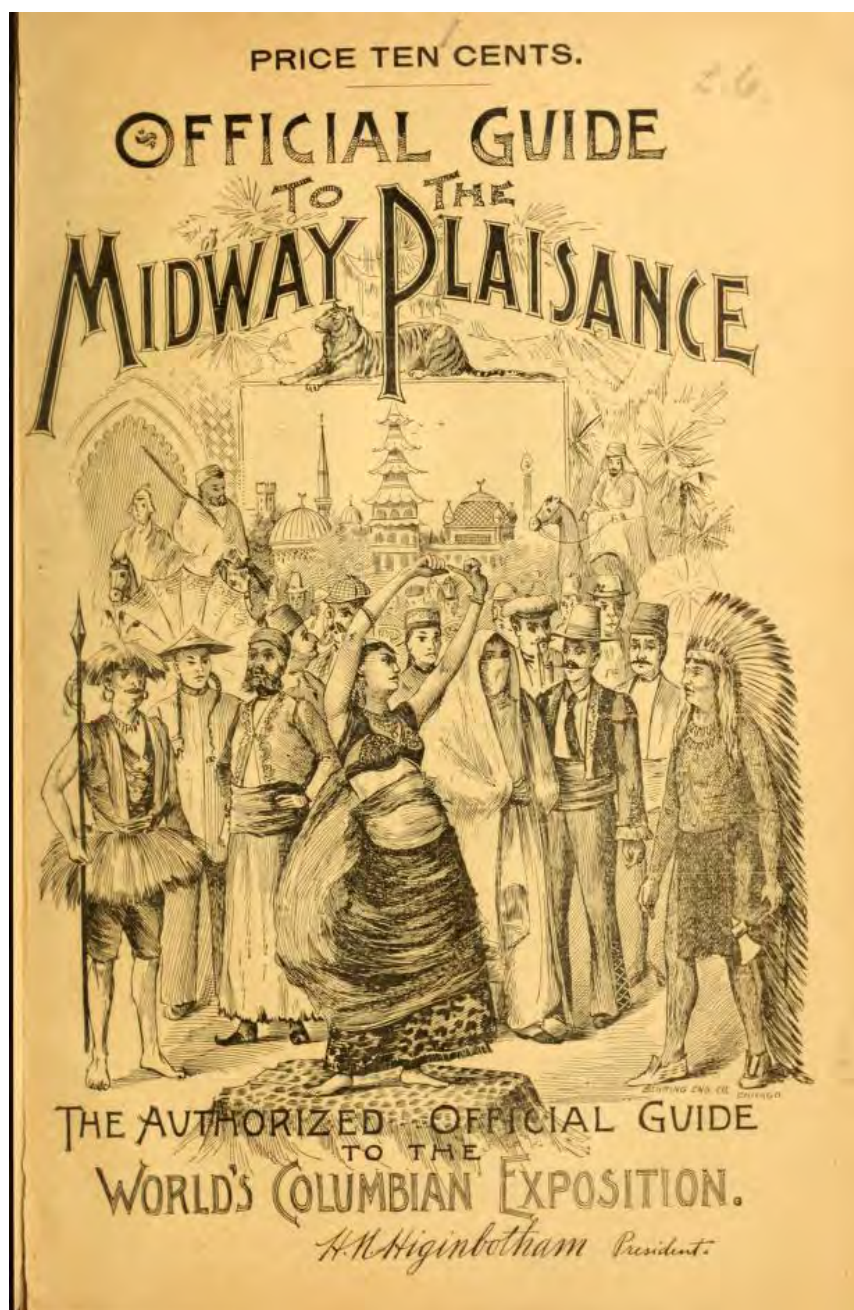
found on the Midway. Another cause for the lack of judgement could reasonably be argued to have been economic. Those producing the catalogues needed willing attendees to purchase their volumes and promoting the Fair as being morally questionable may not have been in their best interests. The innocence of visitors needed to be preserved both for profits and the benefit of the visitors themselves. Better to pretend ignorance of the lewd dances and stumble upon one of the shows than to knowingly seek out a performance.

Most mentions of the dances on the Midway in guidebooks used the term “Dancing Girls” to describe the variety of performances on offer by the Middle Eastern women. Although their reputation preceded them, there is no overt sense within many of the texts that these dances are known to be immoral and both in the construction of the Midway and print descriptions there is an assumption that the dances will be popular. One publication by the Columbian Guide Company notes that “Dancing girls give performances in a hall seating 1,000 persons” (Flinn, 1893, p. 155).

Publications printed, or reprinted, during the months that the fair was open displayed more awareness of the supposedly scandalous nature of the dances. A guide authored by John Joseph Flinn, titled *Official Guide to Midway Plaisance* was reprinted in August 1893 and states that its contents “may be accepted as being absolutely correct” (Flinn, 1893). This catalogue displays on its front cover a drawing of the various people to be found on the Midway, dressed in their traditional costumes. At the centre of the crowd of people is a *danse du ventre* girl. She stands upon her own plinth, dressed in wraps of cloth up to her midriff and an undergarment worn with necklaces to cover her torso. The woman thrusts her hips out and lifts her arms above her head, clearly performing the illustrious dance. Her hands and fingers are placed in a motion, one hand closed in a fist while the index finger of her other hand, in an almost phallic gesture, points into the clenched fist suggesting a sexual act. The woman is surrounded almost entirely by men, the only other clear female stands beside this woman and acts as the reverse of the “dancing girl” in full Islamic covering, only her eyes visible. The men in the image almost all look towards the woman at the centre and she is clearly the main attraction in the image.

Within this catalogue the dances found on the *Street in Cairo* are introduced and their lack of decency hinted at when the theatre is described: “The Theater attracts a great number of persons daily and nightly. Much has been said and written of the dances to be seen here. It is entirely optional with those who visit the Street whether they shall also witness the dances. And it may be said also to be solely a matter of taste” (Flinn, 1893, p. 20).

While there is a hint of caution to the description of the Cairo theatre, the authors clearly felt certain that the “dancing girls” would not be an obstacle to fair attendance. In fact, it seemed that now the fair promoters felt that the opposite was true. The positioning of this “exotic” woman on the cover of the book proves the popularity of such performances. The overtly sexual nature of the image intimates what is on offer to those who pay the price of admission. It can be surmised that the author has read the many newspaper reports on the dance and is presenting a description of the display which both coaxes fair goers to have a look and also fulfils the moral obligation of having warned them of what is inside.



John J Flinn (1893). *Official Guide to Midway Plaisance*, (1893).

Retrieved February 18, 2020, from

<https://archive.org/details/officialguidetom00flin/page/n7/mode/2up>

Upon fair opening the belly dance became a popular exhibit and a standard topic for discussion in newspaper and magazine reports on the Fair. August, the month of the John J Flinn's catalogue publication, had seen much discussion of the *danse du ventre* in the popular print media with much of it pointing to the immorality and scandal of the performance. While women's rights campaigner Ida Craddock argued in an article in the *New York World* that these dances were actually part of an ancient tradition and meant to display sexual restraint, most reporters on the exhibition viewed them from the opposite angle. Dozens of articles were published during this period, describing the shocking and lewd performances and labelling the performers as "immodest", "lascivious", "scum" (*St. Paul Daily News*, 1893, p. 4); (*Morning Oregonian*, 1893, p. 4).

These reports repeat the same accusations, pointing fingers at both the “dancing girls” and those women (or men) who go to see the shows. The main concern here is for the preservation of the morals of the American public against the disturbing exhibitions of the Oriental female body. While Ida Craddock praises the dances as part of an ancient tradition, Reverend B.F. de Costa responds to this in an article in the *St. Paul Daily News* by pointing to the immorality of following heathen religious practices. De Costa comments:

When we propose to tolerate a dance like that of the Midway Plaisance, I would beg the advocates to remember the moral character of the ancient heathen religions. The religion of Baal was of this kind and its fundamental proposition required the sacrifice of female purity as a prerequisite to marriage and entrance into society. (*St. Paul Daily News*, 1893)

Both Craddock and de Costa’s remarks can be seen as part of the tradition of seeing the Orient as a place unchanged by history, their practices part of ancient heathen ritual. De Costa, through his comments in reference to Craddock’s original defence, links the Midway dances with a loss of female purity supposedly seen within heathen religions. Newspaper reporters looked to figures like Rev. de Costa to give their moral opinions of the spectacle but did not shy away from making their own judgements on the decency of the women of the Midway. The accounts of the dances display a fear for the American people and although there can sometimes be suggestions of pity for the actual “dancing girls” their feelings are largely forgotten in the fight for the integrity of the population.

Personal reports from visitors to the Midway, printed in newspaper, often present a different impression of the dances. These reports of the spectacles visitors witnessed while at the Fair often mention the *danse du ventre* but if revealed at all, have different views on the immorality of the shows. These reports often take in the whole exhibition as one event of which the dancing is part of the illusion. Teresa Dean fondly describes the dance and costumes in her article, finishing by stating that “there is no doubt about the world having come to Chicago, and more than one will wonder whether they are awake or dreaming” (*The Daily Inter Ocean*, 1893, p. 5). Kate Field meanwhile, writes about her failure to see how Western dances are so very different to the Oriental style of dance, going on to comment that “vulgar men and women who have set up to howl against this performance would do well to look around the American ballroom and dinner table and discover like food for prurient fancy” finishing my stating that she is “quite sick of Comstockian morality” (*The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1893).

While these articles present another side to American public opinion, they represent views which are not in line with those in positions of authority and their remarks are refuted by those posing as moral adjudicators. The many articles which describe the dances as vulgar call upon the “upstanding citizens” of the nation to abstain. There was evidently a great amount of interest by the public in these dances and it was felt necessary to broadcast opposition to attendance.

An article in the *Morning Oregonian* writes that “there is room for a wide divergence of honest opinion as to whether any particular dance is morally good or bad. But there is no room for any question, whatsoever, concerning the moral transgression of any woman who deliberately visits what she believes to be an immoral performance, knowing beforehand what she is to witness” (*Morning Oregonian*, 1893, p. 4). This statement hints at the popularity of the dancing exhibit at the Midway and an attempt to bring it under control. As the notoriety of the display spread, more and more people visited one of the shows. This popularity continued after the close of the Chicago World Fair when travelling groups from the Midway brought their shows to other cities

(Carlton, 1994, p. 56). While newspapers spread the opinion that the *danse du ventre* was something to avoid for the sake of decency, American citizens became more and more curious as to the contents of such a display. Travelling shows, mimicking the Midway could be seen in major cities all over America and their popularity continued to incite the abhorrence of moral adjudicators wherever they went.

Conclusion

The popularity of both the *Rue du Caire* in 1889 Paris and the “dancing girls” of Chicago points to a popular interest in Middle Eastern culture by Western society. However, these displays most often helped long standing stereotypes and served to further distance the Orient from the more “advanced” West in Western minds. The focus on creating dirty, chaotic streets while ignoring architectural styles and developments only supported typical orientalist prejudices which portrayed the Middle East as a place of barbarism, danger and degeneration. Rather than promoting understanding between cultures, the presentation of the “dancing girls” in 1893 further demonstrated the moral degradation of Middle Eastern society by measuring it up to American moral values. As the largest scale public events of the nineteenth century, the World’s Fairs must be viewed as having had a great influence on Western ideas about the Middle East. These exhibitions gave visitors a chance to see far off cultures, offering a glimpse into life in other regions but that sight was clearly and wholly orchestrated by Western players. Instead of fostering mutual understanding, these fairs performed as servants of Western imperialism and supremacy, creating or nurturing stereotypes about Middle Eastern culture which would endure well into the twentieth century and beyond.

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Corresponding Author: Holly O’Farrell

Email: holly.ofarrell@ul.ie