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Redemption For Our House of Deceit [1]

As a museum curator who has spent most of the last decade dabbling in the collection and display of objects in order to frame rich historical narratives for the civic and educative enrichment of culturally diverse audiences, I can conscientiously admit that there are things an exhibition is capable of doing and things an exhibition cannot accomplish. In fact, it is folly to say one knows exactly just what impact an exhibition with any given theme may have on any audience whatsoever. Whether the artifacts on display are works of art, rare alchemical texts, natural historical wonders, or even an array of symbolic *stuff* that is intended to "win the hearts and minds" of foreign audiences, an exhibition, to conjure an idea from one of my favorite writers, also has the potential to be experienced as a "house of deceit."

The title for this entry, at least in part, comes from Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, the utopian novel published in 1624, which depicts an ideal future where scientific inquiry and self-enlightenment are the order of the day. The sole academic institution of this hypothetical society, known as "Salomon's House," belies an accurate depiction of this fabled country as a whole, since it contains (quoted in the original language): ". . .divers curious *Clocks*; And other like *Motions of Return*. . .We haue also *Houses of Deceits* of the *Senses*, where we represent all manner of *Feats of Juggling*, *False Apparitions*, *Impostures*, and *Illusions*." Exhibitions intended for viewing by the general public began in 1737 at the Paris Salon, a watershed moment where the showcasing of cultural artifacts (in this case, fine art) was meant to educate, influence taste, and ultimately enlighten in a very particular way all who visited. And since then, I contend, all exhibitions, as they are executed by human beings who cannot escape their own prejudices, are biased and tell only half the truth, sometimes half-truths, and at other times falsehoods altogether. Admittedly, in the case of the American pavilion at the Shanghai Expo, one wonders what efforts (or in this case, lack of effort) an exhibition's organizing team will go to perpetrate a very specific national image on the high-stakes stage of this world's fair.

America has at times succeeded and at other times failed to juggle effectively its image in juxtaposition with representations of/by other countries at international expos since the Great Exhibition of 1851. Back then, as today, expectations of how a country would "play" to the vast and mostly indigenous audience of the host country were irrationally inflated. There, in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, on an enormous parcel of gallery floor-space requested by the American committee that included Levi Woodbury, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Senator Jefferson Davis, who was on the Board of Regents of the fledgling Smithsonian Institution, and oceanographer Matthew Maury, the U.S. exhibition commissioners displayed a curious array of products (for the emphasis of the Great Exhibition was indeed the sharing in one place of "the industries of all nations").

On view were Cyrus McCormick's Virginia grain reaper, Matthew Brady's daguerreotypes, Indian rubber goods by Charles Goodyear, and Samuel Colt revolvers. Lesser items included an "air-exhausted coffin" that could hold off a corpse's physical decay, transparent soaps meant to resemble stained glass, Cincinnati pickles, and Hiram Power's *Greek Slave*, which *Punch*

took as a cue to mock America's lack of ingenuity (and exhibits, in general) at the Exhibition: "Why not have sent us some choice specimens of slaves? We have the Greek Captive in dead stone—why not the Virginian slave in living ebony?" Even American Horace Greeley, who served as a juror for the Exhibition award-committee, showed embarrassment at the overall pathetic contribution the United States made at this event visited mostly by English subjects. The proverbial jury is still out on whether these pangs of conscience he suffered included the slavery issue which was about to boil over.

And today it seems everyone has weighed in with an argument as to how the American pavilion at Shanghai has been a disappointment, "drab," and one of many "odd, international museums," to quote the *LA Times*, even going so far as to blame the previous U.S. president outright for our current state of cultural diplomacy (does everyone forget that President *Clinton* effectively shut down the USIA in 1999 amid his own political wheeling and dealing?). To gain a little perspective on the U.S. record for cultural diplomacy, Richard Arndt, former diplomat and director of the Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs (who in part had something to do with these exhibitions of American values), states: "The golden years of cultural diplomacy began to fade four decades ago…Meanwhile, the sharp rise in foreign non-understanding has become a national nightmare. Yet few have suggested that a crippled cultural diplomacy might have anything to do with either cause or cure. Cultural diplomacy's decline has thus passed unnoticed, leaving a nation baffled by its apparent defenselessness against the cultural onslaught of an enraged Islamic fragment." Certainly, responding directly to the last portion of the above quote, the current U.S. pavilion would look much different if the Expo were staged not in Shanghai but in Riyadh, or Casablanca, or Dubai. This begs the question, what exactly was the American pavilion in Shanghai designed to show the mostly Chinese audience?

Those who derogate the U.S. presence in Shanghai are absolutely right, to a point. Sure the overt presence of corporate marketing is a problem as are the miserably inadequate greetings from famous (and some infamous, in my opinion) Americans on large TV screens. This model of displaying products as "the forbidden fruits of the West" worked during the Cold War when American thematic exhibitions catered strategically to the have-not Soviet masses (see my CPD Perspectives Paper on this topic, here). Bob Jacobson's comment in his May 31, 2010 commentary in the *Huffington Post* helps clear the air a bit on who is to blame for an American pavilion whose message (if there ever was one) has fizzled: "Privatizing American public diplomacy was the Bush Administration's policy. Regrettably, the Obama Administration, rather than repealing this policy, has instead accelerated its application."

But there is a bright spot in this that some have acknowledged but only in passing: the presence of English/Chinese-speaking American students who serve as cultural ambassadors at the U.S. pavilion. This tool of public diplomacy was first instituted in the 1947 Marshall Plan exhibitions, which were small, traveling caravans that crisscrossed Europe in order to explain the U.S. objectives in a creative and up-front fashion to a shell-shocked, post-World War II Western European population. And the presence of these able young Americans has been a constant in U.S. exhibitions abroad since then. Frankly, if I were a Chinese visitor to the American pavilion, I would be much more interested in talking with an American university student about how real Americans live than with a U.S. politician, star athlete, or current celebrity who has recently starred in "Thingy-Thingy-Blah-Blah, Part III."

And yes, the U.S. could have done much more with the interpretive spectacle of its lackluster pavilion that will be on display for another few months. Does anyone remember the Brussels International Exposition of '58, the first world's fair of the post-war period, where the U.S.

pavilion featured a curious, separate exhibit called “Unfinished Business?” In this sensitive and creative take on American social problems, mainly segregation, the U.S., amid its flashier discussion of scientific progress, art, music, and other cultural pursuits, gave visitors an intimate glimpse of some of the darker realities of American life.

The idea, taken loosely from Lincoln’s “unfinished work” phrase in the Gettysburg Address, emphasized what the Belgian newspaper *Le Peuple* praised as America’s greatest perceived strength, at least at Brussels: “Let’s face it: only strong democracies are in a position to talk as well of their qualities as their faults. Our thanks to the United States for having demonstrated this at the Heysel.” Though this exhibit was modified by executive order after a number of Southern congressmen took issue with its racial overtones, the U.S. had made a statement: we’re flawed, deeply enmeshed in some very large problems that we can claim as our own. We know this. Yet one of our shining virtues is that we acknowledge democracy is a work in progress. It is not perfect, but it's the best thing out there.

And to quote Lincoln again (this is the message we should have sent to the millions upon millions of Chinese visitors who visited our pavilion), that despite our problems, we still celebrate our “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” Let’s stop deceiving ourselves and win points by discussing our unfinished business openly. Everyone knows our problems anyway. So, in the future, let’s discard this “air-exhausted coffin” of an American pavilion concept and spend more time and energy sharing with the world our national treasures as well as our national faults.