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The *Illustrated London News* and International Exhibitions

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Introduction

William Whewell, addressing the Society of Arts on the results of the Great Exhibition of 1851, compared the display of works of art and industry contained within the glass walls of the Crystal Palace to a sort of fantastic spectacular photograph: “we may compare the result to that which would be produced, if we could suppose one of the skilful photographers whose subtle apparatus we have exhibited there, could bring within his field of view the surface of the globe, with all its workshops and markets, and produce instantaneously a permanent picture, in which the whole were seen side by side,” effectively “annihilating the space which separates different nations” (*Lectures on the Results of the Great Exhibition of 1851* [1852], 1: 13-14). For readers of the *ILN*, such rhetoric would have an oddly familiar ring. After all, in the address to readers with which the editors of the journal introduced their project, the editors promised: “The public will have henceforth under their glance, and within their grasp, the very form and presence of events as they transpire,” and the journal would “keep continually before the eye of the world a living and moving panorama of all its actions and influences” (“Our Address”, 14 May 1842). The coincidence is not surprising, for the *ILN* and international exhibitions shared a common aim: to deploy technologies of spectacular display in the interest of creating common knowledge.

Beginning with the Crystal Palace: The *ILN* and the South Kensington Project

It has become a truism of historical scholarship that the Crystal Palace’s displays constituted a triumphal celebration of the achievements of British industrial

technology and its attendant material culture. As Asa Briggs famously put it: “In its impressive building and in the wide range of exhibits it offered on display, the Crystal Palace proclaimed triumphantly the visibility of human progress” (*Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851-1867* [1975], 16). And the lavish and often celebratory coverage of the Great Exhibition by the *ILN* and the rest of the British press contributed in no small way to this perception. But, like many such truisms, this one rather misses the real point, as an examination of the stated aims of the exhibition’s creators clearly shows. For Henry Cole and his allies (notably including Prince Albert, along with Owen Jones, Lyon Playfair, Richard Redgrave, and M. Digby Wyatt), the exhibition was designed less to celebrate the triumphs of British industrialism than to expose its weaknesses, above all else in the field of design.

For Cole, industrialism had broken the link between artisan and product, had promoted mass production at the cost of fine workmanship, and had produced as a consequence a surfeit of bad design, far inferior to preindustrial craft traditions, a theme he had been developing in the years before the Great Exhibition in his *Journal of Design and Manufactures* (1849-52). The journal was an early experiment for Cole in creating a space to reform English design; as the first issue declared, “the first step to improve designers is to place within their reach systematic intelligence of what is actually produced” (1:1, 3). The Crystal Palace, emblem for cultural critic Tony Bennett of the new complex of exhibitionary technology and aims that he terms the “exhibitionary complex” (in an essay reprinted in Bennett’s *The Birth of the Museum: History,*

Theory, Politics [1995]), would provide a far more comprehensive space for Cole's project. Beneath its glass canopy, the exchange Cole envisioned in advance of the exhibition in the pages of *The Journal of Design*, whereby "the artist, the practical chemist, and the ingenious mechanic, were thus brought into nearer relations with the manufacturer, and the latter with the public; and ... the public is thus educated in the most practical way to appreciate excellence" (1:2, 59), could finally be begun. And in the complex of museums and sequence of international exhibitions that the Great Exhibition (and its profits) spawned in South Kensington, his increasingly comprehensive designs took shape.

The *ILN* was with Cole every step of the way. As Patrick Leary notes in his "Brief History of *The Illustrated London News*" (and as can be seen in the *ILN*'s own account, "The Great Exhibition of 1851", 20 July 1850), the paper had a central role in promoting Joseph Paxton's universally acclaimed "Crystal Palace" design for the exhibition building (or almost universally acclaimed; John Ruskin harrumphed that the building had "no more sublimity than a cucumber frame" [*Praeterita*; {1886}, 67]). After closely tracking the development of the site from mid-1850 onward, the *ILN* devoted over 20 special supplements on the Great Exhibition – for a few examples see: 26 April 1851, 3 May 1851, 31 May 1851, and 15 November 1851 – in addition to extensively covering the site in regular weekly editions. The paper offered detailed coverage of opening and closing events, extensive discussion of the varied displays, and, of course, magnificent, often fold-out full-size, illustrations. Months after the exhibition closed, the *ILN* returned to the subject to offer one

more supplement, a "Grand Panorama of the Great Exhibition", 6 March 1852.

While the *ILN* treated the exhibition in largely celebratory terms, they certainly also picked up the tenor of critique its organizers intended. Thus, following the party line, Lyon Playfair reported to the Society of Arts: "So far as regard beauty of design and harmony of colours, European Nations have little to teach, but much to learn.... So long as the manufactures involve human labour and a perception of beauty as their principal elements, the less civilized states equalled, and often excelled, the productions of Europe" (*Lectures on the Results*, 1:160).

The *ILN* echoed the point: "The general impression produced by the survey of the productions of such countries as Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, and native India, is the same.... In splendour of costume, jewellery, and arms, in pageants and processions, we find it hard to approach people who do not carry pocket-handkerchiefs, and who have not much to do with the washerwoman" ("A Guide to the Great Industrial Exhibition", 10 May 1851). In its treatment of the exhibition's outcome ("The Great Exhibition and Its Results", 11 October 1851), from the principles of free trade to the advocacy of design education for workingmen, the *ILN* picked up Cole's favoured themes. And, in the wake of the exhibition's closing, the *ILN* echoed Cole's own arguments for the retention of the Crystal Palace (see, for example, "If We May Believe..." 24 April 1852).

From the Great Exhibition, Cole turned principally to the development of the complex of museums in South

Kensington (“Albertopolis,” as some Victorians called it) to further his aims, but further international exhibitions remained part of his plan. The 1862 International Exhibition was even bigger in scale than its predecessor (if also, for a wide range of reasons, far less successful), and its progress and contents were again closely followed by the *ILN*. The 1862 show merited only one special supplement on the 10 May 1862, but it was extensively covered in the weekly reports as well. Following the broad pattern of response, the *ILN*’s coverage was far more critical of the Crystal Palace’s successor. Even the praise proffered at the exhibition’s close, for example, was strikingly qualified: “We have already characterised the undertaking as successful. We are not sure the verdict will be either so unanimous or so unqualified as in the case of the Exhibition of 1851. There was nothing to shade the brilliancy of that success. In the present instance there have been many and serious drawbacks to be overcome” (“Close of the International Exhibition”, 8 November 1862). When Cole followed this with a series of thematic exhibitions in 1871-74, and the popularity of the exhibitions plummeted, the *ILN* again followed the general pattern of response. Those annual exhibitions would merit no special supplements and far more limited coverage. It was only in the final series of exhibitions on the South Kensington site nearly a decade after Cole’s departure, another annual thematic series from 1883-86 culminating in the popular Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, that the *ILN* would renew its more attentive coverage, with supplements on most year’s shows (no supplement, but several dozen articles, for Fisheries Exhibition of 1883, but a supplement apiece for the Health Exhibition of 1884, 7 August, and the Inventions Exhibition of 1885, 8 August and a series of eleven special supplements on

the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, separately covering each of the range of colonial possessions (see, for example, the supplement devoted to the Indian Empire on 17 July 1886. Still, the precedent of the Crystal Palace would echo in the international exhibitions that followed in its wake, and the *ILN* would give subsequent world’s fairs significant coverage.

The Development of World’s Fairs

The model provided by the Great Exhibition – peaceful competitive display of industrial productions and art manufactures organized by nation (and usually dominated by the productions of the host nation) – would be followed by subsequent international exhibitions. For the decades immediately after 1851, the exhibitions would centre on a London-Paris axis (London in 1851, Paris in 1855; London in 1862, Paris in 1867; London, 1871-74, Paris 1878; London, 1883-86), although with competing smaller fairs at a more diverse range of sites. By the 1870s, with the Vienna exhibition of 1873 and the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, the two-capitol axis begins to give way to more genuine broader competition for fairs, especially after the Colonial and Indian Exhibition ends South Kensington’s exhibitions in 1886 (Paris would remain a centre, with exhibitions in 1889, notable for the erection of the Eiffel Tower, and 1900, famous for pushing Art Deco, and London would return to the scene with a series of more limited international or binational exhibitions in White City from 1908-1912). The *ILN*’s coverage to a degree reflects the two-capitol axis, with far more extensive coverage offered to London and Paris shows. The Paris exhibitions of 1855 and 1878 each got its own special supplement (on 22 September, 1855 and on 11 May 1878), and the

exhibition in Paris in 1867 was covered in over a dozen special supplements from May to December 1867 (for some examples see: 11 May 1867; 8 June 1867 and 5 October 1867. Few fairs outside Paris or London would merit such treatment; the exceptions were the two Irish fairs, in Cork in 1852 (special supplement on 19 June) and Dublin in 1853 (special supplement on 4 June) the Antwerp Exhibition in 1894 (special supplement on 1 September) and then nothing until New York made the grade in 1939 (special number on 29 April) and again in 1964-65 (special supplement on 16 May). Still, the journal offered multiple articles on most of the major international exhibitions (and sometimes more: unusually detailed coverage of the largely neglected Dublin exhibitions of 1853 and 1865, and multiple articles on the various Australian exhibitions), and at least cursory notice of more distant or smaller ones (although missing most of the more minor American shows).

Over time, however, the focus of international exhibitions shifted. Some of the shifts reflected the national character of host countries: French expositions favoured fine arts over Cole's ornamental arts; American fairs tended to commemorate anniversaries, like Philadelphia's Centennial Exhibition in 1876 or the Louis and Clark-commemorating St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 (or, occasionally, near misses, like Chicago's one-year-late Columbian Exhibition in 1893). Broader shifts can also be noted. The later nineteenth century fairs, for example, increasingly highlighted imperialist themes with colonial displays, often incorporating living villages of various sorts. The shift in evidence is readily apparent in the *ILN*'s coverage of the Colonial and Indian

Exhibition in 1886 ("Colonial and Indian Exhibition", 29 May 1886) or the colonial villages of the Paris exhibition of 1889 (for instance, "The Java Village at the Paris Exhibition", 6 July 1889). Colonial themes figure even in American fairs (most notably in Chicago and St. Louis) and would continue to dominate in many world's fairs at least through the Paris Colonial Exposition in 1931. But this imperial theme overlaps with a broader trend toward human display as popular entertainment. By the turn of the century, the popularity of living villages combined with the increasing focus on entertainment over education at fairs to create a complex mass-cultural display, pioneered by the "Rue de Cairo" at the Paris exhibition of 1878, and more firmly defined by the Midway Plaisance at Chicago's Columbian Exhibition in 1893 (with its "Streets of Cairo," its Ferris Wheel, its belly-dancing Little Egypt and other wilder amusements). To this popular side of the exhibitions around the turn of the century, the *ILN* pays strikingly little heed.

Another new turn can be noted in a number of significant fairs from 1933 onward, which emphasise ideas of progress by trying to embody futuristic visions. Chicago's Century of Progress Exhibition (1933-34) leads the way in this new trend, with the two New York fairs (1939, 1964-65), the 1958 Brussels Exposition (with its central Atomium), and the 1962 Seattle fair (with its space needle and monorail) following the trend. The shift in emphasis is clear in the *ILN*'s coverage, which follows the thematic lead of the fairs by emphasising a technologised future (as in "Futurist Architecture of Chicago's 'Star-Hitched' World's Fair," 27 May 1933, or, in New York in 1939, "'O Brave New World': Aspects of Modern Architectural Motifs," 29 April, or, again in New

York in 1964, "General Motors' Futurama Trip and Other Items", 16 May. By the time of the Montreal Expo of 1967, however, with its theme of "Man and His World" and its developing concern with environmentalism and human habitation, a lack of confidence in technology's ability to secure a future noticeably undermined the progressivist agenda.

Finding International Exhibitions in the *ILN*

For a fairly broad range of coverage of international exhibitions, the mechanics of searching the *ILN* archive are quite straightforward: searching for **international exhibitions**, supplemented by **universal exhibitions** to cover the French-speaking world (both Paris and Brussels), will cover most nineteenth-century examples without too many irrelevant results. For much of the twentieth century, however, the phrase will mostly produce results on auto shows. Luckily, by 1893, the term **world's fair** had come to supplant the earlier phrase, and it will recover material on all the major fairs (except Montreal in 1967, for which **expo** is the term). Neither basic search terms will produce quite comprehensive results, however, and both will tend to miss smaller and more distant examples, as well as a few stray articles even on the major expositions.

The surest way to find everything in the archive is to search by individual fair, by place and year, and occasionally by formal exhibition title (for those less than familiar with world's fair history, lists of events are pretty readily accessible; for example, the online ExpoMuseum, provides a basic timeline and information on major fairs, and a more exhaustive listing can be found at the World's Fair and Exposition

Information and Reference Guide. Place plus year will get most results; so, for example, searching **Chicago** in **1893** will get almost everything on the Columbian Exhibition (although that title will get you nothing except stories about Columbia). For particularly major exhibitions, backing up to the previous year will help (so that, for London's 1862 exhibition, the major coverage begins in 1861). The London White City exhibitions get a bit tricky, and there the specific name of the exhibition is the key to the search (as with, say, the "Franco-British Exhibition" in 1908). But the *ILN* did miss a few entirely, so no search will get you to, for example, Omaha's Trans-Mississippi Exhibition of 1898, or Osaka's 1970 fair, or New Orleans's disastrous 1984 exhibition. In the case of New Orleans, at least, that is no major loss.

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