

Cataloging History

Revisualizing the 1853 New York Crystal Palace

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tiny.cc/crystalpalace

What was the New York Crystal Palace?

The 1853 New York Crystal Palace, also known as the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, was America’s first World’s Fair. Exhibitors from around the world showed off their latest machinery, consumer products, and raw materials. Though the exposition burnt down by the end of the decade, it survives through catalogues documenting its success and the range of products on display.

What is *Cataloging History*?

This project, and the Medium essay series, explored the history and theory of museum and exhibition catalogs by focusing on the 1853 New York Crystal Palace. This poster considers the catalogues from the 1853 New York Crystal palace exhibition in physical and digital forms: as book, file, and database.

This project created a dataset and subsequent database from a digitized copy of the New York Crystal Palace catalog to explore the artifacts documented inside. Explored through digital humanities tools, the Crystal Palace catalogs aid us in viewing catalogs, and their modern database descendants, more generally. How can looking at the Crystal Palace through digital tools let us see not only what the readers of the catalogs in the 1850s saw, but also to see things better, see things differently?

Considering the catalog’s role as a source of data—and subsequently, a database—suggests some of the possibilities of collections as data. Digital scholarship can provide information about the exhibition’s history and the history of the culture it portrayed.

Key Project Questions

What happens to our conception of a catalog change in its transformation from physical to digital object? What are the **affordances of book, file, and database**?

How do digital humanities tools allow us to explore the Crystal Palace catalogs as digital object? What types of relationships in the data do these tools value?

When the catalog becomes a database, how do features like **search, browse, filter, and facet** describe the catalog?

How do interactive visualizations like **maps, plots, networks, and graphs** change the context and future of the catalog data?

In reorganizing the data, visualizations ask us to **reimagine the relationship connections embedded inside** the data. How do visualizations allow us to questions of arrangement, international collaboration, and goals of the exposition?

Building on this project, can catalog-as-database connect this historical moment to similar exhibitions? How do we reconcile differences between catalogs in transforming them to databases?

How might the conception of catalog as database complement other work in museums and digital scholarship? What might we learn if cultural heritage was **”more readily open to computation”**? How does this project allow us to reimagine historical spaces and collections?

Notes

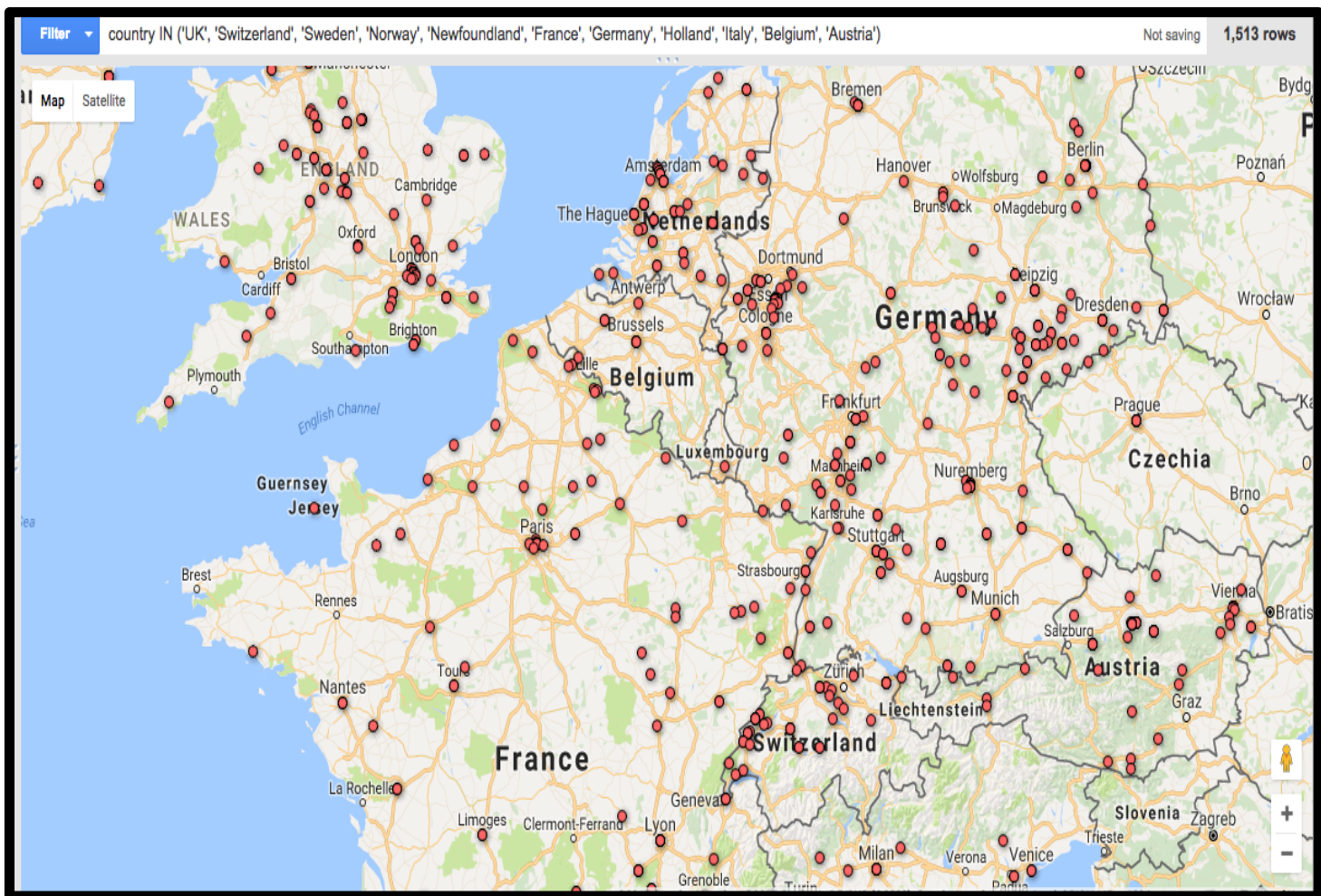
This project and related essays are based on a presentation to the Bard Graduate Center symposium on the New York City Crystal Palace, part of the opening ceremonies of the New York Crystal Palace 1853 exhibition.

View the catalog data on our GitHub repository (tiny.cc/crystalpalace-github). Please note that though the database has been extensively researched and cleaned, it still contains errors.

We used the following tools to manipulate, visualize, and store the database: Palladio (Humanities + Design Lab, Stanford University), Tableau, Google Fusion, D3.js, OpenRefine, and GitHub.

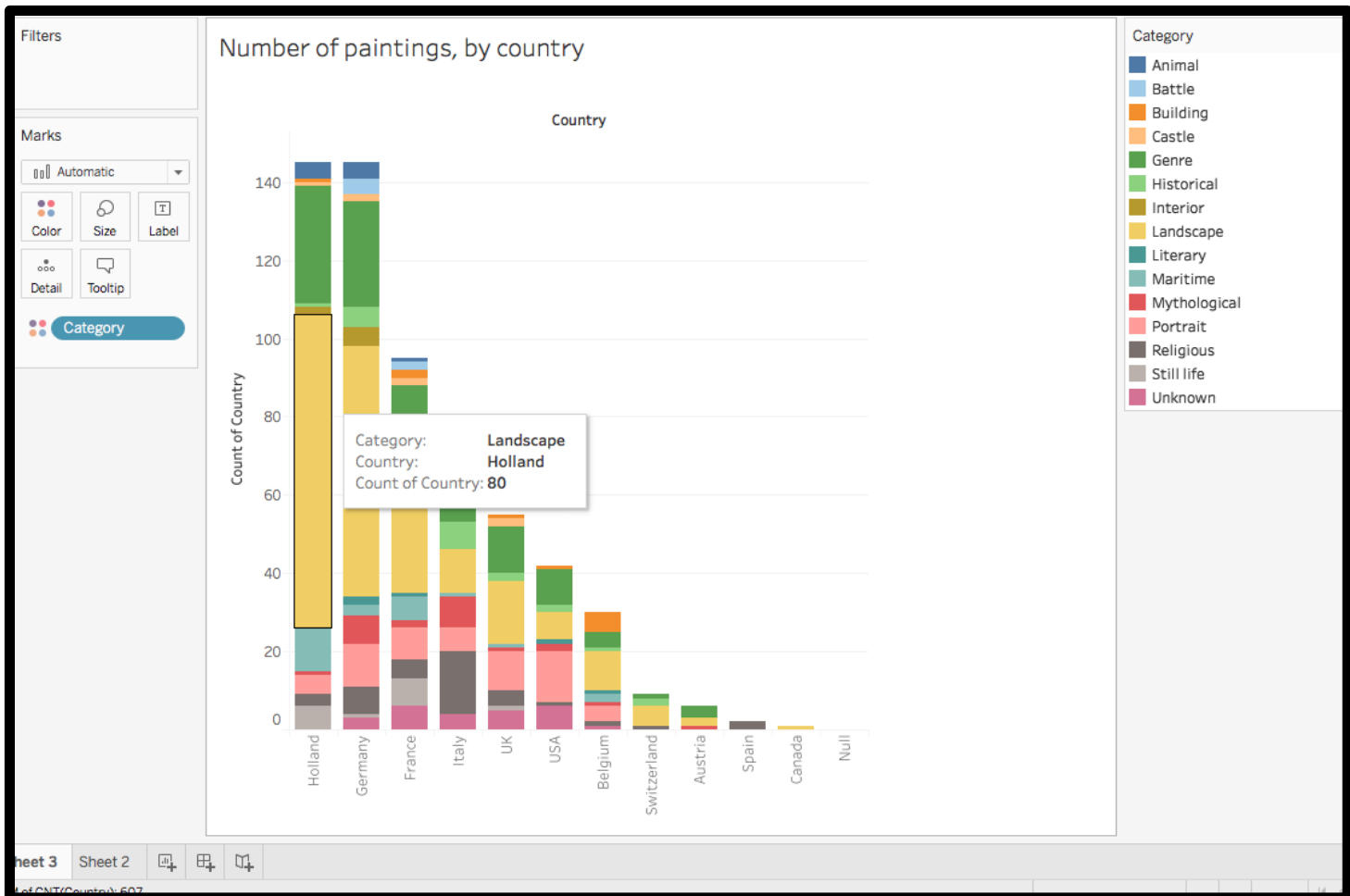
Mapping

Where did industry take place in “all nations” of the world?
What industries were represented and where?



Graphing

How else might the catalog be arranged? What hierarchies exist in the current data structure?



Plotting

How did visitors “see” the exhibition? How did curators arrange the space? How can we reprioritize spatial relationships in visualizing the catalog?

