

The Woman's Building

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“E

ven more important than the discovery of Columbus, which we are gathered to celebrate, is the fact that the Government has just discovered women.”¹ These words were voiced not by a present-day feminist but by Bertha Honore’ Palmer, a wealthy Chicago socialite, at the dedication ceremonies of the World’s Columbian Exposition in October 1892. While the Fair did indeed mark the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the New World, more importantly it became the site of an international forum of women artists, writers, educators, scientists and craftspeople. Government recognition, although not enthusiastic, aided the construction of the Woman’s Building and the establishment of the Woman’s Branch of the Auxiliary Congress which served as a public podium for the discussion of women’s status and rights.

In fact, the very existence of the Woman’s Building can be credited largely to feminists active in the late 1800s. For instance, in January 1890, when the United States Congress was considering establishing the Fair, Susan B. Anthony and other prominent feminists urged the Senate to guarantee women an active role in its planning. As a token gesture a Board of Lady Managers was authorized, and although it had as many members as the men’s Columbian Commission, the latter actually ran the Fair. Nonetheless, the Woman’s Department of the Exposition, responsible for the Woman’s Building, its contents and overall management, was legally recognized and funded by the United States Government.

Despite a certain second-class status, the women who participated in and managed portions of the Fair wielded considerable authority. One of the major reasons for this was the presence of Bertha Honore’ Palmer, President of the Board of Lady Managers, who was appointed to oversee the day-to-day operation of the Woman’s Building and the Auxiliary Congress. She was the wife of a powerful Chicago millionaire, Potter Palmer, the builder of Chicago’s famous Palmer House, who, not coincidentally, was a promoter of the Fair and one of its largest financial sponsors. Bertha Palmer, however, was an extraordinary woman in her own right. Her participation in the Exposition and that of other wealthy and socially prominent women, including textile designer and educator Candace Thurber Wheeler, in the Exposition’s work, helped elevate the view of women’s art so that it was no longer viewed as an amateurish domestic hobby but as a serious endeavor.

But there was another reason for American women’s finally being included in so auspicious a gathering as a World’s Fair. With the rapid rise of industrialization in America following the Civil War, Washington found it politic to become officially involved with women’s employment in industry if not full female suffrage.

While critics of feminism maintained that woman’s status was rooted in her economic dependence on man, one unalterable fact remained: the rise of industrialization required a larger labor force to operate mass-production machinery than could be supplied by males. Women filled that gap. Thus, the number of women working for pay outside the home doubled from four to eight million between 1890 and 1910; a previously untapped economic resource was now being utilized. In addition, industrialization and invention of the telephone, typewriter and telegraph created the need for the office girl.

The Industrial Revolution also had profound social implications. In search of jobs young women (most of them single), like young men, flocked to large urban centers. Upon arriving in the city their social status immediately and perceptibly changed. Young, alone and economically independent, they were freed of their age-old dependence on home and family. Thrown together for the first time, these women forged close ties of friendship, and before long discovered by acting in consort they could be a powerful political force. One of their very first actions was to agitate for the right to vote, which was then denied them.

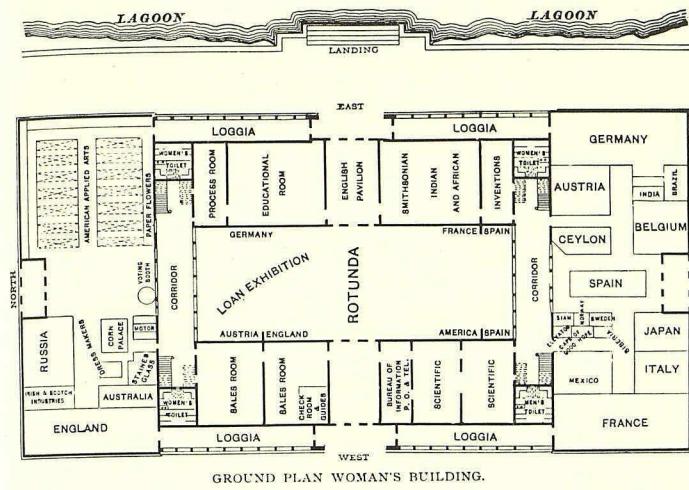
The Woman’s Department was, from the outset, plagued with difficulties. As work progressed on the Fair, the government backed away from its original commitment to the Woman’s Building and individual states had to assume the responsibility for funding its various exhibits. As a result, the Woman’s Building, one of the smallest at the Exposition, was granted only \$200,000 for its construction out of an estimated total of \$12,700,000 budgeted for grounds and buildings. In addition, most of the women artists represented in the Woman’s Building not only contributed their time and work free, but also had to absorb shipping and installation costs for displays of their work; men whose works were commissioned were usually paid in advance.

Other forms of blatant discrimination continually hampered the efforts of the Board of Lady Managers and eventually determined the use to which the Woman’s Building was put. The building was not originally intended to be used for exhibit space; it was planned as the headquarters for women connected with the Fair. But, as Bertha Palmer noted: the building “... has been forced into that relation with the rest of the Exposition because of the partial exclusion of women elsewhere.”²

Bertha Palmer summarized the difficulties the women had encountered in an address she delivered at the opening of the Woman’s Building: “We have been obliged to march with peace offerings lest hostile motives be ascribed to us.”³ She went on to advocate the liberation of women and made it clear that the Woman’s Building and its contents represented opportunities to advance the cause of women’s rights, especially those of working women. She said, perhaps with tongue in cheek:

Without touching upon politics, suffrage, or other irrelevant issues, this unique organization of women for women will devote itself to the formation of a public sentiment which will favor woman’s industrial equality, secure for her work the consideration and respect which it deserves, and establish her importance as an economic factor. To this end it will endeavor to obtain and install in these buildings exhibits showing the value of her contributions to the industries, sciences and arts, as well as statistics giving the proportionate amount of her work in every country.⁴

In order to fulfill this commitment, the organizers included as part of the exhibition records of women’s professional and economic status, reports from social, industrial and cooperative associations and a compilation of statistics on women’s legal, social, political and economic status in countries throughout the world. It was the aim of the Board to see that this information was “... placed on record as



GROUND PLAN WOMAN'S BUILDING.

public documents among the archives of every country.⁷⁵ The Woman's Department further supplied information to women on employment possibilities and training. It was the first time that such a comprehensive survey of women's activities and conditions in every part of the world had been made. The overall impact of this contribution still has not been fully evaluated.

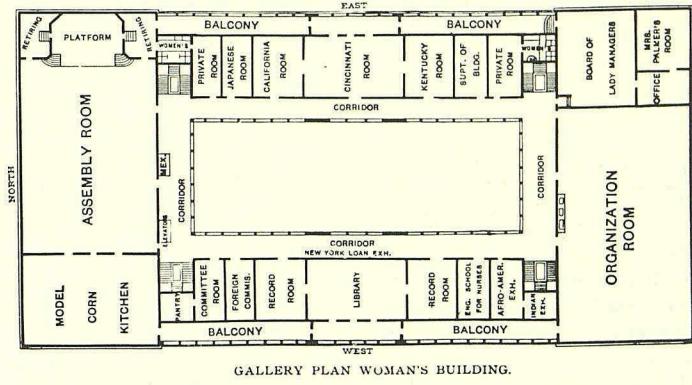
Another far-reaching and innovative idea was the Children's Building. It was conveniently located next to the Woman's Building and provided a place for women to leave their children safely in the hands of a trained staff for a small fee while they viewed the exhibits at the Fair. The Children's Building contained a large gymnasium, a library, a workshop, a nursery and several other departments. The workshop contained every kind of machine and mechanical device, giving both boys and girls an opportunity to learn how to use tools and develop their mechanical abilities. As such, it is probably the earliest example of a day-care center. Like other projects organized by women at the Fair, the Children's Building was given no money by the Exposition authorities and was completely financed by the Board of Lady Managers.

The architect for the Woman's Building was Sophia G. Hayden. In 1890, she became the first woman to complete the four-year course in architecture (with honors) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Hayden's design was selected from twelve others and she began supervision of the building's construction in July 1891. She designed her building in the neoclassic style which was enjoying a revival at the time and was required by the Exposition committee.

The elaborately ornamental Hall of Honor formed the spine of the structure and rose to the building's full two-story height. Sixty-seven and a half feet wide and 200 feet long, it was topped by a skylight. The Hall of Honor was reserved for the core of the fine arts exhibits in the Woman's Building. The major decoration of this important room was left to six American artists: Mary Cassatt, Mary MacMonnies, Lucia-Fairchild Fuller, Amanda Brewster Sewall, Rosina Emmett Sherwood and Lydia Emmett.

Sherwood and Emmett were sisters who had both studied with William Merritt Chase at the Art Students' League in New York and later in Paris at the Julian Academy. Sherwood's mural was titled, "The Republic's Welcome to Her Daughters." Her sister's mural, "Music, Art and Literature," showed the three disciplines personified by three female figures. Fairchild-Fuller, a Bostonian, had also studied with Chase at the League and was a successful miniature painter. Her mural, "The Women of Plymouth," depicted Pilgrim women and children engaged in domestic chores. Sewall was born in upstate New York, studied at Cooper Union and with Chase and William Sartain at the League in Paris. For her mural, "Women in Arcadia," she was awarded a bronze medal by the Columbian Commission.

The two most famous women artists participating in the building's decoration were MacMonnies and Cassatt. MacMonnies's 60-foot mural, "Primitive Woman," located on the north tympanum of the Hall of Honor, was one of the largest ever painted by a woman. It was divided into three sections that illustrated the roles of ancient women as wives, mothers and workers. Cassatt's commis-



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sion to decorate the south tympanum on the subject of modern woman was her first commission in America and her first attempt at mural decoration. Cassatt's space was identical to MacMonnies's, but Cassatt divided her mural into three separate panels with three allegorical themes. The central and largest panel was "Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge and Science." In the right-hand panel were three women who personified the "Arts, Music and Dancing," and in the left-hand panel were "Young Girls Pursuing Fame."

Also decorating the Hall of Honor were murals and paintings, etchings and engravings contributed by American, German, Austrian, English, French and Spanish women. In addition, sculpture and numerous handicrafts were displayed. There was even a bas-relief entitled "Ophelia" made by the famous French actress, Sarah Bernhardt. Finally, names of important women from around the world in the arts, sciences, literature and other disciplines were recorded.

Running along the easterly side of the Hall of Honor were rooms largely devoted to the technological side of women's contributions. Among these rooms were two Scientific rooms, an Inventions room and an Educational room.

Passing through the corridors, the visitor could then enter the Northern Pavilion (on the north side of the building) or the Southern Pavilion (on the south side). In the Northern Pavilion were exhibits from countries such as Russia, Australia and England. The Russian section was especially notable. A remarkable reproduction of a Byzantine gate of the twelfth century marked the entrance. It was made of oak and joined together without a single nail. The wood surface was overlaid with gold leaf. The work was designed and constructed solely by Russian women. Exhibits of cottage industries from Scotland and Ireland included hand-knitted stockings and gloves, shawls and ecclesiastical vestments, as well as many fine examples of embroidery and needlework. Examples of uniquely Irish lacemaking techniques could be seen in displays of Irish point lace, Limerick lace and Carrickmacross lace. The Northern Pavilion also included exhibits of stained glass designs, wallpaper and silk designs, book-cover designs and book illustrations, contributed by American and foreign women.

The most notable exhibit in the Northern Pavilion was that of American Applied Arts. The handicraft contributions (specifically, needlework and embroidery) of the Associated Artists Society, one of the first American schools of embroidery and design, as well as the woven textiles and tapestries, were among the best examples of handwork in the Woman's Building. This exhibit had been organized by Candace Thurber Wheeler, who lent her considerable artistic and managerial talents to the Woman's Building and oversaw its interior decoration. It is fair to say that the American renaissance in embroidery and needlework was initiated and largely affected by Wheeler. Thanks to her perseverance and clout, needlework exhibits at the Columbian Exposition were no longer predominantly English or European, as they had been in the Centennial Exposition seventeen years earlier.

Walking along the Loggia for a breath of fresh air and a fine overall view of the Exposition grounds, the visitor could then tour

the Southern Pavilion which was devoted to exhibits of lacemaking, embroidery, fan painting, jewelry, silverware, carved wood, leather and fans. These exhibits came from France, Italy, Mexico, Japan, Spain, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Sweden and Norway, as well as far-off places such as Siberia, Siam, Ceylon, Brazil and the Cape of Good Hope. One of the most popular exhibits was that organized by the Japanese Woman's Commission. Two rooms of a typical Japanese dwelling were carefully reproduced. The inclusion of such details as fine inlaid boxes, polished steel mirrors and a woman's boudoir gave the spectator a true sense of having actually visited a Japanese home. Another exhibit of special interest was the collection of lace sent by Queen Margherita of Italy which traced the history of lacemaking in that country as well as in all other lace-making countries.

The elevator, a welcome feature of the building at this point of the tour, would then whisk the visitor to the gallery floor of the building, which contained exhibits primarily from the United States.

Running along the east wall of the gallery floor were the California, Cincinnati, Kentucky and Japanese rooms (the Japanese exhibited here as well as in the Southern Pavilion). The California room was warmly inviting with its ceilings, doors and wainscoting all made of rich, mellow redwood. The room was decorated with stained glass designed and executed by American women.

The Cincinnati room, the largest and most important room of this section of the gallery, served as the Managers' Drawing Room. Its display of pottery executed by Cincinnati women underscored women's unique contributions to the craft. Of special interest was Rookwood Pottery, an adaptation of the art nouveau style with flat, linear floral patterns and varied glazes—all of which had gained Rookwood an international reputation for fine ceramics craftsmanship. In addition to examples of Rookwood Pottery decorated by the Rookwood Pottery founder, Mrs. Maria Longworth Nichols

Storer, there were pieces created by members of the Cincinnati Pottery Club. M. Louise McLaughlin, founder of the Pottery Club in 1879, had developed an unusual method of underglaze painting and "Losanti Ware," a hard porcelain with a feldspathic glaze fired at a low temperature. Examples of her work were included in the Cincinnati room exhibit.

Perhaps the most important room, next to the Hall of Honor, was the Library, located directly opposite the Cincinnati room on the west side of the gallery. The interior decoration, including the dark, carved oak bookcases, was the work of Candace Thurber Wheeler. Dora Wheeler Keith, her daughter, decorated the Library's ceiling. She chose an allegorical theme appropriate to the room: a male figure represented Science; Literature was personified by a woman standing beside Science, and Imagination, also a female figure, stood between the two, symbolizing the reconciliation and binding of one to the other. More importantly, the Library contained over 7,000 volumes of American and foreign women's writings (including such great authors as Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, the poetess Harriet Monroe, Louisa Alcott and Susan B. Anthony—making it the largest such collection at that time. Two Records rooms flanked the Library and contained statistics of woman's work in several countries.

Also located on this side of the gallery was the English Training School for Nurses. It was a model of a room for the instruction of nurses and contained all sorts of medical and surgical instruments along with portraits of women who were famous for their contributions to nursing and medicine, such as Florence B. Nightingale.

After visiting the English Training School for Nurses, the fairgoer could walk through the north corridor to the Assembly Room, which was used for meetings, lectures and concerts, and then on to the large Model Kitchen. The kitchen was equipped with the most modern appliances then available and staffed with teachers who instructed women in the science of preparing nutritional foods and even in preparing Indian corn.

The visitor might pleasantly end the tour by resting and dining in the garden cafe of the Woman's Building—a quiet oasis in green in which, reputedly, the best food at the Fair was to be found.

The significance of the exhibits of the Woman's Building was multifaceted. By making the achievements of many fine women artists and craftswomen more widely known, they corrected misconceptions about women's artistic abilities and made it clear that women held an important place in the history of the arts. In addition, the Woman's Building provided a forum for presenting the theme of the changing roles of women. Facts were available for public and personal consumption, and as they cut across social and class barriers, must have had a considerable impact on both sexes. For women, especially, the new sense of history, pride and accomplishment alone was worth the long and arduous struggle to make their building and its contents public.

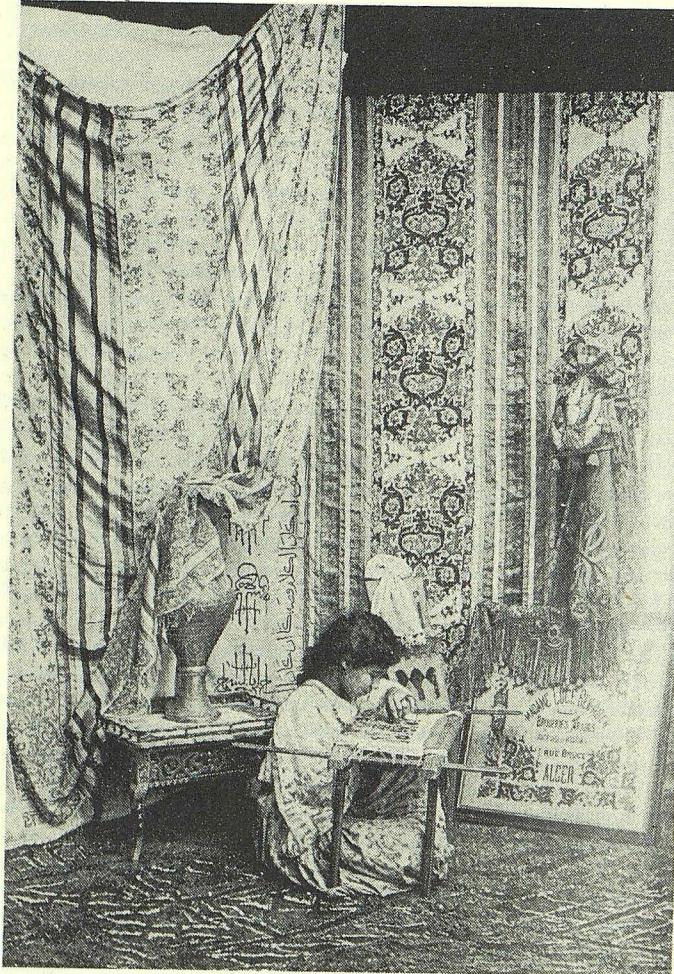
1. Mary Oldham Eagle Kavanaugh, ed., *The Congress of Women*, Chicago, 1894, p. 106.

2. Kavanaugh, p. 125.

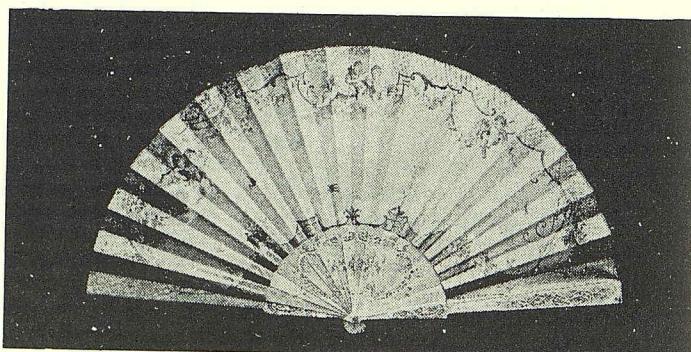
3. Kavanaugh, p. 112.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*



Above: Hangings embroidered in the school of Mme. Luce Ben-Aben. Moorish girls and women of Algiers. Right: Fan with Mother-of-Pearl handle in Rococo style. Painted by Clara Jaqueman. Exhibited by The Women's Industrial Association of America.



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