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# Hollywood's Lost World's Fair: The Failure of the Motion Picture Exposition of 1923

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## Abstract

In the summer of 1923, a pivotal moment in the history of Los Angeles and its film industry, the leaders of both came together to boost their reputations through the traditions of the World's Fair. The Motion Picture Exposition sought to tie the city and the industry to the traditions of historical pageantry and educational display. By tracing the discourse in the local newspapers, this essay shows how this narrative of traditional respectability failed to compel visitors, especially from the local population, who were more interested in the spectacle and glamour that the film industry could supply. This essay proposes that it was the inability of the film studios to work together as a united industry that ultimately led to the failure of the Exposition.

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According to most sources, Los Angeles has never hosted a World's Fair. Those massive confluences of culture, history, amusement, and technology are the legacy of cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, and New York.<sup>1</sup> And yet there was a pivotal moment in history when Los Angeles and its most prominent industry came together and evoked this tradition. It was 1923, when Los Angeles was growing at an unprecedented rate and the firmly-entrenched motion picture industry was working to reconfigure its scandal-tarnished image. The idea of the area's film producers and civic organizations working together to host an International Exposition seemed ideal in this time of reputation building and civic boosterism. Like Chicago or San Francisco before it, Los Angeles would try to use a World's Fair to announce itself as a key metropolis in modern America. However, unlike past successes in 1893 and 1915, respectively, the American Historical Revue and Motion Picture Exposition would pass like a whimper.

As perhaps the only full record of this forgotten event, the local newspaper coverage of the Fair throughout its planning and execution offers

the clearest glimpse into the hopes, failures, and successes of the Hollywood World's Fair.<sup>2</sup> Through their coverage, a distinct discourse emerges, one that echoed that of the organizers, seen through their public statements and private correspondences. This discourse evoked the era's ideas of respectability through civic pageantry and educational display. Strikingly similar narratives emerge from the coverage of the major daily newspapers of the period—*The Los Angeles Times*, *The Los Angeles Examiner*, and *The Los Angeles Evening Herald*—though they were politically divergent rivals.<sup>3</sup> Using the newspaper coverage, we can map out a narrative of the discourse around the Exposition and better understand why it has been lost to history.

Coming at a time when the World's Fair tradition had yet to rebound from the devastation of World War I, the Motion Picture Exposition would try to invoke this cultural legacy without success or the levels of attendance that would place it in the pantheon of such endeavors.<sup>4</sup> Since their inception in the mid-nineteenth century, World's Fairs had been a way for communities to place themselves on the forefront of commerce,

invention, and respectable culture.<sup>5</sup> It was customary in this tradition for an exposition to celebrate an important centennial; in this case, it was the hundredth anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine, first proposed in 1823 as an assertion of US dominance over the Americas, which would be tenuously celebrated as the basis for the event. The cover of the souvenir program for the Exposition, likely printed while the exhibits were hastily being built around the new Los Angeles Coliseum, consisted of an illustration combining the iconic structures from the Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Jamestown expositions. By invoking the successes of these fairs from the previous era, Hollywood sought to position itself within a historical and educational tradition far preferable to the image that was dominating press coverage at the time.

The Exposition was conceived at a historically contentious juncture for Hollywood. By late 1922, exhibitors and regional censorship boards were regularly banning films by those involved in or even associated with scandals like the trial of Fatty Arbuckle and the murder of William Desmond Taylor.<sup>6</sup> Newspapers and civic leaders throughout the country began to question the amount of influence Hollywood had on its massive worldwide audience.<sup>7</sup> As a result of such controversies, Hollywood, and by extension Los Angeles, was seen as a place with no culture and perhaps no morals. In 1922, as movie attendance began to decline, the Hollywood studios knew their image problem was turning into a financial one. In response, the major studios banded together and formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in order to present a united front against bad press, skittish exhibitors, and restrictive censorship boards. They placed then-Postmaster General and President Warren G. Harding confidante Will Hays at the head of the organization. Hays was essentially a publicist for the industry, working to convince the American public that Hollywood had cleaned up its act. The Motion Picture Exposition would be part of this attempt to bring Hollywood just the kind of culture that many believed it lacked, presenting both highbrow art exhibits and middlebrow “wholesome” entertainments, such as pageants and morality lectures.<sup>8</sup>

From its earliest days, it was unclear who would be the driving force behind the execution of the Exposition. The MPPDA was not an official sponsor of the Fair, but there is no doubt of their heavy backroom involvement. Hays himself was a great supporter of the effort, urging his West Coast representative, Thomas Patton, and the studio heads to become more and more involved. Patton had plans to leave his post in Los Angeles, but Hays convinced him to stay specifically to watch over the execution of the Exposition.<sup>9</sup> Hays saw great potential in the Fair to further the public relations work that was the primary mission of the MPPDA at that time. The Exposition would be run more directly by a man named Walter J. Reynolds, the secretary of the Motion Picture Producers Association of Los Angeles, one of the many anti-union motion picture organizations of the day. Though the Producer’s Association had been formed in the mid-teens in order to improve relations between the industry and the city, correspondences between Hays and Reynolds indicate that it had now come under the sway of the MPPDA.<sup>10</sup> Letters to Hays demonstrate reluctance on the part of many motion picture producers to get involved. Reynolds seemed to lack any real influence over the studio executives, as those who did get involved continuously turned to Hays for consultation on the Exposition. Late in the planning, producer Joseph Schenck took up fundraising duties, complaining to Hays:

It certainly looked as if the exposition would not take place for lack of funds, and although all the companies working here on the coast are members of the Producers Association, quite a good many of them refused to come across with money. The Fox Company, the Vitagraph Company, and quite a few others turned us down.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that he would rather go to Hays with such a complaint than to Reynolds, who was an administrator of both the Exposition and the Producers’ Association, is indicative of larger problems of organization and leadership. Throughout the month of May, *Daily Variety* reported from New York the dire fortunes of

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the Fair before its realization was finally assured by the approval of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce.<sup>12</sup> Despite this difficulty in getting investment and cooperation going within the Hollywood community, the organizers took it for granted that the Exposition would be a financial success, virtually guaranteeing investors a return on their funds.<sup>13</sup>

This confidence in the financial soundness of the enterprise led organizers to focus not on the popular appeals of the Exposition but rather on the reputation building aspects of the Fair, namely its educational merits and its invocation of traditional American values. This focus by the planners is reflected in the rhetoric picked up and disseminated by the local newspapers. In the *Los Angeles Examiner's* special section on the Motion Picture Exposition on June 27, 1923, one week before its opening, the film industry was only addressed in three of thirteen pages covering the Fair, while the first four pages were dedicated to explaining the historical centennial being celebrated. Other articles focused on the civic and historical organizations presenting educational exhibits or shed light on the design and architecture of the Fair. The later included many references to the Exposition design's Latin American influence, thus tying the Exposition to the Monroe Doctrine theme.<sup>14</sup> Those articles that focused on the film industry emphasized the technical and artistic accomplishments that would be on display at the Fair as well as the industry's role in building the city itself.<sup>15</sup>

Like the *Examiner* the week before, the *Los Angeles Times's* ten-page special section published on the opening day of the Exposition focused on the educational, artistic, and civic components of the Fair. Several prominent Hollywood figures, including Joseph Schenck, Maurice Tourneur, and Cecil B. DeMille discussed their hopes for the Exposition in the *Times*. Like most of the comments published, DeMille's emphasized the positive role of the motion picture industry in the life of the city of Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup> The more populist *Examiner* had featured similar commentary from prominent Los Angeles citizens rather than Hollywood producers. However, the rhetoric surrounding the Exposition from Los Angeles Mayor George Cryer was surprisingly similar to



A statue of President James Monroe was unveiled in the adobe-inspired Court of Honor on opening day. Courtesy of Doheny Memorial Library Special Collections, University of Southern California.

DeMille's.<sup>17</sup> Both men believed that the Exposition would serve to strengthen the relationship between the city and the industry by advertising both as part of a respectable tradition grounded in American history.

After all the hype, the American Historical Revue and Motion Picture Exposition opened on July 2, 1923, and ran for five weeks. The Coliseum was the setting for the nightly program of pageants, tableaux, ballets, and fireworks shows, while the area around the arena contained exhibits from local businesses and vendors and, most importantly, the film studios themselves. In a section of the grounds called "The Location," twenty-five different film corporations hosted bungalows where "every detail of the making of films [was] shown, from the taking of the picture to its showing on the screen."<sup>18</sup> Though some of these exhibits played like large-scale movie advertising, the more successful ones created an attraction out of revealing the means of film production. Visitors could walk through real film sets, see actual costumes, and even be filmed alongside a studio player for a nominal fee. While newspaper articles showed interest in the studios' displays in the days leading up to the Fair's opening, it was the educational and historical exhibits that received the most attention. The *Times* gave detailed descriptions of the opening night tableaux of Washington crossing the Delaware, Lincoln freeing the slaves, and Columbus landing in the Americas.<sup>19</sup> These bore little relation to

Los Angeles or the film industry except for their inclusion of notable film actors in major parts, including Hobart Bosworth as Columbus and May McAvoy as Martha Washington; rather, they reinforced the Exposition's connection to American history and tradition.

These tableaux and pageants—popular forms of civic education and entertainment since the mid-nineteenth century—were consistent with a type of film being produced and promoted at that time through the Better Films Movement.<sup>20</sup> The Hays Office especially sought to emphasize the educational value of cinema through historical and literary films, thus tying the displays at the Exposition to another reputation-building tactic of the MPPDA. Sumiko Higashi discusses the relationship between the historical pageant and silent Hollywood cinema in her work on the influence of such entertainments on the films of Cecil B. DeMille. During the Progressive Era, the upper classes sponsored these public history demonstrations not only to counter the new commercialized amusements, including cinema, but also “to project a sense of community based on visions of an Arcadian past.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than being part of the problem of mass culture, the film industry saw itself as uniquely positioned to disseminate such respectable values to the widest possible audience, especially if it also served to lessen the threats of censorship and regulation. The Exposition would serve to emphasize this particular role.

The Motion Picture Exposition consistently focused on creating this connection between film production, the city of Los Angeles, and the greater American narrative through its programs and exhibits. There was such a strong emphasis on respectability that the organizers decided to forego any “petty” amusements. As the *Times* put it:

Only those things have received a place in the grounds that are worthwhile. The exhibits are all historical, educational or instructive. There is no pike or midway, no galaxy of forty famous beauties. They have been replaced by industrial displays, by art galleries and by one vast living picture of the birth and development of the moving-picture industry.<sup>22</sup>

This proved to be a failing strategy, though one would hardly know it from the effusive praise and record breaking crowds reported in the *Times*, the *Examiner*, and the *Evening Herald*. However, it is revealing that they all praised the introduction of a midway full of rides, games, and spectacular demonstrations, which was hastily built on the grounds after the disappointing first week. The *Examiner* hoped that the addition of contests, rides, and stunts would “enliven the hours before the big evening show.”<sup>23</sup> For the newspapers with their eyes on the prospects of their growing city, the Exposition could do no wrong, but Angelenos had to be convinced that the Exposition was not a bore. The *Times* assured, “Another idea to be gotten across to the public is that the exposition is a place where a fine evening of entertainment, dining and dancing can be enjoyed; beside [sic] learning some of the secrets of the motion-picture industry.”<sup>24</sup> Though the newspapers indicate that tourists continued to flock to town for the Fair, it is difficult to discern whether this was a reality or merely more boosterism. *Times* editorial columnist Alma Whitaker was one of the only dissenting voices to be found in the local press. She expressed cynical unfamiliarity with the virtuous and noble Hollywood described in Mrs. William DeMille's talk at the Women's Pavilion, saying, “The film people are so decorous. If you want a real flutter, depicting profligate luxury and all that, you have to visit an oil company's exhibit.”<sup>25</sup>

Shortly after the midway was announced, for reasons undisclosed to the newspapers, the studios agreed to more active participation in the Fair, with each one hosting a day of the proceedings.<sup>26</sup> They finally seemed to realize that the Exposition was operating as if it was being executed through their combined efforts, whether that was a reality or not. If the Exposition failed, it could do more harm to their reputations than good, a complete reversal of the intentions of the Fair. Demonstrations by the various movie studios would now supplement the evening show at the Coliseum, transforming prestige pictures, such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) or *Merry-Go-Round* (1923), into tableaux, thereby reversing the trajectory of influence identified above by Higashi. Despite their praise of the earlier, historical program, the newspapers show a decided shift when this

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further spectacle was added to the Exposition's evening show. The *Times* described the night Carl Laemmle's Universal Pictures took over the stage in effusive language:

After more than a week of dignified progress at the Motion Picture Exposition and Monroe Doctrine Centennial, Universal Pictures tore the lid off the place, poured Universal talent into the great Coliseum and brought the thousands who thronged the place to their feet with a roar of applause, last night.<sup>27</sup>

As the Exposition proceeded, new attractions were more spectacular and glamorous, inevitably involving movie stars—from Charles Chaplin lookalike contests to publicity stunts like actress Helene Chadwick flying over Santa Monica to drop free tickets. At the news of the changes in the exhibits and program, Alma Whitaker once again laid down her harsh assessment of why locals were not flocking to the Exposition:

I maintain that the motion-picture industry overestimated its own technical drawing charms, that when it considered it was letting us in on "inside" mysteries they were flattering themselves [sic]. We knew all about it before ... . The Exposition wasn't magnificently high-brow, it wasn't startlingly interesting, not even educational, and it wasn't even engagingly low-brow. Just neither one thing or [sic] the other.<sup>28</sup>

Whitaker demonstrates a strain of resentment in the local population toward the film industry that the Exposition had failed to quell and perhaps did more to exacerbate.

Whitaker's take and not the dominant one offered by the local newspapers would be the final assessment of the Exposition. Bankruptcy and the resignation of Walter J. Reynolds from both the Exposition and the Producers' Association were announced before the gates closed.<sup>29</sup> The death of President Harding days before his intended arrival on the grounds left a dark cloud over the final days.

Newspaper ads emphasized the movie stars in attendance. *Los Angeles Examiner*, 11 July, 1923.

But the press continued to boost the Fair, at least until it ended. What was labeled in the *Times* as an "artistic success" and "credible commemoration" on its closing day was called an "unsuccessful season" only two months later in a report on liability hearings after an outside company took control of the \$200,000 debt.<sup>30</sup> With few in the industry willing to claim responsibility before the Exposition began, none would take blame when it ended in financial ruin.

By focusing on these newspaper reports, we gain a keen sense of the narrative that the organizers of the Motion Picture Exposition were trying to convey. Despite the attempted portrayal of Hollywood as a cohesive community with a new, respectable image, the studios were not yet unified in their efforts. They squabbled throughout

the process of planning and execution over both financial and organizational responsibilities, while their decision to fully commit to the Exposition came too late to fundamentally alter its trajectory. Regardless, it is questionable whether any attempt to improve Hollywood's reputation through such traditional means would ever have succeeded. While future attractions based on motion pictures reflect some of the more spectacular elements of the Fair, the historical tableaux and morality lectures would not become features of Hollywood tourism. The MPPA, the MPPDA, and the producers seem to have given up on such strategies, as the original

plan to make the Exposition an annual event never materialized. Despite the many successes of the Exposition, the narrative of failure stuck to it and it was quickly forgotten. However, it was only a few years later when a very similar group of leaders found a way to collaborate and form the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, calling instead on the veneration of artistic accomplishment to enshrine their medium in respectability.<sup>31</sup> Rather than an annual industrial exposition, it would be the pageantry of an awards ceremony that would eventually become Hollywood's yearly attempt at prestige.

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### End Notes

1 For American World's Fair history, see: John Allwood, *The Great Expositions* (London: Cassell and Collier Macmillan, 1977); Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

2 Coverage in national newspapers and industry trades was sporadic, while the Los Angeles newspapers covered the events of the exposition daily.

3 William Randolph Hearst established the *Examiner* twenty years earlier as a pro-union alternative to the *Times*. The *Los Angeles Evening Herald* was a late edition Hearst paper as well.

4 The first post-World War I American World's Fair of note would not occur until the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition in 1926. Like the Motion Picture Exposition, it was seen as old-fashioned and boring for evoking the prewar expositions. It wasn't until 1933 with the Chicago World's Fair that a new era of modern "World of Tomorrow" fairs began. See Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

5 That most of these fairs relied on cheap amusements and anthropological displays for their financial success was something the organizers of this Exposition failed to recognize.

6 For a discussion of the early 1920s scandals, see Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 78-83.

7 A sample of the articles being written at the time shows a general concern with the influence of the apparent loose morals and hedonistic culture of film industry professions and, by extension, Los Angeles itself. For examples, see: "Land of Make-Believe is Only too Real," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 February, 1922, 2; "Hollywood Trouble Due to High Pay for People Often Lacking Brains," *The Hartford Courier*, 12 February, 1922; "What Los Angeles is Doing to Love," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 August, 1921.

8 For a brief discussion of Los Angeles' perceived lack of high culture, see Sklar, 77.

9 Letter from Thomas Patton to Will Hays, 4 May, 1923 (Los Angeles: *The Will Hays Papers*, Grand Avenue Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, 1923).

10 Denise McKenna, "The City that Made the Pictures Move: Gender, Labor, and the Film Industry in Los Angeles, 1908-1917" (PhD diss., New York University, 2008), 128.

11 Letter from Joseph Schenck to Will Hays, 6 June, 1923 (Los Angeles: *The Will Hays Papers*, Grand Avenue Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, 1923).

12 "Expo Assured," *Daily Variety*, 30 May, 1923, 19. The Exposition was also assured by the investment and management of the World Amusement Service Association, a Chicago-based group more experienced in live entertainment.

13 Letter from Joseph Schenck to Will Hays, 22 May, 1923 (Los Angeles: *The Will Hays Papers*, Grand Avenue Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, 1923).

14 *Los Angeles Examiner*, 27 June, 1923, Section IV.

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- 15 "Motion Picture Industry on Dress Parade in Great Film Revue," "Public Will See Behind Silver Sheet," and "Millions for Film 'Realism,'" *Los Angeles Examiner*, 27 June, 1923, IV5; "Modern Studio is a Small City," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 27 June, 1923, IV12.
- 16 "Is Seeking Problems of People," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July, 1923, IV4.
- 17 George W. Cryer, "Mayor Cryer Praises Aims of Exposition," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 27 June, 1923, IV3.
- 18 "Thousands at Exposition," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 July, 1923, II6.
- 19 "Tableaux to Depict Epochal Events of Hemisphere," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July, 1923, IV5.
- 20 During this period, it appears that the terms "tableau" and "pageant" were used fairly interchangeably in the context of these civic histories, though "pageant" seems to imply greater action in the scene. The National Committee for Better Films was established in 1923 by the National Board of Review. See the section on the Better Films Movement in Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (University of California Press, 1990), 208-210.
- 21 Sumiko Higashi, "Antimodernism as Historical Representation in a Consumer Culture: Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, 1923, 1956, 1993," *The Persistence of History*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (London: Routledge, 1996), 93.
- 22 "Centennial Entertains 'Times' Boys," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 July, 1923, III1.
- 23 "New Features at Exposition," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 9 July, 1923, I4.
- 24 "Plan 'Pep' for Centennial," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July, 1923, III1.
- 25 Alma Whitaker, "Chaste Nudity Reigns," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 July, 1923, III1.
- 26 "New Plan to Aid Exposition," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 10 July, 1923, I8.
- 27 "Snappy Show at Exposition," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 July, 1923, IV12.
- 28 Whitaker, "The Last Word," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 July, 1923, II7.
- 29 "W.J. Reynolds Quits Two Jobs," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 August, 1923, III1.
- 30 "Exposition to End Today," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 August, 1923, II4; "Exposition Liabilities Scheduled," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 October, 1923, II6.
- 31 The list of figures that were both organizers of the Exposition and founding members of the Academy includes Joseph Schenck, Jesse Lasky, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Cecil B. DeMille, M.C. Levee, and Charles Christie.