Forgotten at the Fair: Quilts at Chicago's World's Columbia Exposition

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Abstract

At the first World's Fair with its own women's pavillion, chaired by a woman, designed by a woman, and decorated by a woman at a time when sewing was the predominate activity for women, why were no quilts in the Women's Pavillion Building? This article details the many interesting cultural changes that took place during the Gilded Age in Chicago that set the stage for high art and diminished the handmade craft of quilting.

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Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition cast all doubts aside. Court of Honor, 1893. Momentum to celebrate the Columbian quadricentennial began building in the early 1880s. The World's Columbian Exposition defined American culture. Its World's Congress Auxiliary presented lectures and discussions by prominent political activists and intellectuals about subjects as wide-ranging and pressing as religion and science, labor, and women's rights. Henry Ford saw an internal combustion engine at the fair that fired his dreams about the possibility of designing a horseless carriage. For millions of visitors, the electrical illuminations of the fair were a source of wonder and excitement about the possibilities of illuminating America's farms and cities. The World's Columbian Exposition transformed the city of Chicago in 1893 and influenced the city's development for decades to come. The Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair, was located in Jackson Park, at the current site of the Museum of Science and Industry and the Midway Plaisance. It drew an estimated 27 million visitors, 14 million from outside the United States, at a time when the population of Chicago was just over one million. The Columbian Exposition celebrated, one year late, the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus' “discovery” of the Americas.