MEDIEVALISM AND ORIENTALISM AT THE WORLD'S FAIRS

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ABSTRACT

From the middle of the nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the great European powers mounted enormous international exhibitions, displaying both their technological and economic power and their newly acquired colonial possessions. Curiously, amid the pavilions and exhibition halls were reconstructions of their own medieval past. What was the significance of these medieval installations, which present the Middle Ages as both domestic and foreign, as native and native? This paper traces this dual interpretation of the Middle Ages from World's Fairs to Victorian Anthropology and then further back to the strangely intertwined histories of medievalism and orientalism in architecture, linguistics and literature.

Over the past two decades an enormous scholarly literature has developed on what would have seemed an unlikely subject, that of world's fairs and international exhibitions, especially in the nineteenth century (Allwood 1977; Friebe 1985; Greenhalgh 1988; Rydell 1984). A new interest in the symbolic and theatrical aspects of social history and of simulated environments, reflecting the state of our own cultural moment, has vitalized this previously understudied aspect of how the nineteenth century viewed itself. During the same two decades, literary and intellectual historians have turned their attention to another aspect of the same time period – its obsession with the Middle Ages (Biddick 1998; Bloch and Nichols 1996; Chandler 1970; Dakyns 1973; Dinshaw 1999; Eco 1986; Ellis 2000; Emery 2001; Frantzen 1990; Mathews 1999; Trigg 2002; Studies in Medievalism). This new scholarly concern with medievalism also has a contemporary source, as the Middle Ages increasingly is pictured in both popular culture and academic discourse as an absolute historical opposite, as the last premodern moment in Western Civilization. Yet surprisingly these two distinct turns in recent scholarship turn out to have a link. As it turns out, world's fairs in the nineteenth century not only celebrated the triumph of European modernity, they also displayed aspects of Europe's own medieval past. From the Great Ex-

hibition of 1851 onward, medieval reconstructions were among the most popular exhibits at world's fairs, and often the most difficult to assimilate to the fairs' modernizing agenda. A nearly complete collection of the official records of most of these fairs is available from the Smithsonian Institute on microfilm, and most of the descriptions that follow are based on materials from these reels (Rydell 1992). For most of us today, for instance, the idea of the relation of these world's fairs to the Middle Ages is learned from Henry Adams, who in *The autobiography of Henry Adams* extols the futurist power of the great hall of turbines, and contrasts these dynamos to the accepting grace of the cathedral, as developed in his dichotomy of "The Virgin and the Dynamo" (Adams 1931). Yet one would not suspect from reading Adams' *Autobiography* or his essays or his letters that it would have been possible for him to visit two medieval recreations at the Paris Exhibition of 1900, "Le Vieux Paris" and "Paris 1500" each with extensive reconstructions of buildings, costumed inhabitants and educational literature (Mandell 1967).

My purpose here is to describe some of these examples of medieval installations at world's fairs, but also to uncover some hidden patterns and meanings in their display. Throughout the nineteenth century, we shall see, medieval installations played a complicated and unexpected part in world's fair planning. From the very first, however, the place of medieval exhibitions at world's fairs was unstable and contradictory. For as the nineteenth century progressed, these international exhibitions, which were being mounted as often as every five years on average, not only celebrated industrial wealth and technique, they also celebrated the growth of empire, the imperial triumph of the West over the East and Africa. Installations and displays exhibited the raw materials, the handicrafts and the potential wealth of European colonial acquisitions, as well as those of independent Eastern states. This imperial theme, however, complicated the representation of Europe's own past, that of the Middle Ages. For since the late eighteenth century, the Medieval and the Oriental had been paired, as aesthetic styles, as points of linguistic origin, and, increasingly, as stages of cultural development.

This association, sometimes parallel and sometimes genetic, sometimes positive and sometimes negative, of the Oriental and the Medieval had a history stretching back before even the eighteenth century. In the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, the return to classical order required the rejection of medieval architectural and literary categories. Sir John Evelyn (1723) uses almost racial terms to condemn the spread of Gothic architecture in his *Account of architects and architecture*: "It was after the Irruption, and Swarmes of those Truculent Peoples from the North; the Moors and Arabs from the South and East, over-running the Civiliz'd World; that wherever they fixed themselves, they soon began to debauch this Noble and Useful Art". And in defending his classical plans for rebuilding London after the Great Fire, Christopher Wren likewise condemns the "Saracen mode of building, seen in the East, soon spread over Europe, and particularly in France" (Wren 1823). The fantastic elements in fiction, and sometimes fiction itself, were also ascribed to Eastern influence, and an extended debate continued in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as to whether medieval romance was fundamentally oriental in origin (Huet 1672).

In the eighteenth century, however, antiquarianism, early romanticism and the picturesque, as well as direct knowledge of Eastern cultures resulted in a shift in these valences. Garden architecture and landscape design collocated oriental and medieval motifs as aspects of the picturesque. Intellectual history, according to Raymond Schwab in his great book *The Oriental Renaissance*, "discovered" the East as the Renaissance itself "discovered" classical antiquity (Schwab 1984). Scholarship often migrated from Medieval to Oriental Studies, and back again. The Middle Ages represented in time what the Orient represented in space, an "other" to the present development of Western Civilization. The great moment in this enterprise was Sir William Jones' reconstruction of Sanskrit. Suddenly a unity of world civilizations, frequently compared to the cultural unity of the Catholic Middle Ages, seemed possible through linguistic research. Medieval vernaculars themselves acquired a new antique prestige through their lineage to Sanskrit.

Despite this prestige, by the turn of the nineteenth century, a discourse of Western superiority begins to enter what had been a brief celebration of cultural relativism. It was the West which was to be the inheritor of the grandeur of Sanskrit and Indo-European (and other ancient) civilizations. Comparative studies began to emphasize the creative energy of the Gothic and the relatively static quality of Oriental architectures. If Islamic architecture was unchanging and uncreative, and Gothic architecture had distinct phases and a rich history of development, this would have come as no surprise to the Victorians familiar with nineteenth century philology. For Von Humboldt and Schlegel, the organic and creative syntax of Indo-European contrasted with the inorganic and merely additive structure of the Semitic languages. Said's account of Renan's philology emphasizes the separation of East and West in language as well as in power (Said 1978). The "original" languages of the sacred texts have no special status. Indeed, what philology reveals is the relative inadequacy of their conceptions which are only to be fully developed in Indo-European languages. Renan's project, that is, is not only to demonstrate the historicity and revisionism and multiple authorship of the Gospels, but to strip them of their original and sacred power. That power is now shifted to the interpreter, to the philologist, to a primarily Western form of knowledge. So in language, thus in architecture, or more properly, both were expressions of what would soon be understood as differences in race as well as in the languages of culture.

Egyptologists, including the influential Edward Lane, were as drawn to the Islamic architecture of Cairo as they were to its ancient monuments. Islamic architecture was considered to be "medieval" because it corresponded to that historical nomenclature in Northern and Western civilization. Lane, in his *Manners and customs of the modern Egyptians*, was acutely aware of the pressures of modernity, but for all that, conceived of modern Egyptian life as constituting an unbroken and relatively unchanged thread from "medieval" Cairo (Lane 1836). Lane criticized Muhammed Ali's industrialization efforts as alien to the essentially agricultural economy and society of Egypt. Muhammad Ali, who came to power in 1836, like Ataturk almost a century later, saw his role as modernizing and Europeanizing a "medieval" and "oriental" Egypt. British architects visiting Istambul or India found themselves fascinated with architectural details that reminded them of the craftsmanship of medieval Europe, and which they generalized to the largely "medieval" state of Eastern economies and societies. William Burges, the winner of the competition for the Crimean Memorial Church in Istambul, was especially attracted to the Northern regions of Istambul, including Galatea and the old city, which he compared to a sort of medieval Pompeii. (Crinson 1996: 154-55).

If there was a shift from the picturesque to the interpretation of the Orient as essence, it was marked by the *Description de l'Egypte* (Commission des Sciences et Arts d'Egypte 1809-28), the great post-invasion Napoleonic inventory of Egyptian architecture and culture. As Said points out in his important discussion of the *Description*, its ideological strategy was to place Revolutionary France in the lineage of the great empires of antiquity, relating to Egypt's past glories rather than its barbaric present (Said 1978). Indeed, the present state of Egypt was conceived of as "medieval" in the Enlightenment pejorative sense of the word. As Mark Crinson observes:

> It was between the three images of ancient, medieval and modern Egypt that the study of Islam was to be stretched. Modern Egyptians were regarded as still medieval in their way of life, and yet pragmatic information about their country had to be gathered for the purposes of modernization. Ancient Egyptian civilization was still held to contain eternal verities, and yet the culture of its descendants seemed alternatively time bound or corrupt, resulting from the teaching of a false prophet. The dazzling and beguiling image of that medieval culture had somehow to be mastered or rationalized, and yet mastery of Egypt's past could perhaps only come about by mastery of her present.
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> (Crinson 1996: 26)

As early as 1835, it is possible to locate a positive understanding of the expression of spirituality in both Islamic and Gothic architecture. In his 1835 lecture, published in 1863, "On the influence of religion upon art", Owen Jones saw religious architecture as expressing a sort of racial memory, and he compares both Islamic and Gothic architecture to the present state of religious architecture in Britain:

> Who that has stood beside the fountain of the Mosque of Sultan Hassan in Grand Cairo, or has trod the golden halls of the fairy palace of the Alhambra, has not felt the calm, voluptuous translation of the Koran's doctrines? Who amidst the aisles of a Gothic cathedral has not felt materialism wither away, and awe-struck by the mysterious character of the building, cried out – Here, indeed, is the dwelling-place of the Christian's God! Here may He be worshipped in purity of spirit?   (Jones 1863: 20-21; Crinson 1996: 34)

Of course, Jones' rhetoric contrasts the spirituality of Gothic architecture with the sensuousness of Islamic architecture. The Gothic strikes awe, the Mosque echoes the calm voluptuousness of the Koran. The Gothic, and by extension the Western, is described in patriarchal language; Islamic architecture is feminized: "calm" "voluptuous" and "sensuous". Its implicit paganism and its association with both romance and sexuality is suggested in the analogy to the "fairy palace" a common association. Nevertheless, Jones is according a certain power to Islamic architecture that at least allows a horizontal connection, however stretched, to its Western counterpart, the Gothic. Indeed, the Crystal Palace, for which Jones served as interior design architect, seems almost to express this dichotomy between a sober and inspiring exterior and a sensuously riotous interior.

A case could be made that the Crystal Palace itself was an orientalized fantasy, representing the industrial world as a light filled New Jerusalem. From the late eighteenth century on, garden design and architecture borrowed heavily from prints of Oriental and Islamic architecture and buildings. The garden house was appropriately a little Garden of Eden and the Garden of Eden was a place in the East. The imagery of Victorian gardening thus had about it a millenialist iconography of an orientalized geography of revelation. If the Crystal Palace and Paxton's imagining of it struck many observers as related to a Gothic cathedral, its interior was programmatically related to Islamic architecture. Owen Jones, the architect responsible for most of the interior decoration of the Crystal Palace, was one of the first British architects to study Islamic architecture seriously and he used the light and color of the Alhambra as a model (Jones 1856).

The Great Exhibition of 1851, while it was firmly dedicated to industrial content, made claims in its promotional materials towards a certain medieval lineage. The Exhibition would hearken back to the great trade fairs of the Middle Ages. Moreover, the Exhibition of Ancient and Medieval Art mounted a year before suggested the great potential of medieval artifacts as an attraction. The Houses of Parliament and their medieval decoration, and a certain Arthurian aura cultivated by Prince Albert, had been responsible for a mid-century rise in popularity of medieval imagery and themes. International courts and displays were also popular, and these in general displayed handmade materials, such as

the India Court and the Turkish Court. It was, however, the Medieval Court that drew the most attention because of Pugin's reputation and its relatively large scale (*Illustrated Catalogue* 1851). The Medieval Court consisted mostly of furnishings designed by Pugin and executed by his longtime associate firms. These firms included George Myers of London and John Hardman and Company of Birmingham, the latter owned by a prominent Catholic family. These included a Prie-Dieu, a cabinet, and various domestic items. Most controversial, however, was the 16 foot high cross designed by a Ms. Kids of Bladensburg, Ireland, illustrated with busts of prophets and evangelists. Largely, but not exclusively, manufactured rather than handcrafted items, the Exhibition drew the scorn of Ruskin and of his younger admirers who would form the core of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. It may also have been Pugin's intense brand of Catholicism that placed the Medieval Court by association with a certain foreignness, although by the late 1840s Pugin's preference for esoteric liturgies had been largely rejected by Newman and his circle in favor of a more Baroque and Roman inspired architecture and liturgy (Auerbach 1999). Indeed, Pugin's aesthetic by mid-century had been adapted by the Anglican Ecclessiological movement, which planted Pugin-inspired Gothic churches across the countries that contributed their exotic goods to the Great Exhibition, in something of a mirror inversion of the aesthetics of the Crystal Palace.

Medieval imitations, often explicitly religious, were not limited to the Medieval Court alone. Many were displayed in the non-English sections of the exhibition, and presumably were less controversial because of their placement in "foreign" designated areas. One was a sculptured pietá with a German Gothic screen as background by Ernst Rietschel of Dresden, one of Saxony's most prolific sculptors. (Rietschel's contemporary reputation was itself controversial, since he often represented figures from the historical past in Northern European dress. Rietschel was in any case Lutheran). Crusading imagery showed up elsewhere. A large statue of Godfrey of Bouillion, who died at Acre in the thirteenth century, was contributed by the Belgian sculptor Eugene Simonis, but was executed in Nineteenth Century neo-classical style. Crusade imagery would become a common theme in imperial and colonial art in a few decades, but it was represented as a synthesis of spiritual and temporal ideals in mid-century. The Patent Wood Company of London exhibited a print of one of its products, a machine-made Gothic screen. Prince Albert's home duchy of Saxe-Coburg contributed a number of medieval objects to the Great Exhibition, presumably to reflect Albert's own interest in Arthurian imagery and the efforts to link his persona with the Arthurian revival. The woodcarvers, Tobias Hoffmeister and Company, of Coburg, offered a German-Gothic style sideboard and four armchairs that made it look as if one were sitting in a Gothic cathedral. Despite the critical distance of the Pre-Raphaelites from the exhibit, a number of exhibited pieces re-flected a certain Pre-Raphaelite influence. These included a decorative panel of Queen Eleanor by W. F. D'almaine, imitating "the style of Edward I", on a gold patterned background as well as Waller Brothers' monumental brass of a female figure. Other medievalizing pieces, such as George Hedgeland's Gothic revival stained glass, distinctly lacked Pre-Raphaelite associations; as restorer of King's College, Cambridge, his Gothic frame enclosed a distinctly post-Raphaelite female figure.

One of the ironies of the aftermath of the Great Exhibition was a polarization in attitudes towards "oriental" design. Partly as a consequence of the Great Exhibition, Henry Cole and Owen Jones were involved with the establishment of the Department of Practical Art (1852) and the South Kensington Museum, one of the forerunners of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Cole and Jones were critical of the imitative, rather than functional nature of industrial design at the Great Exhibition, predicting modernist critiques. But what they preferred were the artisanal productions of Eastern and Middle Eastern countries, which they judged more functional, especially given the two-dimensional nature of Islamic ornament. Indeed, in his influential *The grammar of ornament* (1856), Jones devoted far more space to Islamic design and ornament than to medieval European examples.

The Great Exhibition was already moving towards the presentation of other cultures in theatrical settings. The Turkish and Egyptian courts gestured towards some sense of architectural magnificence, albeit stuffed with products of delight and luxury. The Tunisian Court, however, had a tent made of animal skins, and it was presented as a bazaar, even down to a shopkeeper who could bargain over sales. After the success of the Great Exhibition of 1851, Paxton's building, meant to be temporary, was moved in order to create a permanent exhibition hall, a common move in future world's fairs. The move of the Crystal Palace to its site at Sydenham also involved a change of content and program. Instead of the industrial and technical focus of the Great Exhibition, the Crystal Palace was filled with architectural imitations and large scale models. Art historians such as James Fergusson and Owen Jones, instrumental in the installation of the Great Exhibition, now were explicit in their exoticism. Fergusson designed the Abyssinian court and Jones a model of the Alhambra. There was also a medieval court, now placed among a collection of architectural styles, including Islamic, Roman, Byzantine, Abyssinian, Pompeian, Egyptian, Greek, Renaissance, Elizabethan and Italian styles. The effect was less to emphasize historical development as it was to suggest an almost ahistorical panorama of cultural monuments. From the point of view of style, these sites were presented as equal, but the guidebooks and contemporary reactions distinguished sharply between the exotic and the familiar, the domestic and the foreign, the Western and the Eastern, now allowing influence and analogy, now moralizing and hierarchizing.

The Exhibition of 1851 was followed by several successful international exhibitions over the next few decades. Most of these were contained, as was the Great Exhibition, under one roof. However, as the fairs grew more popular, the number of exhibits soon grew too large for one building, and eventually auxiliary exhibits and buildings flanked or surrounded a central exhibit hall. The 1867 International Exhibition in Paris grouped a series of foreign and colonial pavilions around a central exhibit space. Some European pavilions, with early modern and medieval themes, were placed among these. By the time of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, which celebrated India's absorption into the Empire, a loose association between the medieval past of the home country and the present state of the colonies began to be noticeable. A cart drawn by bullocks patrolled up and down an "Asian street", actually a reconstruction of a street scene from Sri Lanka, with appropriate facades. This street scene was matched by an "Old London" street, which combined medieval and Tudor elements of a pre-Great Fire London (Cundall 1886; Hamy 1887). At the 1889 International Exhibition in Paris, the newly constructed Eiffel Tower was surrounded by "villages". One approached technological modernity through the past and the primitive. By the Paris International Exhibition of 1900, an entire section is devoted to the architectural past and to the colonial other. As mentioned above, two entire medieval theme parks were available at Paris 1900, one a meandering series of streets and buildings, "Vieux Paris", virtually reconstructing the medieval Paris that had been obliterated by Haussmann's massive plan of urban renewal, and "Paris 1500", a plaza inspired by the literary Middle Ages of Victor Hugo. Old London, Old Paris, Old Vienna, had become popular, even essential aspects of the world's fair by the turn of the century, at the same time that the industrial and economic forces celebrated in the main exhibits were transforming the material remains of the past beyond recognition.

If the medieval past of the European host countries was sometimes represented as if a colonized past, the present of the colonies was often presented as if it were the Middle Ages, continuing an attitude towards historical development that we saw articulated in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The "Streets of Cairo", with its overhanging balconies and camel rides, was so popular that it became a fixture at world's fairs from the 1880s on, evolving from an installation depicting Cairo to a generalized Oriental-themed entertainment complex. The image of the Oriental street inevitably was associated with the medieval streets of "Old London" and "Old Paris". At the 1867 Exhibition in Paris, the Khedive of Egypt arrived to find his country represented not by its modern progress, but by a royal palace from medieval Cairo, which he moved into and received "visitors with medieval hospitality" (Mitchell 1989: 220). At Paris 1889, Egyptian visitors were also embarrassed to find a reconstruction of medieval Cairo, decorated with artificial dirt (Çelik 1992). Even in domestically fo-

cussed exhibitions, the Middle Ages was associated with kermess, carnival and the oriental bazaar. The "Old London" area of the International Health Exhibit of 1884 was meant to illustrate a contrast of the medieval past with the elaborate waterworks, plumbing and public health advantages of the present, but the medieval themed exhibit turned out to be enormously popular.

In the grand international exhibitions, a clear pattern emerges of an association of the colonial and oriental (and eventually the medieval) with entertainment and recreation on the one hand and domestic and occidental architecture with business, industry and progress. But interesting variations on this pattern were played in some exhibitions held in places other than world capitals. The 1888 Exhibition in Glasgow, for instance, borrowed extensively from Islamic and oriental architecture in its chief buildings. Even the most industrial and technological displays, and indeed the exhibits of Western nations, were held in a frankly orientalizing exhibition hall. The literature surrounding 1888 Glasgow does not clearly suggest the motivation for this design choice, but one aspect of it seemed to be to associate modern technology with ancient wonder. There were no obviously "medieval" villages at Glasgow 1888, save for a Russian village which was at least as much exotically foreign as placed in a specific time period. At the more nationally oriented Glasgow Exhibition of 1911, however, which cloaked itself in Scottish Baronial architecture and included items from Scottish history and played much more directly to the Romantic image of Scotland, there was an "Auld Toon", a bit more architecturally consistent, though no less fanciful, than the similar villages earlier in Manchester and Edinburgh. One entered "Auld Toon" through a newly constructed castle keep which, interestingly, covered a Saracen fountain from an earlier installation.

Even if it seems as if these medieval exhibits were leading to our own employment of the Middle Ages as a theme for entertainment and a license for an almost child-like innocence (or, as in computer and video games, an excuse for a neo-Gothic anarchy), the evidence of their contemporary reception also suggests a good deal of seriousness, respect and affection on the part of their audiences. Elizabeth Emery has extensively analyzed the development of "Vieux Paris" at the Paris 1900 Exhibition, and she finds that this more scholarly reconstruction (led by Albert Robida, the former science fiction illustrator and futurist) was vastly more popular than the frankly entertainment oriented competing exhibit at "Paris 1500", with its recreation of the world of Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*. Emery sees the reception of the "Vieux Paris" as part of a broad based medievalism in late nineteenth century France which attempted to provide a common ground for the highly polarized post-Dreyfus Affair political scene. "Vieux Paris" was a preservationist reminder of what Paris had lost through its recent urban reconstruction, some of it occasioned by the Commune. Similarly, David Wayne Thomas (Thomas 2000) has persuasively argued that "Old Manchester"

at the 1886 Manchester Exhibition rewrote the history of the city in such a way as to attempt to heal the divisions occasioned by its brutal labor history and to offer an alternative to its stereotyping as a city of relentless industrialization.

These different ways of reading the medieval exhibits at the great nineteenth century world's fairs return us to the complex debate on the nature of the Middle Ages with which I began. For since the Renaissance there has been a sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit debate as to whether the Middle Ages was a continuation or an interruption in the development of Western culture, whether it was indigenous and local, the very point of origin of the modern nation on the one hand, or whether it was foreign and imposed, the result of contamination by outside forces. Such questions, as Patrick Geary (2002) has recently reminded us in *The myth of nations* still resonate with sometimes destructive political force. As I have put it elsewhere, the Middle Ages has always seemed to be both "native" and "native", both domestic and foreign. At the great nineteenth century world's fairs, this implicit tension was literally staged through medieval pavilions, streets and exhibitions, as another chapter in the unexpectedly related histories of orientalism and medievalism.

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