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Jeffrey Haydu is Professor of Sociology at the University of California at San Diego. His publications include *Between Craft and Class: Skilled Workers and Factory Politics in the United States and Britain, 1890-1922* (1988), and *Making American Industry Safe for Democracy: Comparative Perspectives on the State and Employee Representation in the Era of World War I* (1997).

Alan I Marcus is Professor of History at Iowa State University and Director of the Center for Historical Studies of Technology and Science there. He is the author of six books, including *Technology in America: A Brief History*, with Howard P. Segal (1989), *Cancer from Beef: DES, Federal Food Regulation, and Consumer Confidence* (1994), and most recently *Building Western Civilization: From the Advent of Writing to the Age of Steam* (1998).


Judith Spraul-Schmidt is Assistant Professor of History at Raymond Walters College, University of Cincinnati. Her publications include “The Ohio Mechanic’s Institute: The Challenge of Incivility in the Democratic Republic,” in *Technical Knowledge in American Culture: Science, Technology, and Medicine since the Early 1800s* (1996).

Tracy Teslow is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 2002, and her dissertation is titled “Representing Race to the Public: Physical Anthropology in Interwar American Natural History Museums.”

Editors’ Correction:
On this page in the Winter 2004 issue of *Ohio Valley History*, the editors incorrectly associated the Thomas Jefferson Papers with the University of Virginia. In fact, the Thomas Jefferson Papers: Retirement Series is sponsored by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, and it is housed in the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, at Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia. Our apologies.
Representing the Art and Industry of Progress: 
*Cincinnati’s Grand Exposition Posters*

TRACY TESLOW

The posters produced to promote Cincinnati’s Grand Expositions in the late nineteenth century operated on multiple levels: as manufactured and artistic objects, as literal and symbolic texts, and as voices in direct and implicit discourses about commerce, industry and arts as well as about race, class, and gender. Most obviously the posters offered a celebration of Cincinnatians’ aspiration to maintain their city’s position in the region, the nation, and the world as the Queen City, to entice exhibitors and entice visitors to join their celebration, and to imbibe its lessons about manliness, about industriousness and invention, about mastery and aesthetics. Overtly the posters sold progress, economic growth, and civilization.

Implicitly, and certainly in retrospect, they also revealed the structures of race, gender and class embedded in all this and how ideologies of democratic commerce, art, and industry were also structures of power and of exclusion. Over the course of the eighteen years that the Expositions were mounted, the nature of the poster design changed dramatically, and in very interesting ways. In the early posters, produced in the 1870s, the themes of race, class, and gender are submerged within a broader presentation, one whose overwhelming emphasis privileged particular civic concerns, namely:

1. Legitimation (primarily by featuring the impressively large Saengerfest, or Music, Hall that evoked the Crystal Palace and other cities’ Exposition halls);

2. Establishing trust (through promises of public financing and guarantees, and invocation of local business, trade and training associations); and

3. Demonstrating quality (the many acres devoted to the exposition, the many categories and quantity of worthy wares, the eager participation of visitors and exhibitors represented by the increasing amount of traffic depicted outside the hall and the crowds within).

Then, in the 1880s, the amount of text declined dramatically, the building
retreated to the background, and the gender, class, and racial dimensions of the Exposition became more explicit. To understand the meaning of this transformation requires some historical background on the production of these posters and a consideration of the posters themselves as manufactured, commercial and art objects.

**Lithography as Art and Industry**

The first aspect of the Cincinnati Exposition posters to which one should give attention is the fact that they are lithographs. This may seem like an arcane art historical detail, but in the context of mechanical institutes and industrial expositions, the use of lithographic posters to advertise Cincinnati’s expositions takes on added significance. The posters themselves are an instance of the very thing they advertise: innovation and the commercial success of art and industry in Cincinnati.

Lithography as a printing process originated in Germany in 1796. Rather than relief printing (for example, wood block), lithography involves drawing an image on a solid non-porous surface, typically polished limestone, with a greasy crayon whose traces hold ink. The lithographer rolls ink across the prepared stone, places paper on the stone, and sends both through a press. Initially lithographers accomplished this in a single ink color, but in 1840 the first chromolithographs, using multiple colors, were produced in Boston. The technique traveled to New York in the late 1840s and reached Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Cincinnati by the 1850s. By 1875 most American cities had at least one of these firms, the most famous being Currier and Ives. The process of chromolithography is complex because each color is laid on separately—the most complicated pictures used up to twenty plates—and colors must be combined to produce nuances of shade and tone. Thus a chromolithographer needed to be skilled in order to ensure that the register of the image was perfectly aligned with each pressing. Moreover, he had to have a sophisticated understanding of color.

In the late nineteenth century, chromolithography was central to both art and industry, important cultural developments that Cincinnati’s Expositions reflect. Prior to 1850, lithographers specialized in providing the American public with images on a variety of popular topics: portraits of famous people, town views and points of interest, historical events, prize-winning animals, and natural disasters. After 1850 the market for these sorts of images was taken over by illustrated weekly magazines whose printing technology—electrotyping printing on steam-powered rotary presses—enabled them to publish upwards of a dozen
illustrations a week in thousands of copies. Lithographers, who still relied on hand presses, could not compete. The typical output for a lithography shop was between two hundred and two hundred and fifty impressions a day, as compared with publications such as Ballou's Pictorial that published some one hundred thousand copies a week. Even in the 1870s, with the introduction of steam-powered presses, a leading lithographic firm such as Strobridge in Cincinnati could average only 2,600 impressions a day. No longer able to compete in the popular market for illustrations of current events, lithographers made a virtue of their capacity to reproduce a wide range of colors and tones and focused their efforts on fine art reproduction and commercial art.

In the late nineteenth century, Cincinnati was home to some of the nation's foremost lithographers. Perhaps the most famous lithographs were those by the Strobridge firm printed for Barnum and Bailey. Nearly one hundred firms in the city turned out posters for road shows, broadsides, advertisements, package wrappers, show cards, placards, labels, logos, and letterhead that used lithographic printing technology and artistic techniques to create commercial art. By the 1870s, these firms produced complex chromolithographic posters that combined artistic elements and scenes with new products and services, often in eight or more colors, for markets all over the country and Canada and often in enormous sizes. At the same time, chromolithographers used their talents in color print production to satisfy a growing desire for fine art. With the development of high quality chromolithographic color reproduction, Americans of nearly all classes could afford to decorate their homes with inexpensive copies of artistic masterpieces and other artistic scenes, both copies and original images. The Strobridge catalog included among its artistic offerings seascapes, rural scenes, quaint cottages, the Founding Fathers, religious scenes and holy sayings, children playing, people fishing, landscapes, women with flowers, and horses.

By the late nineteenth century, America was awash in colorful lithographic imagery that some commentators derided as "democratic art" that created a "chromo-civilization." One critic, Edwin L. Godkin, editor of The Nation, lamented that the suffusion of lithographic images was indicative of the decline of American civilization, the debasement of high culture in favor of a pseudo-culture that cultivated an ugly, false, acquisitive taste for cheap copies of beautiful originals. Godkin castigated the 'chromo-civilization' as a "society of ignoramuses." But others viewed the democratic diffusion of artistic imagery, both commercial and fine art copies, as salutary. In 1875, in Illustrated Cincinnati, D. J. Kenny hailed the work of lithographers in popu-
larizing art among the masses via placards in railway stations, hotels, and other public places. The lithographs were, he said, “works of art.” An 1884 issue of *Art Age* credited “well-drawn, well-colored, well-composed” posters found in America’s city streets with “materially assisting in the art education of a Nation.”

The posters created by German immigrant Adolph Krebs and by other Cincinnati firms for the Industrial Expositions combined all the elements that characterized late nineteenth century lithography—complex and vivid coloration, elements borrowed from fine art and classical art traditions, advertising and promotional design and textual elements (that were in the process of being developed and standardized by these very firms—such as the “Machinery in Motion” highlighted in the 1873 and 1875 posters), and the era’s artistic and industrial products. From the perspective of the time, this democratic art promoted a celebration of art and industry that would bolster not only the local and regional economy but the very process of democracy itself by celebrating and stimulating invention, industriousness, aesthetic elevation, and the diffusion of knowledge. The Cincinnati Industrial Exposition posters were themselves a sort of exhibit, a demonstration of both art and an industrial process, a celebration of excellence by a prominent Cincinnati industry, and thus an eminently appropriate medium for announcing the fairs.

*Men are Men and Women are Symbols*

If we approach the posters by asking what role the organizers and sponsors imagined for men and women in these expositions, and more broadly in art, industry, and American life, they yield some revealing answers. Their depiction of men and women in markedly different roles clearly reflect ideologies about what constituted full and functional citizenship for men and women in this period. Local leaders justified industrial education, competition, and expositions as critical components of virtuous, vigorous, effective citizenship and crucial to the progress and success of Cincinnati, Ohio, and the United States. As such, these simple advertisements and the visual vocabulary of race, gender, class and participation that they invoke take on a deeper significance.

In the poster created for the 1884 Industrial Exposition, Music Hall has retreated to a vignette framed by a classical portico. Unlike earlier posters from the 1870s, the viewers’ attention is now directed toward the two symbolic figures on either side of the portico: art (represented on the left) and industry.
(on the right). Each figure holds objects that signal their occupation: the female figure holds a palette while the male figure hoists a model of a steam engine, a large gear resting at his side. The man sports the “greasy apron” of the mechanic, perched as if about to rise, his sleeves rolled up to signal industrious (though not wage) labor. He is a mechanic that one could imagine meeting on the street or in his shop, presented as both a symbol and an individual, represented in the act of displaying a replica of his work, or at least his class of work. In contrast, the female figure evokes a variety of standard allegorical female figures, from John Gast’s floating symbol of Manifest Destiny to various early American liberty figures. Her dress is made of heavy drapery folded so that she nearly recedes into the edge of the scene where the banners meet the foliage. Unlike her male counterpart, she stands still, unmovng, the significance of the arts captured in her elegant attire and her limited palette and not in her actions.

An even more striking example of this dichotomy between men who are represented as recognizable types and women who appear as symbols is found in the 1880 poster, apparently so successful that it reappeared in 1882. While Music Hall remains prominent at this point, encompassing roughly half of the poster, the drama of art and industry at the top dominates, which represents a sharp break with the posters of the 1870s. In the center sits the Queen City on her throne, the scales of justice in her right hand, a laurel wreath raised in her left. She wears the crown and robes that signal her identity and which serve to remove her from nineteenth-century Ohio and place her firmly in the realm of symbolism. The men, on the other hand, now representing both art and industry, again invoke living men one might have encountered in Cincinnati. Again the mechanic appears in his emblematic apron and rolled sleeves, grasping a hammer in his right hand and gesturing toward an anvil at his left. He is surrounded by mechanical and industrial objects of all sorts: a water pump, a printing press, a large gear, a bale of cotton, all of which culminate in a steaming locomotive and telegraph poles strung with wire. On the right, the artist stands before his easel, a palette and brush in his hand. He is surrounded by various artistic and domestic objects: a large decorative medallion, musical instruments, a fine sword and medieval helmet, pottery and fine furniture, including a marble-topped stand with a potted flowering plant on which our gentleman leans. And indeed he is a gentleman, inserting an explicit class dimension into what in 1884 becomes a more simple opposition of art and industry. Clearly, art and industry are both
domains of men, but the arts and aesthetics are apparently reserved for the middle classes: neither is the domain of women. These men are the exhibitors, the sponsors, and the audience for the Exposition and for this poster.

Unlike men, women—other than minute figures populating the traffic and crowd scenes in the early posters—are exclusively symbolic figures. None provides representations of women that anyone might imagine could have been encountered in life, much less as an industrious worker or artist. Women—or better, woman—were not workers, and thus by extension not full members of the polity, particularly in the logic of the mechanic’s institute and the world of industrial expositions (or at least their posters). We should remember that at this time the rhetoric of separate spheres dictated that the proper place of women, especially middle and upper class women, was in the private domestic sphere. The realm of the industrial exposition and public debates about progress and commerce are then reserved for emblematic women, not real women. Interestingly, an exception to this representational logic existed, or so it at first seems, in the form of an Ohio Mechanics Institute certificate given to students to mark their achievement and completion of their training. The document certifies the holder as a trained mechanic and, in certifying such expertise and in legitimating work and industry, the emblematic figure employed was a muscular young man, a symbol of manliness and vigorous accomplishment. The certifying landscape excludes all femininity and instead invokes the essence of competence and manliness, surrounded by markers of the artistic and industrial life.

The Economy of Race in the Exposition of Art and Industry

The final dimension of these posters to consider is the racial dimension. Only a single poster depicts non-white actors, and it is an extraordinary one. The poster promoting the 1883 Cincinnati Industrial Exposition deployed a fully allegorical depiction of the nation’s states arriving to make offerings of their arts and industrial manufactures. Seated in the throne is Cincinnati, the Queen City, the scales of justice clasped in her right hand, her left outstretched toward Ohio, represented by a woman with flowing blond hair. In the racial logic of the era she represented the antithesis of the African American. Ohio carries a platform on which she offers Cincinnati a mimeograph machine, a satchel of the arts slung across her body. To Ohio’s right, Massachusetts approaches out of the throng with a rolled rug on her shoulder. Behind her, Pennsylvania waits. Yet next to Cincinnati and Ohio, the most prominent figures in the field are a young black male directly behind Ohio, who carries a textile marked “Georgia Mills,” a black man who looks to be West Indian but who carries a basket of tobacco leaves.
tagged “Kentucky,” and a Native American woman as the state of Indiana presenting a steam engine. Reversing the racial and gendered logic of the other posters, the males here are an allegorical man and a boy, and all three non-white emblematic figures appear less as allegorical figures removed from place and time, and more like stereotypical types that white Americans might have imagined to be real. The young black male represents the infantilization of African Americans, the idea that they were childlike people in need of protection and guidance. The Native American woman sports clothing that points to the marginalization and mythologizing of Indians in the late nineteenth century after westward white expansion had effectively dominated them and rendered them non-threatening. These images reflect a complex interplay of reality with allegory, in which allegory acts as a distancing mechanism that allowed African Americans and Indians to be inserted into actual absences. The poster implicitly acknowledges the part played by African Americans and Native Americans in American economic success without overtly opening the Exposition—or American society—to them.

By their presence, the poster makes explicit what is implicit in all the other posters: that the celebration of art and industry was a racialized celebration, a white celebration. Race is not so much absent from all the other posters; rather, whiteness is being privileged in all of them. The sudden eruption of dark bodies in the 1883 poster draws attention to the existence of this racial formation that is otherwise allowed to disappear when only white images were presented to white audiences. Whiteness, which was being produced alongside blackness as an essential pillar of American racial ideology, is revealed as a position not only of identity, but more crucially, of power. Whites, the poster reveals, are the possessors of the key aspects of civilization—art, industry, commerce, economic power. Not surprisingly, this poster was created only four years before the passage of the Dawes Act,
which ultimately stripped Native Americans of much of their remaining land and instituted a policy of forced assimilation, six years after the collapse of Reconstruction and the abandonment of civil rights for African Americans and in an era increasingly marked by Jim Crow restrictions and racial terror.

Cincinnati’s industrial expositions were self-consciously constructed as celebrations of American promise, meant to position the city and region as true competitors, as genuine participants in the progress of modern industry, agriculture and arts. Through the promotional posters created for the expositions, organizers first celebrated the very existence of the fairs, their grandeur, the way they distilled America’s commercial and inventive greatness into “Sixteen Grand Departments, Comprising Eighty Four Classes.” By the 1880s, posters for “The Representative Exposition of America” increasingly focused on the wares found inside Saengerfest Hall and on the nature of the men who made, distributed and used them. At its height the Exposition celebrated not only progress in American commerce and industry, but also the gender, class and racial dimensions of American society that structured it. Cincinnati’s Grand Exposition chromolithographic posters were simultaneously material examples of America’s technical, mechanical, and artistic talent, literal and symbolic invocations of commercial progress, and also emblematic representations of the boundaries of participation in American society. The posters attest in their symbolism and absences to the social, political, and economic restrictions that prevailed inside and outside the walls of Saengerfest Hall. Women, African Americans, and Native Americans were neither the participants, the audience, nor, in many cases, the beneficiaries of the industrial progress Cincinnati and other cities celebrated in the nineteenth century. Despite a desire, proclaimed in the 1886 poster, to “Let Everybody Attend,” America’s Industrial Expositions were not by and for everybody.

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