Colonial Exhibitions

A colonial exhibition was a type of international exhibition intended to boost trade and bolster popular support for the various colonial empires during the New Imperialism period, which started in the 1880s with the scramble for Africa.

The British Empire Exhibition of 1924–5 ranked among these expositions, but perhaps the most notable was the rather successful 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition, which lasted six months and sold 33 million tickets. Paris's Colonial Exhibition debuted on 6 May 1931, and encompassed 110 hectares of the Bois de Vincennes. The exhibition included dozens of temporary museums and façades representing the various colonies of the European nations, as well as several permanent buildings. Among these were the Palais de la Porte Dorée, designed by architect Albert Laprode, which then housed the Musée permanent des Colonies, and serves today as the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration.

An anti-colonial counter-exhibition was held near the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, titled Truth on the Colonies and was organized by the French Communist Party. The first section was dedicated to the crimes made during the colonial conquests, and quoted Albert Londres and André Gide's criticisms of forced labour while the second one made an apology of the Soviets' "nationalities' policy" compared to "imperialist colonialism".

Germany and Portugal also staged colonial exhibitions, as well as Belgium, which had a Foire coloniale as late as 1948. Human zoos were featured in some of these exhibitions, such as in the Parisian 1931 exhibition.

Through the 1950s, Africans and Native Americans Were Kept In Zoos As Exhibits

Throughout the early 20th century, Germany held what was termed a, “Peoples Show,” or Völkerschau. Africans were brought in as carnival or zoo exhibits for passers-by to gawk at. Only decades before, in the late 1800’s, Europe had been filled with, “human zoos,” in cities like Paris, Hamburg, Antwerp, Barcelona, London, Milan, and Warsaw. New York too saw these popular exhibits continue into the 20th century. There was an average of 200,000 to 300,000 visitors who attended each exhibition in each city.
Carl Hagenbeck of Germany ran exhibits of what he called, “purely natural,” populations, usually East Asian Islanders, but in 1876, he also sent a collaborator to the Sudan to bring back, “wild beasts and Nubians.” The traveling Nubian exhibit was a huge success in cities like Paris, London, and Berlin.

The World’s Fair, in 1889 was visited by 28 million people, who lined up to see 400 indigenous people as the major attraction. The 1900 World’s Fair followed suit, as did the Colonial Exhibitions in Marseilles (1906 and 1922) and in Paris (1907 and 1931) which displayed naked or semi-naked humans in cages. Paris saw 34 million people attend their exhibition in six months alone.

Just four years shy of the 20th century, the Cincinnati Zoo kept one hundred Sioux Native Americans in a mock village at the zoo for three months.

In 1906, the amateur anthropologist Madison Grant, who was the head of the New York Zoological Society, put a Congolese pygmy Ota Benga, on display at the Bronx Zoo in New York City. The display was in the primate exhibit, and Ota was often made to carry around chimpanzees and other apes. Eugenicist and zoo director William Hornaday labeled Ota, “The Missing Link.” The public flocked to see the display.

Benga shot targets with a bow and arrow, wove twine, and wrestled with an orangutan. Although, according to the New York Times, “few expressed audible objection to the sight of a human being in a cage with monkeys as companions,” controversy erupted as black clergymen in the city took great offense. “Our race, we think, is depressed enough, without exhibiting one of us with the apes,” said the Reverend James H. Gordon, superintendent of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn. “We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls.”

In 1906, the Bronx Zoo kept Ota Benga on a human exhibit. The sign outside of her fenced in area of the primate exhibit read, “Age, 23 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches. Weight, 103 pounds. Brought from the Kasai River, Congo Free State, South Central Africa, by Dr. Samuel P. Verner. Exhibited each afternoon during September.”

These sorts of, “human zoos,” continued even later. The Brussels 1958 World’s Fair kept a Congolese village on display. Even as late as April 1994, an Ivory Coast village was kept as part of an African safari in Port-Saint-Père (Planète Sauvage), near Nantes, France.

In Germany, as late as 2005, Augsburg’s zoo in Germany had similar exhibits. In August 2005, London Zoo also displayed humans wearing fig leaves, and in 2007, Adelaide Zoo housed people in a former ape enclosure by day. They were, of course, allowed to return home at night, unlike many of the earlier incarnations of these racist displays.

Many people console themselves with the belief that the racism of yesterday remains safely in the past. But the echoes of the, “human zoo,” into recent years show that this is far from the case. The racism of the past continues to bleed through into the present.