

The Centennial Exposition of 1876, Remembered and Preserved

The 100th anniversary of national independence arrived at a difficult time for Americans, as political scandal, divisiveness, and financial trouble marked the years following the Civil War. The country needed a birthday celebration, and a World's Fair, the first major international exposition to be held in America, would provide an opportunity to unify its citizens.

The idea had critics. Some feared that America could not compete with participating foreign nations; others worried that the country simply could not afford such an event. But Philadelphia's vibrant economy enabled it to welcome visitors, and the city's legislators and business leaders donated funds and advertised the fair abroad. As the nation's first capital, Philadelphia proved the perfect host city for a Centennial celebration, and its Fairmount Park provided an ideal setting for the fairgrounds.

The Centennial Exposition of 1876 transformed Fairmount Park, which had been expanding rapidly since its official founding in 1855. It took almost two years to construct the fairgrounds on several hundred acres of the park's west side. Construction delays pushed opening day from April to May 10, and by the time the bell at Independence Hall signaled the Centennial's start, a crowd of over 186,200 had assembled. With admission costing 50 cents and a hotel room up to five dollars (not small change at the time), visiting the Centennial was a splurge for many of those waiting.

About 10 million people attended the Centennial over its six month run, and 50 nations participated, showcasing their national products. Highlights included Alexander Graham Bell's telephone and the future Statue of Liberty's arm and torch. Some visitors described the Centennial as a beautiful sight, while others thought its collections and throngs of people somewhat vulgar. Disorientation, due to the collection's size and its sometimes strange juxtaposition of artifacts, seems to have been a common response.

Reactions to the Centennial's architecture were mixed. Many critics at the time declared the Centennial an architectural disaster, but today's reviews are far more favorable. Twenty-seven-year-old Hermann Schwarzmann, who had recently worked as a junior assistant engineer for Fairmount Park, designed almost all of the Centennial's buildings. The Fairmount Park Commission Archives recently brought Schwarzmann's large format drawings of two Centennial buildings, Horticultural Hall and Memorial Hall, to CCAHA for treatment and housing.

Now regarded as one of the most beautiful Centennial structures, Horticultural Hall contained exhibits of flora considered exotic in 1876—such as hyacinths, ferns, orange trees, orchids, and cacti—as well as displays of seeds and gardening

tools. Memorial Hall served as the art gallery, housing thousands of sculptures, photographs, paintings, and drawings from 20 countries. The works were not particularly avant-garde, although the most popular exhibits, Italian and French sculpture, were more liberal in artistic license than the American art of the time. Some works, such as an animated wax Cleopatra, were considered of questionable taste.

In the years since the Centennial, almost all of Schwarzmann's buildings have been demolished or relocated. Horticultural Hall, built of glass and steel and intended as a permanent structure, remained a botanical conservatory until as recently as the early 1920s, but photographs from 1928 show the beginning of its physical decline. It was demolished in 1955, and a new horticultural center, built in 1973, occupies the same site.

Memorial Hall served various functions over the years. In 1877, it reopened as the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts, which housed some Centennial artwork. But when the School, now the University of the Arts, relocated in 1893, the Museum suffered. It eventually moved to the head of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and became the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Fairmount Park Commission later used Memorial Hall as its headquarters for a number of years. Today, it is home to the Please Touch Museum, and although there have been some changes—the statue of Columbia above the dome is not the original, and the eagles at the structure's corners mysteriously no longer exist—the building still looks much the same as in Schwarzmann's drawing.

One of only two major Centennial structures still standing, Memorial Hall remains as a monument to the country's anniversary. But the Centennial had other enduring effects. America emerged from it an industrial and cultural world power, and its visitors left as a new class of consumers. It prompted the opening of art organizations, museums, and schools nationwide.

As for Philadelphians, the Centennial made Fairmount Park essential to their city's culture. Today, Fairmount Park is one of the largest municipal park systems in the United States, covering 10 percent of the city's land. Just as CCAHA has conserved Schwarzmann's drawings as a part of Philadelphia history, Fairmount Park preserves the city's open space, historic houses, and neighborhood squares so that current and future Philadelphians may enjoy them.

—KATHERINE MAGAZINER

1 / Horticultural Hall and surrounding gardens, 1889 / Image courtesy of the Fairmount Park Historic Resource Archives 2 / Mellon Fellow Jessica Keister filling small losses on the Memorial Hall drawing 3 / Architect Hermann Schwarzmann's side elevation design for Horticultural Hall 4 / Schwarzmann's drawing of the front of Memorial Hall 5 / Memorial Hall, c. 1900 / Image courtesy of the Fairmount Park Historic Resource Archives



TREATMENT Because of the drawings' large size, treatment called for a team of several conservators, including Mellon Fellow Jessica Keister, Senior Conservators Mary Schobert and Soyeon Choi, and Senior Conservation Assistant Jillian Wilcox. The conservators surface-cleaned the drawings, washed them, removed their old, failing canvas linings and then lined them with Japanese paper. Finally, Jessica Makin, Manager of Housing and Framing, and Stephenie Bailey, Housing Technician, rehoused the drawings in polyester film and rolled them onto a protective tube for support.