

Bookends to "The Fair of 1893": 1876 and 1904

By Barbara Siegel (Habiba)

In the late nineteenth century the American public was finally able to see for itself a style of entertainment that, for 75 years, had been of special interest to Orientalist painters and writers — that of the "dancing girl." This cultural encounter was one of the by-products of the world's fairs whose principal goals were to feature commercially exploitable products and to position the countries of the West at the top of the hierarchy of progressive nations. The Arab countries were, themselves, under the colonial rule of the Turks, who were eager for trade with the West. The Turkish *Beys*, rulers of these countries, sent official exhibits designed to impress the world with the richness of cultural heritage dating back to antiquity and also their potential as developing nations to participate in the circle of trade. Parallel views of these countries were packaged by businessmen who leased concessions that provided entertaining glimpses into the exotic. Through these concessions Americans were exposed to large groups of people from countries of the East. The Oriental dancer first came to America via these fairs. Oriental dance in person was by no means new to the west, however. There had been dancers in Paris even before the Paris expositions of the mid-nineteenth century. The French cabaret dancer was already an accepted tradition, and the *danseuse du ventre* was as enthusiastically received as the French dancer, La Goulue. For Americans, it was within the world's fair context that "...in these theaters, amid architecturally authentic settings, belly dancers presented the element of Muslim life most intriguing to Europeans..."¹

Before "The Fair": 1876

The United States Centennial Exposition of 1876 was held for the express purpose of international commercial competition and cooperation. Thirty-eight foreign nations took part. Even before the fair there were foreign influences in Philadelphia in the foreign workmen that built exhibits. One third of the exhibits were brought from abroad by U.S. warships that were sent from port to port.

The fair was opened May 10, 1876, by President Grant in Fairmount Park. The emerging nations of South America and Asia more fully participated than Europe. Among the countries that had their own pavilions were Egypt and Turkey as well as product exhibits in the main building.

The fairgrounds were not as picturesque as they should have been, however. The

reaction to so many foreigners in the United States brought its problems. "These national costumes would have been more frequently seen but for the extremely rude gazing which the wearers were subjected to by the curious eyes of the vulgar."²

Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey had very active participation by their Ottoman rulers. In the Main Building an inscription over the entrance to the Egyptian exhibit read, "The oldest nation in the world sends its morning greeting to the youngest nation." The first thing visitors encountered was a model of the Great Pyramid. Brugsch Bey, ruler of



All photos courtesy of Barbara Siegel

Etching of the Tunisian exhibit in the Main Building of the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876.

Cairo, contributed silk, cotton, books, pottery, furniture and a miniature Koran that measured 1 1/2" x 3/4". One history of the fair credits Brugsch Bey with presenting an Egypt "compactly and completely condensed." The author goes on to say that "the Egypt of the exposition is his creation, brought into being and offered to American eyes by his untiring and discriminating effort."³

The Tunisian exhibit was also in the Main building. The *Bey* of Tunis, Sidi Mahomed Essadok Bey, was also credited with having contributed many things to the exhibit, including jewelry, national costumes, a collection of minerals and ores from Tunis,

pottery, furniture and two Arabian tents illustrating Bedouin domestic life and customs. Also on display was a mosaic from Carthage of a lion.

Housed between Denmark and Tunis, the Turkish products exhibited included perfumes, crafts, wines and liquors, opium (then legal), arms, rugs, garments and leather.

Among the many foreign restaurants and bakeries on the grounds was a Tunisian cafe and a Turkish coffee house.

The Tunisian Cafe, pictured in the engraving, featured a scarf dancer, the first documented oriental dancer in the United States. Evidently, in its premiere appearance, oriental dance quietly snuck into America's consciousness and didn't inspire the controversy of the later dancers in 1893 Chicago. The scarf dance originated as a flirtatious cafe dance and may have been also used in the Andalusian tradition of North Africa.

The Turkish coffee house, or *khawe*, as it was listed, was part of a bazaar and cafe compound. It was "a frame structure displaying a rich variegation of color and a general appearance decidedly Moorish."⁴ It was built by American workmen directed by a Turkish overseer. Attendants (one of them female) offered coffee which was evidently as much of a novelty to Americans because of the method of preparation as the other substance available "which removed the burdens of worry from the mind." You must remember that opium was legal in 1876. Attendants wore a fez, red tunics, yellow sashes and blue or brown silk trousers. Also, in the area were two waiting-rooms for ladies adjacent to shops with luxurious merchandise.

After the fair some of the materials were given as gifts to the City of Philadelphia and became the property of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, the first museum in America dedicated to display of commercially exploitable items from all over the world. This began a Philadelphia tradition of promoting trade. A further series of National Export Expositions was held there, and in 1898 many of the exhibitors paid their debts to the city for rentals and city services by giving the materials to the museum. Some of the things were purchased outright for the museum. The later expos were not without entertainment, and in the archives of the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum, formerly the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, is an album of photographs from the 1898 trade fair, also held in Fairmount Park.



Scene in a Tunisian cafe — "The Scarf Dance." From *Frank Lesley's Illustrated Weekly* 1876.



After 1876... After 1893... The Philadelphia National Export Exposition, 1898! Entertainers are standing in front of the *Cairo Theatre* of the "City of Brotherly Love." The photo has an interesting handwritten note attached: "Little Egypt standing second from the left." By 1898, there were many "Little Egypts." Which one was she? (By the way, most expositions not only had their resident "Little Egypt" but a *Cairo Theatre* as well!)

After "The Fair": 1904

The Louisiana Purchase Exhibition of 1904, held in St. Louis, also called the Universal Exposition, contrasted in several ways to the Philadelphia Exhibition. It was conceived as a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. Held in St. Louis, it tried to be bigger and better and capitalize on the success of the Chicago Fair of 1893. Although it tried to outdo every other fair, it was not considered a great commercial or artistic success. By the time this fair came along the exoticism of the exhibits was formulaic. The same concessionaires constructed the Street in Cairo exhibit and everyone knew that dancers would spell commercial success. Even the song "Meet me in St. Louis" had the line, "We will dance the hootchy kootchy."

In addition to the official national exhibits there were, among the 540 active concessions, four large installations known as Cairo, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Morocco. Just as Chicago had its famous Midway, St. Louis had an area called "The Pike." "In an Asiatic theater performers of these several countries displayed the Devil dance, the *Nautch* dance, the *Jar* and *Catanet* dances."⁵ Clearly, although the American public was more familiar with these forms of entertainment they still couldn't tell the difference between Arab, Persian or Indian culture.

Accounts claim that the Cairo exhibit was at least bigger if not better than in Chicago. "Cairo recalled the greatest amusement success at the Chicago Midway for it was reproduced in St. Louis by the originator, but on such an elaborate scale that the Chicago show was easily eclipsed."⁶ There were 26 different buildings and 67 booths. The same company was responsible for the Constantinople exhibit, an architectural tour de force by a prominent Turkish art critic, Djelal Bey Ben Essad. The biggest open air exhibit was a reproduction of Jerusalem that covered 11 acres of the Pike. One thousand inhabitants of Jerusalem were brought over for the duration of the exhibit.

The world's fairs actually brought together the public and the natives of the various countries, dancers among them. Although sensationalized, there was, at least, some attempt to place the dance in its cultural context.



From the book *The Universal Exposition of 1904* (St. Louis, MO) by David Francis. A dancer from Constantinople. (Publisher's note: I'll bet one day I'll find this photo with the caption, "Little Constantinople.")

We are both the victims and beneficiaries of the fair phenomenon. While we have the indelible hootchy kootchy to overcome, there was some transmission of cultural values in that the public was brought closer to the reality rather than the fantasy. As dancers today we have it in our power to portray the real people and culture of the middle east and not to perpetuate the fantasy of an exotic, but inferior culture.



FOOTNOTES

1. Zeynep Celik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 28.
2. Frank Henry Norton, *Frank Leslie's Historical Register of the U.S. Centennial Exposition, 1876*, a facsimile of Frank Leslie's illustrated historical register of the U.S. Centennial expositions, 1876. New York, Paddington Press, 1974.
3. Edward C. Bruce, *The Century-Its Fruits and Its Festival* Philadelphia, S. T. Souder, 1876. p. 139.
4. Leslie, p.95.
5. David Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904*. St. Louis, Louisiana Purchase Exposition Co., 1913, p. 596.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 598.



Remnants of mysteries and controversies in the *Arabesque* office: As reported in the book, "Images of Woman" by Sarah Graham-Brown (1988), *The Illustrated London News*, May 1904, described the above as, "Egyptian dancing girls on parade, St Louis Exposition, 1904." Even if "dancing girls" of Egypt had to dress more modestly for the parade, I have never seen, in all my travels throughout the Middle East, any remote replica of this costume. The caption is either wrong or the impresarios of the Fair borrowed the dresses from other Eastern European dancers for the parade! Anybody who can "Miss Marple" or "Sherlock Holmes" this for us, please do get in touch.