"The Great American Hall of Wonders." Smithsonian American Art Museum. Washington, D.C. http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2011/wonders/.

Temporary exhibition, July 15, 2011–Jan. 8, 2012. 5,500 sq. ft. Claire Perry, independent curator.

"The Great American Hall of Wonders" examined how nineteenth-century Americans understood the role of science and invention in propelling social and technological change. Focusing on the period 1826 to 1876, the exhibit claimed that in those pivotal years, "Americans believed that a wide range of knowledge was needed to undertake the work of democracy and saw useful material in an astonishing array of fields and skills." The exhibit's physical objects—ranging from early models of the sewing machine to a chronodometer, which improved the timing of race horses—allowed visitors to observe firsthand the diverse results of nineteenth-century Americans' various enterprises. From the vantage point of the present, where patents are perhaps most closely associated with litigation and disputes over the commercial right to intellectual property, it is easy to forget that the bureaucrats who occupied the U.S. Patent Office were once vaunted figures working in a "temple of invention."

Despite the inclusion of nineteenth-century luminaries such as Samuel Morse, the exhibit explored wonder as an attribute that was embedded in the American landscape and therefore available as a source of inspiration to the public at large. Myriad artists worked to capture and share the United States' unique flora and fauna, as well as its rivers, mountains, and climate. The exhibit's paintings and lithographs were vivid reminders that sites such as Niagara Falls and the redwoods of California moved lovers, tourists, and engineers equally. Art in the nineteenth century served a booster role, Perry noted in an e-mail interview, which "helped to bind together the nation's far-flung and fragmented citizenry" around the belief that Americans "shared a special genius" (e-mail to Andy Urban, Dec. 16, 2011). Americans embraced curiosity as a virtue of a democratic people driven by a productive obsession with science and innovation and blessed with untapped natural resources. With the era of the American Revolution receding into a more distant past, the celebration of Americans' collective wonderment nourished the conviction that the United States would remain an exceptional country.

At the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Charles Willson Peale's self-portrait, *The Artist in His Museum* (1822), welcomed visitors to the exhibition space. In the painting Peale lifts a curtain halfway, divulging an extensive collection of taxidermic birds and a mostly obscured mastodon skeleton. A well-dressed female visitor in the painting appears frozen, captivated by the implied enormity of the exhumed animal that only she can see in its entirety. Ever the promoter, Peale was an appropriate gatekeeper for this exhibit. An artist, inventor, naturalist, and archaeologist, he was also the curator and collector who founded the Peale Museum in Philadelphia, widely recognized as the first national museum and predecessor to the Smithsonian Institution. Playing on the idea of a "hall of

wonders," each room in "The Great American Hall of Wonders" was meant to reveal to contemporary viewers a subject that mesmerized nineteenth-century Americans. In "The Buffalo" room, for instance, visitors were left to ponder how nineteenth-century Americans were awed by the abundance of the bison herds that they encountered, yet incapable of preventing their subsequent slaughter. The rooms dedicated to the natural environment suggested a pattern: Americans were reluctant to exploit natural gifts that many felt were divinely bestowed, but they did so nonetheless. Other rooms in the exhibit focused on manufactured goods and industrial changes that revolutionized American society. Figuratively moving indoors, sections on "Democratic Time," "The Peacemaker," and "A Locomotive People" dealt with how new methods of timekeeping, guns, and railroads respectively transformed Americans' day-to-day lives.

While visitors learned that bison were sacrificed to progress, the exhibit offered no comparable discussion of how human actors fared. For example, Albert Bierstadt's *Giant Redwood Trees of California* (ca. 1874), which appeared in the "Big Trees" section, depicts three Miwok Indians harvesting acorns amid the immensity of the sequoias of Mariposa Grove. The painting uses the biblical allegory of the undisturbed garden to situate the Miwok in a distant and primitive past. With Native Americans being actively driven from the land, even ostensibly sympathetic artists such as Bierstadt did little to dispel racial views concerning the advance of civilization; instead, he documented what was purportedly disappearing. Such works may not have openly heralded conquest in the same manner as lithographs espousing Manifest Destiny, some of which were also displayed in the exhibit, but they nevertheless had their origins in the same set of normative assumptions about what was allegedly inevitable.

The section titled "Democratic Time" suffers from a similar paucity of analysis by failing to address the grimmer aspects of Americans' obsession with the ability to manage time. One does not need E. P. Thompson to explain, for example, that Winslow Homer's *Harper's Weekly* print "Bell-Time" (1868), which shows a swarm of workers preparing to enter a New England textile mill, reflects a critical view of how rule by the clock perniciously altered the life rhythms of wage laborers. Eadweard Muybridge's photographic series, *Black Smiths, Two Models, Hammering on Anvil* (1887), which was also included in the section, anticipates in a more aesthetic form the scientific management studies that Frederick Winslow Taylor would begin to popularize only a decade later. Since the exhibit did not address the commodification of labor power as requiring new forms of temporal discipline, visitors walked away only with the vague sense that improvements in the measurement of time allowed for the exercise of greater control over working bodies.

What drove Americans' relentless pursuit and production of knowledge is a question that the exhibit, in all its sections, never answered satisfactorily. In the "Meteorology" room, for instance, the text asserted that "the nation's enthusiasm for meteorology, a science that helped citizens make predictions, expressed the forward-looking character of a country powered by the idea of progress." Perhaps, but more concretely, weather forecasts were about predicting agricultural commodity yields and creating tools to assess flood and fire risk, applications aimed at maximizing profit. Americans' goal of exerting mastery over scientific unpredictability was never an end in itself. Technical innovations were deployed in undemocratic ways, a point that received scant attention here. The exhibit's discussion of how improvements in weapon technology enabled the mass slaughter of the Civil War was the one notable exception in this regard.

Albert Bierstadt's *Giant Redwood Trees of California* (oil on canvas, ca. 1874) depicts Mariposa Grove, which appears untouched by "progress." *Courtesy Collections of Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Mass. Gift of Zenas Crane*.

The exhibit's inability to grapple with more nuanced framings of progress and invention was most prominent in its disappointing "Epilogue" section, which consisted of a lone painting by Robert S. Duncanson. Duncanson was one of the few black artists of the period whom white critics were willing to acknowledge as a talented landscape painter. "In claiming his right to participate in the nation's most elevated endeavors," the exhibit narrated, "the intrepid artist had invented himself." Duncanson should be celebrated for what he was able to accomplish, but what about black invention that did not take place on a national stage? What about the inventiveness of slaves, whose bondage made survival an innovative challenge? Or of women who resisted coverture, disfranchisement, and other gendered exclusions? Of course, those ideas were not typically commemorated in nineteenth-century art; nor did they leave the same type of object-oriented material record. Still, given all the text the exhibit included, this discussion could have been raised. Moreover, as Fred Wilson demonstrated two decades ago in his revolutionary exhibition "Mining the Museum," critical reinterpretations can be derived from existing canons and collections. In her e-mail, Perry stated that "messiness" was a goal of the exhibit and that it illustrated the "noteworthy accomplishments

in art, science, and technology that went hand in hand with inequality, violence, and environmental destruction." While the published book that accompanied the exhibit addresses these fundamental ambiguities more explicitly, it is difficult to see how a casual visitor, lacking this epistemological framework, would have come to this conclusion from the exhibit alone.

Like most exhibits today, "The Great American Hall of Wonders" paid lip service to how the past matters in the present. Specifically, in its opening panel it asked what the "transformative power of American inventiveness" might look like in the twenty-first century and how it might be deployed in the face of the pressing question: "How do we sustain our nation's liberties, bountiful natural systems, and prosperity?" In her e-mail, Perry noted as well that she was inspired by "recent news about America losing its edge in innovation." Visitors leaving the exhibit, however, should be forgiven if they concluded that the path to a "better" future needs to follow the well-trod roads of capitalist innovation mixed with occasional acts of conservation (and if they assumed that this goal is well within the reach of an "exceptional" nation). The more provocative question—who gets to define progress, its goals, and its inclusive parameters?—remained unspoken and therefore unexamined.

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