The Colonial Exhibition of May 1931

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Q. What was the significance of the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in May 1931?

A. In the late 1920s and 1930s, the French state devoted increasing attention to propagandizing the imperial mission of France. The high point of this propagandizing effort was the massive Colonial Exhibition of 1931. Commemorating the centennial of the conquest of Algeria, the event included the recreation of African, Arab, Polynesian, and Asian buildings (including a massive scale model of the Cambodian temple, Angkor Wat). These structures were filled with people from the colonies to serve as craftsmen, dancers, and general examples of *indigènes* or natives. The exhibit bordered on being the 'human zoo' of the nineteenth century. The event, held in a massive park in the east of Paris, was a huge success, attracting thousands of visitors over several months. The event encouraged French interest and fascination with the colonies, creating a popular wave of Primitivism (interest in the supposedly primitive colonial world). We should note that Primitivism and the interest in the exotic did not mean the end of racism and racial stereotypes. On the contrary, Primitivism held up people of the colour from the colonies as exotic sensual savages. As the name implies, they were primitive.

Q. What image of the empire did the Colonial Exhibition set out to project?

A. As a state-sponsored exhibition, the event sought to portray the empire as loyal and valuable. There was no mention of anti-colonial agitation or the serious rebellions that were going on in Vietnam at the time. Rather, the colonial subjects were presented as obedient and hard-working. Fascinating in their strange costumes and odd behaviour, these natives were nothing to fear, rather, they were a great asset to France.

Q. What impact did the Colonial Exhibition have upon France?

A. For the most part, the exhibition was a great success, exposing thousands of French people to the well-crafted and safe image of the empire that the Third Republic sought to promote. Either through visiting the event or reading about it in the press (it was well covered in all the major papers), the average French citizen came to know this state-endorsed version of the colonies.

However, there were voices of opposition to the empire and the exhibition. The French Communist Party picketed the event, passing out leaflets detailing colonial abuses and encouraged the French public to boycott the event. In alliance with the Surrealists (an anti-establishment art movement), the Communist Party staged a counter-exhibition that detailed problems in the colonies. With its pseudo-scientific exhibits on white culture, the counter-exhibition made fun of the colonial anthropologists who presented the natives as curious exotics. An important moment in the history of anti-colonialism, communism and Surrealism, this event did not dissuade popular opinion from accepting the official representation of the empire.

Key publications by Michael Vann

'The colonial casbah on the silver screen: using Pépé le Moko and the Battle of Algiers to teach colonialism, race and globalization in French history', *Radical History Review*, April 2002.
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Further reading

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