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# Revealing the Present through History

The Vatican and International Expositions

1851-2015

EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI

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# Introduction

Micol Forti

“For a critic, for a dreamer given to generalizations [...] there can be few occupations more interesting, more absorbing, so full of surprises and revelations, than comparison between nations and their respective products [...] what, I say, would a modern Winckelmann do, what would he say, at the sight of a Chinese product, a strange product, weird, contorted in shape, intense in colour, and sometimes delicate to the point of fading away? [...] but if it is to be understood, the critic, the viewer, must bring about within himself a transformation, which is something of a mystery, and he must learn by his own effort to share in the life of the society that has given birth to this unexpected bloom.”<sup>1</sup>

These were the opening words of Charles Baudelaire’s review of the *Exposition Universelle* held in Paris in 1855, the second world’s fair after the *Great Exhibition* in London in 1851, and the first staged in France.

Baudelaire’s analytical mind and his considerable experience as an art critic in reviewing the Paris Salons with a gaze never conditioned by prejudice or the need to categorize, enabled him to capture with extraordinary clarity the innovative essence of this colossal international event. A universal exhibition that brought together cultures and ways of life, styles and ideas, fragrances and aromas from many different corners of the globe that were still unknown to the vast majority of Westerners.

The variety of cultures, and the many forms that developed within them, make it impossible to define or apply a canon of the gaze or generic critical principle. Instead, we must refrain from judgement and allow ourselves to be astonished, in order to perceive the “weird” at the heart of all beauty: “I shall therefore strive, in this glorious chance I have of analyzing this superb exhibition, so full of variety in its elements, so baffling for pedagogues, to avoid all kinds of pedantry.”<sup>2</sup>

This exhibition “so full of variety” offers equally varied ways to reconstruct its story, or rather the many stories associated with it. The extensive and still growing bibliography on international and universal exhibitions confirms that their development can be reconstructed and individual aspects analyzed, from many different standpoints. These range from social, political and economic history to technological and scientific development, from the evolution of fashion and design to architectural projects, from racial and cultural conflicts to the contrast between arts and crafts, from the development of the concept of history and progress to communication strategies.

However, apart from occasional references and D.W. Haite’s dense volume, *Der achte Tag* of 2007, this vast and thorough literature still lacks a systematic treatment of the Vatican’s participation in international and universal expositions.<sup>3</sup>

The reasons for this silence could be many, starting with those of a historico-political nature. These range from motivations linked to the mid-19th century – a period which, contrary to all expectations, coincided with the Vatican’s most frequent participation, on the wishes of Pius IX, in all the early European exhibitions and the first in the United States – which saw the birth of the first world’s fair and the reduction of the Papal States’ boundaries to the Vatican walls, to those stemming

1 C. Baudelaire, ‘The Universal Exhibition of 1855: the Fine Arts’ (1855), in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 116.

2 Ibid., p. 119.

3 D.W. Haite, *Der achte Tag: Welthafter Fortschrittsglaube und christlicher Gottesglaube im Spannungsfeld der Weltausstellungen*, Würzburg 2007.

from the incomprehensible and repeated announcement that the Vatican was participating “for the first time” in each exhibition staged in the 20th century. Another reason is the lack of systematic archival research. In fact, this volume required over two years of investigations conducted in many international archives, libraries and institutes, both public and private, starting with the vast legacy conserved in the Vatican Secret Archive, where in 2015 it was only possible to access folders up to the papacy of Pius XI.

A fascinating journey, which I shared with the co-authors Federica Guth and Rosalia Pagliarani. They carried out most of the documentary research, which enabled different aspects, fascinating challenges and novel perspectives to emerge, which go beyond the story of individual events and concern the international politics, economics and culture of the various papacies, or the dioceses that were the protagonists of a specific event. This research enabled us to trace the evolution of the Church’s position on fundamental issues, such as its relationship with other cultures and religions; technological and scientific developments; changing social structures and behaviour, and more generally the concept of progress itself, including the transformations that will affect the future of our planet.

The complex dialogue cannot but embrace the Vatican’s symbolic role within the specific yet multifaceted context of a universal exhibition, which from the outset created a model that, although adapted to each event, established its own rules. A specificity with which the Church interacted and related, making its own contribution through its identity and strong spiritual and cultural tradition.

This dual aspect led us to choose two keywords for the title of the volume: history and present. The “present” is the real protagonist, together with the future, of the universal Expos, which project what is in progress. This is neither rejected nor denied by the Church, but always seen in relation to “history”, which embodies the values and symbolic weight of the Christian religion, and often has a powerful impact on the fabric of these events.

The structure of the volume, therefore, is based on the above premises and is organized according to the order in which the popes succeeded each other, with the aim of emphasizing their various political and cultural horizons, epitomized by the various exhibitions.

The first chapter, like the second, is by Federica Guth. It documents the many exhibition experiences that began under Pius IX Mastai Ferretti (1846-1878), starting with the first world’s fair, the *Great Exhibition* in London in 1851, and ending with the *Chicago Universal Exhibition*, held to celebrate the 4th centenary of the discovery of America in 1893, in which the Vatican participated during the papacy of Leo XIII Pecci (1878-1903).

It covers an extensive series of events that evinced the desire, especially on the part of Pius IX, to present a complete picture of the Papal States through technological research as much as artisanal skills, artistic production – that the rules decreed had to pertain to recent decades – manufacturing, foodstuffs and mineral products. Equally important were the political and diplomatic implications in an international context like the one offered by the exhibitions, which was not limited to Europe and was immediately extended to the United States. This can be seen from the Papal States’ adherence to the first recognized exposition in North America, held in Philadelphia in 1876, and to the many that followed.

The theme of progress and the theories linked to it became the actual guiding thread of this period by establishing a relationship with the past and with tradition, elements that were nearly always programmatically excluded from the Expos. Yet, in an era in which the concept of nation was con-

sidered and formed, also through what has been described as “the invention of tradition”<sup>4</sup> the presence of the Church unequivocally represented the power of identity.

The Vatican’s awareness of the importance of this kind of event is further confirmed by its direct promotion of exhibitions of an international nature within its territory, and while they cannot be put on a level with the great fairs, they are nonetheless an interesting offshoot. The second chapter is devoted to these, and covers the period ranging from the first exhibition in 1870, once again promoted by Pius IX in Rome shortly before his defeat, to those held under Leo XIII within the Vatican walls – the only territory that had survived in the heart of a foreign state. The chapter ends with the large and extremely modern *Esposizione Mondiale della Stampa Cattolica* (World’s Exhibition of the Catholic Press) in 1936, whose design Pope Pius XI Ratti (1922-1939) entrusted to the famous architect Gio Ponti.

The journey continues in the third chapter through the papacies of Pius X Sarto (1903-1914), who confirmed the Vatican’s presence at the St. Louis Expo – authorized by his predecessor Leo XIII – and especially that of Pius XI, who in the difficult interwar years supported through the dioceses or organized directly from the Holy See, one of the most fertile and intense seasons. During this period the Church’s participation was characterized by three aspects. Firstly, the role of missionary activity in foreign policy, which was presented in relation or counterpart to the nascent discipline of anthropology that marked the St. Louis Expo in 1904 and the *Exposició Internacional de Barcelona* in 1929 in particular. Secondly, a concern with the profound changes taking place in Western society that were affecting both Catholic life and the role of the family and Christian communities, which was pivotal to the Vatican’s participation in Paris in 1931 and Brussels in 1935. Thirdly, the growing need to renew the languages and expressive means of sacred art and its ability to communicate, both from a liturgical and, more broadly, artistic standpoint. This was most tellingly achieved and reflected on in Paris, both in 1931 and 1937, when the most important Expo prior to World War II was held.

These wide-ranging experiences were indubitably crucial to Pope Pius XII Pacelli’s (1939-1958) formation and the development of his cultural and political awareness. Indeed, as Secretary of State he followed the planning and production of various exhibitions – not least the E42 in Rome, which unfortunately was never held – and launched an innovative period in the history of the Vatican’s participation in universal exhibitions during his pontificate.

This period is dealt with in the fourth chapter, and centres on two major events: the *Esposizione Internazionale di Arte Sacra*, organized in Rome to celebrate the Jubilee in 1950, and the 1958 Brussels *Exposition Universelle et Internationale*, the first after World War II. The themes of peace, the coexistence of races and religions, the role of technology and science in everyday life, and the different faiths and ideologies, were the leitmotifs of the Church’s interaction with a world that had changed dramatically and drastically.

The postwar period inevitably marked a watershed in international politics, and the climate of the Cold War was also felt in the great universal exhibitions that opened during the 1960s and 1970s. The fifth chapter – written, like the sixth, by Rosalia Pagliarani – admirably reconstructs the intricacies of this complex, layered political and cultural context. This is especially evident in the au-

4 Cf. E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (ed.), *The invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983.

thor's account of the Holy See's participation in the *New York World's Fair* of 1964-1965, which was symbolized by the display of Michelangelo's *Pietà* that left the Vatican for the first and only time.

In this context, more space was given to the relationship between man and the environment as well as to the search for a harmony that became increasingly utopian. The creation of an ecumenical pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, which saw the participation of the Catholic Church and six other Christian Churches, seemed to indicate the need for common and shared values and principles that would make catechetical norms less rigid. But it was perhaps at the universal exhibitions of the 1980s and 1990s that the most complex aspects of this chapter in our recent history emerged. In fact, the Vatican seemed unable to create a space that embraced and interacted with the given themes and, in some respects, it was more of an evocative presence. The wealth of treasures on display from the Vatican Museums, the Apostolic Library, the Secret Archive and the papal basilicas, almost made up for the lack of artworks inside the Expos. Generally speaking very few, if any, were shown at universal exhibitions, also due to conservation requirements, but when they were displayed they affirmed the cultural and spiritual values that the Expos wished to promote. The titles of the works chosen by the Vatican for these events – almost as if preparing an “Expo package” – evoke the unseen difficulties of this specific period. The author describes its complexity, and also its great, but often underrated, potentialities, including the development, albeit difficult, of a new concept of the future and of progress.

Starting in the 1990s, the Vatican pavilions reconnected with and profoundly explored the themes proposed by the various universal exhibitions, especially at the Expos in Genoa and Seville in 1992 to mark the fifth centenary of Columbus' voyage to America. This reflected the Holy See's growing concern with environmental issues and with preserving human life and that of our planet. A line it has since followed uninterruptedly, right up to Expo Milano 2015, where the Holy See pavilion, ‘Not by Bread Alone’ (taken from the Gospel according to St Matthew), was perfectly in keeping with the overall theme of the event: *Feed the Planet – Energy for Life*.

If Walter Benjamin's critical interpretation<sup>5</sup> of the Expo as the place par excellence where the very notion of history is constructed and deconstructed is still valid, the Church's most meaningful experiences at these events spanning more than a century and a half, are telling. They reveal not so much the desire to provide an answer, but constitute an attempt to update the “application” of its stated principles and values, according to the various contexts, in order to renew their meaning and the understanding of the desires and truths connected with them, so that past and future, history and the present might come together every time. Thus generating, through polar and pluralist exchange, a new “force field” in constant evolution, which “neutral” places like the ones that have hosted and still host universal exhibitions can mysteriously accommodate.

5 W. Benjamin, *Opere complete*, vol. IX, I “*Passages*” di Parigi, ed. R. Tiedemann, Turin 2000.