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Revealing the Present through History

The Vatican and International Expositions

1851-2015

EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI

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Foreword

Antonio Paolucci

Paris, summer 1937. The striking architecture of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques appliqués à la Vie Moderne* was on show in the Trocadéro gardens. It was the year of the Spanish Civil War and Pope Pius XI's *Mit brennender Sorge*. Mussolini and Hitler were firmly in power and in Moscow Vyshinsky, Stalin's prosecutor, was preparing the trials for the great purges.

The Soviet Union pavilion was surmounted by stainless steel statues of a worker and a kolkhoz peasant woman. The eagle and swastika topped the German Reich pavilion, designed by Albert Speer. While Picasso's *Guernica* hung in that of the Spanish Republic. There could not have been a more extraordinary and terrible synthesis of the emblems of the 20th century.

A short distance from the Spanish pavilion, the secular socialist France of Leon Blum had permitted the Holy See to give a voice and an image to its message. The Catholic pavilion (supervised by the cardinal archbishop of Paris, Jean Verdier, assisted by the young Father Alain Couturier, and more generally, inspired by the modernist culture of the magazine *L'Art Sacré*) was simple, essential, it focused on representing a life project, given significance and rhythm by the sacraments, in the solitude of the cloister and monastic meditation.

The only reference to contemporary political tragedies was to be found in a radial chapel of the so-called "sanctuary", the symbolic heart of the pavilion, which hosted some foreign countries and where the painter José Maria Sert depicted *St Teresa of Avila Offering Spanish Martyrs to Christ Crucified* to celebrate Franco's Spain.

The 1937 Vatican pavilion is one of many in the history of the Church, at the international exhibitions during the last two centuries. From the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in London, 1851, where in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, the Papal States under Pius IX exhibited mosaics and sculptures, handicrafts and industrial products, alongside products from the Grand Duchy of Tuscany (the famous semiprecious stones) and the Kingdom of Sardinia, all under the title 'Italy'. Right up to Expo Milano 2015 that saw the Holy See, under the direction of Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, presenting works and reflections on the Gospel themes of *Not by bread alone* and *Give us this day our daily bread*.

In its great attempt to go beyond the old regime and enter fully into modernity, the Roman Catholic Church soon became aware of the importance of the international exhibitions. It understood that they were not only trade fairs of states and territories, but ideal places for diplomacy and politics, excellent opportunities to implement its universalistic vocation in new ways.

Suffice it to recall the Vatican presence at the great American exhibitions. In 1876 the United States celebrated its first century of independence at the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia, the impressive Expo that went down in history. The Holy See exhibited some mosaics and tapestry, which were traditional examples of Roman arts and crafts. Not much, of course, but the political gesture was important and, above all, symbolic of the future.

Consider the date, 1876. It was a difficult time for the Catholic Church, which having lost its temporal power in 1870, was practically under attack from the whole of Europe. Napoleon III had lost the Battle of Sedan and was no longer the protector of Christianity. Given Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and the French secular laws soon to be passed, no one could tell what the future held in store for the Church. Fortunately there was the new world, the young, rich American power, where the immigrant masses from Ireland, Poland and Italy were creating a Catholic population destined to

become increasingly numerous and politically influential in the years to come. For these reasons, to represent, encourage and please the faithful, the Holy See decided to be present in the United States in 1876 and to return, this time to Chicago, in 1893, for the *World's Columbian Exposition* celebrating the 4th centenary of the discovery of America.

The Vatican went back to America for the *New York World's Fair*, during the papacy of Paul VI Montini. It was the biggest and most extraordinarily popular event that had ever happened to celebrate a work of art. Michelangelo's *Pietà* from St Peter's was on display in the Vatican pavilion in Queens, New York, between 1964 and 1965. The sculpture was set against a dark blue backdrop designed by Jo Mielziner, one of the most famous Broadway set designers. It was insured for 26 million dollars (a dizzying figure for the time) and was visited by a total of 17 million people.

Readers of this book will find that, on many occasions, works of art from the Vatican Museums or St Peter's (Michelangelo's *Pietà* and *The Good Shepherd* from the Museo Pio Cristiano are the most stunning examples) have been exhibited in the Vatican pavilion during international exhibitions in Europe, the United States and the Far East. Hence, those responsible for the Holy See's art collections have played a pivotal historical role. This is why the Vatican Museums had to celebrate Expo Milano 2015. So here is the book that recounts two centuries of the Vatican's participation in international exhibitions from 1851 to the present. It was my friend and colleague Micol Forti who had the idea and she involved her closest colleagues Federica Guth and Rosalia Pagliarani in this fine and worthy project. The knowledgeable and enthusiastic determination of Mons. Paolo Nicolini, delegate for the Administrative-Management Sectors of the Vatican Museums, did the rest and the most. All this has made it possible to publish a book that honours the scientific tradition of our museums.