
Abstract

Fulfilling neither the role of the Western imperialistic power, nor that of a colonial subject, Japan held a position of novelty and possibility at the World’s Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago, Illinois in 1893. Exhibiting factors of both industry and art, the Japanese intended to use their displays at this World’s Fair to lead others to perceive their nation as an industrial and modern contender on the world stage, all the while maintaining reverence of traditional culture. In their pursuit of this balance, the Japanese commission to the fair practiced varying degrees of control over their own presentation. Working outside of the commission’s influence, the formation of a body of Orientalist texts, such as guidebook literature and newspaper articles, stood as a complicating force in the Japanese ability to retain aspects of traditional culture while pursuing modernization. Japan was able to maintain control of its presentation as modern due to the lack of history on which an Orientalist corpus of texts could be established. However, in presenting Japanese art, the dominating nature of the Orientalist texts relegated Japanese control to a role lacking agency and influence. Regardless of how successful either force may have been in actually affecting the perceptions of fairgoers, the Orientalist forces manifest in the guidebook literature and contemporary newspaper accounts prevented the Japanese commission from even having the ability to retain the balance between others’ conceptions of their industrialization and art. By engaging such literature with Bryman’s Disneyization and Said’s Orientalism this paper shows that although Japan did have the ability to present itself as a modern, industrialized power, the Orientalist literature regarding Japan at the World’s Columbian Exposition disabled Japan’s balance of such modernization with traditional, artistic culture.