Rethinking the Philippine Exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair

Richard Kennedy

Why do we organize a Festival program? And why does the public attend? These are critical questions asked by organizers of the Philippine program at the 1998 Smithsonian Festival.

The midway at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis was the center of the world's fair that Henry Adams called "the first creation of the twentieth century." As part of the celebration of the centennial of the 1803 U.S. purchase of the Louisiana territory from France, the fair presented the cultures of the Philippines, territory bought from Spain in 1898. Photo by Frances Benjamin Johnson, courtesy Library of Congress

The same questions were asked in 1904 of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, one of the last great fairs from the golden age of world expositions. The answers given to the questions nearly 100 years ago, however, were quite different from those we give today.

The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition celebrated the centennial of the 1803 purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France, which represented the first major expansion of American territory. The public sentiments supporting expansion in 1904 were not dissimilar to those in 1803. In the late 19th century, the nation responded to the tragedies of the Civil War by isolating itself from major foreign engagements, just as it had done for similar reasons in the late 18th century. But by the 1890s, a spirit of adventure spurred economic and military interests to expand U.S. territory for the first time beyond its borders.

Americans were ambivalent about this expansion, at times supporting the doctrines of Manifest Destiny and Social Darwinism, which seemed to ordain the country's expansion, and at other times expressing dislike of any American involvement in colonial rule. In the mid-1890s, President Cleveland resisted demands for the annexation of Hawai'i and the invasion of Cuba, but by 1898, President McKinley had made Hawai'i a territory and ignited the short-lived Spanish-American War by sending troops to Cuba to assist the overthrow of Spanish rule. The Philippines was inadvertently drawn into that war when Assistant Secretary of the Navy Teddy Roosevelt asked Commodore George Dewey to launch a surprise attack on the Spanish fleet protecting Manila, Spain's colonial capital for over 300 years.

The United States won the Spanish-American War, and for the public many earlier doubts about engagement were resolved. By 1904 it seems that America was prepared to celebrate the Louisiana Purchase centennial as well as its newly gained territory with a major world's fair. Among the newly acquired lands were the 7,000 islands of the Philippines.

Americans had initially indicated some support for the Philippine independence movement but did not recognize its 1898 declaration of independence from Spain (now being celebrated at this Smithsonian Festival in 1998). The McKinley administration, in a highly contentious decision that accompanied the end of the war, then bought the country from Spain for $20 million. By 1899, American guns turned on the insurgents, and in the end as many as 200,000 Filipinos may have died as a result of the

fighting. More than 70,000 American soldiers were involved. These developments drew much criticism in the United States.

The St. Louis Exposition was planned to be the biggest fair in U.S. history; Henry Adams called it "the first creation of the twentieth century." Following and in the same spirit as the great 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the Louisiana Purchase Fair celebrated exploration and conquest. It was meant to outshine Chicago, but in the annals of world expositions St. Louis is not as well known — most people are familiar with it primarily through the 1944 film and title song "Meet Me in St. Louis." Spread over 1,270 acres (twice the size of Chicago's celebration), the fair followed the pattern of past expositions but on a much grander scale: it featured individual state exhibits, "palaces" of industry, education, agriculture, etc., and international pavilions. In addition, over 400 international congresses and meetings were held in the city during the six months of the fair, and the 1904 Olympics were staged nearby. However, what particularly distinguished St. Louis were the size of its anthropology section and the degree to which attempts were made to construct authentic environments for its participants. The grandest of these constructs was the Philippine Exposition.

This special exhibition was also called the Philippine Encampment or the Philippine Reservation, and together these terms reflect some of the conflicting attitudes expressed in the program. In discussing the participation of the Philippines in the fair, some advocates of American expansion were concerned that "displaying" Filipinos would hurt the chances of convincing the American public that the newly conquered country should eventually become a part of the United States. The inclusion of model schools, bands, and police drill teams was thought to balance a program that to some appeared to present a "primitive" culture. So the term "encampment" highlighted the presence of disciplined military troops, civic order, and, in effect, terrain familiar to the public. On the other hand, the term "reservation" made a clear reference to American Indians and, by implication, created a parallel between the takeover of the Philippines and that of the American West. Both these messages were encoded in the Philippine Exposition program.

Many players were involved in the exposition, which cost $15 million. Individuals, the U.S. government, and the city of St. Louis each committed $5 million in the hopes that an event of profit (from entrance fees and fair sales) as well as of world importance would take place. The $1.1 million Philippine program similarly had a variety of supporters. In 1902, the U.S. Colonial Administration in Manila allocated $250,000 (later supplemented with another $250,000) for the program. Behind the decision was President Roosevelt himself, a leader in the Spanish-American War, and Philippines governor William Taft (soon to be secretary of war and then president). W.P. Wilson, director of the Philadelphia Commercial Museums, was soon appointed to be head of the installation, and Dr. Gustave Niederlein, also from Philadelphia, was placed in charge of collections. John Barrett, commissioner-general for Asia at the fair, called on the business community to organize a committee to advise the government on the project, and many of the exhibits in the forestry, agriculture, and commerce pavilions would portray the natural resources and potential riches of the Philippines. The fair was part trade show, and thousands of examples of crops, tropical woods, and other goods were exhibited in addition to Philippine ethnic communities.

For the presentation of Philippine culture four major ethnic villages were built. A copy of the walled city of Intramuros in Manila housed, among other things, captured weapons. A plaza surrounded by reconstructions of official buildings contained the above-mentioned topical pavilions, including an ethnology exhibit in a building modeled on a Manila cathedral.

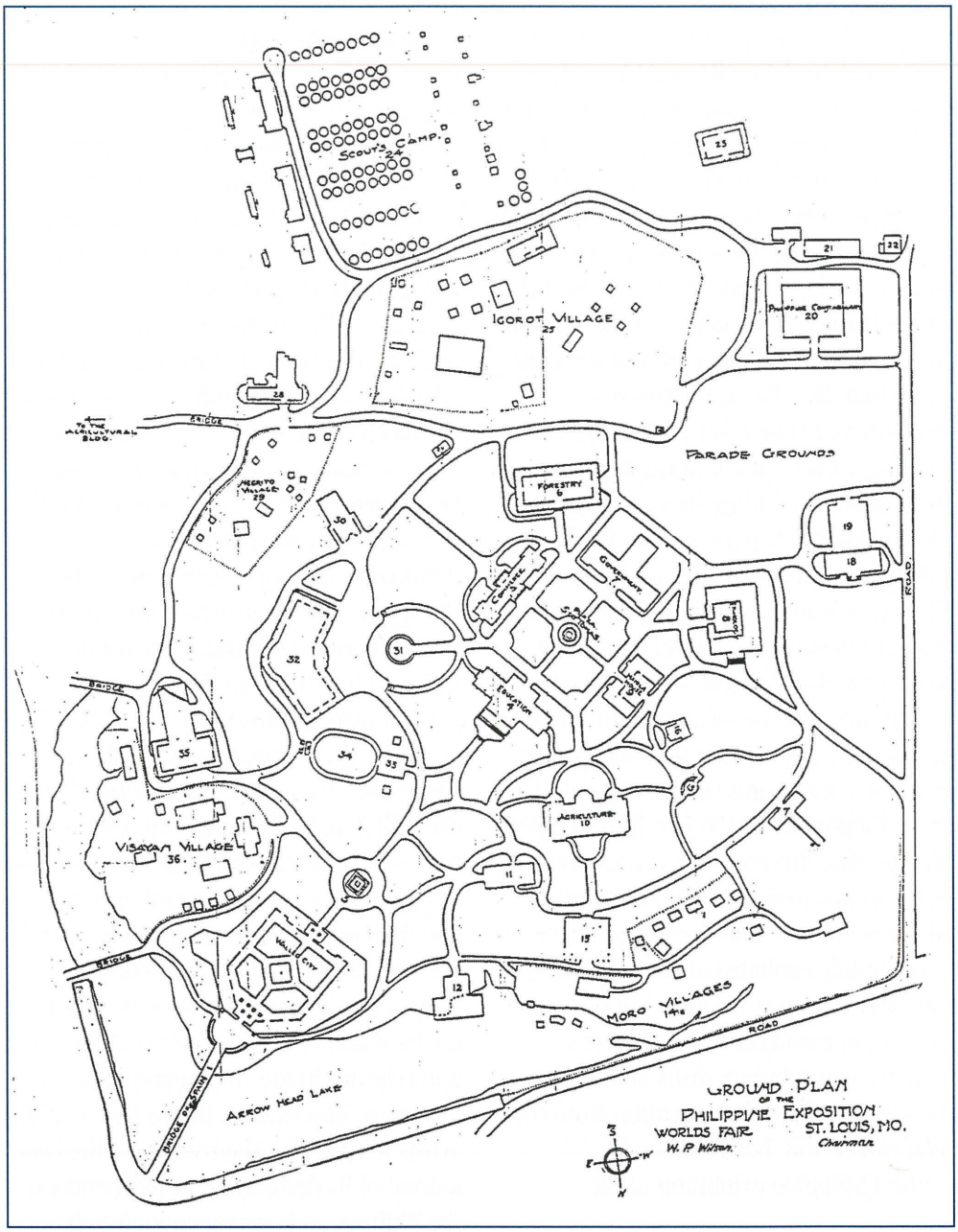
The Metcalfe sisters photographed the 1904 fair extensively. Here one of the sisters (at right) is photographed with a Bagobo participant. About 30 people from the Bagobo community in central Mindanao were part of the 1,200-member Philippine delegation to the fair.

Photo by the Metcalfe sisters, courtesy Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives

The symbolism of the site design was clear. After crossing a bridge and walking through the walled city, the visitor would come upon the center of the exhibition, the Plaza St. Thomas, which represented in the minds of the organizers the most "civilized" aspects of Philippine society. Also in the plaza, the education pavilion presented the educational activities of American teachers. Nearby were the parade grounds and bandstand in which the more than 400 members of the Philippine constabulary paraded, drilled, and were housed. These troops were also brought to police the site.

The four villages — Igorot, Negrito, Visayan, and Moro — representing a diversity of Philippine communities, were placed in a circle outside the central plaza. This diversity was important to the organizers. The 19th-century process of establishing administrative control of new lands created among many imperial powers an obsession with categorization as a way of understanding (and taxing) colonial possessions. Scholars often assisted their efforts. The turn of the century was in some ways a golden age of applied anthropology. President McKinley's Philippine specialist, Dean Worchester, for example, proposed a division of Philippine people into 84 "tribes" — 21 Negrito, 16 Indonesian, and 47 Malay. The official catalogue of the exhibition takes the categorization further, stating that 103 "groups" out of 144 and 308 "classes" out of 807 were represented. The specific meanings of these crude categories seem less important than the fact that attempts were being made to represent a hierarchical cultural diversity. The Report to the Exposition Board claimed,

> While all of the 70 or more groups of people in the archipelago could not be represented, there were the least civilized in the Negritos and the Igorots, the semi civilized in the Bagobos and the Moros and the civilized and cultured in the Visayans as well as in the Constabulary and Scout organizations. In all other respects — commercially, industrially, and socially — the exhibit was a faithful portrayal.



The Philippine exhibit at the 1904 World's Fair was an elaborate re-creation of elements of Philippine culture. Surrounding the central plaza were buildings displaying Philippine commerce, forestry, culture, and education, and the U.S. role in their development. Skirting the center of the exhibit were the "villages" of the Igorot, Negrito, Moro, and Visayan participants. Plan reproduced from William P. Wilson, *Official Catalogue. Philippine Exhibits. Universal Exposition* (St Louis: The Official Catalogue Co., Inc. 1904), courtesy Library of Congress

Defining degrees of "civilization" was an important message of the fair.

The 335 ethnic Philippine participants included members of the Bontoc, Suyoc, and Tinguian (collectively known as Igorot) communities in upland mountain Luzon; Bagobo from Mindanao; two

Muslim Moro groups from Zamboanga; and a variety of Negrito and Visayan communities. Singers, dancers, and musicians performed regularly on stages from 11 A.M. to 6 P.M., and craftspeople such as *piña* (pineapple fiber) weavers and basket makers demonstrated their skills. They were housed on the site and were paid for their presentations. The specifics of the selection process of participants were not recorded other than that Dr. Niederlein was appointed in September 1902 to begin working with local administrators throughout the Philippines to identify people and goods for participation in the exhibition. Except for one or two Philippine names on the various commissions, the selections seem to have been made entirely by American officials.

The choice of the tribal communities led to extensive media coverage, and perhaps as a result the Igorot village was one of the most popular at the fair. In response to charges that this coverage was exploitative, a report to the Exposition Board stated, "It is not true that the savages have been unduly exploited at the expense of the more dignified exhibits, but no amount of emphasis on commercial exhibits, constabulary drills and Scouts parades has distracted attention from the 'dog eaters' and 'head-hunters'."

The Philippine exhibition at the St. Louis World's Fair was the product of many voices. The dominant one spoke of the rich potential of America's newest colony and the important role civilization would play in the development of this distant land. But other voices wanted simply to show how other cultures live and to "promote peace and good will." Audiences certainly did come to see these "others," and heard all these voices. And undoubtedly some came to stand for a moment in the dawn of the new century to reflect on the new status of America in the world. Organizers of the fair had encouraged this.

A hundred years later the voices involved in the organization of the 1998 Philippine Festival program have been quite different, as Marian Pastor Roces writes in her article in this volume. The Festival team organized by the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila researched, conceived, and produced an event that, at its heart, honors and puts at the center master artists. The Festival aims to present their traditions with sensitivity and does not by implication, as in 1904, present these artists as representatives of stages of civilization. Artists were selected for their ability to keep their tradition vital and relevant in the contemporary world. And, most importantly, the Festival enables artists to speak for themselves. At the centennial of its declaration of independence the Philippines is strong enough to be proud of the traditions of all its people and to let them speak for themselves.

Suggested Reading

Breitbart, Eric. *A World on Display, Photographs from the St. Louis World's Fair, 1904.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

Karnow, Stanley. *In Our Image, America's Empire in the Philippines.* New York: Ballantine, 1989.

Lowenstein, M.J., comp. *Official Guide to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition.* St. Louis: The Official Guide Co., 1904.

Rydell, Robert W. *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Terry's 1904 World's Fair home page at www.inlink.com/~terryl/index.html

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Richard Kennedy is co-curator of the Philippines program at the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. He is deputy director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies, where he also has co-curated Festival programs on Hawai'i, Indonesia, Thailand, and Russian music. He was chair of South Asian Area Studies at the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute.