

Women Building History
Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition

By Wanda M. Corn

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Of all the spectacular elements of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, among the least recognized have been the achievements in public decorative arts of the fair's women participants. In *Women Building History*, art historian Wanda M. Corn rescues these achievements from their ill-deserved obscurity to demonstrate that they represented both a "milestone in the history of American art" – as artists such as Mary MacMonnies and Mary Cassatt had "their *last and only* opportunity to fulfill a public commission" (p. 9) – and a contribution to "women's emancipation" (p. 10). Responses to women's sculptures and paintings, according to Corn, "uncover one of the most festering 'disguised confrontations' at the Fair, the warfare between the sexes to determine who would control the image of the female body" (p. 17).

As an art historian, Corn is careful first to explain the artistic language of the late nineteenth century, which relied heavily on allegory, an "old symbolic system that collapses virtues, vices, continents, and individual nations into human form" (p. 36). The Fair was intended as a monumental depiction of Euro-American progress; its decorative arts were intended to translate that progress through allegory into artistic form. This endeavor provided the tableau

for women to distinguish their images from those of male artists.

After explaining this artistic language, Corn explores the dramatic differences between male and female allegorical figures of women and progress. She decisively argues that women contributing the artistic decoration arrived at similar depictions without personal contact but "rather from common transatlantic understandings about woman's progress across history and about female culture in modern times" (p. 98). In addition to leaving men out of their art, for example, they also depicted maternity and childrearing as only one aspect of women's myriad occupations, focusing rather on women's activities and contributions to human progress in the arts, education, and labor.

Corn contrasts the pediments of the Woman's Building and the Mechanical Arts Building to further illustrate her point about difference. The designer of the former pediment, Alice Rideout, self-consciously used the trope of liberation to depict women's important contributions to progress and to symbolize women's freedom. The artistic production of men, as in the latter pediment designed by M. A. Waagen, continued to depict women as the allegorically decorative and virtuous half of

humanity, while attributing all progress to the wisdom, scientific mentality, and innovation of men.

Corn's purpose, however, is not simply to contrast male and female depictions of the female body. She also illuminates the role of women artists and their Fair patrons in promoting a new female form. The iconography of Mary Cassatt's mural of the "Modern Woman," for example, is that of young, active, and fashionable young women, intended to portray, as Cassatt herself described, young women pursuing fame, knowledge and science, and the arts. In all three areas, Cassatt eschewed the traditional allegorical figures – St. Cecilia for music, for example – and refused to "incorporate neoclassical trappings" such as "columns, drapery, or antique dress" (p. 134). Through their contributions to the fair's decorative arts Cassatt and other women sought to "expand the meanings of 'feminine' and to make it embrace the clubwoman, artist, and writer, not just the daughter, wife, and mother" (p. 170).

Despite the efforts of Bertha Palmer to preserve the arts of the Woman's Building, many of those works, including Cassatt's mural, disappeared in the years following the fair. Adding to this loss, Cassatt's vision of the Modern Woman was widely disparaged by critics as aggres-

sive and impudent, and thus doubly lost to our understanding of its significance. Corn has rescued Cassatt's vision and its artistic expression, and that of other women artists, by placing them into the context of the contemporary struggle for women's rights to independence and self-expression.

The book is liberally illustrated with images of the Woman's Building and its decorations, which most readers will delight in seeing for the first time. Corn also summarizes the fate of the art and includes biographies of the women who created the Woman's Building. My only quibble with the book is in how "sidebars" of additional information are interspersed in the narrative structure. I found that practice distracting, but readers less familiar with the fair and the 1890s milieu will appreciate such extra detail.

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