



Maria Grever, Berteke Waaldijk. *Transforming the Public Sphere: The Dutch National Exhibition of Women's Labor in 1898.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004. 352 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3258-9; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3296-1.



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Exhibiting Labor

The inauguration of eighteen-year-old Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands had a powerful affect on the distaff side of Dutch society. In her honor, five hundred women organized the National Exhibition of Women's Labor, a public display of women's contributions to Dutch society which showcased a wide range of professions (traditional and non-traditional) practiced by women. While the inauguration sparked a revival of Dutch nationalism and imperial aspirations through national festivities focused on the Dutch "Golden Age" of the seventeenth century, it particularly inspired the Dutch women's movement "to express its hopes and desires for the future" by tackling the Netherlands' nineteenth-century social issues—economic and political stagnation, agricultural crises, and colonial exploitation (p. 11). What better way to bridge past and future: "after all, the movement reasoned, if a woman could fill the highest post in the Netherlands, then it was high time the nation realized that women could—and already did—play an important role in other areas of society" (p. 11). This sentiment echoed the statement made by Bertha Palmer, the Board of Lady Managers President, at the Dedicatory Ceremonies of the World's Columbian Exposition. "Even

more important than the discovery of Columbus, which we are gathered together to celebrate," said Palmer, "is the fact that the General Government has just discovered woman." [1]

The National Exhibition of Women's Labor was held from July 9 through September 21, 1898 with its displays and activities housed in temporary wooden structures located in the dunes between The Hague and the North Sea coast. It boasted 90,000 visitors (including Queen Wilhelmina herself) and 1,400 contributions. The latter included live labor demonstrations and still displays of modern Dutch women's labor as well as Dutch-colonial native trades (such as Javanese weaving and batik dyeing). Exhibition president Cecile Goekoop-de Jong van Beek en Donk had been inspired by her visit to the Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893. In fact, many of the physical aspects of the National Exhibition appear as foundations for the expanded version in its Dutch sister. The Hall of Industry with its hands-on exhibitions, displays of women's professions (such as social work, nursing, and education), the Library containing books written by and

about women, the Art Hall featuring paintings by Dutch women artists, displays of the work of native cultures, the Congresses held in the Conference Hall and presenting pertinent issues of the day, and even restaurants, all had counterparts in the Chicago Woman's Building.

The Dutch National Exhibition of Women's Labor was the culmination of thirty years' work by the Dutch women's movement, which brought to the forefront the economic, social, cultural, and political plight of women, and spotlighted poor and dangerous working conditions, limited educational opportunities, lack of legal recourse, and social inequities faced by Dutch women and girls in the mid to late nineteenth century. By the 1870s, it had become apparent that bridging their "internal divisions in age, religion, social class, and political views" would be vital to the success of the Dutch women's movement (p. 13). Organizers therefore explicitly attempted to overcome class divisions. "Labor" was an all-encompassing term for the Dutch exhibition, including working-class factory girls and middle-class professional women, and industriousness itself was portrayed as a social virtue. The National Exhibition strove to replace the negative image of women's labor, namely that of low-wage earners who worked in unsafe conditions while their activities outside the home endangered a healthy family life, with one of "civilized and decent forms of employment ... emphasiz[ing] the role of productivity in social and industrial progress" (p. 14).

Transforming the Public Sphere: The Dutch National Exhibition of Women's Labor in 1898 is the first comprehensive social history of the Exhibition of Women's Labor. Originally published in Dutch in 1998, to coincide with the centennial of the National Exhibition of 1898, the current publication is revised and updated.[2] The eighteen color images and thirty-one black-and-white period photographs are well chosen and augment the text. As with most exhibition research, Maria Grever and Berteke Waaldijk relied on archives for their information base, in this case the International Information Center and Archives of the Women's Movement (Internationaal Informatiecentrum en Archief voor de Vrouwenbeweging) in Amsterdam, which houses nearly all of the Dutch National Exhibition of Women's Labor materials as well as information about national and international women's organizations and related biographical data. Also provided by the archives are many of the period photographs included as text illustrations. Such materials are a vital reconstructive tool for the researcher of temporary exhibitions. Without the foresight of the exhibition organizers who collected and deposited these documentary

materials, works such as Grever and Waaldijk's are impossible to produce.

New to this edition is Antoinette Burton's well-crafted introduction, "The Spectacular History of Dutch Feminism." Burton places the work of late-nineteenth-century Dutch women into a cultural and global perspective and provides the framework of research in Dutch feminism, colonial history, and Euro-American women's studies upon which Grever and Waaldijk build. Her informed discussion of the National Exhibition contextualizes the diverse global concerns of the time—consumerism, industrialization, labor, imperialism, and "the woman question"—as they converged at the exhibition. "Despite the veritable explosion of historical work on exhibitionary culture in the last decade," writes Burton, "relatively little attention has been paid to the role of women in organizing the transnational spectacles that dominated the culturescapes of imperial modernity" (p. 2). Grever and Waaldijk fill this lacuna. The editors employ Nancy Fraser's modification of Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, in which "the public sphere was not a monolithic entity, but consisted of a variety of publics and counterpublics" (p. 15). Grever and Waaldijk see the National Exhibition as an example of a counterpublic in which new participants and standards of communication are found, thereby challenging the traditionally masculine nature of the public sphere.

Within the eight chapters of this well-written book, one finds "the story of how the women's movement in a small, Western nation with a large colonial empire used an exhibition to put women's social position on the political agenda" (pp. 9-10). The authors attempt to interpret the developments leading up to the National Exhibition by examining "the exhibition's role as a feminist intervention in the process of constructing the public sphere and citizenship" and "considering how women shaped and adapted the format of the colonial exhibition," thereby "shed[ing] light on the imperial context in which Western women's movements, and the Dutch women's movement in particular, claimed citizenship in the nation-state" (p. 10).

In chapter 1, Grever and Waaldijk establish the parameters of their study and review pertinent historical facts, historiography and methodology. The next two chapters explore the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the exhibition. Chapter 2 addresses the period leading up to the National Exhibition of Women's Labor, explaining why the exhibition was organized and what obstacles were faced by the Dutch women (as well

as previous female fair organizers) when attempting a cross-cultural assembly and display. The organizers of the National Exhibition studied closely the design and success of their predecessors: the Pavilion of Women's Labor at the Vienna World's Fair (1873), the Women's Pavilion at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition (1876), the Danish International Women's Exhibition from Past to Present (1895) and, of course, the Woman's Building at Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition (1893). Chapter 3 presents what the exhibition was—its ceremonies, plan, and exhibits. By focusing on the Hall of Industry and social work exhibits, the authors interpret the views of the organizers regarding social relations, labor, and citizenship as a counter-representation of gender (p. 67). The exhibition displays are described, analyzed and contextualized in depth in chapters 4 and 5. Grever and Waaldijk convincingly interpret the many ways in which visitors experienced the exhibition. The historical sources focus on the intentions of the organizers but what was the reality? Due to different social and educational backgrounds, visitors to the exhibition did not have a "homogenous experience" (p. 111). Many of the threads of the authors arguments, including the impact of colonialism and the Dutch feminist cause, come together successfully in these chapters. The final three chapters are devoted to the implications and lasting effects of the National Exhibition. The Exhibition ultimately empowered its organizers to then take what they had learned and disseminate it to their various professional, political, and social strata.

What every woman's movement learns (usually too late) is that female gender does not automatically unify

and override class, politics, age, or race. For female fair planners, the optimism of the event assumes the organizational structure to be a pyramid, built on cooperation, with Woman's Progress at the pinnacle. In fact, the structure is more often akin to a multi-faceted diamond, with each plane representing the concerns of the social, educational, generational, religious, financial, or racial group of which each woman contributor is a part, and the plateau at the apex the place where all these facets, plus Woman's Progress, converge. Grever and Waaldijk make this point as well. "If the exhibition made one thing clear, it was that the 'generic woman' did not exist. The sheer diversity of representations prompted visitors to reflect on the concept of *woman*" (p. 219). *Transforming the Public Sphere* is a significant scholarly contribution to the field of women's history and should be on the book shelf of every student of industrial exhibitions, women's labor, and Dutch colonialism.

Notes

[1]. Bertha H. Palmer, Address at Dedicatory Ceremonies of the Exposition, Manufactures Building, October 21, 1892, in *Addresses and Reports of Mrs. Potter Palmer* (Chicago: Rand, McNally and Company, 1894), p. 119.

[2]. An article presenting the book's salient features was also published in 2004. See Maria Grever and Berteke Waaldijk, "Women's Labor at Display: Feminist Claims to Dutch Citizenship and Colonial Politics around 1900," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2004): pp. 11-18.

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