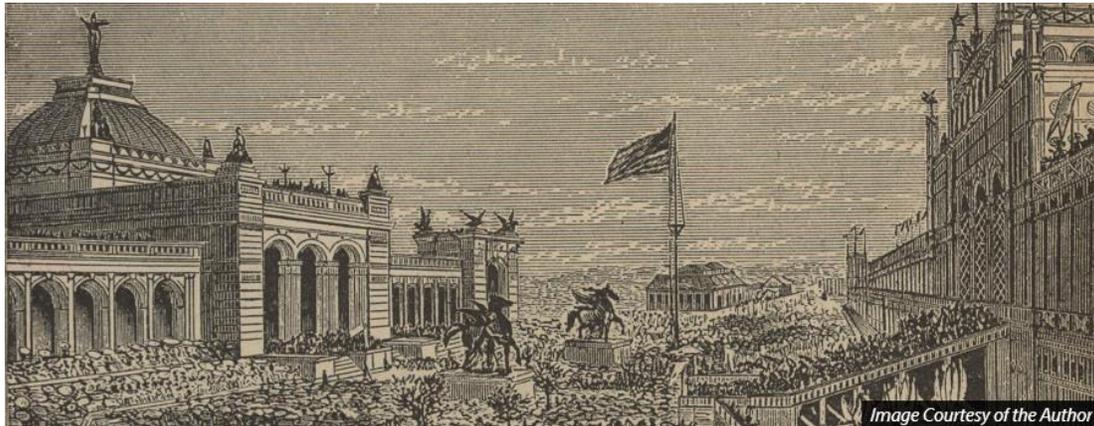


# Building Babel: The 1876 International Exhibition at the Philadelphia Centennial

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*Ceremonies at the Opening of the Centennial Exhibition, 1876.* (James D. McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition, Held in Commemoration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of American Independence* (Philadelphia, PA: National Publishing Company, 1876), 30-31.)

The Centennial Exposition opened on May 10, 1876, and attracted nearly 10 million visitors during its six months of operation. [1] Covering 450 acres of Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, the Centennial, officially titled the International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the Soil and Mine, featured five grand structures and a collection of temporary pavilions that dotted its picturesque landscape. [2] The only building to survive is Memorial Hall, a permanent structure of glass, iron, and granite that housed the “Arts” display and functioned as one of the five exhibition halls of the fair (**Fig. 1**). The floor plan of the edifice and its annex reveals an unexpected layout of nations (**Fig. 2**). Instead of a strictly compartmentalized grid that clearly segregated each state, the plan suggests a scattered realization that frequently split countries between two buildings, often requiring them to share gallery space. In a few cases,



**Fig. 1.** Art Gallery, 1876. (J.S. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition Described and Illustrated* (Philadelphia, PA: Hubbard Brothers, 1876), 108).

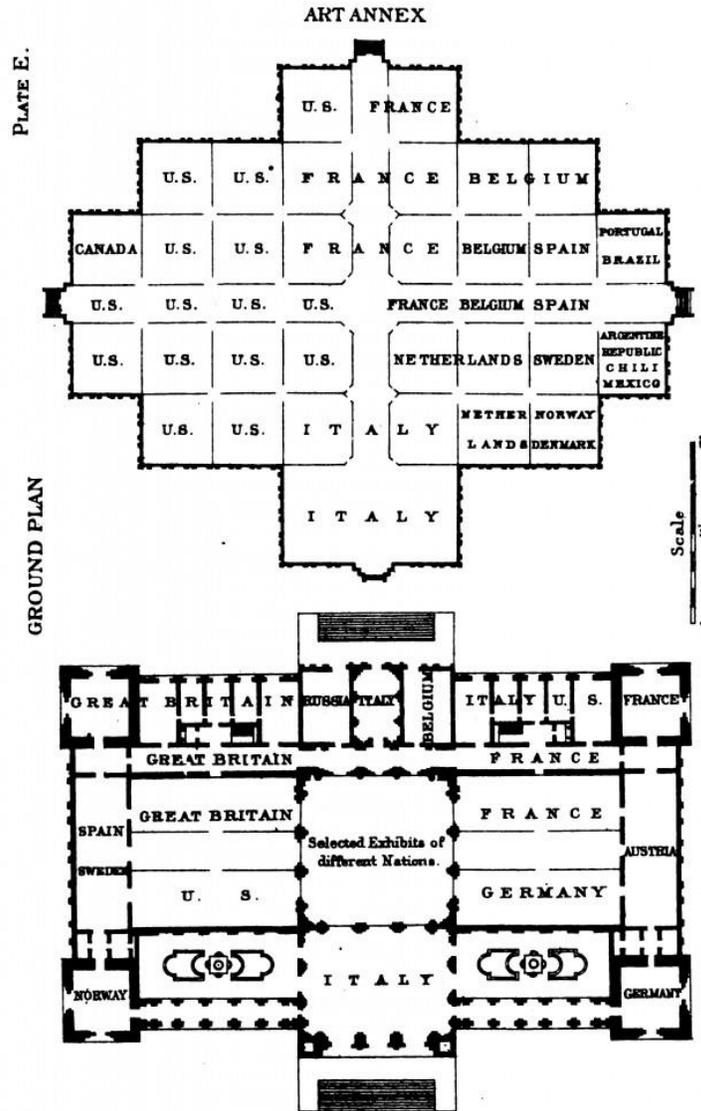


Fig. 2. Plate E—Memorial Hall and Annex, Ground-Plan, 1876. (Dorsey Gardner, *Grounds and Buildings of the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1880), 58, Plate E).

narrow hallways featured art from two countries, their paintings literally facing off against each other. Within the context of a world’s fair, position in an exhibition generally corresponded to a predetermined order of importance. Rather than reserving the most desirable locations for its arts, the United States often shared coveted positions or yielded territory to other countries.

A number of scholars have written about the 1876 Centennial, yet no one has explained the unusual floor plan of its arts exhibition, a vacancy in the scholarship that this project hopes to fill. [3] By investigating the decisions behind the design of the Centennial’s arts display, this paper will show how Henry Pettit, the Chief of the Bureau of Installation, instituted a calculated layout of nations and how John Sartain, the Chief of the Bureau

of Arts, complicated that plan through his accommodation of countries and their large submissions of artwork.

As Chief of the Bureau of Installation, Henry Pettit also served as the Consulting Engineer for the United States Centennial Commission, a governing body of representatives from every state and territory charged with planning the fair. [4] In an 1880 report, Pettit discussed an overarching arrangement of nations, which he implemented in the Main Building and its display of manufacturing. He called it an “installation by races,” which privileged the United States, England, France, and Germany. [5] In its application, each of the four races—“Latin,” “Anglo-Saxon,” “Teutonic,” and “American”—occupied the four corners of the Main Building. Although the report does not refer to Memorial Hall, the floor plan of the arts display suggests that it was initially organized according to Pettit’s “installation by races.” By neatly quartering Memorial Hall, placing the four nations in its corners and together under the central dome, Pettit’s plan invited visitors to compare the United States and the leading European states. [6]

In September 1875, during Memorial Hall’s construction, the Centennial Commission appointed John Sartain as Chief of the Bureau of Arts. As “[Superintendent] of the Fine Arts Department ... including allotment of space to exhibitors,” Sartain introduced a key modification to the “installation by races” by placing Italy in the entranceway. While Italy’s manufacturing did not merit a central location in the Main Building, its cultural authority in the arts required an elevated position within Memorial Hall (**Fig. 3**). [7] Pettit’s plan and Sartain’s adjustment suggest a purposeful association of American art to European masterpieces in order to imply a direct comparison. In the only guidebook sold on fair grounds, a description of Memorial Hall reads,

*From the works thus selected, and on exhibition, the best works of each country of the Old World have been taken, and placed in the main gallery of Memorial Hall, opposite to and in close comparison with the best works of the most eminent artists of the United States, thus forming a most interesting exhibition.* [8]

By placing the United States in close proximity to older empires, Pettit and Sartain thus created a “most interesting” juxtaposition that served to elevate American art in the public’s estimation. Next to the fine art of the “Old World,” the art of the United States strove for legitimacy and acknowledgement on an international stage.

Before opening day, when participating nations arrived with more or less artwork than planned, the limited confines of Memorial Hall required Sartain to mediate between nations and adjust the previous allotment of galleries. In a letter dated March 6, 1876, Sartain wrote, “The building of Babel is the only thing I can compare this to with the jealousies of foreign nationalities and impossibility of satisfying conflicting interests.” [9] By referring to the building of Babel, a tower left unfinished by its builders because they spoke different languages, Sartain reveals his frustration at responding to multiple demands from foreign nationalities. In attempting to please several parties, Sartain reassigned some galleries to other countries in need of room, or in a few instances, he appointed multiple nationalities to the same gallery. In perhaps the most

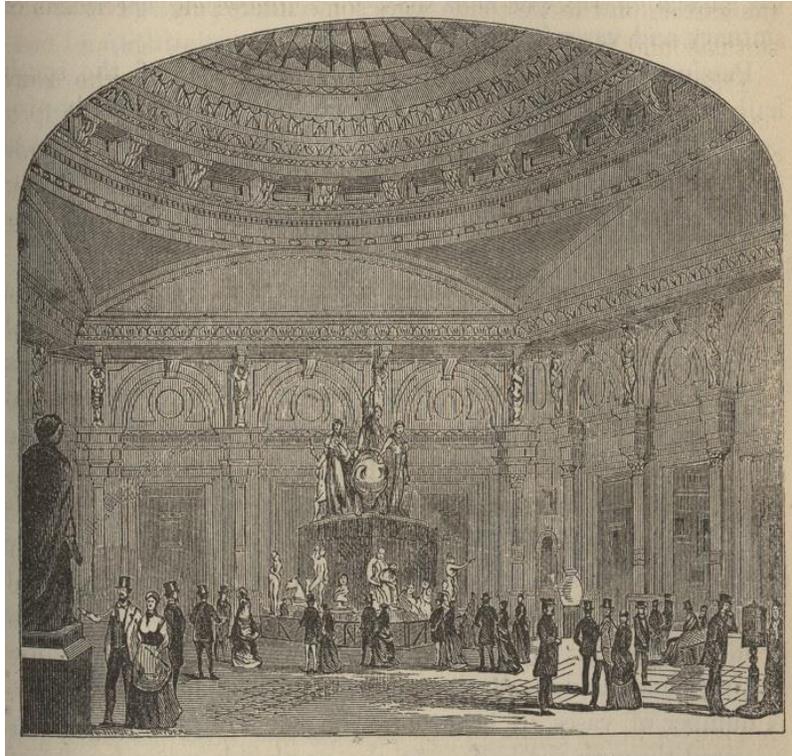


Fig. 3. Interior of Rotunda of Memorial Hall, 1876. (James D. McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition, Held in Commemoration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of American Independence* (Philadelphia, PA: National Publishing Company, 1876), 583).

extreme case, the southwest corner pavilion of Memorial Hall displayed collections from the United States, Sweden, Norway, and Italy in one room. [\[10\]](#)

Once Hermann Schwarzmann, the Chief Architect of the Centennial Exhibition and designer of Memorial Hall, realized that the arts display needed more gallery space, he began preparations on the construction of an Annex in early 1876 (**Fig. 4**). [\[11\]](#) The Annex consisted of “one large room fifty-five feet wide by one hundred feet long, and thirty smaller rooms, each about forty feet square.” [\[12\]](#) In his autobiography from 1899, Sartain proudly recounted a suggestion he made to Schwarzmann for the new structure:

*When the architect submitted to me his plan, the doors were all placed in the center of the walls. I showed him that they occupied precisely the space most valuable for the display of pictures, and left only the corners for that use. I made a sketch for him with the opening in each room at its angle, cutting it across diagonally to the line of the walls. [\[13\]](#)*

The resulting plan for the Art Annex created an incidental equalizing effect between nations. Situated in rooms of equal size, the exhibition enabled visitors to pass easily from one country to the next through the corners of its galleries. The consequential ebb and flow between nations ultimately characterized the international experience of the fine arts display.



Fig. 4. *Annex to the Art Gallery*, 1876. (James D. McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition, Held in Commemoration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of American Independence* (Philadelphia, PA: National Publishing Company, 1876), 584).

While tensions between cultures arose during the initial negotiation of space, the tenor of the exhibition did not reflect the kind of competitive nationalism observable in subsequent world's fairs. Some nations willingly relinquished precious space, such as Austria, which gave its gallery wall to the United States, "by crowding together [its] own exhibit on the opposite wall." [14] Moreover, many foreign artists embraced the Centennial theme, producing works that celebrated America's historical democracy rather than their own country's achievements. An Italian artist, Pietro Guarniero, sculpted the *Apotheosis of George Washington* (c. 1875), a large marble bust of Washington pictured atop an eagle, popularly viewed and reproduced in *Frank Leslie's*, a favorite illustrated newspaper of the period (Fig. 5). [15] In a similar international spirit, the United States dedicated one of its galleries not to its own artistic production, but to a display of foreign artists owned by American collectors, additionally revealing the nation's own cosmopolitan tastes to an international audience. [16]

During the six months of the Centennial fair, one-fifth of the American population purportedly attended the exposition, and undoubtedly most would have floated in and out of Memorial Hall. [17] The exhibition's layout, as planned by Pettit, adapted by Sartain, and encountered by fairgoers, frequently encouraged comparisons between American and European artistic ingenuity in order to legitimize the new nation's artistic heritage. Ultimately, the perfectly segmented "installation by races" required practical adjustments and the resulting fluidity of nations that characterized the Philadelphian exhibition would disappear in subsequent world's fairs, increasingly bent on proud and prominent displays of individual states in competition for power and position.



VESTIBULE OF MEMORIAL HALL.

Fig. 5. "Vestibule of Memorial Hall." (Frank H. Norton, ed., *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition, 1876* (New York: Frank Leslie's Publishing House, 1876), 228).

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## Endnotes:

[1] Linda P. Gross and Theresa R. Snyder, *Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 7-8.

[2] John Maas, *The Glorious Enterprise: The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 and H.J. Schwarzmann, Architect-in-Chief* (Watkins Glen, NY: American Life Foundation, 1973), 23.

[3] John Maas, *The Glorious Enterprise: The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 and H.J. Schwarzmann, Architect-in-Chief* (Watkins Glen, NY: American Life Foundation, 1973); Richard Nicolai, *Centennial Philadelphia* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Bryn Mawr Press, 1976); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Ethan Robey, "John Sartain and the Contest of Taste at the Centennial," in *Philadelphia's Cultural Landscape: The Sartain Family Legacy*, ed. Katharine Martinez et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000); Bruno Giberti, *Designing the Centennial: A History of the 1876 International Exhibition in Philadelphia* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2002); Linda P. Gross and Theresa R. Snyder, *Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005).

[4] United States Centennial Commission, *International Exhibition, 1876. Report of the Director-General, Including the Reports of Bureaus of Administration, Volume I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), 43.

[5] *Ibid.*, 54.

[6] Giberti has discussed the “installation by races” as it applied to the main exhibition hall, but falls short of discussing its implementation within Memorial Hall. In understanding the use of the term of “race” within the 1876 context, I am in agreement with Bruno Giberti’s interpretation. Instead of reading the “installation by races” as proof of a racist program as Robert Rydell has argued, Giberti views the organizational layout as more of a consolidation of imperialism and nationalism. Moreover, Giberti has rightfully noted, a category of “race” did not exist in the Philadelphia classification system. Instead, the “installation by races” functioned more as an organizing principle based on national origin myths, rather than a racist agenda.

[7] Edward Strahan, *The Masterpieces of the International Exhibition, 1876: Illustrated Catalogue* (Philadelphia, PA: Gebbie & Barrie, 1876), cxi; John Sartain, “Allotment of Space in Art Galleries to Italy,” January 17, 1876, Sartain Family Papers, 1795-1944 [Collection 1650], Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

[8] Centennial Board of Finance, *Visitors’ Guide to the Centennial Exhibition and Philadelphia: May 10th to November 10th, 1876* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1876), 13.

[9] John Sartain to William D. Lewis, March 6, 1876, Sartain Family Papers, 1795-1944 [Collection 1650], Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

[10] Centennial Exhibition, *International Exhibition, 1876 Official Catalogue: Part II—Art Gallery, Annexes, and Outdoor Works of Art: Dept. IV—Art* (Philadelphia, PA: John R. Nagle, 1876), 52, 105, 108, 120.

[11] A young engineer and architect from Germany, Hermann Joseph Schwarzmans designed the Centennial fairgrounds in his capacity as Chief Architect. For more information on Schwarzmans, see Maas, *The Glorious Enterprise*.

[12] Dorsey Gardner, *Grounds and Buildings of the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott & Co., 1880), 65.

[13] John Sartain, *The Reminiscences of a Very Old Man, 1808-1897* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899), 264.

[14] United States Centennial Commission, *International Exhibition*, 144.

[15] Centennial Exhibition, *International Exhibition*, 118; A largely unknown artist today, Pietro Guarnerio was an Italian sculptor active in Milan, whose submissions to the Centennial drew popular attention.

[16] *Ibid.*, 37.

[17] Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 10.