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Michael D. Brooks
University of Central Florida, michael.brooks@knights.ucf.edu

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Civilizing the Metropole:  
The Role of the 1889 Parisian Universal Exposition's Colonial Exhibits in Creating Greater France

By: Michael D. Brooks  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Amelia Lyons  
UCF Department of History

ABSTRACT: During the era of New Imperialism, the French state had the daunting task of convincing the French public of the need to support and to sustain an overseas empire. Stemming from its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and hoping to regain its former global position, the French state set out to demonstrate the importance of maintaining an empire. Since the vast majority of the French people were apathetic towards colonial ventures, the French state used the 1889 Parisian Universal Exposition not only to educate the French about the economic benefits of the empire, but to entertain them simultaneously so that they would begin to accept the notion of an interconnected Greater France. This exposition contained a group of colonial exhibits in which indigenous colonial subjects, whom the expositions' organizers handpicked to come to France, showcased their daily lives and interacted with the visiting public. Visitors witnessed the daily routines of indigenous cultures and took away from the exhibits a greater understanding of those who lived in the colonies. However, the vast majority of the French public who visited the expositions did not experience a shift in their mindset and favored the continuance of a colonial empire. Until they could personally see an impact of the colonies onto their daily lives, the French public remained indifferent toward the French state’s colonial ventures.

KEYWORDS: France; history; empire; colonialism; exposition; Greater France
“Out of this grand exposition, France expects grand results. She sees it as a solemn demonstration to honor her among nations, as an act showing her power, as a peaceful victory returning her to her rightful rank in the world.”

As Lockroy’s words demonstrate, following its defeat in the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War, the collapse of the Second Empire, and the subsequent territorial forfeiture of the departments of Alsace and Lorraine, France’s high international standing, upon which the nation based its perceived superiority, was obliterated. In the wake of these events, France founded the Third Republic based on universal republican values. This new government confronted political adversities from the start, including the monarchists, who yearned for a reinstatement of the royal family, and the Bonapartists, who wanted to restore the empire. In addition to external political challenges, government officials also encountered internal conflicts over the very meaning of republicanism. Republicans themselves did not agree on a variety of issues, including colonialism, social questions, the government’s relationship with the Catholic Church, and the pace at which reforms should be realized. They also faced anxieties about industrialization, modernization, cultural and moral degeneration, and population loss, all of which magnified the damage done to French pride and France’s political and cultural reputation as a world power.

This article analyzes how the French Third Republic attempted to combat these concerns and apprehensions by staging the 1889 Parisian Universal Exposition. The goals of the exposition’s organizers were twofold: to disseminate the importance of maintaining an empire to the French public via the concept of Greater France and to try and recapture France’s former global standing in the aftermath of recent events. In addition to constructing the Eiffel Tower and the Gallery of Machines, both of which displayed French ingenuity and expertise, the organizers used the exposition’s colonial exhibits to inform visitors about the French empire through education and entertainment. They planned and built sixteen colonial exhibits to offer visitors the opportunity to journey through an idealized version of the French empire, learning about the goods produced in the colonies and observing the colonial subjects performing their daily routines, without having to leave France.

As well as reminding the French public about France’s position as the epicenter of universal culture, the exposition’s human and material displays educated visitors about the progress of France's civilizing mission and about their colonial subjects’ lifestyles in an idyllic and picturesque manner, devoid of any notion of resistance, conflict, pacification, or violence. Colonizing ambitions, cloaked under the guise of the civilizing mission, aimed to spread French civilization to “inferior races.” This civilization, according to French leaders, included the latest advancements demonstrating how technology and science had mastered nature. The expansion of railroads and the shift from local, artisanal production to urban, industrial production contributed to this new mastery, and metropolitan priorities shifted from imperial expansion to the “rational economic development” of existing colonies, a practice known as mise en valeur.

In addition to teaching the French public about France’s colonial efforts, the organizers understood that they needed to create some entertaining elements as well in order to attract large numbers of visitors to the colonial exhibits. Therefore, they planned restaurants in which attendees could sample native cuisine, parades displaying indigenous customs and dress, and theatres in which autochthonous dance troupes held several performances daily. These educational and entertaining methods and techniques aimed to instill a greater imperial cognizance into the visiting public, with the hope of leading to an idea of fraternity within the “imagined community” of Greater France.

1 Lockroy, “Discours de M. Édouard Lockroy prononcé à la première séance de la Commission de Contrôle,” L’Universelle Exposition de 1889 illustrée, 1 February 1887, 4.
2 Wawro, The Franco-Prussian War, 310–314.
3 Lehning, To Be a Citizen, 1–2.
4 Cole, The Power of Large Numbers, 1.
5 Picard, Rapport général, 2: 22. Three directors-general served under Lockroy: Mr. Alphand headed the exposition’s planning and construction, Mr. Berger headed the exposition’s daily operations, and Mr. Grison headed the exposition’s finances.
6 Berenson, “Making a Colonial Culture?” 133.
7 Conklin, A Mission to Civilize, 13.
10 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 7.
Gary Wilder has argued that the Third Republic’s management of the end of the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War, the 1871 Paris Commune, and industrialization between the two world wars changed “imperialism from a political inheritance into a state project.”

Building on Wilder’s work, this article submits that the shift in imperialism from a political legacy of universal republicanism to a contradictory state mission of assimilation and exclusion occurred during the late nineteenth century. One element of this state project was the dissemination of the concept of Greater France to the French population. The notion of Greater France strove to unite all segments of the French empire into one cohesive entity. This included territory in North, West, and Equatorial Africa; Indochina; Madagascar; and various islands located in the Caribbean Sea and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The idea circulated extensively during the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. In an effort to regain France’s former global stature and as a counterpoise to the enormous British empire, French leaders recognized, in the wake of the tumultuous upheaval their nation recently experienced, metropolitan France lacked the raw materials and manpower required to compete on a worldwide level. The material foundation upon which French power rested would be too paltry to thereby jeopardizing France’s ability to regain its status and as a political inheritance into a state project.”

Building on Foucauldian concept of connecting knowledge with the operations of power, Said highlights how knowledge about the Orient, produced and disseminated in Europe, emerged as an “ideological accompaniment of colonial power” and became a tool the French populace. “The coupling of Orientalism and exoticism led to the display of the world both as a quasi-scientific exhibit and as an object of systematic study.”

While offering visitors the opportunity to experience colonial culture in an attempt to construct a Greater France, the exposition’s organizers concomitantly reinforced perceptions of Oriental and other exotic cultures as less civilized than European culture. This objectification engendered much curiosity about those on display. One newspaper article stated that the exposition became “all the more curious for having specimens of diverse races, Asians or Africans, concentrated in the same location.”

The organizers of the 1889 exposition recognized they faced an uphill battle with the French public. With the exception of urban areas with colonial economic ties—Paris, Lyon, Marseille—the vast majority of the French populace remained “stubbornly indifferent to colonial affairs.” Most exhibited only sporadic bursts of colonial enthusiasm during times of national crisis, while others were openly hostile to colonialism. The explorer Francis Garner wrote in April 1869, upon his return to France, that one is struck by the public’s profound indifference to all aspects of the colonial contribution to our national greatness.

There seems to be no connection between the overseas interests which one has just defended and that metropolitan power which, sunk back on itself, does not even dream of seeking overseas outlets for the restless activity consuming it at home.

The organizers of the exposition countered this indifference and hostility through entertainment in order to attract a larger visiting public and to guarantee the fiscal success of the event.

Threats to French pride and glory stemmed not only from past events. One potential danger existed in 1889 that could have derailed the opening of the exposition, thus jeopardizing France’s ability to regain its status and glory. Most of the European monarchies informed the
exposition’s committee of their refusal to send official delegations to the opening ceremonies, quite the opposite of previous Parisian expositions, which began in 1855. One reason for their absence was a desire not to be associated with the centenary of the French Revolution. Instead of attending an event celebrating the overthrow of a monarchy and the inception of a republic founded upon popular sovereignty, the monarchs chose to show solidarity with one another by abstaining. England, Germany, Italy, and Belgium sent only their chargés d’affaires. Representatives from Spain, Austria-Hungary, and Russia were absent, although some of them encouraged their industries to participate.

After the Eiffel Tower and the Gallery of Machines, which easily captured the preponderance of the visiting public’s attention, the colonial exhibits were, according to the official guidebook, the “star attraction” of the 1889 exposition. As intended, the colonial displays played a major role in the achievement of a more “popular, immediate, and normalized access in mass culture” to something that had been viewed as exotic and cloaked in ambiguity; During this time in French history, the majority of Europeans drew their conceptions about distant and remote areas from paintings or travel narratives. The publication of photographs in books and newspapers, offering an unprecedented level of precision and detail, was just in its infancy during this era due to technological and economic hindrances. One author of an article in Le Petit Français illustré wrote, “The public . . . has learned more in six months by traveling through a reduced version of the colonial world than what the largest books could impart to it.” He later added, “One forgets very little of what one has seen with one’s own eyes through observation.” The exposition itself transformed the conditions of contact between Western and non-Western peoples, presenting the latter as more real and as part of Greater France, and less distant than ever before. The visiting public now had the opportunity to interact directly with French colonial subjects within the limits the organizers established, as opposed to getting information about the French empire’s inhabitants from newspaper articles or from travel publications. The exposition’s organizers situated the colonial pavilions away from the main exhibition space, requiring visitors to board a train to visit them, or to walk a long distance. In the process of creating a cohesive Greater France through education, the exposition’s organizers buttressed the separation between the perceived modernistic metropolitan French populace and the traditional indigenous peoples. This partition suggests a concerted effort on the part of the organizers to reinforce a safe distance between the civilized French and the uncivilized colonial subjects, a technique that French officials copied when they sought to modernize Morocco after the turn of the century.

Almost all of the pre–World War I expositions in Europe paid close attention to the perceived magnetism of Arab architecture. The official guidebook of the 1889 exposition fulfilled its educational duty by informing the visitors about the type of weather under which the indigenous population would feel most at ease and be more likely to interact. The guidebook advised guests to visit the colonial sections on a clear and hot day with full sun. Only on a bright day would the Western eye not be offended by the exotic architectural elements and the polychromatic color schemes used to paint the buildings: “Vividly illuminated and with a blue sky as a background, these decors come alive.” The guidebook also suggested that European tastes in color and architecture were more refined and advanced than those of the colonized, since multicolored façades and abrupt edges were not typical of French buildings, implying that the sparkling colors and severe architectural lines, on a cloudy or overcast day, possessed the potential to offend the visitors’ sensibilities. The organizers juxtaposed this refinement, based on the notion of European tastes as modern and civilized, with traditional elements of colonial architecture in order to construct and to regulate a "controlled diversity.”

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21 Picard, Rapport général, 1: 356.
22 “Les Représentants des puissances étrangères,” Le Constitutionnel, 9 May 1889, 2. This newspaper was a voice for the world of commerce, politics, and serial literature, including works by George Sand, Alexandre Dumas, and Honoré de Balzac. After the election of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, Le Constitutionnel became a major government newspaper of the Second Empire.
24 Krakow, Guide bleu, 246. The word clou is also in quotes in the original.
25 Young, “From the Eiffel Tower to the Javanese Dancer,” 354.
26 “Ce qu’on voit à l’Exposition,” Le Petit Français illustré, 20 July 1889, 263.
The illusion of travel was one way that the exposition’s organizers ventured to entertain the visitors. For the vast majority of the French populace, a visit to the exposition was the closest they would ever get to Africa or to Asia. No longer was it necessary to embark on a long, tiring, and expensive journey to see an exotic locale. However, the organizers orchestrated this journey, leaving nothing to chance. Replicated mosques, cafés, markets, temples, and obelisks on the exposition’s grounds afforded visitors the opportunity to take their own journey to an exotic and foreign land while remaining comfortably ensconced in metropolitan France. A particular pavilion’s success could be encapsulated by its ability “to capture and recapitulate the experience of travel.” Even the colonial greenhouses, containing palm trees, orchids, and ferns, completed the “illusion of [a] voyage to the countries of the sun.” As Herman Lebovics has argued about the 1931 exposition, “wrapping native cultures within the high culture of European France” legitimized colonial cultures “in the eyes of Europeans by relating them to European icons.” This legitimacy infused the pavilions with a manufactured authenticity, which the organizers used to create a preformulated and comfortable area in which the viewing public could observe the world around them without ever leaving their backyard. An article by Paul Bourde in Le Temps reinforced this alleged authenticity: “You can abandon yourself without worry in the pleasure that [the buildings] give you. What you have before your eyes are not counterfeits.”

Therefore, the pavilion’s architects went to great efforts to reproduce an idealized version of each of the colonies on display. The main architect of the Algerian section, Albert Ballu, spent five years in Algeria drawing and sketching the main historical monuments of Arab architecture. The detailed and meticulous recreation of indigenous buildings and gardens, including a Kabyle house, an artisanal well, tents, and a Moorish café, transported visitors across the Mediterranean Sea without having to leave the Hexagon. The construction of a Kabyle house is significant in that it was not an Arab house. French authorities viewed Berbers as aggressive and unruly, but viewed Arabs from the Kabyle region as hardworking, passive, and more assimilable to French ways. In his article in Le Temps, Bourde wrote about the Kabyle buildings being “an exact copy” of villages in North Africa. Even though the reconstruction of North African buildings showed the viewing public a French vision of the architecture of the region, the author later described the pavilions as “a barbarous stopover [escale],” implying the uncivilized nature not only of the exposition’s indigenous participants but also of the region’s inhabitants in general.

The pavilion’s exterior illusorily charmed the visiting public, while the interior sought to educate it through an economically diverse display of goods and products. Believing that wine was a sign of a civilized culture, French colonists who were farmers in Algeria catered to this affinity. To educate the visitors about alternative sources for wine, the organizers devoted the largest exhibit in the pavilion to Algerian viticulture, an industry that the phylloxera blight that had ravaged France’s vineyards for over a decade did not affect. Over 1,600 wine producers displayed their goods at the exposition, and the official guide predicted that within twenty-five years Algeria would become the world’s principal wine supplier. As with the Algerian exhibit, the construction of colorful Tunisian buildings at the exposition aimed to educate the public further about the empire and to transport the viewing public, most of whom would never have the opportunity of traveling to the empire, into the colonial setting they expected to see: a world of exotic beauty, free from any mention of conquest or pacification. The Tunisian exhibit contained several buildings, including a central palace, a building housing Tunisian flora and fauna, a bazaar, various boutiques, and a café. The architect of the main palace did not draw his inspiration from just one building, but from many. Each of the façades contained elements from at least two buildings, and the architect did not duplicate any feature. One newspaper article hailed the Tunisian exhibit, with its indigenous merchants and artisans working under the “eyes of the public,” as “one of the most marvelous attractions of the Universal Exposition of 1889.”

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34 Krakow, Guide bleu, 263.
35 Lebovics, True France, 57.
38 Ibid., 2: 22.
39 Çelik, Displaying the Orient, 30; Lorcin, Imperial Identities, 2–6.
40 See note 36.
41 Picard, Rapport général, 2: 162.
42 Krakow, Guide bleu, 249.
44 “La Tunisie à Paris,” L’Universelle Exposition de 1889 illustrée, 15 April 1888, 3.
The organizers also used the notion of Orientalism in the Indochinese exhibit. The Cochin Chinese pavilion did not replicate any extant building in the colony, but was an amalgamation of autochthonous architectural styles. Temples and houses offered the inspiration for this building. Inside the pavilion, nineteen Annamite artists, brought to Paris specifically to decorate the interior, executed colorful representations of indigenous scenes. When Alfred Picard described their artisanship in the general report, he further reinforced French assumptions about racial superiority: “Their imagination, their steadiness of hand, and their ability to work quickly were truly surprising.” This statement evinced Picard’s surprise that Annamite artists were able to produce quality work at a suitable pace to complete a task within the amount of time given. Georges Marx, the facilitator of the Annamite Theatre’s visit to Paris, stereotyped its performers by saying, “The Annamites are too lazy.” One newspaper article also commented on their ability to work: “These brave workers have a modest, exacting, and tenacious work ethic that would not embarrass our [French] workers, but which draws the admiration of the French public.” The Annamite artists had to demonstrate that their abilities, contrary to popular perception, equaled those of Western artists in order to gain praise and recognition from their colonizers.

These statements suggest that Europeans deemed non-Western peoples intellectually inferior, and these sources, in line with the organizers’ goals to increase interest in the empire, attempt to counter these prejudices through education. The Cambodian pavilion, modeled on the ancient temple of Angkor Wat, stood to the right of the Cochin Chinese pavilion. One newspaper article commented that this “was perhaps the most interesting of all the exotic village models.” Picard recounted how Cambodia possessed numerous ancient monuments, then standing in ruins, which “testified to a very advanced ancient civilization and demonstrated the power of an extinct race that populated the region long ago.” But because this “civilization” had disappeared long ago, it posed no threat to the French perception of their superiority. Consistent with Orientalist discourse, ancient civilization could be admired, but since it had crumbled, European civilization now would rejuvenate the region through development and would end stagnation. Picard’s admission that a non-Western society was capable of constructing a “civilization” contradicted the mainstream Social Darwinism of the era, in which racial hierarchy justified colonial expansion and domination under the pretext of development and progress.

While the exposition’s organizers focused mainly on architecture and the illusion of travel to create a Greater France, the element of entertainment could not be overlooked. In addition to the exotic villages, the organizers used shows to enhance the divertissement aspect of the exposition. The special events—ceremonies, spectacles, celebrations—and the areas of interaction and consumption allowed the viewing public to engage actively with the idealized colonial subjects on display and to become more than just receptacles of a republican colonial discourse. These exchanges between the predominantly French audience and the colonized subjects expanded the former’s knowledge and comprehension of the French empire, and subjected the latter to the perceived beneficial influence of the French way of life.

Alongside the Cambodian pavilion was an Annamite theatre, able to seat five hundred people. Several times a day an indigenous troupe, which had been brought from Annam with costumes, stage sets, and accessories, performed traditional shows. Like the other amusement aspects of the exposition, the organizers used this group to attract many visitors. So that the viewing public would comprehend what was happening on stage, the exposition’s organizers arranged to have booklets translated into French sold inside the theatre to explain the action. Men performed all of the roles, harkening back to the male-dominated theatre of ancient Greece and the male-only Elizabethan stage. However, since the French “civilization demanded [that] women” be on stage, twenty female Tonkinese dancers accompanied the troupe. At night, thanks to the use of electricity, the theatre produced a “diabolical effect on the crowd, and would be a grand success.”

45 Picard, Rapport général, 2: 166, 168.
46 Fauser, Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair, 186.
47 Quoted in Ruscio, Le credo de l’homme blanc, 66.
51 Tran, “L’Éphémère dans l’éphémère,” 144, 146.
The spatial distribution of the nonwhite races in and around the exposition demonstrated the organizers' worldview of racial hierarchy and reinforced the entertainment element of the colonial exhibits. The Europeans inhabited the buildings housing the artistic and technical exhibits. The organizers segregated the nonwhite races in a series of "mock foreign settings" according to their race's hierarchical rank. Gustave Le Bon's study of skull volumes and Paul Broca's study of brain weights influenced the organizers' construction of the colonial section. These men and other contemporary sociologists and anthropologists claimed that races with larger skull volume and heavier brains possessed more abilities, thus placing them higher than races with smaller skull volumes and lighter brains.

By separating the colonial subjects from the white and Western races, the organizers attempted to guarantee that the foreign cultures did not threaten those of the colonizing nations. While reducing the geographic distance between the viewing public and the colonies, the colonial exhibits accentuated the cultural differences between them. The organizers' effort to display an idyllic, pastoral vision of colonial life removed any perception of danger on the part of the visitors, included no references to resistance or pacification, and maintained a distance between the colonial subjects and the viewing public which augmented the entertainment feature.

The organizers of the 1889 exposition, cognizant of the disgraced standing with which France found itself during the final quarter of the nineteenth century and of France's desire to recapture its worldwide prestige, set out to make the Paris exposition one of the ways in which France might regain its reputation as a leader on the world stage. The exigency of recovering France's former glory was amalgamated with education and entertainment, found not only within the industrial and architectural elements of the exposition but also within the colonial section, in order to teach the visiting public about French industrialization and mise en valeur and to engage the visitors' senses so that the illusion of a voyage around the world would have been plausible.

By displaying to the French public a carefully selected group of the empire's indigenous inhabitants and by offering visitors the illusion of traveling to the colonies, the exposition's organizers attempted to instill the notion of a Greater France, one in which the average French citizen could feel proud of France's accomplishments, its civilizing mission, and its cultural superiority. Through a series of carefully planned and orchestrated pavilions, the colonial section of the exposition displayed a sanitized unity between the metropole and the empire, which, in the eyes of the exposition's organizers, would help France to regain its former place as a world power and would persuade the French people of the importance of maintaining the colonies.

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55 Cohen, French Encounter with Africans, 230.
56 Young, “From the Eiffel Tower to the Javanese Dancer,” 339.
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