

## The worlds around us: World's Fairs at the Mint

by [Michael J. Solender](#)



Picture by Marcel Breuer piece

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**[Inventing the Modern World: Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs 1851-1939. At Mint Museum Uptown through Jan. 19, 2014.](#)**

**National Presenting Sponsor: Wells Fargo.**

Charlotteans have a scant few weeks left to take in one of the most significant exhibitions featured at the Mint Museum Uptown since the museum's opening in 2010. *Inventing the Modern World: Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs 1851-1939* is an evocative and inspiring assemblage of nearly 200 objects drawn from those shown at every major world's fair from 1851 to 1939. "World's Fairs" is the largest special exhibition at the Mint and is the first to occupy two floors of exhibition space.

Visitors learn that certain themes shaped the functional objects at the fairs, including: Historicism, cross-culturalism, nationalism, and technology. There are three main areas of focus found in the exhibit, said Brian Gallagher, the museum's curator of decorative arts. "The first is the importance of these fairs for displaying innovative or revived manufacturing techniques," he said. "Next is their importance as venues for cross-cultural and cross-national influences (e.g., American and European artists and designers attending the fairs especially in the 19th century were fascinated to see the works on view from Japan, both which had just recently opened to the West, as well as works from China, India, and Africa.) And finally their importance for instilling national pride in visitors and for celebrating and highlighting particular aspects of a country's cultural and artistic heritage."

Much like the fairs themselves, the exhibition offers visitors almost too much to take in and absorb and assign appropriate context to.

One such item is billed with hyperbole that in retrospect is somewhat modest. "The chair that changed the world," is chair #14, manufactured by German-Austrian cabinet maker, Michael Thonet. In 1859, Thonet established and refined a revolutionary process of steaming and bending solid wood. The process eventually was adopted widely and led to the industrialization of the technique in which component-based inexpensive Beachwood parts, shipped unassembled by the crate-load all over the world, were used to construct sturdy, yet elegant chairs that became the standard Vienna Coffee House chair. A stalwart all over Europe and beyond, Thonet's chairs were seen and used all around the globe – long before IKEA.

Alongside Thonet's chair is the magnificent Wooten Patent Office Cabinet Secretary constructed of primarily Walnut and Maple with bronze hardware. Shown in Philadelphia in 1876, it is an ingenious writing desk that illustrated the notion beauty and utility could be combined in an object that could be admired both in use and as a dormant sentry in the appropriate home library or study. The closing desk opens to reveal more than 100 interchangeable drawers and slots in an arrangement that could be customized for the buyer. Viewers will note the fashionable renaissance revival on the crest and incised and gilded decoration on the interior.

### Connecting the world pre-internet

For an unconnected, non-Internet world at the turn of the 20th century, cultural events and international gatherings such as World's Fairs were the preeminent vehicles for debuting advancements in all forms of contemporary living. Nearly 100 such gatherings were held across the globe during the 88-year span that is the focus of this exhibition. While some of the events in outlying venues such as Hanoi, Kingston, Jamestown, and Adelaide were staged, they were no rivals for those truly global economic and design powerhouses such as Vienna, Paris (eight World's Fairs during this span), Stockholm, Milan, Glasgow, New York, London, St. Louis, and San Francisco.

Premier showcases for design and technological innovation, the decorative arts during this period were the physical representation of the economic and progressive ideals. Mint visitors will find many forms of glass and enamel work, fabrics, textiles and embroidery, furniture and woodworking, sculptures, jewelry, and exquisite metal work. The represented artisans and master-crafts houses that were among the finest in the world at the turn of the century remain among the finest today – Cartier, Faberge, Tiffany, Baccarat, Wooten, Murano, and others.

There was plenty of "showing off" and one-upsmanship on display at the fairs often clad in nationalism and in the juried design competitions. Many of the pieces on display in the Mint exhibit have dubious functionality, yet are simply jaw-dropping in their craftsmanship, no piece more so than the giant tortoise-shell tray with lacquer and ivory that was shown at the second annual exhibition in London, 1892. Close to four feet in circumference this oblong tray features a central scene of Mt Fuji rising above a bustling Japanese village. The tray is a masterwork in lacquer-ware and was designed at a time when the European demand for Asian-themed decorative pieces was in full frenzy. The artisan behind the work remains unknown, attributes suggest it was made possibly in Nagasaki, Japan around 1870.

The overwhelming power and strength of the World's exhibition is found not only in the sheer number and quality of items on display, but in the range, variety and breadth of advancement and influence, as the creation of the objects had significant impact on society.

**Take a second - or third - look**



Gustave Herron, designer; Ernst Plassmann, woodworker

Some pieces that Gallagher encourages visitors to keep a special look out for include a Fabergé tiara fashioned from thousands of tiny rose-cut diamonds set on knife-edge mounts to appear as if woven like lace; and a breathtakingly beautiful screen by Japanese artist Hashio Kiyoshi. Titled "Morning Sea," the embroidery includes 250 shades of silk thread, and it was critically praised at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco.



Peter Carl Faberge, designer, Albert Holmström, workmaster

There is also an extraordinary vase on a stand, called the "Vase des Binelles." "Designed by Hector Guimard, one of the most important artists of the French Art Nouveau, the vase was a highlight at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase International Exposition in St. Louis," Gallagher said.

He also points to a monumental, Gothic Revival bookcase made by Erastus Bulkeley and Gustave Herter, and displayed at the 1853 World's Fair in New York. "It is so big that it takes six art handlers to install it," Gallagher said.

"I especially like the Renaissance Revival style, and there are some wonderful examples of that in the exhibition," he said. "My favorite, though, has to be the ewer and stand by Antonio Cortelazzo. It was made around 1870 and is steel with silver and gold inlay. Its ornament includes acanthus leaves, putti, sea nymphs, and other creatures from classical mythology."

#### Wells Fargo - a sponsor with history

The Mint Museum is the fourth and final venue for the exhibition, which was co-organized by Jason Busch at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, and Catherine Futter at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO. Wells Fargo, the presenting national sponsor for the show, helped to bring this collection to Charlotte as well as the other venues.

"We underwrote the national exhibition plan as part of Wells Fargo's focus on supporting art, history and culture in communities across the country," said Jay Everette, community affairs manager at Wells Fargo. "But we have an historical connection as well. Wells Fargo delivered materials to Chicago during the construction of the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, and mounted an exhibition there that told the story of our company's growth around the world."

*The Mint is holding their own mini-World's fair on Wednesday, Jan. 8 with a special panel discussion on "What's next: Inventions that will change contemporary living."*  
[More information.](#)



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