

Transforming the Intangible into the Tangible; Expositions of Ethnic Culture in the United States

By

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Introduction

The United States has been characterized as a veritable melting pot of immigrant cultures. This paper explores early twentieth century presentations of immigrant/ethnic culture in several public contexts. It considers ways in which intangible expressions of traditional culture have been transformed from fluid performance displays to static exhibitions of material culture. Also discussed is the outdated concept that these cultural expressions were in the process of disappearing.

The examples that follow took place in Cleveland, Ohio, a northern industrial city, which in the early twentieth century attracted hundreds of thousands of immigrants seeking employment and economic advancement. The response of the society-at-large was a movement to Americanize these large numbers of foreigners. One of the aims of the Americanization program, in addition to providing English language instruction and practical assistance in meeting the legal requirements of citizenship was to teach the immigrants the culture of America. Conversely, in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the Americanization programs also organized extravaganzas geared to expose the customs, traditions and values of the new immigrants to the public-at-large.

Two city-wide festivals and expositions separated by a distance of ten years in Cleveland's cultural history, interspersed with similar, smaller displays, stand out. At these events, ethnic cultural symbols – song, dance, art, and craft – were presented to the general public outside of their traditional settings after years of discouragement. Ethnic performing groups, vitally important to the maintenance of traditional culture were invited to make presentations to the American public-at-large. These events were the showcases of ethnic traditional culture – tangible and intangible.

The two events had the effect of moving the immigrants into the realm of public display, both tangible and intangible in which the native English speaker was the audience. The newcomers were forced to translate their presentations and traditions into a form palatable to the American tastes in entertainment. Thus, many customs and traditions, removed from their original contexts were artificially arranged for viewing by the community as a whole. The events described here were by no means exclusive to Cleveland. Similar movements were organized and staged in other American urban settings.

Cleveland, Ohio 1919-1929

Ethnic diversity has long been an important fact of life in Cleveland, Ohio, where many different cultures, transplanted from other countries, have shown an unusual tendency to flourish side by side. Historian Welling Fordyce in 1936 suggested that Cleveland "might wear the title of 'The Foreign City' as well as that of 'The Forest City' which it so proudly advertises." No single national group dominated the scene. Instead, visitors to the city on Lake Erie were confronted by a wonderful crazy quilt of ethnic neighborhoods.

As in other American cities, Cleveland's growth between 1890 and 1930 was marked by the establishment of ethnic communities and institutions, which aimed at preserving cultural expressions – tangible and intangible - of their respective immigrant populations. Immigrants who had come to the United States and to Cleveland with or without the intent of settling permanently brought with them a wide variety of traditional objects. Women, often newlywed, brought their trousseaus, consisting of intricately embroidered and woven linens, garments and jewelry, as well as utensils necessary for preparing special foods. Other tangibles such as kitchen pottery and wooden dinnerware and children's toys were among the immigrants' possessions, recalling their former lives as peasants.

Immigrant-oriented newspapers, schools, churches, cultural and social organizations helped preserve the values and aesthetics of the immigrants. They served as a context in which certain performance genres of traditional culture – singing,

dancing, drama and ritual – were maintained as well as adapted to the new life.

Skills continued to be taught and practices so that some of these items, and some of the customs could be perpetuated. Handcrafts associated with rituals and other traditions were still produced. Decorated Easter eggs and handwork for the church were among the items made by immigrants in their new home. Objects necessary to singing and dance performances in the old styles were also made. For example, in 1910 J.M. Dobranic, a Croatian immigrant, formed a company which built tamburicas in Cleveland. His workmanship was known to fellow countrymen all over the world.¹

A prominent feature of most institutions was the preservation of language, which was considered the key to cultural maintenance. They prospered because of the need for belonging which grew out of the immigrant's inevitable adjustment to a new mode of life in urban America.

In the early twenties, the authorities who administered Americanization programs realized that it was necessary to recognize the values which the immigrants brought and maintained in the form of handcrafted objects, customs and cultural events. In April 1919, The Cleveland Museum of Art hosted a "Homelands Exhibit" with the cooperation of both the Cleveland Public Library and the Cleveland Public Schools. "The plan was to have a series of local exhibits during the month of March in the schools and libraries from which the Museum authorities would select the finest things for a larger exhibit at the Museum."²

Other assistance for this exhibit came from the city's settlement houses, which were in constant touch with the immigrants. They were service centers providing instruction as well as gathering places for social events. Nationality groups represented in this first exhibit included:

Armenian	Hungarian	Scottish
Austrian	Italian	Serbian
Bohemian	Lithuanian	Slovak
Croatian	Moravian	Swedish
Dutch	Norwegian	Swiss
English	Polish	Syrian
French	Romanian	Turkish
German	Russian	Welsh

Also cooperating with the Art Museum was the Americanization Committee, which arranged programs presented in English by the immigrant groups on the weekends. Speakers briefly described the art and cultural traditions of their homeland. These lectures were followed by songs and dances in costumes presented by ethnic singing societies. Craft demonstrations were also organized on weekends by people dressed in costume.

At the opening of the program, Mr. Frederic Allen Whiting, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, discussed his believe that the color and gaiety which was the native inheritance of the immigrants was sadly needed in the more drab American life. He went on to state that the new Americans would realize the value of their traditions and not "lose their love of color and dancing and singing just because they had come among people to whom it is not a natural heritage."³

The Homelands Exhibit was the first time in Cleveland's history that the tangible and intangible resources contributed to the community by the immigrants were brought together under one roof and presented to the public with the joint goal of entertainment and education. The singing and dance organizations were provided with the opportunity to share the traditions they maintained to reinforce their sense of solidarity as homogeneous groups within a heterogeneous city.

At about the same time, the Cleveland Play House decided that it ought to serve the immigrant music and drama societies. Such organizations were invited to make use of the facilities of the Play House not only for community-oriented performances, but also to bring the foreign and native elements together on the common meeting ground of culture for mutual discoveries and appreciation.⁴ Although several cooperative performances took place, no longstanding relationship took root. The Play House concluded from this experience that while drama seemed to be more universal in the relevance and significance it had for the city's various ethnic communities, it was necessary to make small allowances to what it called "exotic forms" in order to see them as "expressive of the spirit and culture" of Americans as a people.⁵ The

conclusion of this early attempt of sharing and understanding was that "it was fatal to bring folk arts into juxtaposition with sophisticated arts."⁶ This statement reflects the pervasive attitude towards the variety of art forms popular in the ethnic communities as compared to those accepted by the established American society. It also suggests the attitude that was to be shown towards the curiosities that would be presented in public expositions over the next ten years.

Both the Cleveland Public Library and the International Institute promoted and sponsored cultural exhibitions scale smaller than the expansive Homelands Exhibit in the 1920s. In 1923, in cooperation with the Polish community, an exhibit of Polish handcraft was presented at the East 79th Street Branch Library. At the Broadway Branch Library musical programs were presented by St. Michael's Russian Orthodox Church choir along with Slovenian and Czech choral societies.⁷ That same year, the International Institute arranged an exhibit including "old an valuable pieces" with the assistance of eleven nationality groups.⁸

The second major public display of ethnic folklore in Cleveland was organized in 1929. Folklorist Allen H. Eaton called it the "New Cleveland Experiment"⁹ to distinguish it from the Homelands Exhibit ten years earlier. Conceived on a much more ambitious scale, the new display was composed of three major elements, all highlighting various skills of the immigrants. There were the All Nations Expositions, the Theater of All Nations and the Sports of All Nations. Sponsored by the city Department of Recreation, these programs had additional support for the three local newspapers – **The Cleveland Press**, **The Plain Dealer** and **The News**, respectively.

The World in Cleveland's BackYard

The "Dance of the Nations" sponsored by **The Cleveland Press** at the downtown Public Auditorium in 1927 proved that an audience for such an extensive exposition existed. A similar pageant was presented in 1929 at the outdoor auditorium at Brookside Park.¹⁰

The All Nations Exposition held at Public Hall between March 18 and March 23, 1929, featured two main elements. First was an elaborate series of exhibits of national folk arts and crafts, often set in the context of the ethnic home., Simultaneously, supplementary entertainment and demonstrations of the performing arts were presented.

Approximately 100,000 people attended this seven-day event. Thirty groups contributed to the displays. In addition to those nationality groups which had participated at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Homelands Exhibit in 1919 were:

Bulgarian	Czech	Chinese	Danish	Greek
East Indian	Irish	Macedonian	Mexican	Philippine
Slovenian	Tyrolean	Ukrainian		

Taken together, these two lists of participating ethnic groups suggest a fuller picture of the broad representation of ethnic groups in Cleveland that were actively cultivating at least some aspects of traditional culture, tangible and intangible. No wonder, seven years later Fordyce claimed that Cleveland should be called "The Foreign City."

Foremost among the goals of the All Nations Exposition, according to the director of the Cleveland Division of Recreation, was to bring to the wider community a new awareness of the many different talents of the city's nationality groups. In recognizing "the remarkable work" being done within the groups for their own cultural advancement, encouragement was also implicitly given for the continuation of those cultural programs.¹¹ The youth the ethnic groups were also encouraged by this recognition of their heritage by those outside their community to take pride in it. This development, of course, followed years during which the city's ethnic youth were consistently striped of any sense of pride in their backgrounds by the public schools.

At the All Nations Exposition, visitors were introduced to a mixture of old and new, primitive and ornamental.¹² Public Hall was transformed into another, very foreign world. Full scale replica cottages, homes, castles and villas in the homelands of various immigrant groups were constructed. In one instance an entire cottage with all its furnishings was presented; sometimes only a single room, such as a Danish kitchen; or a special isolated feature such as a Lithuanian bake-oven, or an entire Slovenian street scene.¹³ Flats behind the buildings were painted with countryside scenes to complete the illusion of being immersed in a rural environment. An "American" home, featuring both a 1929 model living room and a Puritan kitchen of the Mayflower era insured the representation of all possible groups residing in Cleveland.¹⁴

The replicas served as mini-contexts in which traditional objects were arranged and displayed as they would have been seen in their original setting. The Irish cottage housed a large collection of Irish lace, linen and other articles.¹⁵ Other types of handwork on display included weaving, embroidery, rugs, porcelain, mosaics, furniture, trunks, decorative glassware, spinning shells, toys and grams as well as painting and sculpture. At the Romanian exhibit, students from the Romanian school demonstrated skills such as wood carving and embroidery.

The reaction to these displays of immigrant artifacts, as recorded in the contemporary media, was characterized by both admiration from the older Americans as well as some newly awakened feelings of nationalism.¹⁶ "The boundary line fences of Europe became the backyard fences of cosmopolitan Cleveland as the exhibits of all the nations stood hospitably open, door to door, in the main floor of the big hall," observed **The Cleveland Press** on the day after the opening of the Exposition.

With the exhibit as a backdrop, performances by singing groups, dance groups, orchestras, and gymnastic displays by the sokols were presented nightly, with some 2,000 people in all participating. Among the groups represented were the Hungarian String Orchestra and the Hungarian Workers Singing Chorus of 100 voices; the Lithuanian Dancers; the Slovenian Tumblers, the German turnverein; The Greek Church Chorus and the Swiss Yodelers.¹⁷

Recreations of traditional celebrations were also staged by members of the ethnic communities as part of the entertainment at the week-long exposition. These included wedding scenes from Krakow, Poland, a wedding march from Yugoslavia, and a county fair from Croatia. Thus, what had formerly been merely folk traditions unfolding within a single community now took new levels of meaning and new significance when set in a public context. Such rituals were no longer simply enactments of a certain group's traditions and beliefs, but were transformed into statements to the community-at-large about these groups and their sense of identity.

In the opinion of William R. Hopkins, city manager of Cleveland, the All Nations Exposition, in laying a new foundation for a better understanding among all citizens, was the most remarkable civic event that had ever been staged in Cleveland.¹⁸ The March 19, 1929, editorial in the **Cleveland Press** recognized that as one looked on the peasant folk pride of the groups represented in Public Hall, one had the sense that they was seeing a microcosm of the cultural life of the city as it unfolded the year around.¹⁹

The traditional culture – tangible and intangible – in the two settings in early twentieth century Cleveland, the Homelands Exhibit and the All Nations Exposition, not to mention the smaller exhibits in the intervening years, served as an expressive form of exterior ethnicity. Such public displays were confirmations of the fact that the given ethnic group enjoyed the freedom and opportunity of manifesting their distinctiveness.²⁰ Posern-Zielinski feels that such events played a very interesting role, as a kind of intermediate phase in the processes of acculturation and assimilation, in diminishing the sense of deprivation immigrants inevitably felt as a result of severance from their mother-land and consequent feeling of nostalgia – in conjunction with the distressing economic conditions in their newly adopted country which eventually led to the Great Depression.²¹ The rhetoric of the Americanization programs which sponsored presentations and displays such as these included the goals of developing closer understanding among the people with various racial backgrounds,²² encouraging younger generations to take a new pride in their own heritage, and strengthening the spirit of each group to contribute to American life.²³

Conclusion

Because the greater American public was not aware of the tangible and intangible traditions and customs that were part of the everyday life in the immigrant communities, as well as holiday and life cycle celebrations, the pageantry presented at the citywide festivals was not doubt seen as many as a collection of exotic anachronisms that no longer played a vital role in American's ethnic communities. While multi-ethnic programs, such as those discussed here, were staged in an effort to actualize the great melting pot, they served to humanize the immigrants while presenting examples of their rich cultural roots. On the side of the immigrants, the underlying feelings of connection with an age-old heritage and a supportive community that shared a set of values were a powerful force operating in the industrial North American cities such as Cleveland, Ohio.

Footnotes

¹ Eleanor C. Ledbetter, **The Jugoslavs of Cleveland**, Cleveland: Cleveland Americanization Committee, 1918.

- [2](#) **Americanization in Cleveland**. Cleveland: Cleveland Americanization Committee, n.d.
- [3](#) Allen H. Eaton, **Immigrant Gifts to American Life**, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1932, p. 62.
- [4](#) **Americanization in Cleveland**, op.cit.
- [5](#) Ibid.
- [6](#) Ibid.
- [7](#) **Cleveland Year Book**, Cleveland: Cleveland Foundation, 1924, p. 105.
- [8](#) Ibid.
- [9](#) Eaton, op. cit. p. 97.
- [10](#) **The All Nations Exposition Program**, Cleveland: 1929.
- [11](#) Eaton, op. cit.
- [12](#) Cleveland Press, March 13, 1929.
- [13](#) Eaton, op. cit. p.99.
- [14](#) Cleveland Press, March 21, 1929.
- [15](#) Cleveland press, March 12, 1929.
- [16](#) Cleveland Press, March 16, 1929.
- [17](#) Eaton, op. Cit., p. 100
- [18](#) Eaton, op. cit.
- [19](#) Cleveland Press, March 19, 1929.
- [20](#) Aleksander Posern-Zielinski, Ethnicity, Ethnic Culture and Folk Tradition in the American Society, **Ethnologia Polona** 4 (1978), p. 117.
- [21](#) Ibid.
- [22](#) **The All National Exposition Program**, op. cit.
- [23](#) Eaton, op. cit.

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