Lesson #3: Meet Me in St. Louis, Meet Me at… the Human Zoo?

Abstract: The 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis included two “living exhibits,” which today would be referred to as human zoos. One of the exhibits was meant to display the progression and culture of indigenous peoples from around the world, and the other was meant to introduce visitors to the many nations of the Philippine Islands, a territory that had been conquered by the United States in 1898. In this lesson, students will investigate the purpose of these living exhibits, the people who were displayed in them, and the appropriateness of such displays. Students will read primary source documents and oral histories and will analyze photographs of the living exhibits to gain an understanding of the historical context of the displays that were among the most popular of all of the exhibits at the 1904 World’s Fair.

Essential Questions:

• How did the human zoos at the 1904 World’s Fair reflect American imperialism in the early-1900s?
• What is the purpose of a human zoo, and how was it used at the 1904 World’s Fair?
• How did visitors to the World’s Fair experience the human zoos?
• Are human zoos ethical?

Assessment: Students will be assessed based on their ability to analyze the numerous readings and photographs related to living exhibits. Students will also be assessed based on their diary entry at the end of the lesson and the application of their knowledge of human zoos to the final project in this unit.

Procedures:

1) Setting the Purpose: At the beginning of class, students should take out a sheet of paper. The teacher should ask students to imagine that they have been put in charge of creating an exhibit on Urbana at the Illinois State Fair. This exhibit must depict life in Urbana, and it must include both artifacts and people. On their sheet of paper, students should write about the kind of exhibit that they would create. What kinds of artifacts would they include? What types of people would they include? How would they “display” the people in the exhibit? After an appropriate amount of time, the teacher should discuss with the class what the exhibit would look like. The class should also discuss the appropriateness of using humans as displays in an exhibit.
2) (Optional) If the teacher would like to provide the class with additional background information about living exhibits, he or she should hand out the article “The Human Zoo: Science’s Dirty Secret” to the students. This article includes information about the history of human zoos, including the exhibits at the 1904 World’s Fair.

3) The teacher should then show the Progression of Peoples slideshow to the class. This slideshow depicts the living exhibit of indigenous peoples from around the world that was on display at the World’s Fair. The photographs are arranged in the order of the exhibit, starting with the people considered by the organizers to be most primitive—the Pygmies from the Congo—and ending with the people considered to be most advanced—the Eskimos. As students view these photographs, they should answer the following questions on a sheet of paper:

- Why do you think the Fair organizers displayed these groups of people in this order?
- How do these people appear to be reacting/adapting to being on display?
- How does this exhibit reflect common American attitudes in the early-1900s?
- How might visitors to the 1904 World’s Fair have reacted to this exhibit?

If the teacher wishes to supplement the photographs with additional information, he or she should have the students read the handout on anthropology exhibits at the 1904 World’s Fair.

4) The teacher should hand out the Philippine Exposition Background Reading to the class. Students should reading the handout and answer the accompanying questions. This reading provides background information about the design and people of the Philippine Exposition at the 1904 World’s Fair. Students should also view the overhead photograph of the Philippine Exposition.

5) The teacher should once again divide the students into six groups. Each group will receive a different photograph from the Philippine Exposition at the 1904 World’s Fair. As a group, students should analyze the photograph using the Photograph Analysis Sheet. Students should focus on how the photograph serves as an example of American imperialism in the early-1900s, and they should also comment on the appropriateness of such displays. Each group should then present their photographs and analysis to the class.

6) After viewing the living exhibits, students should complete a diary entry in which they reflect on their impressions of the exhibit. The teacher should explain to the students that they should write this entry as though they were viewing the Fair in 1904, and they should include their impressions on the people that they saw. Students should refrain from editorializing on human zoos from a modern perspective in this entry. This diary entry should be at least 1 page (single-
Analysis of Local Primary Sources: During this lesson, students will analyze numerous photographs of exhibits and artifacts from the 1904 World’s Fair. These artifacts will help to recreate some of the exhibits that were on display at the Fair.

Ties to National Primary Sources: During this lesson, students will read excerpts from national publications about the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis. These publications were written during and shortly after the Fair and will give context to the images that students view of the living exhibits.

List of Materials and Resources:

“The Human Zoo: Science’s Dirty Secret,” Channel Four

Progression of Peoples Slideshow

Anthropology Exhibits Reading from History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition

Philippine Exposition Background Reading from the 1904 World’s Fair Bulletin and History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition

Philippine Exposition Reading Questions

Philippine Exposition Map and Key

Philippine Exposition Photographs

Photograph Analysis Sheet