

## The Paris Exposition of 1900 and W.E.B. Du Bois

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The 1900 *Paris Exposition Universelle* was slated to be a grand welcoming of the new century, and plans for the United States' participation called for a "Negro Section." The director of this section of the Exhibit was Thomas J. Calloway, an employee of the War Department. Also a former classmate W. E. B. Du Bois at Fisk, Thomas asked Du Bois to coordinate the display. This charge came to the celebrated Atlanta University professor of sociology at a low point in his professional life. He was in the midst of a serious struggle with Booker T. Washington, who had refused to endorse, in writing, Du Bois' candidacy for Assistant Superintendent of Washington D.C.'s black school district. Du Bois seriously wanted the job but had infuriated Washington by turning down the offer of a professorship at Tuskegee Institute, directed by Washington. Du Bois blamed his failure to land the Washington D. C. superintendency on the "Tuskegee Machine."

The 32 year-old Du Bois sailed from New York City to Europe in mid-June with several boxes of materials. The trip came at a time when lynchings, segregation, and the disfranchisement of black Americans had reached a frenzied pace. There were few signs that the new century held promise for any immediate change. But, the Paris Exposition, which covered 280 acres along both banks of the Seine from the Eiffel Tower to the Place de la Concorde, offered Du Bois an opportunity to make a statement to the world. The beautiful palaces and pavilions dedicated to a "summation of the century" made this, in Du Bois' words, the "finest, perhaps the very finest, of world expositions." This opportunity was not likely to come again on the world stage.

The American Negro Exhibit was housed in a simple white building devoted to the "science of society." The exhibit presented a stunning collection of 500 photographs, captions, maps, and educational materials that Du Bois gathered from Atlanta University, Berea, Fisk, Howard, Hampton, and Tuskegee. So impressive were the images, that the Exhibition judges awarded Du Bois a gold medal as the Exhibit's principal compiler.

Du Bois intended the exhibit to show the world the successes a disadvantaged and oppressed people could achieve, even amidst the most difficult of circumstances. The images displayed American blacks studying and thinking--as Medal of Honor winners, as accomplished businessmen and professionals, and as determined men and women of high standards and a work ethic equal to that of any white American. He presented pictures of respectable middle-class houses, neat farms, schools, and churches. Taken together, the exhibit demonstrated in images rather than words that a talented black elite did indeed exist in America. He intended to show by implication, rather than directly, that these black intellectuals and heroes, businessmen and scholars, were subject to the same oppressive conditions as the illiterate and impoverished field hands in Mississippi.

The exhibit clearly had a political intention in that it did not dwell directly upon any of the injustices suffered by American blacks at the hands of a racist, white society. Indeed, no images documenting such oppression would have been allowed by the American authorities. Instead, the exhibit was a visual appeal for world to recognize that talented African Americans were ready and prepared to take their place among the most civilized people of the coming modern age. Less than a summation of the past, Du Bois' exhibit portrayed a vision of the future.