San Diego’s 1935-1936 Exposition: A Pictorial Essay

By

David Marshall and Iris Engstrand

The Official Guide to San Diego’s ambitious California Pacific International Exposition began with unparalleled optimism, declaring that it was “Built Upon a Glorious Past Dedicated to a Glorious Future.” Designed to counteract problems of the Depression that were felt nationwide, the celebration, called “America’s Exposition,” represented “not the short ten months that have gone into its building, but the four hundred years that have seen California reach the heights. . . . Perhaps it is wiser to say that this Exposition is not so much a dedication to yesterday, today or tomorrow, but rather a toast, a god-speed to the continuation of an epic that will be written as the years march on.”

San Diego architect Richard S. Requa built upon the original 1915-1916 Panama-California Exposition by designing and supervising construction of many new buildings, some modern and some recalling the ancient styles of the Americas. San Diego was fortunate to receive the first funds allocated by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to an American city in order to create whole new areas of the park. Architect Bertram Goodhue’s remaining 1915-1916 Spanish colonial revival structures were incorporated into the plan as well as the newer Fine Arts Gallery/Museum of Art (1926) and Natural History Museum (1933) designed by William Templeton Johnson. G. Aubrey Davidson, president of the 1915-1916 Exposition, became chairman of the board of directors and Frank G. Belcher of the Spreckels Companies was named president. Oscar W. Cotton chaired the fund-raising campaign that topped its goal of $500,000 by $200,000—totaling a mid-Depression figure of $700,000.

The second exposition, quite unlike the first, featured some controversial exhibits and unusual sideshow entertainment—a nudist colony called Zoro Gardens, Alpha, a silver robot with a walking counterpart, a Midget Village, an Old Globe Shakespearean Theater and spectacular lighting shows. Three internationally famous gardens—one patterned after the Casa del Rey Moro (House of the Moorish King) Garden in Ronda, Spain, another duplicating that adjoining the Alcázar in Sevilla, Spain, and a third from a patio garden in Guadalajara, Mexico—were also reproduced. Federal funding made it possible to construct a new permanent building copied from the Mayan Palace of Governors in Uxmal, Yucatan. Located

David Marshall, AIA, is author of San Diego’s Balboa Park, a 2007 edition in Arcadia Publishing’s Postcard History Series. Marshall, an architect specializing in historic preservation, has a personal collection of over 5,000 postcards as well as dozens of pamphlets, guidebooks and collectibles from both world expositions in Balboa Park. Except as noted, all illustrations in this article are from his private collection. Iris Engstrand, professor of history and author of several local works including San Diego: California’s Cornerstone (2005), is co-editor of The Journal of San Diego History.
to the south of the Spreckels Organ Pavilion, it is today’s San Diego Hall of Champions. Edsel Ford, who had visited the park in 1915-1916, also sponsored a building and test track to promote Ford’s latest models.

The statue “Woman of Tehuantepec” by Donal Hord, a well-known San Diego sculptor of the 1930s, graces the patio of the House of Hospitality. Located nearby in the garden between that building and the Casa de Balboa is a unique tile fountain called the Persian Water Rug Fountain that was conceived by Richard Requa. Other subtle 1935 details can be found throughout the park. As Exposition President Frank Belcher wrote: “Here in Southern California we have a rich heritage from the gracious days of the Spanish Dons. Hospitality has always been a keynote in our lives.”

The 1935 fair continued for a second season when President Franklin D. Roosevelt pressed a gold telegraph key in the White House on January 1, 1936, to turn on the exposition’s lights. “When the final numbers were tallied, the 1935-1936 event counted 6.7 million visitors – almost double the total of the 1915-1916 exposition. The buildings from both expositions now make up a National Historic Landmark District which is perhaps the most intact exposition site remaining in the nation.” The year 2010 marks the 75th anniversary of this remarkable exposition and Balboa Park remains the nation’s largest urban cultural park.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
The Shell Information Service Headquarters on the grounds across from the Spanish Village supplied travel brochures and featured a large animated, highway map. The 34,000 filling stations across the country gave away informational material to those driving to San Diego.

The Old Globe Theatre built for the 1935 Exposition was modeled after an Elizabethan theater built in London in 1599. The Theatre burned to the ground in March 1978 and was replaced by a similar structure, re-opening in 1982. Images courtesy David Marshall.
The modern Ford Building dominated the southern promontory of the Park. To the left was the Ford Music Bowl, today's Starlight Bowl, where symphonic, choral and organ music were presented for visitors. The name Ford appeared in red neon on all four sides of the rotunda.

The foreground of the Ford Building featured the Firestone Singing Fountain with special lighting effects. The building today houses the San Diego Air and Space Museum. All color images are from the Postcard and Ephemera Collection of David Marshall, AIA.
The House of Hospitality, remodeled by Richard Requa, utilized the center portion of the 1915 Foreign Arts Building to make possible a patio patterned after the Convent of Guadalajara in Mexico. Donal Hord sculpted the “Woman of Tehuantepec” that sits atop the central fountain. Requa also added a second floor with specialty rooms and arcades that overlooked the central patio.

Night lighting effects on the Café of the World, House of Hospitality and Statue of El Cid by Anna Hyatt Huntington in the Plaza del Pacifico. The Official Guide exclaimed that “The lighting experts of America’s Exposition have created the world’s greatest nocturnal spectacle in the illuminations.”
The Laguna de Espejo (Reflecting Pool) looking south with the House of Hospitality on the right. On the left, today’s Casa de Balboa, known in 1935 as the Palace of Better Housing houses the Museum of Photographic Arts, the Model Railroad Museum and the San Diego Historical Society with its History Center.

The Botanical Building and Conservatory with reflecting pool in the foreground. The botanical garden contained lilies, begonias, fuchsias, aralias, and many varieties of choice ferns. The plants “harmonized” with the large groves of eucalyptus and palm trees in the park.
The Standard Oil Building located at the north end of the Plaza de America featured the 108-foot “Tower to the Sun” inspired by pre-Columbian palaces in Yucatan and central Mexico. Standard Oil supplied visitors with material about the National Parks in the West.

The California State Building was built to the north of the Ford Building and featured four large murals illustrating various phases in California’s history. It became the San Diego Automotive Museum in 1988.
Cabrillo Cactus Garden. This garden was located adjacent to the Cabrillo bridge at a time when only a small two-lane road ran through the park under the bridge. It can still be seen today.

A night photo showing the Arch of the Future and the Spreckels Organ Pavilion reflecting their multi-colored lighting in the lagoon built within the Plaza del Pacífico. This area today is a parking lot in front of the San Diego Museum of Art. The House of Hospitality is on the left. “Painting with light rather than flooding with light, is the motif, so that Balboa Park stands out in all its natural beauty for the night visitors to the fair,” claimed the postcard publishers.
The Hollywood Motion Picture Hall of Fame featured a collection of mementos and exhibits from the earliest motion picture productions of the 1920s to the “latest” of the mid-1930s. There was an authentic sound stage and a children’s puppet theater.

An “Odditorium” was built on the midway to house Ripley’s Believe It or Not exhibits. They were generally strange and in some cases—unbelievable.
A postcard in “natural color” shows Zoro Gardens—the nudist colony located between today’s Casa de Balboa and the Fleet Science Center—as an attraction at America’s Exposition in Balboa Park 1935-1936. The reverse side contained the official seal of the California Pacific International Exposition.

The Palace of Travel, Transportation and Water is on the right. Special “aurora borealis” lights atop the Spreckels Organ Pavilion display the fantasy night lighting effects.
CALIFORNIA PACIFIC INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION
OFFICIAL GUIDE
SOUVENIR PROGRAM AND PICTURE BOOK
Alpha the Robot was invented and built by Professor Harry May and performed feats that were almost human. It could stand up, sit down, answer questions, and smoke cigarettes. The 2,000 lb. chrome-plated giant was a hit attraction. Inset: Alpha's "man-in-a-suit" as a monster robot who carries off Zorine from Zoro Gardens 1935. ©SDHS #80-8387-52.
Burlesque queen Sally Rand was featured in 1936 much to the dismay of “official” nudists. Born Helen Harriet Beck, she was named Sally Rand by Cecil B. deMille who was inspired by a Rand McNally Atlas. She also appeared in the 1933-1934 Chicago World’s Fair and in 1939-1940 at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. ©SDHS Union-Tribune Collection #82-46-2.

Zoro Gardens nudists protest Sally Rand for refusing to visit their colony. She claimed her dance, an art form, did not glorify nudism. She performed two shows daily in the Palace of Entertainment and two in the evening in the Plaza del Pacifico. ©SDHS #80-8387-56.