Behind the Curtain: Collecting the New York Fairs

July 27, 2014

Oct 18, 2015

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This year and next, the Queens Museum is celebrating the anniversaries of the two New York fairs as well as the birth of Flushing Meadows Corona Park. Exhibitions planned for this two-year period will fill the building, itself a child of the 1939 and 1964 fairs, with singular artifacts and one-of-a-kind commemorative objects. *Behind the Curtain: Collecting the New York Fairs* is one such presentation, highlighting private holdings as well as the museum’s own.

The very purpose of a World’s Fair is to inspire wonder. In 1939-40, the far-thinking design team presented a unified vision of “Building the World of Tomorrow,” the fair’s theme symbolized by the elegant Trylon and Perisphere. In 1964-65, the fair’s theme of “Peace Through Understanding,” was represented by the Unisphere, a gift to the city from United States Steel which still stands today just outside the museum. World’s Fairs truly are meant “to be universal, to have something for everyone,” as Moses and his collaborator, Walt Disney, envisioned for their dream project in 1964, and, from the memorable waffles served in the Belgian Village to “Wonder World’s” man in a rocket suit flying around the Unisphere, perhaps they did.

Imagery of the Trylon and Perisphere and, 25 years later, the Unisphere, permeated the fairs, especially in items for sale at the ubiquitous information/souvenir stands on the grounds. The anniversaries have encouraged a plethora of impassioned collectors to come forward to share their vast holdings with the museum’s visitors. A 1939 original photograph of NYC Mayor LaGuardia, Fair President Grover Whalen, and President and Mrs. Roosevelt on opening day, and the actual British Pavilion visitors’ book signed by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth are juxtaposed with a Kan-O-Seat autographed by Billy Rose, Rudy Valle, Abbott & Costello, among others. And from the 1964-65 Fair, a newly restored Cushman 3-wheeled Scooter used to collect refuse and make emergency repairs gleams, while a pair of objects from Sinclair’s Dinoland – a baby brontosaurus and a painted banner reading “Get your Bag-O-Dinos” – reflect the prehistoric past, while two ten-button pushbutton phones from the Bell System Pavilion highlight the then-future.

This exhibition is organized by Louise Weinberg, Registrar, Archives Manager and Curator.


Joseph Kiselewski, Male and Female Maquettes for “Time,” the giant sundial at Business Systems and Insurance Building, Rose Court, 1939, Plaster on wood. Courtesy of John Riccardelli.
Singular artifacts in the exhibition include a remarkable six foot panoramic photograph commemorating the 40th anniversary of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union Convention at the fair in 1940 where their massive ranks filled the open plaza in the Court of Peace; original LP recordings of the official World’s Fair radio show featuring Joan Crawford and Pat Boone produced and loaned by Albert Fisher, Director of Television for the 1964-65 fair; the painted screen door from the red barn in Firestone’s Farm Exhibit, 1939, where a fully operational farm demonstrated the use of pneumatic tires on all tractors loaned by John Riccardelli, a collector since the age of 12; and the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry has loaned “Carby Carburetor,” star of the Chrysler Pavilion Theater, 1964-65, a puppet created by noted puppeteer Bil Baird. Other unique commemorative objects include the visitors’ guest book from the British Pavilion signed by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth on June 10, 1939; Unisphere medallions created in solid gold for Robert Moses, Fair President, and in sterling silver for The Duke and Duchess of Windsor and Mario J. Cariello, Queens Borough President. Recent acquisitions from the museum’s collection include a member’s badge from the 105-year-old Society of American Magicians whose first president was Harry Houdini, and members of which performed at both New York Fairs; a Boy Scout jacket, neck kerchief and ephemera preserved from a boy’s week working at the 1964 Boy Scouts of America pavilion; a giant Unisphere banner and original blueprints of the proposed Willets Point Boulevard subway station addition and the World’s Fair district map, both 1936.

Please join us as we reveal these unique objects in the most fitting venue for this exhibition – back to their source – 50 and 75 years later.

Institutional and private lenders to Behind the Curtain: Collecting the New York Fairs include the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry, University of Connecticut; Pat Carella; Bill Cotter; the family of Nevio Dobry; Albert Fisher; Flushing Council on Culture and the Arts; Erik Gordon; John Riccardelli; the Society of American Magicians Parent Assembly, Joel Tolchinsky and Robert Yowell.
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