

Exhibitions

Deconstructing Power: W. E. B. Du Bois at the 1900 World's Fair

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York
9 December 2022–29 May 2023

The cynosure of the exhibition *Deconstructing Power* was a selection of twenty of the sixty-three data portraits produced by W. E. B. Du Bois and his students at Atlanta University for the 1900 World's Fair, the Exposition Universelle in Paris (Figure 1).¹ The missions of the Paris Exposition were to commemorate the start of the new century and to display examples of the monumental technological and cultural advancements of the “Great Nations,” which suggested that further progress was still to come. The fair's displays of national pride, however, typically included, directly and indirectly, derogatory racial and ethnic comparisons, with nonwhite and non-Western peoples portrayed as incapable of modern progress and in need of white Western intervention or management. Du Bois's intention in creating the data portraits was to put forth an alternative narrative of the social and economic achievements of Black Americans—and by association Black folks generally—within the nearly four decades following their legal emancipation. These hand-drawn records were accompanied by hundreds of photographs visualizing the modernity and beauty of

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Figure 1 Installation view, second-floor hall, in *Deconstructing Power: W. E. B. Du Bois at the 1900 World's Fair*, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York, 2022–23 (Matt Flynn © Smithsonian Institution).

Black people that further countered the racial stereotypes that had shaped the social fabric of most Western nations as well as their ideologies of modern progress. After attending the 1900 World's Fair, Du Bois published his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he proclaimed that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.”²

Deconstructing Power extended Du Bois's critique of the color line to other objects and geographies of the 1900 World's Fair. Staged across the main hall and the family library (known as the Teak Room) of the second floor of the Carnegie Mansion, where Cooper Hewitt is housed, the exhibition inserted into the conversation some of the museum's decorative arts holdings from the 1900 fair, not only to show how systems of racial capitalism and racial myths played a central role in the

Paris Exposition but also to ask, as one piece of wall text put it, if “our ideas of beauty and betterment inadvertently perpetuate bias.” This colossal endeavor was echoed in the near-life-size photographic reproduction of the “Exhibit of American Negroes” that greeted visitors as they walked up the staircase to the second floor (Figure 2). The photograph shows the tremendous number of materials Du Bois helped organize in addition to his data portraits in an effort to confront the stereotypes of Black people, including hundreds of photographs of Black life in the United States, publications by Black authors and inventors, materials on the patents held and inventions created by Black persons, and a 300-plus-page compilation of “Black Codes” in Georgia from 1865 to 1900. The photograph made clear that the authority of both Du Bois's data portraits and the 1900 exhibits was derived



Figure 2 “Exhibit of American Negroes at the Paris Exposition,” 1900 (Library of Congress).

not solely from their sociological methods or facticity but also from the physical density and recombinatory possibilities within the mass of “evidence” arranged in front of fair viewers, who would likely have been familiar with similar scientific cabinets of curiosities. In other words, their authority was derived from the volume of things that worked in concert to consistently confront racial prejudice and superstition.

Although not every additional object included in the exhibition was contextualized in relation to racial capitalism or racial biases, the curators provided several explanatory wall texts that presented general critiques of the racial themes that underwrote many of the national displays at the 1900 Paris Exposition. For example,

opposite a copy of the twenty-sixth issue of the German magazine *Jugend* (Youth), which highlighted the then widespread fascination with bicycles, the curators placed an explanatory text that unpacked the association of movement with the progress that was a prevalent focus of the 1900 fair. The text further noted that a significant portion of the rubber used to make inflatable bike tires for the European market was extracted from colonies such as the Belgian Congo, where this extraction was made possible through the inhumane treatment and frequent dismemberment of Indigenous forced laborers. Such texts served as prompts for visitors to begin to read the 1900 fair’s works of design and their Eurocentric

narratives of progress differently (i.e., to see the spatial liberation of white women, as depicted on the *Jugend* cover, as tied to the subjection and brutalization of other bodies elsewhere).

The curators confronted the imperialist fantasies undergirding the 1900 fair most forcefully in the Teak Room (Figure 3). Within this highly ornate and decorative space sat Carlo Bugatti’s “Cabinet,” which fetishistically combines forms from non-European cultures; Adolf Loos’s “Elephant Trunk Table”; and a collection of decorative objects, including earthenware by Dutch architect and ceramist Theodorus Adriaan Christiaan Colenbrander and a porcelain plate designed by Dutch painter Roelof Sterken. These works reflected what the curators referred to as the “spectacle of colonialism,” in which the brutal extraction of precious raw materials from the colonies was made more palatable through the pseudoscientific reconstruction of “savage” villages, such as the Dahomey Village, a main attraction at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Again, these wall texts and additional objects were mixed with Du Bois’s larger commentary on the racial superstitions of the twentieth century to provide visitors with the context for taking a more critical approach to the fair’s decorative objects, such as Edward Colonna’s gold, opal, pearl, and garnet buckle—viewing them as object lessons in the material flows of colonial extraction.

One of the museum guards, whose curiosity was raised by my looking perhaps too closely at the work, told me that for her, *Deconstructing Power* clarified how “things *really* were” for Black folks as the then-common narratives of Black stagnation and inability persisted within the post-Civil War U.S. cultural imaginary. This is why Du Bois’s data portraits have captivated so many throughout time. They refute the assumption of innate Black inferiority not through philosophical polemics or the other traditional mediums we know and value Du Bois for, but rather through a straightforward yet alluring presentation of data that speaks for itself (Figures 4 and 5). As Aldon Morris notes in his essay “American Negro at Paris, 1900,” this form of visual sociology was quite rare for its time, making Du Bois’s portraits not only unique in their content and context but also prescient in their anticipation of communicating statistical data to broader



Figure 3 Installation view, Teak Room, in *Deconstructing Power: W. E. B. Du Bois at the 1900 World's Fair*, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, 2022–23 (Matt Flynn © Smithsonian Institution).

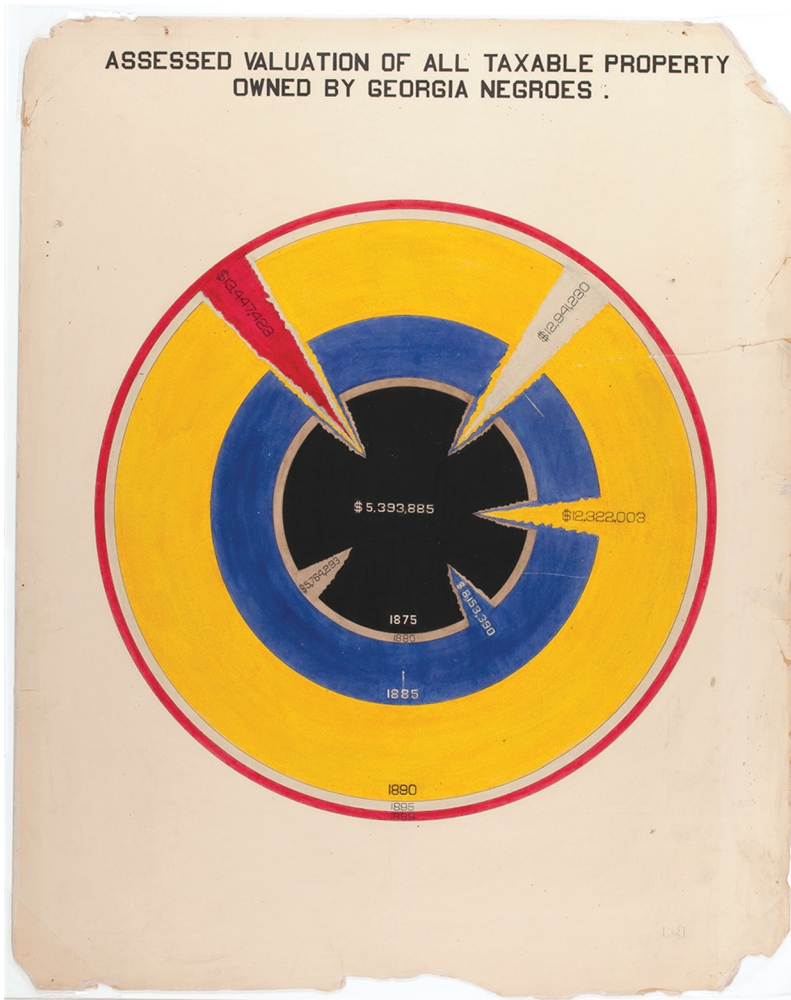


Figure 4 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Assessed valuation of all taxable property owned by Georgia Negroes,” 1900 (“The Georgia Negro”; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

audiences.³ Yet, beyond being intermediary objects through which viewers can get a sense of Black life of the past, these portraits also open onto their own operations as intermediaries between Du Bois, his students, and historical views—sites where questions of Black identity, at scales of both the nation (United States) and the broader African diaspora, are negotiated. In summary, this exhibition served to remind visitors of the power of racial narratives as well as how their associative assumptions and biases are materially affixed to what would otherwise be seen as benign decorative objects.

However, the curators could have been more critical in their staging of the exhibition and its engagement with the space in which it was contained, the Carnegie Mansion. Although the inclusion of other decorative objects from the Paris Exposition helped to highlight how racial capitalism and racial superstition shaped ideas of beauty and betterment at that fair, the exhibition’s most forceful engagement with the racism Du Bois sought to challenge was tucked away to the side in the Teak Room. I would have liked to see these 1900 fair objects—specifically, Loos’s “Elephant Table” and Bugatti’s “Cabinet”—engage directly with Du Bois’s data portraits in the center of the second floor’s main hall. The decision to stage these objects on the periphery is especially curious given a clear parallel between the fascination of European designers like Bugatti and Loos with the cultural aesthetics of other peoples and the Teak Room’s own wall stenciling and ceiling decorations by American designer Lockwood de Forest. De Forest was key in introducing East Indian craft revival into the American Gilded Age. His design for the Teak Room is considered to be adapted from the *jaalis* of Indian temples and houses, and the teakwood used to decorate the room was likely sourced from India and Myanmar (formerly Burma).⁴ Despite the historical differences among Loos, Bugatti, and de Forest in their fascination with the aesthetic forms and craftwork of non-European cultures, the exhibition’s lack of address to the physical and material space in which it was staged felt like a missed opportunity to connect the space with curatorial questions around beauty and betterment, which might have included situating Andrew Carnegie’s politics and racial philanthropy.⁵ Such



Figure 5 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Negro business men in the United States,” 1900 (“a series of statistical charts illustrating the condition of the descendants of former African slaves now in residence in the United States of America”; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

a connection could have challenged the historical/social remove that is almost inherent in the museum exhibition as a modern medium of cultural display and could have helped to introduce mechanisms through which institutions and their audiences might hold themselves accountable.

A more glaring spatial oddity of *Deconstructing Power* was the overall disconnection between the exhibition and its neighboring exhibition, *Hector Guimard: How Paris Got Its Curves*. The curators intentionally presented the two shows “side by side” so that the public might “both admire the visual beauty and understand the historical complexities of the objects on display.”⁶ However, the exhibitions were actually connected only by

a small knee-high sign in *Hector Guimard* that encouraged visitors to “learn more about the history of the term ‘whiplash line’ in the exhibition *Deconstructing Power* on display in the adjacent gallery.” Rather than being mixed into an overall commentary on the 1900 World’s Fair and its aesthetic histories, the two exhibitions were spatially segmented, so that it was unclear whether the curators were simply including Du Bois’s portraits within a canon of existing designers or whether they intended a more thoroughgoing critique of exhibitionary and institutional structures: what to do with the fact that a museum presents the work of Guimard as an authorial and iconic figure of design while a mere few feet away the subtext of Du Bois’s work calls into question those

very structures of authority and iconicity? In other words, these exhibitions never really addressed the dichotomy between the whiplash of art nouveau as emblematic of logic, harmony, and sentiment, on one side of the wall, and of colonial atrocity on the other side, beyond the boundary of referential exhibition text.

Could Cooper Hewitt hold both readings of art nouveau curvatures simultaneously? Can the overall mission of a modern design museum sustain the kinds of questioning on which *Deconstructing Power* was premised? If Cooper Hewitt’s curators intended to ask meaningfully whether “our ideas of beauty and betterment inadvertently perpetuate bias,” they might have started by (re)thinking the nature and schedule of exhibitions beyond simultaneous juxtapositions, a lesson that many hoped New York’s Museum of Modern Art learned after it deafly “replaced” *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* (2021) with *Automania* (2021–22). Doing so might have required them to forgo some of the conventional structures of art and design historiography, such as authors, genres, and styles, which have often been means of gatekeeping or recapitulating violent erasures that render some groups legible and others mere accompanying texts.

Such an approach might even find precedent in Du Bois’s curation of the “Exhibit of American Negroes” for the 1900 Paris Exposition. With its great collection of various yet related media, Du Bois’s physical exhibit might even be seen as a proto-version of what Fred Turner coined the “democratic surround,” wherein exhibition viewers of the 1960s were led to conclusions through multimedia immersive environments.⁷ Although Du Bois’s data portraits are striking, many scholars have thoroughly explored the “Exhibit of American Negroes” and its collection of statistical charts and photographs.⁸ What made Du Bois’s 1900 exhibit powerful was its overwhelming wall of well-presented facts, which inundated viewers with information; in contrast, Cooper Hewitt’s display methodology only dipped a toe into Du Bois’s work while including other objects from the 1900 fair for comparison. By building on Du Bois’s methods, the curators of *Deconstructing Power* might have further provoked the questions that they

sought to address. These questions also point to why critical curatorial efforts beyond mere inclusion are much needed: they help us understand how things *really* were/are.

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Notes

1. For a full collection of Du Bois's data portraits, see Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert, eds., *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America; The Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2018).

2. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 359.

3. Aldon Morris, "American Negro at Paris, 1900," in Battle-Baptiste and Rusert, *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits*, 36.

4. "Carnegie Mansion: Architecture & Interiors," Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/carnegie-mansion-history> (accessed 7 July 2023).

5. For a critical perspective on Andrew Carnegie's library philanthropy to Black colleges, see Shaundra Walker, "A Revisionist History of Andrew Carnegie's Library Grants to Black Colleges," in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 33–53.

6. "Hector Guimard: How Paris Got Its Curves and Deconstructing Power: W. E. B. Du Bois at the 1900 World's Fair to Open This Fall at Cooper Hewitt," Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2022/11/02/hector-guimard-how-paris-got-its-curves-and-deconstructing-power-w-e-b-du-bois-at-the-1900-worlds-fair-to-open-this-fall-at-cooper-hewitt> (accessed 10 June 2023).

7. Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

8. Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert, "Introduction," in Battle-Baptiste and Rusert, *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits*, 11.