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## World's designs come to the Nelson-Atkins

BY ALICE THORSON  
The Kansas City Star

Last fall, at a small auction in Paris, Keith Davis, the Nelson-Atkins Museum's head of photography, spotted what he called a "gorgeous, great image" of the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle. The photo showed booths laden with decorative objects and interspersed with cozy seating.

It was a serendipitous find given that other members of the Nelson staff were deep in preparations for a sprawling new exhibit, "Inventing the Modern World: Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs," which opens April 14.

The exhibit is the biggest project the museum has tackled since the opening of the Bloch Building in 2007, museum staffers say.

"We knew very well of the upcoming show," said Davis, who placed the winning bid on British photographer Charles Thurston Thompson's albumen print, "World's Fair French Department, 1855."

A month ago the photograph arrived at the Nelson to join the museum's Hallmark Photographic Collection. Davis was happy to oblige when Catherine Futter, decorative arts curator, asked if a mural-sized version of the image could be used as a backdrop in the World's Fair exhibit.

The blow-up contained a revelation, another serendipity.

There in the photograph, displayed on a shelf is a double-handled Byzantine style vase, a vessel that will be part of the Nelson exhibit.

Futter, who organized the show and chose its more than 200 objects with Jason T. Busch of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, was delighted.

The vase, made by Frederic-Jules Rudolphi, a Danish artist active in Paris, now belongs to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The Victoria and Albert is one of many museums around the world lending works to the "World's Fairs" show. Encompassing large pieces of furniture, fragile works in glass and ceramics, delicate jewelry and textiles, it's a massive undertaking involving years of planning and months of physical work.

More than 100 Nelson professionals, from the museum's curatorial, conservation, education, preparation, photography and graphic and exhibition design departments, have spent the last two months making arrangements



Chris Ochsner

Preparing for the "Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs" exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Adam Crowley (left) John Laney (right) and Jack VanDerWerff (at center near wall) recently moved a piano from the 1939 World's Fair.



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and readying the galleries for the show. Twenty-three couriers are delivering objects and sticking around to see them safely installed in specially designed cases.

Organized chaos prevailed in early March, as installers began positioning a dozen objects from the Nelson's collection. They include a huge, Gothic-inspired Gustave Herter bookcase from 1852-53, which appears in the show's opening section exploring the theme of historicism.

The decorative arts tell a lot about the cultures that made them — from what they valued to whom they interacted with and were influenced by. In some ways they tell a story of cultural globalization.

"There's no purity of style for anybody after the World's Fairs start," Futter said.

The Nelson-Atkins recently acquired an Islamic-inspired charger plate by the French potter, Joseph-Théodore Deck, which will be on display for the first time as part of a section exploring the proliferation of cross-cultural influences at the fairs.

One batch of objects already installed came from Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art and includes a "Humidor" (c. 1865) for cigars from the 1867 Paris Exposition Universelle and a walnut "Folio Stand" (c. 1870) shown at the Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition of 1876. A standout is a sinuous 1902 "Cobra Chair," made of parchment-covered wood and painted with a delicate design of dragonflies by Carlo Bugatti, father of the famed auto designer, Ettore Bugatti. The chair leads the show's modernism section.

Couriers recently began delivering more objects, including an 1890s "Viking Punch Bowl" from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This piece and a silver centerpiece in the form of a Viking ship stress the role of the decorative arts as a way to express national pride. Both works were shown at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Custom-made cabinets will house all of these treasures. The museum hired two local firms, Profile Cabinet and Design and Arbor Wood Products, to build 57 cases, 20 platforms and four specialty cases.

Amber Mills and Amanda Ramirez of the Nelson's exhibition design department designed the cases as part of an overall scheme that changes as the visitor moves through the exhibit's timeline. The exhibit starts with pieces from the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 and ends with objects from the 1939 fairs in New York and San Francisco.

Mills and Ramirez have lots of gallery space to work with and have been working on creative ways to activate it, including details on temporary walls, layered platforms and "wow" moments.

The World's Fair exhibit will occupy more square footage than any previous show in the Bloch Building, spreading through all of the special exhibition galleries, on the south end of the building, as well as a small, adjacent gallery on the west side.

The exhibit also has an abundance of multimedia and interactive components, including a wall-sized projection of historical World's Fair clips at the show's beginning.

Moving through the exhibit, visitors will be able to pick up six souvenir art cards with QR codes and take them to an "augmented reality station," where a camera will read the digital codes and bring up the featured objects in 3-D.

"You can turn it around and spin it by moving the card," Futter said, "or opt to view a short video about the importance of the object, its fabrication and how it changed the way we live."

Bound to be popular is a dressing table station with a stool, where images of jewelry in the exhibition appear on three-sided mirrors, enabling visitors to sit down and virtually try them on.

The 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale included a glass centerpiece and four bowls by the Austrian firm of J.&L. Lobmeyr that change color under different light. Viewers can experience the phenomenon by pressing a button on the display case.

The exhibit will continue outdoors, on the southern front of the Nelson's property, where workers are installing the Sun Pavilion. Powered by solar panels, it was designed by Kansas City architecture firm Generator Studio.

Generator's geometric design was the winner of an international competition to design a pavilion for the show. The firm is working in conjunction with Los Angeles-based artist Tm Gratkowski, Brightergy LLC, Prosser Wilbert Construction and structural engineering firm Thornton Tomasetti.

Throughout the run of the exhibit, the galleries will be enlivened by period music. In the Bloch Building's Creative Cafe, people can have their photographs taken by webcam and make World's Fair posters featuring themselves.

Visitors also may participate in a postcard activity that invites them to imagine Kansas City as the site of the next World's Fair and to describe what they would put in it.

Perhaps a future generation will find the results bearing more than a bit of serendipity.

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