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## “The Great Palace of American Civilization”

*Allen Eaton’s Arts and Crafts of the Homelands, 1919-1932*

Diana Greenwold

### Abstract

Allen Eaton’s *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition premiered in Buffalo, New York in 1919, where it drew record crowds to the Albright Gallery. Iterations of the display soon opened in Albany, Rochester, and then in several other cities across the United States. *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* showcased European craftwork of local immigrant groups to celebrate a model of early twentieth-century American pluralism. This article examines the aims of exhibit organizers, immigrant presenters, and native-born visitors to these exhibitions. The structure of the displays—which highlighted domestic tableaux of old-world objects—obfuscated the contemporary contributions of immigrant groups to American cultural and economic forums. I argue, however, that local groups took advantage of the exhibit’s performance spaces to assert their active presence in American public life.

### About the Author

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# “The Great Palace of American Civilization”

Allen Eaton’s *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands*, 1919-1932

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At the 1919 *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition in Buffalo, New York, over 40,000 visitors admired this Swedish-made chest (fig. 1). Its image also featured prominently in organizer Allen Eaton’s 1932 publication, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*, which chronicled the displays at Buffalo and the exhibit’s subsequent iterations in Rochester, Albany, and across the United States.<sup>1</sup> An examination of the chest’s design elements quickly reveals what Eaton found so compelling. Decorated with symmetrically spaced sprigs of painted white flowers, the wooden trunk exudes old-country charm. Metal supports that secure the

box create decoratively undulating bands crossing the chest’s front and top surfaces. Within these bands, one can make out the excised silhouette of a pair of houses, an evocation of the domestic space in which such a trunk and its contents would have resided. The chest carries the markings of its owners in the looping white script painted on its face with the dates 1739 and 1805 and the initials AC, ND, and IH each signaling the passing down of this heirloom and its contents from one generation to the next. Its exhibition in Buffalo conjured the vast distances its owners travelled from Europe to the United States and registered the American presence of the family whose names and histories adorn its surface.

This Swedish example is merely one of hundreds of objects from the homes of European immigrants that populated Buffalo’s stately Albright Gallery for two weeks between October 22 and November 3, 1919, when exhibits sprawled across six galleries and the museum’s atrium, displaying objects from twenty-two countries.<sup>2</sup> With funds from the American Federation of Arts, the University of the State of New York, the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, the Buffalo mayor and city council, local organizations, and individual citizens, the display in Buffalo transformed a beaux-arts palace of fine arts into a celebration of America’s shared European heritage.<sup>3</sup>

This article examines the exhibition’s displays and the expressed and implicit messages they conveyed to native-born and immigrant visitors. Using Eaton’s written account of the exhibitions, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*, I argue that *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* enacted a progressive model of American multiculturalism. In some respects, however,

<sup>1</sup> Versions of the exhibition as well as displays inspired by Eaton’s model include the 1921 *America’s Making Exposition* at the New York City Armory as well as iterations of the *Homelands’* displays in Trenton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Boston. Allen Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life: Some Experiments in Appreciation of the Contributions of Our Foreign Born Citizens to American Culture* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1932).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Albright Knox Gallery’s exhibition checklist, the 1919 displays included objects labeled as Amish, French, Italian, Irish, Russian, Polish, Dutch, Scotch, English, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Hungarian, Jugo Slav, Cecho Slovak, Armenian, Adazian and Persian, Roumanian, Greek, Bulgarian, Ukranian, Swiss, Belgian, Indian, and Alsace Lorraine (spelling appears here as it is listed in the original document). *Homeland Arts Object List*, 1919, Courtesy of the G. Robert Strauss, Jr. Memorial Library and Archives, Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

<sup>3</sup> Although the object list includes some examples from outside Europe—such as a single Indian object and materials from Persia and Armenia—the majority of items on display came from European communities. “*Exhibition of the Arts and Crafts of the Homelands Exhibition at the Albright Art Gallery*,” *Academy Notes: January-July, 1920* (Buffalo, NY: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1920), 18.



**Figure 1**

"Swedish Immigrant's Trunk at Buffalo and Albany," in Allen H. Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*. © 1932 Russell Sage Foundation, 112 East 64<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10065. Reprinted with Permission. Reprinting, reposting, or republishing is prohibited without written consent from the Russell Sage Foundation.

*Homelands'* exhibition strategies cordoned immigrants off from mainstream American commercial and popular culture. While the strictures of Eaton's model associated immigrants with old-world Europe, local communities nonetheless found ways to transcend the display's boundaries and manipulate its messages. *Homelands* provided immigrants with opportunities to assert their relevance to contemporary American life, educate their children about their European heritage, and inscribe the boundaries of outsider access to particular community knowledge.

Part handicraft display, part domestic tableau, and part community performance space, *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* drew record crowds of immigrant communities and native-born Americans alike.<sup>4</sup> Versions of the original Buffalo exhibit opened across the United States between 1919 and 1932 with each iteration featuring the same basic structure:

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Academy Notes*, "The attendance for the exhibition of the Arts and Crafts of the Homelands, held at the Albright Art Gallery October 22<sup>nd</sup> to November 4<sup>th</sup>, was 42,951. This was the largest attendance on record for the Gallery during any two consecutive weeks since it was dedicated." "Exhibition of the Arts and Crafts," 18.

booths devoted to each participating ethnic community and a large performance and gathering space. In the Buffalo, Rochester, and Albany exhibits, visitors entered through a small showcase of objects gleaned from participating groups and then proceeded to individual displays arranged regionally where costumed interpreters helped guide visitors through arranged scenes. During the day, representatives from local communities demonstrated weaving, carving, or sewing techniques, and in the evenings, participants performed the dances, theater, and music of their native countries.

Allen Hendershott Eaton was the primary promoter of the exhibition. Born in Union, Oregon in 1878, Eaton dedicated his life to exhibitions and publications that celebrated the work of folk craft and artists from marginalized communities. Eaton was inspired by Arts and Crafts principles, namely, the valuation of hand craftsmanship as an antidote to the industrialization and standardization of commercially produced objects.<sup>5</sup> According to David B. Van Dommelen, the young Eaton first recognized the plight of immigrant Americans during his work with the Emergency Fleet Corporation of the United States Shipping Board, through which he came to know hundreds of newly-arrived European workers. Sympathizing with the difficulties of adjusting to life in new surroundings, Eaton vowed that, "if I ever could find any way to do so, I would try to do something to help interpret these immigrants to our native born citizens, and reciprocally our native born citizens to them."<sup>6</sup> He began his work on *Homelands* as Field Secretary for the American Federation of Arts. In 1920, Eaton joined the Russell Sage Foundation, where he spent the rest of his career organizing exhibitions and crafts displays and publishing surveys of regional craftwork, such as *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* and *Handicrafts of New England*.<sup>7</sup> Eaton's lifelong interest in reinvigorating hand artistry and addressing the needs of populations outside mainstream American culture converged early in his career in the conception and execution of *Homelands*.

## Collective Identity in Collected Objects

In *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*, Eaton stated that the purpose of the displays was to encourage Americanization efforts among immigrant communities by celebrating their inclusion in American life and fostering their unique artistic heritages.<sup>8</sup> For participating ethnic communities, *Homelands* visibly enacted what Jewish activist Israel Friedlander described as "the great palace of American civilization." Within this metaphorical structure, Friedlander proposed that ethnic communities might each, "occupy our own corner, which we

<sup>5</sup> A useful overview of Eaton's career can be found at "Allen Eaton," *Craft Revival: Shaping Western North Carolina Past and Present*, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CraftRevival/people/alleneaton.html>

<sup>6</sup> David B. Van Dommelen, *Allen H. Eaton, Dean of American Crafts* (Pittsburgh: Local History Co., 2004), 58. For more on connections between the American Arts and Crafts movement, immigrant assimilation, and American settlement houses, see Eileen Boris's *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Allen Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1937). Allen Eaton, *Handicrafts of New England* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949). The Russell Sage Foundation, founded in 1907 by Margaret Olivia Sage, was committed to "the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States of America." The Foundation was an early leader in promoting American social work and sponsored the influential 1907 Pittsburgh Survey, the first study to systematically explore working-class life in a large American city. *100 Years of Social Science Research: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1907-2007* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts*, 21.



**Figure 2**

George Hare, Installation photograph of the *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition held at the Albright-Knox Gallery October 22–November 4, 1919. © 2013 Albright Knox Gallery. Image courtesy of the G. Robert Strauss, Jr. Memorial Library, Gallery Archives, Albright Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

will decorate and beautify to the best of our tastes and ability to make it not only a center of attraction for the members of our family, but also an object of admiration for all the dwellers of the palace."<sup>9</sup> Based on such early twentieth-century models of multiculturalism, Eaton aimed to "strike a new note in Americanization—that instead of telling the immigrant what America had done for him, that we proclaim publicly what the immigrant had done for America."<sup>10</sup> He proposed that displays could, "through sympathetic and wise treatment, and by conserving and fostering the offerings they [immigrants] brought from all corners of the

<sup>9</sup> Israel Friedlander, "The Problem of Judaism in America," in *Israel Past and Present: A Collection of Jewish Essays* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing Company, 1919), 277. Similar metaphors included Horace Kallen's 1915 image of the American symphony, in which each immigrant community in the United States was represented by a particular instrument whose unique voice combined to create the rich sound of a full orchestra. Horace Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation*, February 25, 1915. These models differed from earlier conceptions of America as a melting pot, which proposed immigrants shed much of their individual ethnic identity to espouse shared American attributes. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 89–91.

<sup>10</sup> Van Dommelen, *Allen H. Eaton*, 59.



**Figure 3**

Unknown photographer, exhibit booths in right aisle at the Rochester *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition held April 10-19, 1920 on the grounds of Exposition Park in Rochester, NY. Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester Archives.

earth . . . enrich this nation as no country in history had ever before been enriched.”<sup>11</sup> In the face of increasingly brazen American Nativism, calls for immigration restriction, and World War I-era solidarity efforts—many of which questioned immigrant patriotism—Eaton’s model of progressive pluralism aimed to use objects to celebrate Americanization efforts while nurturing communities’ unique ethnic identities and contributions to a shared American culture.<sup>12</sup>

Within the first moments of entering Eaton’s exhibits, visitors encountered displays visualizing the project’s collaborative nature and its claims for shared communal stakes in a collective American project. Introductory displays featured costumes, textiles, and small objects from participating communities to propose equivalencies between European traditions (fig. 2). In his written account of *Homelands*, Eaton encouraged future exhibitors to feature such introductory exhibits because, “this was a kind of association of nations group bringing together something from each country and making of them one harmonious

<sup>11</sup> Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> This article deals primarily with the early stagings of the exhibition as described in Eaton’s 1932 account of the exhibitions. Although the book centers on the 1919-1921 displays, Eaton did not publish his work on the exhibitions until 1932 and so the conclusions he draws are necessarily colored by the massive political and social changes of the intervening years. By the time Eaton published *Immigrant Gifts*, the Johnson Act had all but cut off United States immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe forcing Eaton to frame his efforts under the guise of salvaging cultural heritage already present in the country rather than welcoming new immigrant traditions into the United States. As he explained, “If then, in the necessity to limit our immigration, we have lost one of our oldest and most precious traditions (the taking in of immigrants), perhaps we can find a substitute for our loss, a kind of compensating principle by consciously setting about to discover and conserve the best qualities which our immigrants have brought and are bringing from their old homelands.” *Ibid.*, 19.

unit."<sup>13</sup> The opening object groupings—Scandinavian carved furniture below Italian embroidered textiles, Italian ceramics nestled beside English needlework—melted distinctions between communities and invited visitors to marvel at a shared pan-European disposition towards fine craftsmanship.

Rather than arrange individual ethnographic groups along a continuum designed to foster comparison and exaggerate difference, Eaton's opening gallery nestled objects from the United States' newest immigrants, such as the Polish, alongside those of communities who had lived in the country for hundreds of years, such as the French. The "association of nations" provided a venue that effectively erased the hierarchies prevalent in exhibitions such as world's fair ethnographic displays, the antecedents to Eaton's multicultural celebration. Such a formation helped Eaton sidestep questions about the relative sophistication of various racial, religious, and ethnic contributors. Rather, his displays celebrated the collective promise of immigrant artistry to augment and uplift America at large. While some of his fellow Americans, such as the members of the Immigration Restriction League, were debating which communities of immigrants were and were not worthy of American citizenship, Eaton's exhibit visualized equivalence between the nationalities on display.<sup>14</sup>

Eaton's introductory presentation created spaces where cultures converged, but the exhibition also provided each community a distinct space to exhibit objects gathered from its own members (fig. 3). In Rochester, wooden barriers surrounded each group's offerings to physically separate ethnicities from one another as well as to maintain distinctions between visitors and exhibitors. The exhibits' visual permeability, however, also allowed viewers to take in the exhibition space as a whole and consider the various ethnic booths as part of one continuous display.

*Homelands'* visualization of working artisans alongside crafts divided by nationality has its roots in techniques pioneered in the nineteenth century at international world's fairs in Europe and the United States. Beginning in 1851 at London's Crystal Palace, exhibitors juxtaposed massive presentations of Western technological advancement against exhibits of the daily life and activities of cultures deemed less sophisticated. Anthropological exhibits such as the Exposition Universelle's 1889 "Histoire de l'Habitation" in Paris allowed Western European and American visitors to peruse examples of domestic architecture from around the world and to watch representatives from communities across the globe enact daily rituals and special ceremonies.<sup>15</sup> Based on ideas of social Darwinism, ethnographic displays in world's fairs equated folk traditions from across the world with the pre-industrial past of Western nations. As we will see, Eaton's displays borrowed from these constructions both as a means to celebrate the array of nationalities that made up urban populations in the United

<sup>13</sup> Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Mathew Frye Jacobson discusses eugenicists of the early twentieth century and their influence on debates leading to the passing of the 1924 Johnson Act, which capped new Eastern and Southern European immigration at 2% of each community's population in the United States as of the 1890 U.S. census. He cites the Immigration Restriction League of 1893, 1910's Dillingham Commission report, and Madison Grant's 1916 *Passing of the Great Race* as some of the catalysts for the narrowing conceptions of which ethnicities were valuable as American citizens. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 77-86.

<sup>15</sup> The most comprehensive treatment of American expositions and the use of foreign people and objects to advance western imperialism is Robert W. Rydell's *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

States, but also to showcase European immigrants as linked to an idealized vision of European peasant life.

In addition to borrowing from the formal strategies of world's fairs displays, Eaton's collaborative strategies were connected to larger efforts among fine art institutions to display European handicraft. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Newark Museum instigated programs to engage directly with local immigrant organizations and create displays reflective of local artistic traditions.<sup>16</sup> In 1916, the Metropolitan sponsored an exhibition of immigrant crafts at Washington Irving High School with the Folk Craft Guild and the National Conference on Community Center Problems. Using language that Eaton would mimic in his writing, the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* described the importance of these crafts and the threat to their survival as immigrants assimilated into the dominant culture:

Folk craft is part of the social heritage of every old group of people. Today when the immigrant comes to America this valuable heritage is lost. The present movement, of which the exhibit was one expression, does not hope to revive traditional designs so much as traditional principles of social art.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to using these displays to cultivate connections with new constituencies, the Metropolitan displayed immigrant handicraft to celebrate the small-scale production on which it was based. Centered on concerns over the rapid homogenization of American culture, the museum sought out "old" groups whose craft traditions might serve as alternatives to the sea of mass-produced objects available to American consumers.<sup>18</sup>

In 1916 the Newark Museum also premiered an exhibition of New Jersey textiles, which featured a section entitled *Homelands*, to highlight objects made by Newark's immigrant communities alongside articles of pre-industrial spinning and weaving.<sup>19</sup> Similar to the efforts at the Metropolitan, the Newark Museum's director, John Cotton Dana, gathered items from local community members by soliciting donations through local public schools. Unlike the display sponsored by the Metropolitan, however, which celebrated immigrant handicraft in opposition to modern mass-produced objects, Dana's displays incorporated immigrant crafts into a celebration of New Jersey's textiles industry. In Newark, a booming industrial center,

<sup>16</sup> In the early twentieth century, museums and immigrant communities used the school system as a primary space for collaboration. Public schools served as the exhibition venue for the Metropolitan's exhibit and the means by which the Newark Museum obtained objects for its *Homelands* display of textiles.

<sup>17</sup> "Notes," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 11, no. 7 (July 1, 1916): 159.

<sup>18</sup> Eaton was no doubt well aware of the Metropolitan's efforts to exhibit immigrant crafts through his multiple connections to Robert W. De Forest of the Metropolitan Museum, the American Federations of Arts, and the Russell Sage Foundation. De Forest, a noted lawyer and philanthropist, served as trustee, secretary, vice-president, and president of the Metropolitan along with his position as president of the Russell Sage Foundation and Olivia Russell Sage's personal lawyer. De Forest also served as president of the National Federation of Arts, where Eaton began his work on the *Homelands* exhibitions. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 26, no. 6 (June 1931): 138. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Memorial Exercises* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1931), 4.

<sup>19</sup> As director of the Newark Museum, John Cotton Dana helped create 1916's *Homelands* exhibition at the Burnet Street Public School, but because of political squabbles with the Museum's board of directors, he did not officially participate in the exhibition. Eaton was likely aware of Dana's exhibitions of industrial arts and immigrant crafts in Newark, although further research must be conducted to know if the two met or corresponded. Carol G. Duncan, *A Matter of Class: John Cotton Dana, Progressive Reform, and the Newark Museum* (Pittsburgh, PA: Periscope Publishing, 2010), 131.



European handicraft displays celebrated the expertise that immigrant craft workers brought to the United States. The exhibit proposed that knowledge of old-world spinning and weaving would make newly arrived European workers well suited for employment in the city's modern factories. Eaton's efforts constitute larger scale visions of experiments already underway in museums under the direction of like-minded progressive museum professionals. However, as we will explore, Eaton followed the model of the Metropolitan more closely than that of Newark by presenting European handicraft as opposed to, rather than complimentary with, industrial products and means of production.

*Arts and Crafts of the Homelands'* communal focus was also closely linked to celebrations of immigrant artistry and hand production on display in American settlement houses, the most popular of which premiered at Chicago's Hull-House in 1900.<sup>20</sup> Hull-House founder Jane Addams' Labor Museum highlighted the craft industries of local immigrant communities by presenting handicraft techniques related to five principle materials: metals, woods, grains, textiles, and bookbinding.<sup>21</sup> Addams and co-curator Jessie Luther populated their displays with prints and artifacts borrowed from Chicago's Field Museum, raw materials, tools, examples of handmade crafts, and immigrant artisans demonstrating various skills. Similar to the anthropological and Midway displays at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the Labor Museum's exhibits visualized the evolution of technology from the primitive to the modern. The industrial United States represented the pinnacle of modern progress while immigrant crafts and production were positioned as less sophisticated iterations of contemporary domestic goods and technologies. Similar to the Newark Museum, Hull-House promoters imagined their displays as a means to educate immigrant workers and native-born visitors about the origins of various trades rather than to advocate for immigrant handiwork as a viable commercial alternative to factory labor.<sup>22</sup> Eaton's displays borrowed many of the formal strategies of Hull-House exhibits, but *Homelands* showcased a very different message, one that de-emphasized immigrant contributions to modern industry and enforced ties to a pre-industrial past.

Eaton's displays celebrated multiculturalism by showcasing a profusion of small items that collectively represented the heritage of a local community. As a crafts promoter, Eaton spent a lifetime defending the artistic worth of handmade crafts and the importance of saving disappearing techniques of hand workmanship. Yet, the exhibit model he championed for the *Homelands* exhibitions relied little on the individual value or the aesthetic quality of any particular item on display.<sup>23</sup> In his instructions to exhibitors in *Immigrant Gifts*, Eaton acknowledged the necessity of assessing artistry when selecting objects for display from local

<sup>20</sup> Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 216-217.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Addams, "Labor Museum at Hull House," *Commons* 47 (June 30, 1900): 3. A discussion of Addams' goals for the Labor Museum can also be found in Duncan, *A Matter of Class*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Shannon Jackson's reading of the Labor Museum proposes that while the progressives established an evolutionary framework within the museum, immigrant visitors read these messages selectively to favor the contributions of their own communities and used the exhibits to forward narratives which celebrated the achievement of their home nations. Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 260.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Bronner extols Eaton's imbedding of folk art objects into composed domestic scenes over the model promoted by institutions such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's Folk Art Museum, which isolated individual objects in a "fine art" arrangement and in doing so, removed them from their cultural context. Simon J. Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1998), 413.



**Figure 4**

Unknown photographer, Russian booth at the Rochester Arts and Crafts of the Homelands exhibition held April 10-19, 1920 on the grounds of Exposition Park in Rochester, NY. Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester Archives

groups, but he also stressed that communities should feel included regardless of the quality of their contributions. "Such an exhibition is more than a display of artistic skill judged by a narrow standard," Eaton explained, "It is an expression of the love of people for familiar objects which combine both human interest and beauty."<sup>24</sup> Eaton's text also reminds future exhibitors that clever exhibition tricks can easily disguise homelier offerings within larger arrangements.<sup>25</sup>

This image of Rochester's Russian booth showcases how such items could be combined to create a compelling presentation (fig. 4). Within the booth, nearly every surface has been covered with all manner of textiles, ceramics, furniture, tapestries, and paintings. The back wall displays multiple examples of embroidery and lace while the tabletop is littered with ceramics and metal work. Paintings fill the shallow sidewalls of the three-sided booth. No single object in this scene appears designed to arrest the attention of the visitor and, indeed, the barriers enclosing the booth deliberately keep audiences at a remove from the assembled items and discourage careful observation of any particular object.

That Eaton's priorities lay in stimulating cooperative energy over promoting individual examples of craftsmanship is also evidenced in the small number of items that travelled to more than one exhibition venue. Promoters worked with local community organizations at each new location to assemble novel displays almost entirely from scratch. From Albany to Rochester to Cleveland, each venue celebrated the unique constellation of that city's

<sup>24</sup> Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts*, 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

immigrant groups and the objects gathered from their attics.<sup>26</sup> As a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor* described the *Homelands* displays at Buffalo:

In place of the Old Masters came the New Peoples. Where had hung the Redfields and Innesses was a brave array of the lace work of the Sophie Kremeneffs and Thamar Nijinskys. The Symons and Duvenecks gave way to embroideries from the painstaking fingers of Johanna Kroghs and Olga Zbories, and the loving handiwork of the carving Pietros and the brass stamping Giuseppis replaced the sleek bronzes and self-sufficient marbles.<sup>27</sup>

The article distinguishes immigrant craft objects from the "self-sufficient" work of European masters. No one object stands alone in the writer's estimation, who concedes only that the labor involved in creating the works was both "painstaking" and "loving." Singular paintings and sculpture from the hands of Western European and American masters were replaced by "a brave array" of alternative items, which in their abundance and variety alone approach work from the hands of trained painters and sculptors. Eaton's communal booths, in their profusion of objects, allowed for more comprehensive participation amongst various communities while coding the objects on display explicitly as craft and therefore of use to create a composition rather than worthy of singular display. The collections of small crafts celebrated the unique contributions of participating local communities but inferred that handmade objects and the craftsmen who created them were less sophisticated than the museum's typical installations of Western European and American painting and sculpture.

## Domesticating and De-modernizing the Immigrant

*Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* celebrated American pluralism, yet its display techniques also constructed a palatable vision of ethnic diversity for native-born audiences by fashioning immigrants as part of a safely domesticated past.<sup>28</sup> In her discussion of ethnographic displays, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains that for turn-of-the-century exhibitors, "recently arrived immigrants became the ethnographic 'other,' in part as a way of creating social distance under the threatening conditions of physical proximity."<sup>29</sup> Eaton's exhibits enacted this distance by constructing a vision of immigrant life as pre-industrial and domestic, distinct from modern American industrial processes and urban consumerism.

*Homelands* premiered amongst heated debates over the status of the immigrant and his role in the larger American social body. Lingering distrust of some immigrant groups stemming from World War I infused rhetoric among Nativists eager to keep select European

<sup>26</sup> Allen H. Eaton, "Art and Americanization: Arts and Crafts of the Homelands Exhibition," *The American Magazine of Art* 11, American Federation of Arts (1920): 97.

<sup>27</sup> Report from the *Christian Science Monitor* quoted in Eaton, "Art and Americanization," 98.

<sup>28</sup> Kristin Hoganson argues that the immigrant gifts movement promoted a safe and sanitized version of European immigrant life to quell unease about the role of the immigrant in political and social upheavals of the early twentieth century. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 236.

<sup>29</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1991), 411.

groups from entering the United States.<sup>30</sup> The exhibit also opened amidst labor unrest associated with immigrants, notably 1919's failed steelworker's strike, the Seattle general strike, and nationwide steel and coal walkouts. *Homelands* premiered only a few years before Congress enacted laws sharply curbing the number of Southern and Eastern Europeans coming into the United States.<sup>31</sup> By the time Eaton published *Immigrant Gifts*, 1924's Johnson-Reed Act had tightened immigration with strict quotas that choked off nearly all non-Western European arrivals into the United States based on the science of Eugenics and theories of racial purity.<sup>32</sup> Immigrant tenement neighborhoods had also become feared spaces for some middle-class Americans concerned about sanitation and the spread of disease in cramped living quarters and overcrowded streets.<sup>33</sup> Eaton's displays addressed wary native-born Americans by presenting a non-threatening image of immigrant life, one that placed immigrants worlds away from unruly picket lines, bustling factories, and dingy tenement homes.

Perhaps nothing could be further from such menacing spaces than the Albright Gallery, nestled within Buffalo's Delaware Park, where *Homelands* first welcomed audiences. To reach the exhibits, the visitor navigated a route of serpentine paths before ascending a staircase that placed him above and away from the city's urban core.<sup>34</sup> Eaton claimed that he chose the site, "in spite of the admonition that it was 'too high-brow for the people you want to reach,' and 'people won't go beyond the business section of Buffalo for a thing of this kind.'"<sup>35</sup> In fact, it seems that Eaton selected both park and gallery not in spite of, but specifically *for* the distance it afforded patrons from Buffalo's workplaces and immigrant neighborhoods.

For the duration of the exhibit, the Academy of Arts removed its permanent collection of European and American masterworks to feature craftwork of Western and Eastern Europeans. By situating these heirlooms in place of the Albright's permanent collection, Eaton denaturalized objects from the immigrant neighborhoods in which they would typically be found. The displays celebrated craft as an alternative, though not equivalent, artistic inheritance from Europe. Visitors to the exhibitions were constantly aware of the larger building envelope that enclosed the small vignettes. As we can see in the image of the Russian booth at the Rochester displays, the gallery's interior with its tall windows is visible above the constructed booths (fig. 4). Though a visitor might have been transported temporarily to the cozy interior of a peasant home, she was ever aware of the larger

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed account of the effect of the First World War on particular American immigrant groups and how these changes were visualized in an *Immigrant-Gifts*-inspired exhibition, see Ilana Abramovitch's chapter, "The Hyphen: Immigrants at America's Making" in her 1996 dissertation, *America's Making Exposition and Festival (New York, 1921): Immigrant Gifts on the Altar of America* (New York University, Graduate School of Arts and Science, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Abramovitch also connects fear of immigrant strikers to the Red Scare by explaining that native born Americans often feared strikers were Bolsheviks. Abramovitch, *America's Making*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 77-86.

<sup>33</sup> Tracts such as Robert W. De Forest and Lawrence Veiller's *The Tenement House Problem* (London: The MacMillan Company, 1903) exposed the poor conditions of life in immigrant neighborhoods. While these publications were designed to instigate reform, they also brought images of urban poverty to public attention, which helped fuel stereotypes about the cleanliness of immigrant homes and neighborhoods.

<sup>34</sup> The park in Buffalo was originally landscaped for the 1901 World's Fair.

<sup>35</sup> Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts*, 35.

museum architecture that re-contextualized these objects from immigrant neighborhoods into an elite cultural institution.

If Eaton's exhibits elevated the status of immigrant craft, they also disengaged these same communities from full participation in contemporary American life. Rather than present items forged in the United States, which would have celebrated the integration of immigrant talents into American culture, Eaton specified that all objects on display evoke the domestic spaces of pre-industrial Europe. For his exhibits, Eaton solicited what he deemed "fine expressions of yesterday" and stipulated that items on display celebrate "old-world" traditions and pre-industrial techniques of production.<sup>36</sup> Records from the Buffalo display make proud note of the age of select objects and their histories, such as a Swiss watch described as having been "presented to donor's grandfather by Charles the twelfth," or a Spanish convent sampler "from the fifteenth-century."<sup>37</sup> The celebration of ancestral treasures gleaned from the attics of what Eaton called "the older races," masked the hybrid nature of immigrant life in the United States and the degree to which immigrant families participated in the modern American production and consumption of mass-produced goods as well as in the cultural and social life of American cities.

As Lizabeth Cohen has described, European families newly arrived to the United States eagerly purchased industrially-produced furnishings for their homes as signs of middle-class taste and sophistication.<sup>38</sup> Unlike displays at Newark, which sought to celebrate European craftwork in order to elevate modern American industry, Eaton's displays of craft traditions, what the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* termed an "old-world medley," disengaged immigrants from the larger structures of the commercial economy and undermined immigrants' role as participants in the contemporary workforce and the consumer culture of Northeastern American cities.<sup>39</sup>

In *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands*, composed scenes of handcrafted objects featured items such as rugs, chairs, and kitchen implements: objects that collectively celebrated rural peasant life. Here in the Danish booth in Rochester, several types of elaborately carved seats and a low bench create an informal semi-circle that welcomes an imagined guest into the constructed domestic space (fig. 5). On the back wall, sconces frame an elaborately carved triangular shelf, which displays small metal cooking and serving bowls to conjure associations of familial eating and drinking. Above the shelf hangs a painted or embroidered image of a village gathering to link this domestic scene to an idyllic agrarian existence. The rug on the floor lies ready to warm the imagined feet of the family who might gather in such a room, and—to complete the tableau—we find an open chest, a symbol of familial continuity in which these family heirlooms would be lovingly stowed. Such a domestic vision traded potentially disconcerting visions of worker unrest for a rosy picture of the European hamlets from which many Americans imagined these immigrants came.

<sup>36</sup> Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> *Homelands Objects List*.

<sup>38</sup> Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts*, 32. For information on immigrant interest in mass-produced domestic furnishings, see Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885–1915," *Journal of American Culture* 3, no. 4 (December 1, 1980).

<sup>39</sup> "Homelands Exhibition Seems More Like Old-World Medley Than Mere American Exhibit," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, April 14, 1920, 26.



**Figure 5**

Unknown photographer, Danish booth at the Rochester Arts and Crafts of the Homelands exhibition held April 10-19, 1920 on the grounds of Exposition Park in Rochester, NY. Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester Archives.

Unlike the Labor Museum, which exhibited European craft traditions to provide the immigrant industrial worker with a sense of his contribution to the advancements of modern industry, Eaton celebrated a strictly pre-industrial vision of European peasant life as the contemporary contribution of immigrant communities to American culture. In articulating the aims of the Labor Museum, Jane Addams explained that “young people who earn their livings in the shops and factories would have a chance to gain some idea of the material which they are constantly handling and might in time become conscious of the social connection of their work.”<sup>40</sup> According to Addams, lessons in the origins of various industries would benefit the local immigrant working classes by situating their labor within a larger historical framework.<sup>41</sup> Her model readily acknowledged the role of immigrant labor in American factories. Conversely, *Homelands* exhibitions obscured these associations with exhibits geared solely towards exhibiting the lives of families before their immigration.

<sup>40</sup>Jane Addams, “First Report of the Labor Museum at Hull House” (Chicago, 1902), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Jane Addams, “Educational Methods,” in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1902), 94-95.



**Figure 6**

George Hare, Photograph of dancers performing during an event that corresponded with the *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition held at the Albright-Knox Gallery October 22-November 4, 1919.

© 2013 Albright Knox Gallery. Image courtesy of the G. Robert Strauss, Jr. Memorial Library, Gallery Archives, Albright Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

## Immigrant Bodies and the Social Body

Eaton was, no doubt, aware of the potentially alienating effects that exhibiting explicitly old-world craft might entail. *Homelands'* program of daily and nightly live performances and demonstrations inserted living immigrant performers into the exhibition space as teachers to younger generations, cultural interpreters to native-born audiences, and gate-keepers to their community's privileged traditions. In Buffalo, Rochester, and Albany, Eaton designed spaces around large central areas for nightly performances, concerts, and gatherings in which dance, theater, and music breathed fresh life into the staid examples of European handicraft. To visualize such bodies permeating the barrier between rural domestic scenes and an open, public performance space allowed participating communities to claim a shared stake in a larger forum and to present themselves as essential to the construction of a collective American community.

In this image of a performance in Buffalo, a man extends a leg to begin teaching a dance to his young pupil under the watchful eye of classical statuary (fig. 6). Their bent bodies, both dressed in similar white costumes, mirror one another and form an enclosed circle between teacher and student. The man's open hands create a frame for the boy's forward-leaning torso, as if he were gathering energy from his eager pupil, who leans his body into the gap his instructor's outstretched arms provide. At the far left, a nearly invisible spectator alongside a group of chairs evokes an audience who was or will soon be enjoying the dance. Similar to handicraft demonstrations at the Labor Museum, these expressions of

multi-generational learning helped affirm the continued importance of European traditions to younger groups and facilitated the communities' claims to space within the public arena of the exhibition and, by extension, the civic arena at large.

*Homelands'* dance and theatrical performances, which were conceived of and realized by local community groups, took inspiration from larger progressive interests in civic pageantry to picture America as a nation of immigrants whose individual contributions collectively strengthened the larger national character.<sup>42</sup> Such pageants often culminated in personifications of the United States welcoming costumed members of various groups of European immigrants united to form one community. Naima Prevots describes one such pageant, Boston's 1910 *Cave Life to City Life*, in which representatives hailing from countries across Europe performed dances from their native regions before joining together to participate in the symbolic "aspiration" dance as a single group.<sup>43</sup> Progressives argued that the cooperative process of practicing and performing pageants fostered tolerance among immigrant groups and between native-born and immigrant communities. While Eaton's message did not advocate the stripping away of "foreign" attributes in favor of American ones, his programming took advantage of various ethnic dance, music, costume, and theatrical traditions as a primary means to visualize the offerings immigrants brought to enrich the character of American life at large.

Posters advertising the exhibitions underscore the use of the immigrant body to bridge the temporal disconnect separating immigrants from contemporary urban life (fig. 7). As with presenters in the exhibition's public spaces, this poster depicts the corporeal presence of a youthful immigrant who simultaneously embodies her European past while contributing her traditions to the shared culture of a modern United States. Artist Vojtech Pressig's linoleum cut for Buffalo and Albany's promotional materials depicts a lithe young woman wearing a prim white dress and colorful cap. The economy of line and the poster's limited palette renders the pattern on her costume nationally ambiguous, so she may stand for the body of every immigrant presenter at the exhibitions—although her fair skin would have made her complexion markedly lighter than many of the Southern and Eastern European presenters. While her body forms a static white mass in the center of the frame, she appears to have flung open the chest and the black hatbox in the foreground to reveal textiles gleaned from her family's home country. Pressig frames the woman with the lid of the massive chest, a blocky form that fuses into the back wall of the room as it creates a border surrounding her figure. The ambiguities of space in this image, in which chest dissolves into room and then back to dimensional object, create a feeling that the sitter herself may have sprung from the opened trunk as a beloved memento from overseas. Like the men, women, and children who performed during the exhibitions, her presence alongside the objects of her homeland unites past and present to propose the continued relevance of old-world objects and people in twentieth-century civic culture.

<sup>42</sup> David Glassberg describes a Springfield Massachusetts' 1908 July 4<sup>th</sup> parade, which featured a "pageant of nations" in which thirteen immigrant groups created floats illustrating their contributions to the shared project of American life. David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 63.

<sup>43</sup> Naima Prevots, *American Pageantry: A Movement for Art & Democracy* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 35.





### Figure 7

Vojtech Pressig, "Poster Used at the Exhibitions of the *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands*", image from page 60 of Allen H. Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*. © 1932 Russell Sage Foundation, 112 East 64<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10065. Reprinted with Permission. Reprinting, reposting, or republishing is prohibited without written consent from the Russell Sage Foundation.

## Conclusion

*Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* provided Allen Eaton, the American Federation of Arts, and the Sage Foundation with an important opportunity to display the European craft traditions of urban immigrant communities to the American public. A visual manifestation of Friedlander's corners in the American palace—in which each community might decorate its own space as one part of a larger whole—*Homelands* celebrated early-twentieth century conceptions of multiculturalism. Yet, Eaton's displays also intimated that these groups were not full participants in modern American institutions. Similar to contemporaneous projects at northeastern American museums, Eaton worked to counteract this reading by welcoming local communities to people the exhibition with intergenerational celebrations of immigrant life in the United States; an effort that helped native-born Americans experience a shared multi-ethnic public forum.

In considering the effectiveness of Eaton's exhibits to display the heritage of America's immigrant groups, we must note that the displays invited the shaping of local community identity selectively. *Homelands* evolved from the input only of those community members willing to loan objects, volunteer time, and offer contacts. For many newly arrived European immigrants, such as those not fluent in English, participation in projects such as *Homelands* likely held little interest. Eaton's representation of immigrant life must therefore be considered as successful only in so far as it promoted the objects and performances of those already at least somewhat integrated into local projects and familiar with urban civic institutions.

Our analysis has considered *Homelands* primarily as the work of one dedicated promoter, Allen Eaton, and discussed his efforts to create a forum for immigrant and native-born interaction. Immigrant representatives at the *Homelands* displays also took advantage of Eaton's framework to communicate messages intended for their own communities rather than for general consumption. *Homelands* helped immigrants advance their own means of self-identification by delineating the boundaries of how much the non-native viewer might explore traditions unique to each immigrant group. Turning again to Pressig's image, we see a closed book resting on the ledge of the chest. While trunk and hatbox are open for the viewer's inspection, here is one portion of the immigrant's gifts that remains shuttered to the outside world. The inclusion of the locked book, whose decorative exterior is on display, but whose contents remain unknowable to the non-native viewer, gestures to the limits of knowledge attainable when surveying the domestic tableaux at these exhibitions. Though the attractive presenter's smile and the framing of her face with her hands coyly suggest her availability for inspection and her desire to introduce the array of objects before her, the book is a small but present portion of her identity to which the viewer has no access, but which the community insider might unlock for herself. The book within the open chest registers the stakes for participants in these displays and the limits of Eaton's reach as manager of the exhibits. While his strategies and performance schedules governed the ultimate look and agenda of the exhibition, *Homelands* also functioned as a forum in which immigrants could, to some degree, set the terms on which their communities might be understood and penetrated by native-born Americans and other immigrant groups.



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