

# International Exhibitions

The International Exhibitions developed between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries as an expression of 19th-century positivist and romantic thought. They were promoted by the industrialised Western nations, initially to celebrate progress in industry and science, with numerous different sectors interested in fostering talent in the arts and disseminating knowledge nationally and internationally. Naturally these exhibitions were based on the growth in world trade, but this was fuelled by a period of rapid expansion in European colonialism and contact with African and Asian cultures. While national fairs, which were held frequently from the beginning of the 19th century, focused mainly on industrial products, the international commercial element grew significantly and can be considered “universal” at the time of the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. From that moment onwards, the major European capitals, followed by cities further afield, began competing with each other to host the best exhibition: France organized five Expositions Universelles in Paris (between 1855 and 1900), alternating with Austria (1873), and there were International Exhibitions or World’s Fairs in Britain (1862, 1871#74) and the USA (New York 1853, Philadelphia 1876 and Chicago 1893). The success of these exhibitions extended to the Ottoman Empire (Ottoman General Exposition, 1863) and Egypt, on the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal (1869). From the outset, the enthusiasm for these exhibitions was met in some quarters by ironic, negative criticisms of the masses, who poured into colossal structures built to accommodate huge trade bazaars, real festivals of the picturesque. The exhibitions were a celebration, at times rhetorical, of the meeting between East and West. Beyond their manifestos, however, they reveal not only political tensions but also the creative, industrial and commercial orientations of the time, showing clearly the trends and changes taking place in the “Western” and “Arab” worlds.

## More:

- The official showcase of the nations
- Temporary structures and presentation of national contexts
- The diffusion of models and promotion of trade
- West and East, fine art at International Exhibitions



**Photograph of the copy of the fountain of Ahmed III**

c. 1873

MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art  
Vienna, Austria  
Photography



**Tunis 2**

c.1852

Victoria and Albert Museum  
London, United Kingdom  
Joseph Nash  
Colour lithograph



**A retrospective: Preparations for the exhibition of 1889 - the Eiffel Tower under construction**

1936

National Library of France  
Paris, France



**The Three Ages of Woman**

1905

National Gallery of Modern Art (GNAM)  
Rome, Italy  
Gustav Klimt  
Oil on canvas



**Alhambra vase**

c.1862 (made)

Victoria and Albert Museum  
London, United Kingdom  
Joseph-Théodore Deck  
Earthenware, inlaid with coloured clays and, possibly, painted