

The Bronzeville Forum: Race and Reception in Pre-Great Migration Chicago

This paper showcases investigations into a recently discovered, and potentially very important, example of the role of classical reception in civil rights movements in late 19th century Chicago. Approximately one year ago a remarkable theater drop curtain was found in an attic during renovation work of the Forum Club, a politically oriented performance and community space built in 1897. This drop curtain, which was displayed before performances, features a painting of the Roman Forum in a ruined state and is based on Stefano Donadoni's "Figures Before the Forum Romanum the Companion." This appropriately themed image is remarkable due to a particular alteration from its Italian prototype, the addition of three dark-skinned tourists observing the remains of the Basilica Julia, representing perhaps the earliest representation of dark-skinned people in American theatrical art of this kind (Waszut-Barrett, 2024). This paper distills the work of a handful of researchers investigating both this image and the building itself, but focuses on the enigmatic place of this work in the history of classical reception and race in 19th century America and Chicago in particular.

The crux of this paper is the elucidation and analysis of two extraordinary facets of the work's spatial and temporal relationship to certain significant events in the history of Chicago, one of which is the Great Migration. The Forum Club was built in what would come to be called Bronzeville, the heart of Chicago's famous Black Metropolis, the city's epicenter for new residents arriving from the South in the Great Migration. The Forum Club eventually grew to be central to this movement, both in terms of political and artistic developments. Remarkably, however, this building, was actually constructed just prior to the Great Migration, in a period when white residents made up more than 99% of the surrounding population. This chronology raises several important questions to be considered here. For example, what was the significance of this change for the drop curtain's first viewers, and is it a coincidence that this image hung at the precise location that would later become the hub of the Black Metropolis, or is this instead testimony to

political movements that anticipated that development? I address these questions by situating this piece within synchronic discourses around race and classical antiquity, both in America broadly and in Chicago. This analysis also explores how and why the drop curtain's characteristics coincide with known features of Black Classicism's interest in ruins of antiquity (Bernard, 2017).

The second extraordinary facet of the work's time and place is its relationship to the World Columbian Exhibition of 1893-1894 and its famous White City, a temporary installment of buildings inspired by Greco-Roman architecture, which launched the American neoclassical movement. The exhibition's organizers excluded from it all African American cultural contributions to the United States and denied African American citizens leadership positions in its planning, decisions that were controversial even in their own time. The Forum Club was built near the site of that exhibition and devised in its immediate aftermath. Clearly there is a poignant visual contrast between that exhibition and the image at the Forum Club: one having a Romanesque cityscape from which African Americans were excluded; the other depicting the actual city of Rome with dark-skinned people comfortably inside it. However, the connection between the two goes even deeper when we consider the political activism that had taken place at the exhibition. For despite the organizers' attempted rejection of African American participation, the exhibition in fact became a hotbed of civil rights activism, spearheaded by Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass, who used Douglass' role as former American ambassador to Haiti to arrange his appointment as the Haitian representative at the exhibition, which allowed him a place in the exhibition that he turned into a forum for African American political debate and art, at least some of which dealt with the relationship between classical antiquity and people of African descent. These developments were so well-known that they must have been familiar to the creators of the Forum Club as well as its early audiences.

This paper then attempts to situate this remarkable drop curtain within its precise historical moment with respect to white and black political activism around race and classical antiquity and to

explore how this piece may contribute to the early intellectual history of the Bronzeville neighborhood, the city of Chicago, and perhaps even the nation at large.

Works Cited

Barnard, John Levi. *Empire of Ruin: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Waszut-Barrett, Wendy. "A Forum for Progress." *Die Vierte Wand* 12 (2024): 60–83.