

History of Unusual Entertainment: Human Zoos and Circuses

By Kaan Ertan

Chariot races, ancient Greek tragedies, operas, Olympic games, fairs, concerts, cinema... These are a few of the countless things that we do, or used to do, to entertain ourselves. Although some of these are now obsolete, all of them surely sound nice and harmless. However, not everything we have ever done in the name of entertainment has been so innocent. From this viewpoint, I want to discuss 2 forms of entertainment that were once extremely popular, yet very inhumane: human zoos and freak shows.

Human zoos were public exhibitions of humans as if they were animals in a zoo. These exhibitions often emphasized the physical and cultural differences between Europeans and non-Europeans. Today, such exhibitions would be seen as highly degrading and racist, but they were extremely common and popular during as late as the 19th and 20th centuries.

As early as in the 16th century, some zoos in Europe started exhibiting humans, too. These humans were usually physically and culturally different than Europeans, and therefore were viewed as “exotic”. Among these people were Indians, Africans, Moors, and many more. With the beginning of European colonialism, colonists encountered a wide variety of human races and cultures. As they saw the physical and cultural differences between the Europeans and the natives of the newly exploited regions, they started to bring these people back to Europe with them. In Europe, these people would be sold to zoos and freak circuses.

By the late 1800s, human zoos could be found in every major European city, and also in some American cities like New York. These exhibits were a major form of entertainment for the Europeans. For instance, it was possible for an ordinary German to see Eskimos and Cherokees, whom he would never encounter unless he migrated to the New World himself. At the time, various human traffickers were competing to get a hold of different indigenous populations. Especially populaces who lived far away from Europe would attract more attention from the zoo visitors, and therefore were more desirable for traffickers. Samoans, Inuits, Nubians, and Sioux native Americans were among these populaces.

Human zoo exhibits were so popular, that many world fairs in the late 19th and early 20th century period would host them. In these fairs, millions of people visited these folks, who were dressed and accommodated in a realistic fashion. In some zoos, a whole village would be displayed in a large area. The exhibited people would live inside the zoo for months, as if they were in a reality show. The visitors viewed these exhibits as scientific study fields since they thought that the displayed populace would live in the zoo exactly as they lived in their original homeland. In reality, the living space of these people was arranged by designers. At the zoos, the indigenous people on display faced many difficulties. Sometimes, African tribal

members were forced to wear traditional clothing intended for the equatorial climate, even during the cold European December. For another example, in one of the zoos, Filipino villagers were forced to perform a seasonal dog-eating ritual over and over too often, just to shock the audience. Additionally, the lack of safe drinking water and poor sanitary conditions led to dysentery and other illnesses.



A Human Zoo in Coney Island/New York City/USA

In the same time period, there was a second form of entertainment which is very similar to human zoos, the freak shows. Freak shows were viewed as a part of American life from the 19th to 20th centuries. Unlike human zoos, freak shows were much smaller and were mobile. They would travel from town to town to exhibit people, who were viewed as freaks because of their unique physical appearances or disabilities. Among these people were albinos, dwarfs, Siamese twins, people who lacked limbs, and tattooed people. Some of the shows consisted only of the "freak" person and the showman, whereas others had a handful of exhibited people.

Some argue that freak shows were in fact beneficial for the exhibited people since this meant a job and a steady income for them, rather than being institutionalized for their disabilities. Others argue that the showmen and managers exploited performers' disabilities for profit. In reality, both arguments are correct. In some cases, the manager would grant only food and accommodation to the performer, therefore exploit him/her. And in other cases, the performer would get a share of the profit as well.

With the dawn of the Information Age, both human zoos and freak shows have disappeared. The 21st-century people, who are more educated than ever, do not find any mystery or amusement in such exhibits. On the contrary, most people now find such events inhumane

and shameful because of their degrading nature. Nonetheless, this is already a part of our history. It is too late to fix this erroneous venture that our ancestors took part in, but with the past days gone, we continue our progress towards a more equal and humane world.

<https://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/features/human-zoos-a-shocking-history-of-shame-and-exploitation>

<https://timeline.com/human-zoo-worlds-fair-7ef0d0951035?gi=2013fa90e9e3>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/freak-show>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_zoo