

# A 1939 World's Fair Souvenir Plate

ON APRIL 30, 1789, George Washington was sworn in as the first President of the United States at Federal Hall on New York City's Wall Street. On the same day 150 years later, the New York World's Fair opened, in ostensible celebration of the earlier event. Both days are memorialized on a souvenir plate from the fair depicting Washington on a balcony gazing out toward the Trylon and Perisphere, the geometric odd couple that stood at the fairgrounds' heart.

It was common for world's fairs to celebrate some historic event. The 1876 Philadelphia fair and the 1889 Paris fair marked the centennials of the American and French revolutions, while Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 observed the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. Lacking a grander anniversary, the New York fair organizers settled on the sesquicentennial of Washington's inauguration, though they aimed to build an event that wasn't just commemorative. As the *Official Guide Book* put it, "Those who formulated the theme determined that emulation was the highest tribute—that the Fair should attempt to accomplish in our day what Washington and his contemporaries did in theirs. ...From this inspiring determination arose the slogan: 'Building the World of Tomorrow.' The eyes of the Fair are on the future."<sup>1</sup>

The organizers worked to ensure that every aspect of the fair was determinedly optimistic. Even its site was symbolic. Over the course of three-and-a-half years in the middle of the Great Depression, the fair rose out of the mournful heaps of the Corona dump in Queens, a landscape immortalized in 1925 in *The Great Gatsby* as a grim valley of ashes brooded over by an enigmatic billboard depicting the massive, bespectacled eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. In 1939, instead of Eckleburg's myopic stare, F. Scott Fitzgerald might have taken note of the proud, farsighted gaze of the approximately 65-foot-tall plaster statue of Washington by James Earle Fraser. It was planted on "Constitution Mall," facing the 700-foot-tall Trylon and 200-foot-in-diameter Perisphere—almost exactly the same stance and view depicted on the souvenir plate.

Seven "zones" radiated outward from the Trylon and Perisphere Theme Center, called "Democracy." For the Food Zone, industrial designer Russel Wright (whose iconic *American Modern* line of tableware was also launched that year) created a focal exhibit meant to illustrate "the progress made in the cultivation, preparation, processing, and distribution of food since 1789."<sup>2</sup> Wright, who had once worked as a set designer, built a series of playful displays to convey the facts and information that fair researchers had gathered. At one point, visitors arrived at "as hysterical a landscape as any surrealist ever conceived."<sup>3</sup> This diorama was loaded with symbols like winged lobsters to evoke the miracle of modern transportation; an avocado studded with five jewels to represent food's five nutritional elements (carbohydrates, proteins, fats, minerals, and vitamins); and a backward-spinning clock inside a can to express how "canning has perpetuated harvest times."<sup>4</sup>

Within the Food Zone, fairgoers visited dramatic displays such as Borden's "rotolactor," a revolving platform that could mechanically milk fifty cows in twelve minutes. Other exhibitors included the Continental Baking Company (showing off Wonder Bread in a building decorated with red, blue, and yellow balloons to recall the loaf's iconic packaging), Sealtest, Swift, Planter's, the Doughnut Company of America, Nabisco, and even a now-defunct enterprise called The George Washington Coffee Refining Company (maker of an early form of instant coffee).<sup>5</sup>

The elaborate exhibits and performances were designed to emphasize the health, hygiene, and efficiency of the various products and their producers. The overwhelming message? In the World of Tomorrow, food would come from factories, not farms, and we would all be better off for it. Not all visitors were impressed. Of his visit in May 1939, *New Yorker* writer E.B. White wrote of catching sight of "the white ball and spire...the banners flying from the pavilions" and romantically imagining that the world of tomorrow was a tournament field at Camelot. "A closer inspection, however, on the other side of the turnstile,



revealed that it was merely Heinz jousting with Beech-Nut—the same old contest on a somewhat larger field.”<sup>6</sup>

Food was all over the fair, not just confined to one zone. There were some twenty restaurants in the foreign government area alone. (After the fair, the operators of the restaurant in the French pavilion went on to establish Le Pavillon at 5 East Fifty-Fifth Street in Manhattan, one of the temples of French gastronomy in mid-twentieth-century United States.)

Despite the seeming emphasis on edification and high culture, the fair wasn't entirely lofty. It was, after all, still a fair. Stands offered hamburgers, frankfurters, sandwiches, Orange Crush, Coca-Cola, root beer, fruit drinks, ice cream, malted drinks, buttermilk, chocolate milk and milk, salt water taffy, popcorn, and “other things that go along with amusement—all inspected daily for quality and freshness, and all at standard prices.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to food, other corporate pavilions showed off equipment and materials that would usher the domestic kitchen into the future. In one, Westinghouse staged a daily “Battle of the Centuries” devoted to dirty dishes, in which

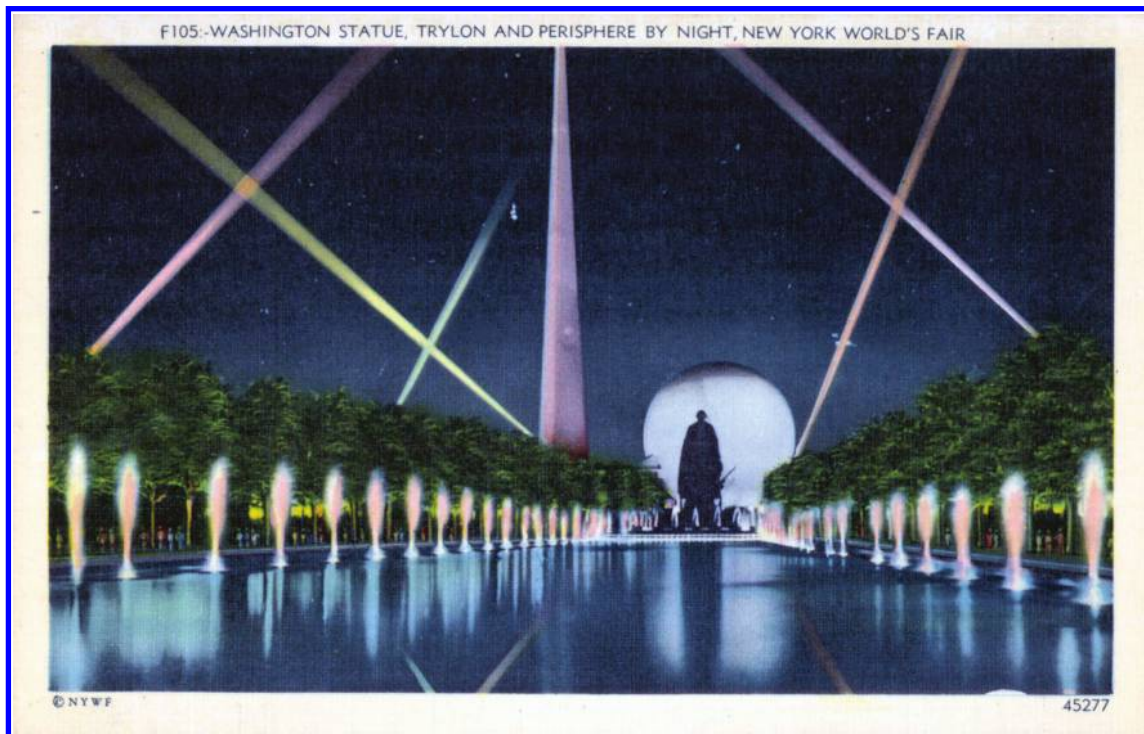
*Above: Blue-and-white, transfer-printed plate from the 1939 New York World's Fair. Made by Lamberton Scammell China, Trenton, New Jersey. Marked “Official Souvenir” on reverse.*

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dowdy “Mrs. Drudge” slaved over a steaming kitchen sink, while chic “Mrs. Modern” waited patiently for her electric dishwasher to do the work.<sup>8</sup>

Most souvenir plates from the fair display colorful, jazzy, Deco-Cubist designs, in keeping with the fashions of 1939. By contrast, the George Washington plate's graphic style and blue-and-white coloring would have been familiar to many a fairgoer's grandmother, except for its bizarre juxtaposition of an eighteenth-century gentleman with futuristic architecture—the Trylon and Perisphere, of course, but also GM's Futurama (at nine o'clock on the rim), the Amusement Area's famous Parachute Jump (at two o'clock), and the Marine Transportation Building (at four o'clock).

The invention of the transfer printing process in the mid-1700s, by which designs could be printed directly onto a ceramic surface, had ushered in an era of relatively inexpensive



(compared to hand-painted designs) image-bearing china. By the early 1800s, savvy English manufacturers began producing dishware designs specifically for the American market. These included images of buildings and landmarks (Mount Vernon, Harvard College), landscapes and natural wonders (Niagara Falls, the Hudson River), American cityscapes, and marvels of engineering (the Philadelphia Waterworks, the Erie Canal). Such dishes were not sold as souvenirs but rather were intended for daily use. As one early connoisseur noted, “It was the tableware of the great middle class throughout this country.”<sup>9</sup> Only late in the nineteenth century, after these scenic dishes had been relegated to attics in favor of more fashionable tableware, did they begin to be valued as collectibles and migrate to walls and shelves. With their detailed central images and elaborate rims, these scenic pieces influenced the design of many souvenir plates. Some accounts claim that the first true souvenir plates—sold singly for display rather than use—were made to commemorate London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, the first World’s Fair. The American-made 1939 Washington plate clearly fits into this visual tradition.

After Washington’s death in 1799, memorial images of him became hugely popular on all sorts of material, especially pottery. Pitchers, punchbowls, plates, and more bore his visage (and sometimes, curiously, his tomb). Because printing was so easy and cheap, Washington the man was soon transformed into a symbol.<sup>10</sup> The iconography culminated with several versions of an “Apotheosis,” in which the first President was shown ascending to heaven, accompanied by angelic personifications of such virtues as Faith, Love,

*Above: The Washington Statue, the Trylon, and the Perisphere by night, at the New York World’s Fair, 1939.*

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and Hope. It is this divine Washington, still benevolently concerned with the citizens he helped unite, who seems invoked by the image on the plate. As a statue on the fairgrounds, and a figure on this plate, the Washington of 1939 was depicted gazing intently into the future of the Republic he helped create—the “World of Tomorrow,” indeed. ●

#### NOTES

1. *Official Guide Book of the New York World’s Fair 1939* (New York: Exposition Publications, 1939), 35–36.
2. *Ibid.*, 81.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 82.
5. *Ibid.*, 82–91.
6. E.B. White, “The World of Tomorrow,” in *Essays of E.B. White* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 140.
7. *Official Guide Book*, 13–14.
8. Ethan Robey, “The Battle of the Centuries,” in *Biblion: The Boundless Library—Exploring the 1939–40 World’s Fair Collection*. New York Public Library. Accessed 21 March 2012. <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/biblion/worldsfair/enter-world-tomorrow-futurama-and-beyond/essay/essay-robey-dishwashing>.
9. R.T. Haines Halsey, *Pictures of Early New York on Dark Blue Staffordshire Pottery Together with Pictures of Boston and New England, Philadelphia, the South and West* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974; reprint of 1899 edition), xii.
10. For a fascinating study of Washington symbolism over time, see Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876–1986* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).