

Debut of the Goldfish

The 1893 World's Fair brought 51 nations, the Ferris wheel and the Japanese goldfish to Chicago.

By Peter J. Ponzio

A number of innovations were introduced at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, which was meant to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus, and was located in Chicago, Illinois. Among the many firsts were the introduction of the Ferris Wheel, the participation of Japan in a world's fair, full-size replicas of Columbus' three caravels, a record number of visitors at a fair (28 million), and the creation of a permanent park out of landfill and land reclaimed from Lake Michigan (Jackson Park). With more than 200 buildings specially constructed for the fair (covering more than 30 acres), 51 nations participating, and more than 40,000 workers helping to design and build the fair, it is not surprising that one exhibition has gone largely unnoticed over the years. The Columbian Exposition was also the site of the first formal exhibition of Japanese goldfish in the United States. This article will provide background for the goldfish exposition, as well as determine the fate of the Japanese goldfish at the end of the exposition.

A Colorful History

Before describing the fish brought to the fair, it might be helpful to trace the history of goldfish from their origins in China and their subsequent development in Japan. Goldfish originated from a fish that was similar to the common carp, and it was known by the scientific name of *Carassius carassius*. A later mutation resulted in the Gibel carp or golden carp (*Carassius auratus*), which is the present-day goldfish. The first goldfish were not golden in color, but instead a drab, olive green that enabled the fish to hide from predators. The first mutation was probably for color, with orange and red colors appearing on some fish. Eventually, the partially colored orange-and-white fish were collected by Buddhist monks in China and intentionally bred for their colors. The color pattern stabilized, and soon, orange, red-and-orange and red fish were cultivated.

The first partially red, orange, and orange-and-white fish were noted in the Jin Dynasty (265-419 C.E.). Reports of Buddhist monks cultivating these fish were noted during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.), and by the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1126 C.E.), monks and other breeders were cultivating these fish for use in temples and by Chinese royalty. By the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 C.E.), goldfish were kept and raised by common people. Goldfish were exported to Korea and Japan sometime during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 C.E.), and goldfish were reported in mainland Europe sometime in the 17th century. While the dates of

introduction of goldfish into Europe are fairly certain, the country of introduction is more difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

Goldfish officially arrived in America in 1874 or 1876 as a result of a diplomatic trip made to Japan by Rear Admiral Daniel Ammon. Admiral Ammon travelled to Japan to establish diplomatic relations and returned with common goldfish, among other gifts, from the Empire of Japan. The goldfish were presented to President Ulysses Grant, and they were later displayed in ponds located in the Nation's capital.

The United States Fish Commission, established by an Act of Congress in 1871, was responsible for developing scientific surveys relating to fisheries management and was run by the same individuals responsible for fisheries management at the Smithsonian Institution. The establishment of freshwater and marine aquaria for the U.S. Fish Commission at Central Station in Washington, D.C. by William P. Seal, in 1889, led to Mr. Seal's selection as the person responsible for constructing the aquaria and ponds used during the Columbian Exposition. Mr. Seal, aided by a Mr. Barrett, constructed the aquaria at the Fisheries Building and in the Pennsylvania exhibit. In addition, these gentlemen built a reflecting pool to house goldfish and other carp-like fish.



Detail of the Fisheries Building, showing bridge to Wooded Island (photo courtesy of *The World's Columbian Exposition*, 40.)

According to a report prepared by S.A. Forbes to the United States Fish Commission titled *The Aquarium of the United States Fish Commission at the World's Columbian Exposition*, which detailed the results of the aquaria constructed for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, 350 goldfish were exhibited at the Fisheries Building. Among the goldfish exhibited, were the following varieties of Japanese goldfish: *Carassius auratus*, Ryukin variety; Wakin variety; and Maruko variety.

The Japanese government, in addition to exhibiting goldfish, constructed a beautiful building on the Wooded Island to highlight Japanese culture. Given that the Columbian

Exposition marked the first time that the Empire participated in a World's Fair, the Japanese wished to display their culture in the most favorable light possible and to demonstrate to the West that Japanese culture was both ancient and refined. In fact, the Japanese government spent \$650,000 or the equivalent of approximately \$16 million in 2011 dollars.

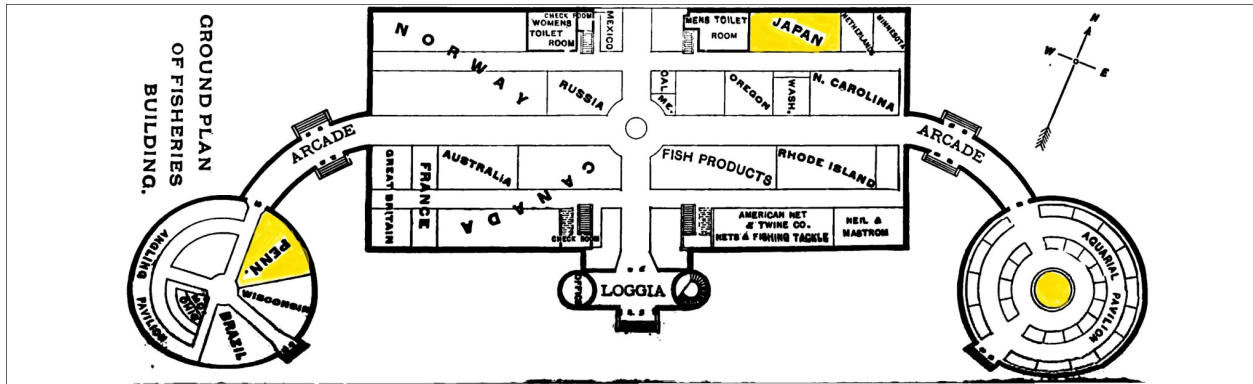
The Ho-o-Den, or “house made like the Phoenix,” was one of the highlights of the Exposition, and visitors could participate in a tea ceremony, view Samurai warriors and geisha, take a ride on a traditional Japanese fishing boat, or simply sit at their leisure on one of the shaded rest areas provided on the Island. The Island location was considered to be the prime piece of real estate at the fair, with a number of countries vying for the privilege of constructing their exhibit on the Island. Ultimately, the Japanese delegation was allowed to construct their exhibit on the Island, and it proved to be one of the main attractions.



Rest area at the entrance to the Wooded Island, (photo courtesy of *The World's Columbian Exposition*, 37.)

While there are no extant pictures describing the interior of the Fisheries Building, where goldfish were exhibited, we do have the testimony of Mr. S.A Forbes, Professor of Zoology at the University of Illinois, regarding the presentation of the fish at the Exhibition: “For the purely ornamental fish, like golden ides, goldfish and the more brilliant minnows, aquaria were decorated in a purely fantastic manner, with a view simply to heightening the artistic attractiveness of the collections.”

The layout of the Fisheries Building is shown in the accompanying illustration, with goldfish exhibits highlighted in yellow. The Japanese and Pennsylvania exhibits are clearly marked (both exhibited goldfish), along with a reflecting pool, located in the right rotunda, which contained goldfish, tench and golden ides (gold orfe).



Drawing courtesy of *Rand McNally's Handbook to the World's Columbian Exposition*: by Stuart Charles Wade, 144.

Charles Stuart Wade describes the reflecting pool on page 144 of the *Rand McNally's Handbook to the World's Columbian Exposition* as follows: "In the center of the polygonal building is a rotunda 60 feet in diameter, in the middle of which is a basin, or pool, 26 feet wide, from which rises a towering mass of rocks, covered with moss and lichens. From clefts and crevices in the rocks, crystal streams of water gush and drop to the masses of reeds, rushes and ornamental, semi-aquatic plants in the basin below. In this pool, gorgeous gold-fishes, golden ides, golden tench and other fishes disport. From the rotunda one side of the larger series of aquaria may be viewed. These are 10 in number and have a capacity of 7,000 to 27,000 gallons of water each."

The fair was dedicated on October 21, 1892, and it opened some six months later, on May 1, 1893. By the time the fair ended in October of 1893, more than 28 million visitors attended the fair, 200 hundred buildings were constructed (with all but two being demolished) and 40,000 workers were employed to build and take down the exhibits. Of the two buildings that remained after the fair, the Building of Fine Arts was eventually turned into the Museum of Science and Industry, and the other building, the Japanese Ho-o-Den, remained at the site of the fair until 1942, when it was somewhat ironically (given the Phoenix, for which it was named, arose from the ashes of fire) destroyed by a fire.



from http://ecuip.lib.uchicago.edu/diglib/social/worldsfair_1893/gallery/08-14_state.html

At the close of the fair, the various exhibits were packed up and returned to their places of origin. The Japanese delegation, wishing to create a lasting impression on the host country of the United States, presented the contents of their fisheries exhibit to the U.S. Fish Commission. Tarleton Bean, head of the U.S. Fish Commission, and Curator of the Fisheries Exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution, wrote a report to the Commission titled *Report of the Representative of the United States Fish Commission at the World's Columbian Exposition*, in which he lists the material donated by the Japanese government. That material filled 46 cases.

Along with the exhibits of fishing implements, vessels, and preserved specimens were the remaining live Japanese goldfish displayed at the exhibit. It may seem odd that Bean accepted these fish without having prior knowledge of their proper care and cultivation. In fact, Bean had two associates who helped construct the aquaria at the Exposition, Seal and Barrett, who worked for Bean at the United States National Museum. In fact, both Seal and Barrett had extensive knowledge of goldfish care--Seal as the curator of the aquaria at Central Station in Washington, D.C. where goldfish had been kept since 1891; Barrett as an importer of Japanese goldfish prior to 1894. Smith, in his book, *Japanese Goldfish: Their Varieties and Cultivation*, goes on to relate that the United States Bureau of Fisheries, "distributed Japanese goldfish gratis to applicants and hatched and sent out thousands each season."

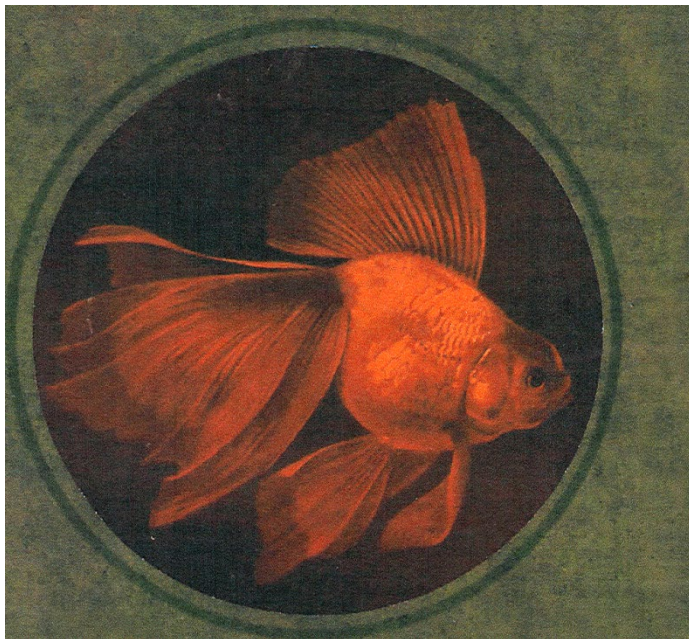
For many years after the close of the Columbian Exposition, rumors circulated in the goldfish community regarding the whereabouts of the Japanese fish. Some people believed that the fish found a home in the reflecting pools of the Lincoln Memorial. As fanciful as this narrative is, the reflecting pools were built in the 1920s, and the fish donated at the end of the 19th century. Others believed that the collection somehow wound up in the hands of private collectors, and that these collectors developed new varieties of goldfish from the original Japanese stocks.

The truth is, in some ways, more fitting and quite as charming as the rumors. The Columbian Exposition fish did journey to the Nation's capital but not to one of the reflecting pools or to private collectors. The fish found a new home in the National Museum, in what is now known as the Smithsonian Institution, under the care of Mr. Bean, Mr. Seal and Mr. Barrett.

The Progeny

Had the story of the Japanese fish ended at the Smithsonian, after a journey of thousands of miles and many years, it would have been a happy and successful ending. But the story did not end there. The progeny of the Japanese fish were cared for by Seal and Barrett, and their offspring were distributed across America. But this also was not the end of the story.

Seal and Barrett were possessed of that great American trait of stick-to-it-iveness; they raised their prized possessions and attempted to perfect them. Sometime after the turn of the century, they developed a new variety of goldfish which was derived from the original Japanese Ryukin stock. This new fish took the country by storm, and it was considered the achievement of perfection in the art of raising goldfish. In fact, the fish became so popular that it was known as the "World's Fair Fish" in common parlance. William T. Innes, in his book titled *Goldfish Varieties and Water Gardens* tells how this new fish was regarded "as a type of perfection that could not be improved upon." The variety, known as the veiltail, became the emblem of the Philadelphia Aquarium Society and later the Goldfish Society of America. It continues to be raised today by amateur breeders in the U.S. and Great Britain, and is one of two varieties of goldfish (the other being the comet, also likely developed by Seal and Barrett) developed in the U.S.



The original World's Fair Fish, a veiltail from the Fronts page of *Goldfish Varieties and Water Gardens* by William T. Innes

So, the journey of these fish from their native land of Japan to their adopted homeland in the United States is explained at last. The gift of the Japanese government found a home at the National Museum, and from there, made its way into the homes of millions of people in the U.S. It is estimated that more than 200 million goldfish are sold annually in the U.S. As anyone who has kept one of these ubiquitous pets can attest, we owe a profound debt of gratitude to the Smithsonian Institution, Bean, Seal and Barrett, whose dedication ensured that we have goldfish in America.

Peter J. Ponzio has raised goldfish for more than 40 years, when fancy goldfish were more difficult to acquire than they are today. Peter is one of the founding members of the American Goldfish Association (AGA) (americangoldfish.org), and he publishes their bi-monthly newsletter. He helped write the U.S. goldfish standards in 1996, with a revision in 2009 and 2014. He is a certified goldfish judge and author of *Spike's Goldfish Guide*, which was published by the MAKC. He is also an AKCA-certified judge and wrote the standard for judging Longfin koi in conjunction with Larry Christensen, Joe Pawlak, Myron Kloubec and Joel Burkard. Peter has judged at more than 60 goldfish and koi shows in the 20-plus years he has been judging.

When not judging goldfish or koi, Peter writes novels, stories and poems. Prior to teaching, Peter was a financial executive at a Fortune-500 firm.

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