

## EXHIBIT REVIEW

### *Miracle at Philadelphia*

"Miracle at Philadelphia," an exhibition sponsored by Independence National Historic Park (INHP) at the Second Bank of the United States, celebrates the Constitutional Convention of 1787. It is a multifaceted display that offers letters, journals, diary accounts, printers' proofs, broadsides, oil portraits, furniture, statues, free-standing metal sculpture, hands-on participatory displays with buttons and knobs, slide shows, and computers. Visitors are given an opportunity to append their signatures to the Constitution and to take home a clip-on lapel pin. INHP curators gave considerable care to the physical presentation of the material. They provided large and legible labels, and placed the documents at or near eye level, though the plexiglass protecting the documents often reflects the glare of the incandescent lights. Displays are positioned to maximize their accessibility to visitors. The U-shaped exhibition space encompasses six rooms in this rectangular building: two small rooms to the left of the foyer lead to the long, arched-ceiling central room stretching across the width of the building, beyond and behind which is a space subdivided for the slide and the slide-tape presentations. The last part of the exhibition is in one of the two rooms to the right of the foyer; the other room houses a bookstore suitably stocked with books and Constitutional materials. No catalogue accompanies the exhibit. Visitors make do with a sixteen-panel brochure (half of which is devoted to the exhibition) that they receive upon entering the building.

"Miracle at Philadelphia" begins with the story of the struggling and financially strapped Confederation disunited and unable to work effectively as a nation. In the small first room are several rare documents, including Elbridge Gerry's copy of the Articles of Confederation, a copy of the definitive treaty between Great Britain and the

United States, and John Nixon's copy of the Declaration of Independence. The second room focuses on individual nationalists and their concerns—an ineffectual, largely unsupported Congress, insufficient international recognition accorded the new and debt-ridden nation, and domestic problems that fostered localism within the states. The message in this room is carried by excerpts from their correspondence, and, perhaps to reinforce the sincerity of these men as much as to give visitors a sense of who these leaders were, the curators have hung portraits of several of these leaders on the opposite walls. The letters (drawn largely from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, American Philosophical Society, Library of Congress, and INHP collections) detail specific concerns. They deserve full reading, and are spaced to promote this. But curators have even considered the needs of visitors touring under time constraints—selected passages are silk-screened on the display panels, and visitors can skim those to gain a sense of the pressing concerns of the nationalists.

Since the first two rooms set the stage for the Constitutional Convention, it is easy to presume that the substantive issues raised here will be repeatedly addressed in the displays to come. Regrettably, this does not occur. "Miracle at Philadelphia" asks visitors to attest to the change not to analyze it.

The heart of the exhibition is in the long third and fourth rooms that stretch across the width of the building. The latter offers space for the two slide shows. The former, subdivided by column-flanked arched partitions that echo the interior architecture of the building, has several small displays that home in on specific elements. Two of these elements were the subject of lengthy and heated debates at the Convention, yet that they related to the issues which brought the delegates to Philadelphia is never cogently addressed. Unless visitors already possess an understanding of the complex perspectives held by delegates representing large or small states, slave or free states, industrializing or agrarian states, and unless viewers recognize how the resolutions of these debates relate to the problems that beset the Confederation, the exhibition becomes an interesting sequence of events rather than an intellectually challenging experience—a general narrative rather than an analysis of why the choices considered are indicative of specific responses to domestic and international problems.

Nonetheless, in physical terms, the space and the exhibition gadgets in the third room are impressive. Visitors are greeted by a modern

statue of Madison and copy of a chair next to a period desk on which are his invaluable detailed notes of the debates (on loan from the Library of Congress). Next is the first of the four partitions that march like sentinels down the center of the room. This one presents the two hotly debated alternatives and the final compromise reached on the issue of the legislature's composition. In a simple but effective display case the legislative seats that each state would have received under each of the three plans are color coded; yet the display sidesteps the underlying issues of power and control, the very concerns that consumed so much time and effort during weeks of debate. The second partition uses three panels on which a map of the thirteen states is painted to present the compromise reached on the issues of commerce and slavery. Visitors are encouraged to put themselves in the shoes of delegates and answer three questions upon which the debate hinged and in so doing slide the panels in or out until the knob lines up with the answer they have chosen; in practice, most visitors find this an exercise in how to make the coastline of the nation contiguous rather than a reason to ponder how the divisive issues led to a particular solution. That the delegates had finessed this problem rather than resolved it is presented on the opposite side of the panel where visitors are encouraged to push a button that illuminates a Civil War image. Yet the very introduction of just that war leaves the lingering impression that no other significant problems were also finessed. (At this point in the exhibition, according to the brochure, visitors were supposed to move into room four to view the slide show that gives various biographical details about the fifty-five delegates attending the Convention and then a slide-tape about the debates over the electoral college; instead, most visitors continue to work their way across room three and progress to the fourth room only afterwards. So shall this reviewer.) The third partition focuses on the mechanics of government and uses a balance scale surmounted by a type of ball—somewhat reminiscent of an orrery—out of which the states, represented by smaller balls, radiate. This device purports to depict the interdependent relationship of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. The image is misleading. Only the executive and legislative are balanced and the third component, the judiciary, rather than being interdependent, is totally detached and focuses on neither of the other two but instead peers upward through a magnifying glass at the states. The final partition presents

the work of the Committee of Detail that gave order and phrasing to the resolves. In addition to the silk-screened text of the resolutions at eye level, a waist-high case holds James Wilson's draft of the resolutions and the printer's proof. This part and the next are marvelously instructive and frequently hold visitors' attention for minutes on end as they study the evolution of the wording. The final part of this is a technological tour de force: three computer terminals visually demonstrate the refinement of the text. Phrases are highlighted, then deleted, and new words are dropped in. Facing the terminals is Benjamin Franklin's copy of the Constitution and below on either side is a desk at which the visitors may append their names to a scrolled list of signatories.

In the long fourth room of the exhibition are the slide and slide-tape presentations, both of which were produced by the American History Workshop. The brief slide show presents biographical data about the delegates. The information is unweighted and often inconsequential. Visitors are provided with comparative data about ages, educational levels, business interests, previous governmental positions, and local living arrangements of the delegates, as well as their subsequent political and economic careers. The slide show never suggests why this trivia will help viewers understand the political or social philosophies that informed the opinions of the individual delegates. The audio-visual loop in the adjacent room is also disconcerting. The topic is the debate over the electoral college. The slides switch with dizzying rapidity from one close-up of a baize-covered table to another while disembodied voices boom back and forth across the room. Visitors quickly lose track of who is saying what and are not told the whys and wherefores. That there was discussion and debate is more clearly brought out, but its import is less well conveyed.

The final room of the exhibition, located near the front of the building, uses a series of rotating panels to convey the issues related to passage of the Bill of Rights. On the opposite wall are broadsides, newspapers, letters, and pamphlets that focus on the ratification of the Bill of Rights. Surprisingly enough, few of the documents detailing the actual debate are displayed.

Overall, the impression left by "Miracle at Philadelphia" is that those who put together the exhibition for the INHP disagreed about the nature of the audience they were trying to reach. Thus, the initial portions showing the intensity of the concerns leading up to the

Constitutional Convention are not matched by an equally well-tailored exhibition that explores the debate over substantive issues. Important issues are trivialized in the effort to demonstrate that "high-tech" can be used to talk about how the compromises were reached. The visual displays are unusual and eye-catching but not always useful. In contrast, the oral presentations by the INHP staff who occasionally take a group through are far more sophisticated than the exhibit materials. For the celebrations of the Constitution's bicentennial, we, the people, need an exhibition that addresses our minds; we do not need mere entertainment.

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