

## Confection

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Since Valentine's Day the Field Museum has featured "Chocolate," an exhibit about the natural, economic, and cultural history of the delicious, and sometimes intoxicating, snack. Though Chocolate is designed to stimulate both your tastebuds and your mind, entertainment and education don't always mix well in this exhibit. Instead, two stories emerge: one pleasantly recounts chocolate's transformation from a bitter drink to the modern candy bar, while the other suggests the ugly consequences of this confection's production.

At first sight Chocolate seems to be a mild and pleasing concoction, exactly what one might have expected for an exhibit devoted to one of life's minor pleasures. The narrative follows the development of chocolate: first as a seed of the cacao plant originally found in the Americas; later imported into Europe by Spain, becoming a luxury for the well-to-do of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe; and finally, in egalitarian America, chocolate becomes available to one and all. One must exit at the museum's chocolate shop, which has become the ultimate interactive site, allowing every visitor the chance to purchase and eat the treat whose history they've just traced.

Objects and images support Chocolate's simple story. In the exhibition's first room, visitors file by life-size model of the cacao plant, its seeds, and see magnified views of the mites which fertilize the cacao. Then a spread of Meso-American artifacts, set in dim lighting against cocoa-colored walls, show how cacao was made into a bitter chocolate drink and how the drink was consumed. Visiting kids quickly shuffle cacao seeds at an interactive display where visitors are encouraged to count their cacao as money at the Aztec marketplace. A map depicts the seeds' travels from the Americas to Europe, where it is served in a liquid mixture sweetened by sugar. The exhibit's huge video screen shows the mixing in appetizing detail. Milady is shown in dishabille ingesting her morning dose of the sweet drink while an appreciative quote from the German poet, Goethe, completes the atmosphere of luxury and privilege. Period artifacts, particularly china, show the elegance surrounding the consumption of chocolate. In the next room, one arrives at a small section on the methods of chocolate manufacture, spies dozens of brands of chocolate bars, and scans reams of old-fashioned advertising. These panels lead up to a statement that World War I brought chocolate to everyone. The exhibit declares the triumphant success of the contemporary chocolate industry while the visitor learns about the global consumption of chocolate, complete with pictures of the luscious chocolate product farmed by healthy and busy Ghanaian farmers. Stools in the shape of bon-bons cluster around the happy final video about how everyone enjoys chocolate. Guests exit into the museum shop where caffeine-laden chocolate reinvigorates people's energy for the purchase of coffee table books by Abrams and chocolate products by Field. (Yes, Marshall Field I established both the museum and the department store.) Chocolate leads visitors down a straight and narrow exhibit, quite literally, and has been presented what appears to be a rather sweet tale.

Yet the story of Chocolate becomes a bit more biting when one traces the environmental aspect of chocolate production throughout the exhibit.

Tropical rainforests are the natural habitat of the cacao plant. These forests are threatened by economic development and the pressure to put resources to “productive” uses. The Field Museum recently has developed its environmental capacities, sending teams of scientists all over the world to do rapid assessment of environmental problems such as rainforest preservation. In Chocolate, attention is devoted to the relationship between cacao planting and rainforest preservation. Descriptive labels inform the viewer that, as a small tree, cacao can be grown under the cover of larger trees and thus can be helpful in the partial preservation of rain forests. Furthermore, cacao can serve as a barrier between dense human developments and the forest by being cultivated in zones at the rainforest’s edge. Yet while the exhibit points out that scientists are working to make it more possible for cacao to be grown in these environmentally-friendly modes, Chocolate’s description of environmental affairs is fairly uninformative. The viewer never learns how much land planted in cacao has replaced rain forests and how much has helped in rainforest preservation. Overall, the environmental text of the exhibit is phrased in a positive way, appropriate for a pleasant presentation. When these views are taken in the context of pleasing pictures of modern-day tropical farmers engaged in growing cacao, we aren’t troubled, but comforted by Chocolate’s continuing story.

However, a much darker picture of chocolate can be obtained by the visitor to the Field who reads labels and focuses upon social history. The second story of Chocolate, is not just richer in detail. It is a different story entirely, focusing on exploitation of people.

We begin with the bitter chocolate of tropical Meso-America which is said to be available to rich and poor alike. However, after the Mayans are conquered by the Aztecs of Mexico City and the highlands, cacao seeds travel as tribute, and are used as money. The consumption of the chocolate made from the seeds is limited to the upper and priestly classes. In 1492 the Spanish arrive in the New World, and soon engage in conquering, killing, and enslaving many of the indigenous Americans. The conquerors bring the bitter chocolate home to Spain. When mixed with sugar, another product of the slave system, chocolate becomes a sweet and expensive drink Europe’s finest and fairest sip the luxury from their delicate china cups and saucers.

At this point, Chocolate uses a large panel to address the issue of slavery. Because European diseases decimated indigenous populations of the Americas, African slaves were imported as another source of labor, cultivating crops such as tobacco, indigo, and the two ingredients essential to the exhibit: cacao and sugar. A tiny teaspoon of sugar is labeled to show the value of a slave’s daily labor on an 18<sup>th</sup> century sugar plantation, receiving gasps from visitors who spot it. In later years, cacao production is spread through the tropical world, but apparently remains connected with exploitation of human beings. A panel displays a 1910 letter by William Cadbury, the British producer of chocolates bearing his name, who proposes to boycott cacao grown on plantations with slave-like working conditions. The same year, the U.S. Congress votes to implement his proposed boycott by banning the importation of slave-grown cacao.

After traveling through the modern manufacture of chocolate, the theme of slave labor is introduced again at the very end of the exhibit. It is given an inconspicuous position, just as the chocolate store comes into view. Here another panel of text recognizes twenty-first century allegations of slavery in the production of chocolate. In response to current headlines reporting the exploitative use of child labor and even the trafficking and enslavement of children for cacao

production in West Africa, candy manufacturers have joined in the formation of a commission to investigate plantation labor practices. The industry has stated its commitment “to eradicate child and forced labor from cacao fields”. But the Field's exhibit downplays this issue almost to the point of invisibility. In tiny caramel-colored print on the final panel of the exhibit, the visitor may find:

An international program (supported by governments, nonprofit organizations, and chocolate companies) to study labor practices on 3,000 farms in Ivory Coast and Ghana began in the fall of 2001. But it will take time to assess labor conditions and develop an effective solution that eliminates the exploitation of children and addresses the interests of millions of farmers depending upon cacao for their livelihood.

After its bitter and its sweet passages, the exhibit this ends on this saccharine note. Though Chocolate directs the viewer to its website for further information about labor practices, the link has not been updated with current news. For more information, one can refer to the original news reports about chocolate and child enslavement at

[http://www.realcities.com/mld/krwashington/news/special\\_packages/taste\\_of\\_slavery/](http://www.realcities.com/mld/krwashington/news/special_packages/taste_of_slavery/) and see the American Chocolate Manufacturer's response at [http://www.chocolateandcocoa.org/News/labor\\_issue.htm](http://www.chocolateandcocoa.org/News/labor_issue.htm).

All in all, the exhibit is quite unsatisfying. It has tried to move in two directions at once: It both expresses concerns about environmental and social issues and at the same time attempts to be jolly and contented with a nice product now available to all of us in the First World. The net result is to darken the good feelings while evading legitimate questions. The Field Museums can tell about adult and serious issues. It can also reach out for childlike good humor. But discussions of slavery, disease, and exploitation do not mix well with pleasantries. This exhibit tries hard to do several worthwhile things, but falls short.

Chocolate at the Field costs \$6 in addition to regular museum admission. Closing in Chicago on December 31, 2002, this exhibit is scheduled to travel to ten other museums around the country.

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