

# Collecting and Creating Canada: A Review of Recent Work on the History of Museums and Canadian Culture

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## Collecting and Creating Canada: A Review of Recent Work on the History of Museums and Canadian Culture

Deciding what is 'art' is not only a matter of academic tradition, semantics, or personal preference, it is also a political act.<sup>1</sup>

CANADIANS UNDERSTAND THEIR CULTURE, artistic and otherwise, to be, in many ways, a political issue, and many have come to consider the state's involvement on its behalf necessary. Museums, where curators and administrators must wrestle with the political acts of identifying and defining culture, in connection not only with art, but also with the equally contentious history and natural sciences, are political and cultural minefields. One might think that, for this reason, historians of Canadian culture would seize upon these flashpoints and provide us with vital insights into the relationship between the State, the Arts and the 'Canadian Identity'. Instead, most scholars are more fascinated by the high-profile Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the films of Denys Arcand or *Maclean's* magazine. Within the larger field of Canadian culture, the history of museums has fallen to those who themselves work in museums. Academics employed in universities and colleges might do well to incorporate the institutionalization of Canadian culture, particularly prior to the Massey Commission, into their studies. The history of museums cuts across social, political and cultural history, and raises important questions that all who are interested in Canadian culture should consider.

The mid-20th century saw the centralization and the professionalization of the arts in Canada. This period has been understood by Canadian historians in different ways, but often with the common intention of linking Canadian culture to Canadian identity. From different perspectives, historians have tried to describe how culture and identity were shaped before and after the Second World War, and to determine the role of the state in that process. In their analyses, historians have overlooked some of the ways culture is institutionalized, the ways in which we gather, display and interpret our history and our art. However, before we overemphasize the paucity of work on museums, let us consider and appreciate what has already been written.

A few histories of museums in Canada do exist, but they are not all of equal calibre, and the occasional absence of analysis prevents their entry into the Canadian cultural debate. To peruse the past decade: the writer Lovat Dickson gave us *The Museum Makers: The Story of the Royal Ontario Museum* in 1986; in 1988, McGill-Queen's offered Susan Sheets-Pyenson's *Cathedrals of Science: The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums during the Late Nineteenth Century*; the same year brought K.M. Molson's *Canada's National Aviation Museum: Its History and Collections*; and in 1992 U.B.C. anthropologist Michael M. Ames assembled a collection of his essays, entitled *Cannibal Tours and Glass*

1 Michael M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver, 1992), p. 154.

*Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums.*

If we go all the way back to 1973, we also find Archie F. Key's *Beyond Four Walls: The Origins and Development of Canadian Museums* (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1973), a detailed, if at times rambling, exploration of each province's and territory's museum development. After the first 100 pages, which have almost nothing to do with Canada, Key finally addresses his subject in the remaining 250. According to Key, the creation of museums in Canada was hampered by "public and private apathy, lack of funds, and appropriate buildings" (p. 9) and we thus owe what we have to the dedication of a few. Prior to the 1960s, governments at all levels were reluctant, to say the least, to offer assistance.

And yet, isolated and unsupported as they may have been, those brave few managed to accumulate some significant collections. The National Gallery, one of the lucky recipients of federal money, was founded in 1880. In 1903, according to Key, the New York State Museum conducted a survey that credited the collection of Canada's National Museum (an institution which did not open until 1911, and did not receive Parliamentary recognition until 1927) with "the most complete specimens illustrative of Canadian geology, zoology, botany, archaeology and ethnology in the world" (p. 127).

Lovat Dickson's history of the Royal Ontario Museum, *The Museum Makers* (Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum/University of Toronto Press, 1986), describes the evolution of a prestigious collection (albeit one whose source is not Canadian), also under the guidance of but a few hands. At the turn of the century, Charles Currully began the collecting during his travels and work as an archaeologist's assistant in Egypt, while Sir Edmund Walker, general manager of the Canadian Bank of Commerce in Toronto, looked after the fundraising. Together with a small group of supporters, they built the collection and the facilities of what became the Royal Ontario Museum. This was no small feat. And it was no small achievement. Extensive renovations and additions completed in 1937 made the ROM the British Commonwealth's largest museum outside of London. Dickson's *Museum Makers* is a story, and an interesting one, but, with little analysis or attempt to place the characters and events in a broader framework, it is limited in its usefulness to historians. What is of use is the vast amount of information he presents as he brings his tale through to the 1980s.

The story told in Molson's *Canada's National Aviation Museum* (Ottawa, National Aviation Museum, 1988) is a similar one. It was again a case of a few dedicated people — of whom Molson, as founding curator, is one — initiating and struggling to build a meritorious collection. The book itself is beautiful; each piece of aircraft in the museum's holdings is described and illustrated with a photograph, many of them in colour. The 80 pages of history that precede the collection listings are specific only to the museum's development, with little commentary on the broader environment or the philosophy of museum-building. Dickson's and Molson's contributions are intended as sources of basic information rather than as interpretive histories.

In sharp contrast, *Cathedrals of Science* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988) is a broader history of museums in the colonies of the British Empire. Sheets-Pyenson uses a core/hinterland model to link the

establishment of museums with the imperial attitude of “extending the frontiers of civilization” (p. 12). The “museum movement” that circled the globe among the educated and monied classes in the late 19th century rescued Canadian museums from their cramped spaces, poor facilities and general lack of funding. They remained, nevertheless, dependent on the popularity of the museum movement elsewhere. That movement waned quickly at the “core” and had faded by World War I. Sheets-Pyenson argues that Canadian museums were then disadvantaged by their “intensely strong association with individuals and their particular aspirations”, and that this dependence “was no substitute for a coherent plan or program of museum development” (pp. 98-99).

Sheets-Pyenson, who also authored a history of McGill University’s Peter Redpath Museum, clearly supports the existence of museums. Dickson’s love for museums, particularly the ROM, is evident in every sentence of *The Museum Makers*. Molson’s interest is clear from his active role. Key widely quotes intellectuals speaking to the importance of preserving one’s heritage within museums. Each of these authors reminds us, implicitly or explicitly, of the importance of museums. Did we need such reminding in the 1970s? Do we now? Michael M. Ames might argue that we do.

Ames is a Professor at the University of British Columbia and has directed its Museum of Anthropology since 1974. His 1992 collection of related essays, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1992), raises and explores many issues of history, culture and heritage in modern Canada. One of the most obvious issues is the question of funding. State funding can bring artists and curators unwanted political pressures, even the potential for censorship. Politicians mainly interested in promoting their own agendas or public careers may exert pressure on artists to aid them in achieving their goals in return for government support. Should we allow the state the right (if not the ability) to define our identity as well as fund it? Would that not give a very small elite more cultural clout than they deserve? Such a situation is the antithesis of a culture composed of individual expression, and one which artists resist at every turn. Then again, it sounds not unlike the role played by the Massey Commission which, in the view of George Woodcock, rescued Canadians from a “cultural desert”.

Ames also worries about the extreme opposite of state control: he observes in modern society a “tendency to view citizens as consumers, to redefine cultures as commodities, to measure value by public opinion polls, referenda, head counts, and sales receipts” (p. 166). Ames acknowledges the “paradoxical roles” museums play, “sometimes reflecting popular opinion and at other times guiding it” (p. 153). As museums try to serve a population more interested in entertainment than education, and to satisfy a government’s political goals, will they compromise themselves to maintain high attendance rates and adequate funding? Will a popular culture that spurns societal self-reflection determine what we hold to be our finest achievements? what we consider to be our identity? What might happen to history in the presence of mass culture that is only concerned with the most current of events, styles and issues?

To properly consider these questions today, it is reasonable to uncover the

motivations and expectations of the “the museum makers” as we ponder our own. Where do museums fit in our society and culture? If the State has played such a meager role, perhaps historians’ focus on government involvement in Canadian culture is somewhat misplaced. Until historians explore the subject more thoroughly, all these questions are little more than rhetoric. Instead of exploring, however, historians have frequently avoided museums as subjects of study.

For example, Mary Vipond’s *The Mass Media in Canada*, published in 1989, focusses on the role of the state in small-‘c’ culture, specifically the mass media.<sup>2</sup> She allows the mass media to represent Canadian culture as a whole, and intentionally leaves to the side other forms. Her own observation makes the limitations of her study clear: “A good proportion of [the \$2.5 billion the federal government spends on “culture”] is spent on parks, museums, archives and other areas that do not concern us here”.

Similarly, Paul Litt’s study, *The Muses, The Masses, and the Massey Commission* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992), does not address squarely the creation of museums. At one point, Litt begins a discussion of museums, referring, in passing, to their history of financial difficulty, but he does not bring it to any conclusion. It may not be possible to do so, for, while the history of Canadian culture is often placed, legitimately, in the context of pre- and post-Massey Commission, the development of museums seems to stand outside its effects. They were struggling before 1951 and they were still struggling afterwards. Despite the report’s recommendations concerning these institutions, other factors must be involved to account for their postwar neglect, or even to argue for the perpetuation of the spirit of the commission when funding eventually arrives. As Litt asks:

Is it realistic to suggest, as [Commissioner Fr. Georges-Henri] Levesque did in his memoirs, that the government was still implementing the Massey Report when it built a new National Museum and National Gallery in the 1980s? (p. 246).

Litt’s work also underlines, more indirectly, the intentionally-constructed nature of Canadian culture in the wake of the Massey Commission. The commissioners’ attitudes towards creative culture, their “liberal humanism”, reflected their background and that of most leading figures in the political arena, but not the reality of the diversity of what Litt calls Canadian “social culture”. Nevertheless, with the support of the cultural elite, they were in a position to shape not only the arts, but ideas of Canadian identity as well, justifying a strong role for the state in the process.

An earlier work, George Woodcock’s *Strange Bedfellows: The State and the Arts in Canada* (Vancouver and Toronto, Douglas & McIntyre, 1985), deserves mention for its inclusion of museums in the Canadian cultural conversation. Among other artistic organizations, he discussed museums as good examples of how Canadian

2 Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada* (Toronto, 1989).

citizens have had to develop small-scale, local organizations with the support, more often than not, of volunteers. With the possible exception of its support of the National Gallery, the federal government set a miserly example that most provincial and municipal governments followed (p. 32). Woodcock's purpose, however, was not to describe a history or question the process of defining one's culture; rather, he was venting his frustration with the federal government at their continued reluctance to fund the arts.

Woodcock's real concern was that, although from premodern days societies had recognized the importance of their artists and had properly supported them, Canada seemed in danger of losing sight of the significance of the role played by artists in reflecting a distinctive Canadian culture. He praised the Massey Commission for having the courage, "in the cultural desert of Canada", to "decide what seemed to be good for the arts and suggest that what was good for the arts was good for the country" (p. 51). It is not clear why Woodcock chose to insist that the state must assume the role of patron of the arts, particularly as he did not beat a nationalist drum; rather, he stressed the local and global aspects: "[a]rt begins with the individual insight and proceeds to the universally understood truth, but it can only do so through the community to which the artist belongs". Moreover, he himself cited examples of the strength and success of local organizations, such as "the Ontario Society of Artists, founded in 1872, which supported an art school that, in 1911, became the Ontario College of Art" (p. 32). Perhaps such cases indicate alternate models of sustaining artistic culture besides reliance on governments.

Our discussions of culture need to stretch to consider both public and private expressions. Museums are full of the cultural products of individuals as well as of societies. When we talk about Canadian culture, our frequent preoccupation with American influence prevents us from viewing citizens as active participants in their own self-expression; we assume that what they are exposed to in public forums is received unfiltered into their private minds. In her *Making Culture: English Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990), Maria Tippett attempts to overcome the bias against private culture, although she focusses on Anglo-Celtic Protestant Canada, and thereby excludes large sections of the country. Based on primary sources from coast to coast, *Making Culture* challenges Woodcock's assumption that before the Massey Commission's 1951 report and subsequent federal assistance to the arts, Canadians were an uncultured lot and the nation a cultural desert. Tippett replaces "uncultured" with "amateur", and details the artistic expressions of Canadians in the 19th and early 20th centuries, from the individual home to the broader community. What the Massey Commission, the Canada Council and continued state involvement achieved for the arts in Canada, she argues, was their professionalization. Initiatives on the part of cultural nationalists in the early post-war period organized rather than created. Tippett's approach not only gives "ordinary" Canadians the credit they deserve, but also places post-war Canadian culture within a history and tradition that make it comprehensible.

To a certain extent, Paul Litt also subscribes to the view that the rise of more public and professional cultural expressions signified more cultural activity on the part of Canadians. Dividing the public and private, the professional and the

amateur, and allotting greater legitimacy to the former in each case is not justifiable. Whose history are we trying to tell? Scholars tend to create such divisions because they are concerned with an idea of “national culture” and in need of a way to define it. The inherent difficulty in such an idea is that, realistically, no one lives or expresses oneself in a national context; people’s lives and identities are far more local in nature. The existence of an elite artistic class does nothing to change that.

In our search to find and measure Canadian culture, why have we not looked more closely at museums? Why do otherwise thorough works like Litt’s and Vipond’s consciously exclude them? Museums are institutions that not only touch the questions of state funding and national identity, but also complicate the content/medium/audience interchange in an important way. Museums developed in Canada in the late 19th century, at a time when their previous function (in both Europe and North America), which was to amuse, was being replaced by the more moral concern: to educate.<sup>3</sup> The medium and the content of museums not only vary enormously, but carry with them the weight of authority, something that works of art or historical artifacts do not necessarily hold outside that context. It is also an authority that television and print media, even in their factual journalism, do not share.

As Michael Ames has suggested, it is, nevertheless, an authority that is problematic, because of “the simple fact that [museums] are the self-appointed keepers of other people’s material and self-appointed interpreters of others’ histories. They circle around the question of who controls the rights to manage and interpret history and culture” (pp. 139-40). Historians and other academics who would seek to claim that interpretive right, in attempting to define and explain Canadian culture, have, for the most part, neglected the institutions that struggle with the same question.

I invite scholars of Canadian culture, its history and its present, to take the information already uncovered and incorporate it into the work on the arts and the media. The works discussed in this review raise many possibilities for developing new insights into the relationship between the State, the Arts and the ‘Canadian Identity’: Susan Sheets-Pyenson and Michael Ames certainly give us plenty to think about. Even the less analytical works have something to offer in this regard: for example, never having focussed on the world of aviation, I had no idea that, in the middle of the Depression, this country transported more air freight than any other, or that “per capita more Canadians own or fly aircraft than any other people in the world”.<sup>4</sup> Without a museum, would anyone but aviation buffs discover these tidbits overlooked by historians? Think of the way the railway became a metaphor, almost an ideology for conceptualizing Canada; what insights might come from a parallel image of the airplane? Moreover, what impact did such early enthusiasm for aircraft have on the railway?

Finally, those who try neatly to connect Canadian culture, especially the arts,

3 Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of Science*, p. 4.

4 Molson, *Canada’s National Aviation Museum*, pp. 6-7.

with Canadian nation building should reexamine the conventional wisdom that such culture is the glue that holds a country together in the context of Canadian history. And, above all, culture, perhaps especially in the Canadian case, must be recognized as more than artistic expression in its refined forms. In expanding definitions of culture, religious culture, political culture, economic culture and others must be added to the picture. Canada, from politics to demographics, defies traditional definitions of nationhood.<sup>5</sup> Forcing traditional models of cultural nationalism is surely doomed to prevent rather than produce valuable insights.

The past year has been a quiet one in the history of culture in Canada, in all its manifestations. This is unfortunate, not only because it is a fascinating topic, but also because we have left the field in a very incomplete state. We have only just begun to uncover the artistic and political inspirations that have shaped Canadian culture. Even the basic terms of the debate, namely “Canadian” and “culture”, are still defined in narrow and sometimes exclusionary ways. A successful, insightful exploration of the history of museums necessitates a more carefully considered discussion of what we mean by these terms. And the institutionalization of the many sides of culture in the form of museums is a relatively unexplored chapter of Canadian history that merits more attention.

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5 Richard Collins, a British scholar at the London School of Economics, deserves a word in this debate. He challenges the CBC credo that “there can be no political sovereignty without cultural sovereignty”. While he agrees that Canada lacks a clear national culture with the usual symbols and myths, he believes Canada’s unity rests in other social institutions, especially in the political sphere. See his *Culture, Communication, and National Identity: The Case of Canadian Television* (Toronto, 1990).