

Museums of History, Personal Histories of Museums

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Museums of History, Personal Histories of Museums

CANADA'S MUSEUMS HAVE DRAWN CONSIDERABLE ATTENTION of late. If nothing else, they have been controversial. Voices rose in protest over the recent renaming of the Canadian Museum of Civilization to the Canadian Museum of History and the construction of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg has attracted criticism on numerous fronts. An eye cast over the past quarter-century would spy a series of similar incidents. In 2009, a living history museum in Ontario was criticized for staging a medieval fair in a faux-19th century setting. Around the country, museum governance has also come under fire. But the most substantial protests have revolved around exhibits and curatorial decisions. Among the most famous examples, Canadian museums have faced protests over *Into the Heart of Africa*, *The Spirit Sings*, commemorating the Holocaust, and depictions of war crimes at the Canadian War Museum. Many of these controversies implicitly involve competitions over who "owns" aspects of Canada's past. But more fundamentally, they mark shifts in the values of Canadian society. Museums and their exhibits, as well as protests against them, reflect the societies that build and patronize them. When the values of those societies change, it is only natural that once-acceptable exhibits and practices will seem out of touch. But understanding these historical changes can only follow from a recognition that museums themselves have a history. What they display and how they display it, the growth of their collections, their place in the community, and even their credibility and legitimacy, are all products of history.

A decade ago, very few books on the history of Canadian museums existed. Certainly, individual institutions produced a handful of in-house retrospectives. However, anyone interested in a critical study of the development of museums in Canada had to rely on a small number of scholarly articles or on primary sources, such as the Massey Report or the 1932 report on Canadian museums compiled for the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Archie Key's *Beyond Four Walls: The Origins and Development of Canadian Museums* is an important exception to this rule.¹ Published in 1973, Key's survey of Canadian museums large and small was unique and revealing in its day, even though now it offers only a dated reading of Canada's museum history. In more recent years, inspired in part by the so-called "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s, but also by interdisciplinary developments in art history and the histories of science and anthropology, scholars have recognized museums as important subjects for critical inquiry.² Museum studies and public

1 Archie F. Key, *Beyond Four Walls: The Origins and Development of Canadian Museums* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973).

2 Among recent works, see Michelle Hamilton, *Collections and Objections: Aboriginal Material Culture in Southern Ontario, 1791-1914* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010) and Alison K. Brown, *First Nations, Museums, Narrations: Stories of the 1929 Franklin Motor Expedition to the Canadian Prairies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014). See also the special issue of *The Public Historian* – "Public History in Canada" (guest editor Lyle Dick) 31, no. 1 (February 2009). See in particular the five essays in the section "Canadian Museum and Historic Site Reviews."

history programs expanded alongside programs in information science, making the histories of these institutions more pertinent. Historians have recognized museums as places where national identity is displayed and expressed. And so they have examined the politics of collecting and display, often revealing museums to be sites of conflict and accommodation between competing worldviews. Ideology, politics, class, gender, and race have turned museums, at least in academic minds, from stuffy places with glass display cases into important sites and even agents of cultural change. The idea that museums are sites of conflict and accommodation is not unique to Canada. The field of museum history is in its infancy in this country, but more robust national dialogues exist around the world. Canadian scholars are picking up on an international literature that emerged organically from discussions of social memory and heritage, including the work of thinkers such as Tony Bennett, Patrick Wright, Roy Rosenzweig, David Lowenthal, and Raphael Samuel. At the same time, Canadian scholars are struggling to define a Canadian museum experience and trace a history that is more than a simple offshoot of these international trends.

McGill University historian Brian Young's study of Montreal's McCord Museum was one of the earliest of this new wave of museum histories. Published in 2000, *The Making and Unmaking of a University Museum: The McCord, 1921-1996* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000) traces the history of the McCord from its foundation in 1921 by lawyer and philanthropist David Ross McCord until 1996 when the position of museum archivist was abolished. Along the way, Young treats his readers to insights into university and cultural politics through the middle decades of the 20th century. But, most importantly, Young inserts a political message into the history he tells. Despite entreaties from colleagues to let old fights die, Young's history is a recounting of institutional infighting over access and control of an important part of Montreal's and indeed Canada's heritage. This is a book populated by heroes and villains that makes for engaging reading – and a deeply political account in which Young takes sides.

Young is a historian of Montreal. He has no particular expertise in the study of museums or museum history, with previous works documenting the business career of George-Étienne Cartier, Montreal's Sulpician Seminary, legal codification in Lower Canada, and the Mount Royal Cemetery. This is evident in the manner in which Young traces the development of the McCord. He shows little interest in the theoretical approach to display and the categorization of knowledge that emerged among Canadian historians during the 1990s. His focus is on the institutional relationship between the museum and its parent university. This is Young's entry to the field of museum history: the McCord is a Montreal institution, as is McGill. Situated within sight of the main gates to the university and housing an impressive collection of Canadiana, the McCord ought to have been a gateway between university learning and the public. One might also expect it to have been a central feature of one of Canada's top institutions of higher learning. According to Young, it has not and this is his lament. As he argues, the marginalization of the work of museums is part of a larger paradox: a "growing public perception of the past and yet, within institutions, marginalization of the intellectual workers, such as curators and archivists" who guard and protect our knowledge of the past (3). Later, he comments that this crisis is indicative of a broader demotion of professions crucial

to Canadian cultural life that is part of the ongoing restructuring of our national and cultural institutions. And thus Young's example of the McCord can be read as a road map for understanding the marginalization of knowledge professionals at other archives, museums, libraries, and even universities.

Despite the obvious parallels to broader anti-intellectualism in North American public institutions, and despite Young's repeated reminders of this fact, *The Making and Unmaking of a University Museum* remains a local study. Young does not fully set struggles within the McCord in the larger intellectual context of Canadian museums or universities. The result sometimes is a frustratingly narrow account. A case in point is the attention he pays to gender. No one could read this book and not come away with the sense that women were fundamentally important to the life of the McCord and that gender expectations played a central role in its fate. Gender norms help explain the marginalization of the museum within the university, where the largely male administration and professoriate looked down on the public education role of the museum. It often fell to women to champion the McCord in the face of masculine apathy. Isabel Dobell, for instance, pressured McGill to re-open the McCord to the public after decades of a shuttered existence. Important roles played by women such as Dobell mirror the museum roles of other Canadian women of the same era, including Ruth Home in Ontario.³ This is a small critique of a fascinating account, but casting a wider net might have strengthened Young's broader argument about the dwindling respect he sees for cultural and intellectual workers across the continent. Women played a central role in many North American museums, and gender dynamics similarly structured the lives and (sometimes) the demise of other museums. Such an approach might also have suggested where to begin the search for the border between studies of museums in general and their specific, Canadian historical development.

On the surface, a more recent book takes a similar approach to museum history. Lianne McTavish's *Defining the Modern Museum: A Case Study of Challenges of Exchange* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) is also a case study of a particular museum. McTavish devotes her book to the development of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, and uses it to explore how modern museums developed as institutions. Like Young's study, hers is an institutional history that has implications beyond the walls of one particular museum. A professor of the history of art and design at the University of Alberta, McTavish brings to her study an interdisciplinary approach rooted in the revisionist interpretations of museums that emerged during the 1990s. At base, she argues that the modern museum can be "simultaneously constraining and enabling to various groups" (5). McTavish, moreover, takes exception with critics of modern museums, including Young, who decry the commercialization of museum collections, a trend evident since the 1980s that has allegedly turned scientific museums into an extension of the entertainment industry. In perhaps the strongest chapter in the book, chapter two on visual culture, McTavish demonstrates that museums have long been devoted to amusing the

3 Ruth Home left the Royal Ontario Museum in 1945 and became curator of the Jordan Historical Museum. She was instrumental in organizing the Museums Section of the Ontario Historical Society.

public. Museums once trained people to see scientifically by encouraging learning through the observation of artefacts. What has changed, she argues, is the status of vision, which is no longer valued in popular culture as a positive tool for education. Without using this specific language, she seems to suggest that postmodern society has equated the visual with the superficial. “The visual perception of North American mass media,” she writes, “is popularly portrayed as a negative act that . . . lulls viewers into a state of numbness” (69). This is a dubious and controversial claim that McTavish does not adequately explain.

Despite these attempts to draw explicit connections between a 19th- and early 20th-century museum and postwar museological developments, it is hard to reconcile the title of McTavish’s book with its content. Indeed, *Defining the Modern Museum* does not offer a clear definition of a modern museum. McTavish’s study ignores the wide range of institutions we collect under the rubric “museum.” It focuses instead on a single museum, but only up until the Second World War, before many of the important postwar initiatives that modernized Canadian museums occurred. The book’s subtitle, on the other hand, “A Case Study in the Challenges of Exchange,” more clearly identifies the content. McTavish makes an interesting case for the importance of studying exchanges of artefacts between museums. She argues that exchanging specimens between museums was neither simple gift-giving nor capitalist trade aimed at accumulation and profit. Instead, the process of exchange helped to develop the museum as a series of relationships among social groups, established by the circulation of objects between them. “To a large degree,” McTavish writes, “exchange itself was the goal, especially for fledgling organizations” (45). Placing specimens in the exchange networks of established institutions gave value to those specimens when they became integrated with more prestigious collections around the world. These exchange networks drew this one Canadian museum into an international system of knowledge. Science and scientists (actually hobbyists and amateur collectors) established their legitimacy through community building. This is an innovative way to see the concept of “museum.” Yet while McTavish claims this vantage point decentres the importance of preservation in the meaning of “museum,” it must be noted that legitimacy and knowledge remained tied to artefacts. Historians of science, moreover, might recognize this same process of community building, which has been going on since at least the Renaissance. Apothecaries, doctors, and men of learning regularly traded specimens for centuries, a practice that actually lies behind the birth of the modern institutions we recognize as museums.⁴

McTavish is not a historian by training, a point she makes clear in her introduction. She revisits the point again in her final paragraph, where she indicates a degree of naïveté about historical method. Her understanding of historical “documents” appears simplistic in its focus on official records, but at the same time reveals an astute awareness of how archival holdings can shape research and conclusions. For McTavish, the New Brunswick Museum’s archives “supported

4 See, for example, Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Angela Byrne, *Geographies of the Romantic North: Science, Antiquarianism, and Travel, 1790-1830* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

research on the rich history of the institution” but fell silent on many other questions (9). But her claim that her omission of decades of historical development from her narrative encourages us to think about historical “messiness” runs counter to the theoretical literature on memory, heritage, and historiography. Moreover, McTavish’s understanding of historical method affects the quality of the historical conclusions she draws. Again, gender serves as a case in point and, as with Young, the attention played to gender dynamics is a real strength of this book. Increasing professionalization, McTavish notes, went hand-in-hand with the marginalization of women’s contribution to the museum: “The professionalization of museums included the suppression of women’s long-standing contributions as well as their ‘feminine’ identities” (103).⁵ This is a conclusion historians of gender will recognize from studies of the professionalization of medicine and the same process that unfolded in the development of the historical profession itself. Yet, apparently missing the context of intellectual and cultural life in Canada more broadly, McTavish fails to draw the connections and link the museum’s historical development to shifts in cultural values. Similarly, her conclusions regarding the connections between museums, historical societies, and libraries mirror the international, especially British, literature on antiquarianism and natural history without drawing the connection. This is an omission that detracts from an otherwise sound argument about museum work in the first half of the 20th century.

McTavish’s lack of attention to period context reveals itself in another way. *Defining the Modern Museum* is a personal book, in much the same sense as the book by Brian Young. McTavish inserts herself into the narrative, engaging in a conversation with her readers by highlighting her approach, her conclusions, and what she wants readers to take from her argument. Unfortunately, that attention to the personal side is not extended to the subjects of her study. McTavish’s networks of exchanges are institutional in nature, devoid of personality and humanity. Even though the New Brunswick Museum was dominated through much of this period by J.C. Webster (and his wife Alice Lusk Webster), few of Webster’s sometimes-prickly personal characteristics appear in the book. This seems to have been a conscious decision on McTavish’s part, but it is an approach that denies past individuals their humanity. Moreover, given the tiny scale of Canada’s heritage world before the Second World War, it obscures the deeply personal and class-based nature of the artefact exchanges that are central to the book’s argument. If, as McTavish comments on page 31, exchanges served to enhance individuals’ status (or perhaps class position), then it follows that exploring their personal motivations would greatly enhance our understanding. It might also truly make the narrative “messy.” Perhaps these historical critiques are unfair to a book that was written “primarily as an intervention in critical museum theory” (21), rather than a historical account of the development of a museum. But the historical approach she takes demands greater contextualization and attention to historical method to make it a fully satisfying argument for many historians.

5 A recent virtual exhibit highlighted the efforts of women collectors to promote and shape the New Brunswick Museum. See Bonnie Huskins, “Progress and Permanence: Women and the New Brunswick Museum: 1880-1980,” *The Public Historian* 31, no. 1 (February 2009): 129-36.

A third recent work on museum history, Ruth B. Phillips's *Museum Pieces: Towards the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), is also deeply personal. Like McTavish, Phillips is not a historian. Her focus on indigenizing Canadian museums does not reflect an argument about the uniqueness of the Canadian Indigenous experience or of Canadian museums, but the fact that her career flourished in Canada. It is the environment she knows. Phillips has been writing about museums in Canada for years. Her work is well known to students of Canadian museums, and she brings some 40 years of experience to bear on her arguments. Indeed, rather than a history of Canadian museums, this book presents a personal account of the author's own career, taking us through important moments in the uneasy and awkward relationship between the museum as an institution and the cultures it displays. The book's cover is a wonderful illustration of that uneasiness. It consists of an adaptation of the American painter and museum owner Charles Wilson Peale's self-portrait *The Artist in his Museum*. The image will be familiar to many. Painted in the 1820s, the original depicts an elderly Peale holding back a heavy curtain to reveal his museum of natural history specimens. In the 2005 adaptation, however, the Métis photographer Rosalie Favell altered the original by digitally placing her face on Peale's body and replacing the museum's displays with her family snap shots. As the book's cover image, it is disconcerting because it is both familiar and yet different. No doubt, this is the point. Phillips is clearly a fan of the double entendre, and the cover accomplishes visually what a double entendre accomplishes orally: it offers two meanings and challenges us to approach the familiar from a different perspective.

Although the book does not claim to be a history it does present a historical argument about the emergence of a collaborative model of museum work, especially around the presentation of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. Echoing McTavish, Phillips traces how museums can simultaneously constrain and enable. At base, Phillips urges museums to become brokers and mediators of negotiated postcolonial relationships among groups of people. In doing so, she exposes the poverty of such concepts as cultural purity or authenticity and lays bare the hypocrisy of contrasting binaries between art and artefact, modern and traditional, or contemporary and tribal. Until fairly recently, Indigenous material culture was judged through these lenses. The categories used for display thus contributed to the marginalization of groups of people along ethnic and racialized grounds. Classification systems are so ingrained, Phillips argues, that even in the more inclusive museum environments of the recent past they have not been critically interrogated. As a result, museums continue to present either/or choices that perpetuate old paradigms. For Indigenous peoples, this phenomenon is best seen through the contrast of art versus artefact. In this paradigm, peoples that produce art are participants in a dynamic, progressive culture, and the objects they produce are assigned to art galleries. Peoples that produce artefacts, on the other hand, are seen as timeless and technologically retrograde. Their material culture is assessed on a scale of cultural purity that expressly refuses them the ability to legitimately assimilate outside influences and disavows the cultures' ability to adapt and change. Such a paradigm denies a historicity to certain cultures and consigns them to ethnology.

One problem with Phillips's argument is that this dichotomy is not restricted to Indigenous peoples' material culture. She acknowledges, if only in passing, that so-called "folk" cultures are treated similarly. Indeed, cultural historians have examined a nearly identical process of "ethnologizing" in the construction of folk culture. The folk, while often construed along ethnic lines, nevertheless represent a precursor to the modernizing urbanites who collected and preserved their handicrafts, songs, and recipes. As western societies modernized, similar attitudes were also assigned to city dwellers' rural cousins as demonstrated years ago in Keith Walden's study of urban modernity.⁶ Folklore adds a class dimension to the racial and ethnic dynamic Phillips sees at play in museum displays of Indigenous material culture. The connection is especially clear in the centrality of one man – Marius Barbeau – to the developments of both Canadian folklore and Canada's museums. Although a greater sensitivity to class, even if it is often confounded with race and ethnicity in colonial societies, might inform a more subtle understanding of these categories, Phillips makes an important point. To be inclusive, museums must move past these legacies of colonialism.

Museum Pieces follows a case-study approach in tracing the history of museum-Aboriginal collaboration in Canada's museums that closely parallels a case-by-case narrative of her own career. Written over many years, the book is sometimes repetitive, with key themes revisited from time to time, but it is always thought provoking. Phillips argues that the *Indians of Canada* pavilion at Expo 67, right at the start of her own academic career, initiated an anti-colonial critique of standard museum narratives of Aboriginal history. Its displays were framed as a revisionist history, refuting the official narratives set forth by government policy, scholarly monographs, and museum exhibits. Although few visitors likely noticed the implicit challenges it posed to the status quo, with hindsight Phillips (she acknowledges that she skipped the exhibit herself while in Montreal in 1967) sees the *Indians of Canada* pavilion as the initiation of increased activism from First Nations and other Indigenous peoples. Museums got caught in the storm that followed.

At times, Phillips was at the centre of this storm. One of the first controversies she faced in her career involved the contentious *The Spirit Sings* exhibit at Calgary's Glenbow Museum. She was one of six curators invited to contribute to the exhibit as part of the cultural program for the Calgary Winter Olympics. The blowback around *The Spirit Sings* is well known, and Phillips situates it in a history of activism around land claims, restitution, and social justice. The 1988 boycott, centred on the Lubicon Nation's protest against oil exploration, was powered by demands for Aboriginal voices in representing their own histories, calls for the removal of sacred objects from public display, and demands for the repatriation of appropriated heritage. Perhaps she might have provided more detail on the politics of these protests, and on their initial public failure. At least one contemporary observer commented on the small number of protesters in contrast to the exhibition's robust

6 Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). For a recent study of urban elites and government bureaucrats collecting and appropriating folk culture, see Erin Morton, "Commemorative Expectations: The Mixed-Economy Model of the Maud Lewis Painted House Preservation, 1970-1998," *Acadiensis* XLIII, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): 3-34.

attendance figures – nearly 130,000 people – without noticing the irony of using such colonizing figures to discredit an anti-colonial protest. Still, as Phillips explains, the boycott also led to greater sensitivity and, although she does not dwell on the concept, recognition of the value of sharing authority among institutions, experts, and communities.

Phillips walks her readers through a number of episodes in the development of shared authority, which she considers “one of the clear achievements of Canadian museology since the 1980s” (229). She outlines this process as it occurred during the design of the “Facing the Other” section of the abandoned project for the Portrait Gallery of Canada. Again, Phillips was involved in developing the gallery and she highlights the problems experts encounter when exhibiting someone else’s living culture. The Portrait Gallery of Canada was planned for the old American embassy on Wellington Street in Ottawa. It was never built, but Phillips unpacks some of the struggles to incorporate Indigenous representations of identity within an institution premised on the western notion of portraiture. The solution was consultation. Phillips explains how Dene, Six Nations, and Nuuchah-nulth artists and elders were brought into the process of selecting appropriate objects and images for display, and explaining their context. Although its success or failure as an exhibit cannot be judged, “Facing the Other” demonstrates the sort of alternate modes of representation Phillips champions.

There is a clear distinction between the personal museum experience Phillips describes and the more historical accounts of past practices outlined by Young and McTavish. Yet, at the same time, all three books reveal the personal connection their authors have with their subjects. This is not surprising, as those familiar with museum studies will recognize. Such texts often combine personal experience with archival research to advance their arguments. Of the three authors examined in this essay, McTavish is perhaps the most optimistic, seeing the practices of long ago as confirmation that the modern museum will survive. Phillips singles out *The Spirit Sings* and its resulting controversies as a major and painful watershed in her life – one that haunted her subsequent curatorial work, forced her to re-examine her training as an art historian, and redirected the focus of her academic research to the processes of museum display and representation. But, while painful, she implies that it was also beneficial. The result of that re-examination is a distinguished career and a wealth of reflection contained in her book. Young’s personal connection to museum struggles was more deflating. His description of the marginalization of the McCord reflects all too faithfully the demoralizing experiences arising from the widespread marginalization of professionals dealing with culture in museums, archives, libraries, and universities due to the increasing corporatization of these institutions.⁷

The three books reviewed here elucidate the practices of a range of different museums over time in ways that point to an encouraging diversity. Yet, ironically, each exhibits a fairly conservative view of what constitutes a museum. The authors’

7 For a discussion of the corporatization of North American universities, see Neil Tudiver, *Universities for Sale: Resisting Corporate Control over Canadian Higher Education* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1999) and Donald Fisher and Adrienne Chan, eds., *The Exchange University: Corporatization of Academic Culture* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

discussions focus on history and natural history museums, leaving largely unnoticed the role of art galleries, living history museums, eco-museums, and science centres; these discussions, not surprisingly, also favour the standard format of artefact, image, and accompanying text. With the exception of Phillips's embrace of sharing authority, the institutions discussed in these books are traditional "bricks and mortar" institutions where expert knowledge is put on display. Yet it is precisely the museum's authoritative voice that has given rise to many of the recent challenges to museum exhibits. A combination of a resulting anxiety and the recognition of opportunities emerging from the challenges to expert authority lie behind recent scholarly interest in museum history. Controversies over shifts in present-day social values, as well as their implicit challenges to accepted conventions, have encouraged historians and museum-studies researchers to interrogate the practices of Canada's museums of the past.

Although the field of museum studies is still young in this country, the three books in this essay demonstrate its potential as well as its current limitations. Museums of all kinds are important cultural institutions. In their displays and galleries, they hold a mirror to the accepted values of the society that built them. Protests against them demonstrate how some people resist those broadly accepted norms. For these reasons, museums cannot be studied in isolation. The historical context of cultural, social, economic, and political life must be part of the analysis if we are to understand the museum's place in national life. That context – that Canadian context – might also help us to decide if there is a distinctly Canadian museum history.

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