

“INDIANNESS” AND THE FUR TRADE:
REPRESENTATIONS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE
IN TWO CANADIAN MUSEUMS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Museum representations of Aboriginal people have a significant influence over the extent to which Aboriginal presence in and contributions to Canadian history form part of the national public memory. These representations determine, for example, Canadians' awareness and acknowledgment of the roles Aboriginal people played in the Canadian fur trade. As the industry expanded its reach west to the Pacific and north to the Arctic, Aboriginal people acted as allies, guides, provisioners, customers, friends and family to European and Canadian traders.

The meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal experiences in and perspectives on the fur trade in museums' historical narratives is, however, relatively recent. Historically, representations of Aboriginal people reflected the stereotypes and assumptions of the dominant culture. These portrayals began to change as protest, debate and the creation of The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples took off in the late 1980s, leading to the recognition of the need for Aboriginal involvement in museum activities and exhibitions.

This project examines whether these changes to the relationships between museums and Aboriginal people are visible in the exhibits and narratives that shape public memory. It focuses on references to the fur trade found in the Canadian Museum of Civilization's First Peoples Hall and Canada Hall and throughout the Manitoba Museum, using visitor studies, learning theory and an internal evaluation of the Canada Hall to determine how and what visitors learn in these settings. It considers whether display content and visual cues encourage visitors to understand the fur trade as an industry whose survival depended on the contributions of Aboriginal people and whose impacts can be viewed from multiple perspectives.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	vi
LIST OF COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS.....	viii
DEFINITIONS.....	ix
ACRONYMS.....	xi
PREFACE.....	xii
CHAPTER ONE SYMBOLS OF INDIANNESS, SYMBOLS OF THE FUR TRADE.....	1
CHAPTER TWO A NEW VIEW OF THE FUR TRADE: THE CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION'S FIRST PEOPLES HALL.....	30
CHAPTER THREE SNIPPETS IN A MONTAGE: THE FUR TRADE IN THE CMC'S CANADA HALL.....	53
CHAPTER FOUR SNAPSHOTS FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES: THE MANITOBA MUSEUM'S PORTRAYALS OF THE FUR TRADE.....	78
CHAPTER FIVE RE-PRESENTING, RE-EVALUATING AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE.....	110
EPILOGUE.....	126
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	130

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Display on the material culture of colonial Canada and the fur trade, Royal Ontario Museum, Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada.....	7
2. Fur trade display, Glenbow Museum, <i>Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta</i>	7
3. Recreated voyageur encampment, Canadian Canoe Museum.....	8
4. Birchbark canoe loaded with trading goods, Canadian Canoe Museum.....	8
5. Floor plan of the First Peoples Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.....	31
6. Orientation area, An Aboriginal Presence zone, Canadian Museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall.....	33
7. Orientation area (second view), An Aboriginal Presence Zone, Canadian Museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall.....	33
8. Fur trade display, Canadian Museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall.....	36
9. Artefacts in a display case in the Arrival of Strangers zone, Canadian museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall.....	36
10. Cradle board, Canadian Museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall.....	50
11. Floor plan of the Canada Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.....	54
12. Environmental exhibit recreating a coureurs de bois encampment, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Canada Hall.....	56
13. Artefacts in a display case in the Canada Hall’s fur trade module, Canadian Museum of Civilization.....	66
14. Artefacts and a text panel on “Native People and Furs” in the Canada Hall’s fur trade module, Canadian Museum of Civilization.....	66
15. Floor plan of the Manitoba Museum.....	79
16. Displays on the Dene and Caribou Inuit, Manitoba Museum, Arctic-Subarctic Gallery.....	84
17. Display on hunting and fishing, Manitoba Museum, Arctic-Subarctic Gallery.....	84

18. Smoking bag, Manitoba Museum, Arctic-Subarctic Gallery.....	84
19. Display on Fort Ellice, Manitoba Museum, Parklands Gallery.....	88
20. Miniature diorama of an Anishnaabe village, Manitoba Museum, Boreal Forest Gallery.....	88
21. Diorama of Native people and wildlife in the boreal forest, Manitoba Museum, Boreal Forest Gallery.....	91
22. Lake Agassiz display, Manitoba Museum, Grasslands Gallery.....	91
23. Northern Cree woman's hood, Manitoba Museum, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery.....	94
24. Silver candelabra owned by Governor George Simpson, Manitoba Museum, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery.....	94
25. Tableau of a Hudson's Bay Company historical exhibit, Manitoba Museum, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery.....	94
26. Map of Canada inset with display cases, Manitoba Museum, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery.....	99
27. View of the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, Manitoba Museum.....	99
28. Hudson's Bay Company Gallery (second view), Manitoba Museum.....	100
29. Tableau of Hudson Bay House, Manitoba Museum, Hudson's Bay Gallery.....	100
30. Display case on Aboriginal women and the fur trade, Manitoba Museum, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery.....	105
31. A three-dimensional map of Canada at the entrance of the Canadian Museum of Civilization's Canada Hall.....	115
32. A close-up of the map's depiction of the fur trade, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Canada Hall.....	115
33. Full-size display of Inuit people with a dogsled, Canadian Museum of Civilization.....	119

LIST OF COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS

1. “North America in A.D. 1500” (text panel), courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibit, 2010.....	35
2. “Arrival of Strangers” (text panel), courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibit, 2010.....	35
3. “Early Relations” (text panel), courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibit, 2010.....	38
4. “Aboriginal Women” (text), courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibit, 2010.....	39
5. “Population and Identity” (text panel), courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibit, 2010.....	46
6. “The Fur Trade ca. 1750” (text panel), courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibit, 2010.....	58
7. “Fur and Native People” (text panel), courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibit, 2010.....	69
8. “For Richer or Poorer? The Historians Debate” (text panel), courtesy © Canadian Canoe Museum.....	73
9. Untitled text panel, Arctic/Subarctic Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.....	83
10. “New Opportunities for Trade – Fort Ellice: 1832-1890” (text panel), Parklands Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.....	86
11. Untitled text panel, Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.....	96
12. Untitled text panel, Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.....	103
13. Untitled text panel, Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.....	106

DEFINITIONS

auditory learner. A person who learns best through listening and for whom non-auditory activities, such as reading, are often aided by the presence of background sounds or music.

coureurs de bois. “Runners of the woods,” inhabitants of New France who travelled into the Canadian interior and carried out unlicensed trade with Aboriginal people.

descriptive label. A body of text shown alongside an artefact, providing relevant information that can include, but is not limited to, identifying an object, describing its significance, use, age, origin and accession number.

diorama. An arrangement of objects – artefacts or replicas – in a space that has been created to mimic an historical or natural setting that contextualizes the objects and assists visitors in visualizing the past.

display. A curated arrangement that, at its most basic, consists of a glass case of artefacts and labels describing them, and often groups objects and information relating to a particular theme or topic.

environmental exhibit. A variation of the diorama that re-creates a full-scale historical setting in great detail; often used to describe the theme park-inspired dioramas of the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s Canada Hall.

Euro-Canadian. Refers to the newcomers and traders who travelled through and settled in the Canadian interior; the term includes people who came directly from Europe, and people who were born in the regions of present-day Quebec, Ontario and the Atlantic provinces but were of European descent.

exhibit. A collection of displays connected by an overarching theme or narrative; most commonly used to describe permanent features in a museum or art gallery.

exhibition. Also a collection of displays connected by theme, narrative or subject matter; generally used to refer to special events in museums or art galleries that tend to be shown for a year or less, and will sometimes tour multiple venues.

gallery. The physical space in museums and art galleries where objects are displayed; venues can contain more than one, which are typically named for their contents or a patron.

kinaesthetic learner. A person who learns most effectively when given hands-on opportunities to carry out an activity.

label copy. The text which appears on a descriptive label or text panel.

module. A smaller segment within an exhibit or exhibition, consisting of a group of displays for which there is a common topic or theme; the term is used by the Canadian Museum of Civilization to describe the twenty-three smaller units into which its Canada Hall can be divided.

period room. A furnished, full-scale replica of the interior of a building, usually a dwelling space, i.e. a pioneer kitchen; as dioramas have evolved to include more elaborate backgrounds (instead of painted murals), the distinction between a period room and a diorama has eroded.

tableau. An arrangement of objects in a simulated historical setting; the term used by the Manitoba Museum to describe its full-scale dioramas in the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery.

text panel. A block of writing, typically bearing a title and mounted on a wall or a display case for visitors to read; the content of a text panel tends to describe particular aspects of the exhibit or exhibition's subject, serving to advance their narrative, rather than to describe individual artefacts.

visual learner. A person who learns most effectively by associating images with information and ideas.

ACRONYMS

CMC	Canadian Museum of Civilization
FPH	First Peoples Hall
HBC	Hudson's Bay Company
NMAI	National Museum of the American Indian
NWC	North West Company
ROM	Royal Ontario Museum

PREFACE

During my grade school years in Peterborough, Ontario, it was fairly standard practice to take a field trip to the local history museum at some point in every school year. The museum focused on the city's early settlement and growth, especially the arrival of the Irish immigrants who were driven from their homes by poverty and famine in the mid-nineteenth century. There was a three-dimensional mural of an Irish family, made of paper maché and painted a drab shade of gray, to show how destitute (and apparently also dirty) life was back in Ireland. There was also a small, dark room containing wooden bunk beds and the sounds of waves crashing and beams creaking to simulate the living quarters of the ships on which the Irish traveled to Canada; you could climb onto the bunks to see how cramped and uncomfortable they were.

My favourite childhood memories of learning history, though, came from camping trips with my family. Once, at Champlain Provincial Park, on the Mattawa River, Ontario, we participated in an interpretive programme where we went paddling in a full-size Montreal canoe, like the voyageurs (at a more leisurely rate, of course). A guide taught us how to bang our paddles on the gunwales of the canoe in time, to greet the people on shore because, we were informed, the voyageurs liked to make showy landings.

These memories provide some sense of a personal background, and more especially, of the roots of my longstanding love of museums and interest in the fur trade. They also highlight how learning history is possible in various settings – in a museum as part of school activity or outdoors on a family vacation being just two examples. Finally, they describe experiences that are by no means recent, and yet I remember them vividly.

In fact, these experiences still come to mind when I think of the history of my hometown or the history of the voyageurs.

These memories also illustrate certain characteristics that all learning experiences have in common. Léonie Rennie and David Johnston, two theorists in the field of visitor studies, described certain “essential attributes of learning” as requisites for understanding how learning occurs in museums. With reference to the three dominant characteristics, they stipulated that, “first, learning is personal; second, learning is contextualized; and third, learning takes time.”¹

In my research I have encountered other stories of museum experiences that parallel my own, with museum visits – even those of the distant past – influencing conceptions of a distinct social, cultural, racial or ethnic group. One particularly striking example was provided by Kahente Horn-Miller who admitted she was first exposed to Aboriginal culture in a museum setting, only later discovering that the culture on display was hers. “My earliest memory of my culture,” she stated at a 1993 meeting of the Canadian Museums Association, “[was] from taking a walk through the old Museum of Man in Ottawa.”² I can recall what seemed to me at the time to be fancy costumes behind glass and a set-up of a Plains tepee with life-size human mannequins all contained behind a glass barrier.”³ For journalist Michele Landsberg, seeing Aboriginal cultures depicted “behind glass” was also a prominent feature of early museum experiences, particularly at the Royal Ontario Museum, where

¹ Léonie J. Rennie and David J. Johnston, “The Nature of Learning and Its Implications for Research on Learning from Museums,” *In Principle, In Practice: Perspectives on a Decade of Museum Learning Research (1994-2004)(Science Education Supplement)*, vol. 88, supplement 1 (2004): S6.

² The museum was later renamed the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

³ Kahente Horn-Miller, “The American Indian and the Problem of History,” *MUSE* (Fall 1993), 44.

what I knew best... was the diorama of a Plains Indian family, standing stiffly in a glass case. It was always the first and most notable stop on school tours of the ROM. Even when I was there alone I was embarrassed and disturbed by it. Wasn't it rude to stare at these half-naked people, frozen in our gaze? How stiff they were, and slightly dusty, with pots lying in the reddish earth at their feet. They were, like the dinosaurs, clearly extinct.⁴

Reflecting on how the diorama influenced her conceptions of Aboriginal people, Landsberg noted that "it never occurred to me to link these quasi-mummies with real Indians, nor to wonder if there were still Indians alive anywhere...Indians being so completely Other (as epitomized in that display case at the ROM), we didn't have to take account of them, or know anything about their contemporary existence, struggles or rights. That is the real reward of stereotyping – for the stereotypers."⁵ She then proceeded to explain how these memories were re-contextualized when she viewed the ROM's *Fluffs and Feathers* exhibition,⁶ which called attention to the inaccuracies and stereotypes about Aboriginal people that museum exhibits and other facets of popular culture have long propagated.

Anthropologist Cory Willmott in "Visitors' Voices: Lessons from Conversations in the Royal Ontario Museum's *Gallery of Canada: First Peoples*," her article on the 2005 opening of the ROM's new Aboriginal history gallery, recalled similar memories of the ROM's old displays of "Indians." Willmott described the 1980s Prehistory dioramas as containing "figures [who] were dressed scantily in rough uncut and unsewn animal hides which gave the whole group the appearance of 'primitivism' and 'savagery.'"⁷ This memory was evoked by a conversation with Trudy Nicks, the new gallery's curator,

⁴ Michele Landsberg, "ROM exhibit takes fluff out of native stereotypes," *The Toronto Star*, 13 November 1992, C15.

⁵ Landsberg, "ROM exhibit takes fluff out of native stereotypes," C15.

⁶ Although Landsberg viewed this exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, it was mounted by and first shown at the Woodlands Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario.

⁷ Cory Willmott, "Visitors' Voices: Lessons from Conversations in the Royal Ontario Museum's *Gallery of Canada: First Peoples*," *Material Culture Review* 67 (Spring 2008), 67.

and two visitors who approached them to ask questions about the displays, and to express frustration at the absence of the old plaster figures of Aboriginal people (especially for illustrating how artefacts such as cradleboards were used).⁸

Both Landsberg and Willmott recognized in these reflections that the ROM's old ethnology displays portrayed Aboriginal people as Others lost in a distant and irretrievable past.⁹ They also acknowledged that, decades after the ROM had updated its portrayals of Aboriginal people, they could still recall the images presented in those older displays. How many visitors to Canadian museums have memories such as these? How many Aboriginal visitors have experienced disappointment or confusion upon seeing their histories and cultures thus presented? How many non-Aboriginal visitors never questioned the inaccuracies or silences in these versions of Aboriginal history, or their disconnectedness with present realities? What is missing in our national historical narrative when settlers, voyageurs and other figures in Canadian history are commemorated but Aboriginal people are not? And when Aboriginal people *are* acknowledged, is it only when they "contributed" to Canada's colonial development (such as when they traded furs or served as military allies), or is their resistance to and oppression under colonialism also represented? Since the 1980s, these concerns have come to the forefront of the discussions on how to foster working relationships between museums and Aboriginal communities.

⁸ Willmott, "Visitors' Voices," 67.

⁹ According to Johannes Fabian, signifiers such as "savage," "primitive" and "tribal" serve to "connote temporal distancing as a way of *creating* the objects or referents of anthropological discourse." (emphasis added) In the museum context, the result is that visitors like Landsberg and Willmott will view Aboriginal people – or at least Aboriginal people as they are represented in certain dioramas – as existing in a different period or concept of time than themselves, thus becoming the Other; Johannes Fabian, *Time and Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 30.

The main trigger for these discussions was the Glenbow Museum's opening of its special exhibition, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, to coincide with Calgary's hosting of the 1988 Olympic Winter Games. The museum was immediately criticized for insufficient consultation with Aboriginal communities on how they wanted to see their cultures portrayed.¹⁰ The museum was also criticized for focusing on past Aboriginal traditions and ways of life without acknowledging that the people and their traditions were still around. These critiques, combined with an outcry over the museum's acceptance of Shell Canada's sponsorship for the exhibition while the company was drilling for oil on territory claimed by the Lubicon Cree in Northern Alberta, overshadowed the relative merits of the exhibition (whose curators had negotiated loans of some 665 artefacts from museums outside of Canada)¹¹ and precipitated a re-evaluation of where Aboriginal people fit into the administration and exhibition content of Canadian museums.

After *The Spirit Sings* exhibition closed, a dialogue on the deficiencies of displays and exhibitions that lacked Aboriginal input and ignored contemporary contexts began to emerge. This dialogue was carried out at a major conference held in 1988; in the consultations and report of a national task force; and within the academic, museological

¹⁰ Glenbow and the curators of *The Spirit Sings* had, it should be noted, attempted to address these issues during the planning process. Harrison, the exhibition's curator and the head of the Glenbow Museum's ethnology department, responded to these critiques by insisting Glenbow had invited input from Aboriginal communities throughout the planning process, and that the "adaptability and resilience" of Indigenous peoples was amongst the exhibition's key themes. Julia D. Harrison, "Completing a Circle: *The Spirit Sings*," in *Anthropology, Public Policy and Native Peoples in Canada*, eds. Noel Dyck and James B. Waldram (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 337-38, 342, 344-45.

¹¹ Duncan F. Cameron, "Preface," in *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, ed. Julia D. Harrison (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 7. Not all of these artefacts did, however, appear in the exhibition. According to Karen Coody Cooper, intense debate and the Lubicon Cree's boycott of the exhibition resulted in roughly 160 artefact loans being cancelled by foreign museums; Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 22.

and Aboriginal communities.¹² Meanwhile, the Royal Ontario Museum dismantled its older dioramas; it now contains a completely renovated gallery on Aboriginal history that was created in collaboration with a committee of Aboriginal people, to whom visitors are introduced in a series of panels situated at the gallery's entrance. In the last decade, the Glenbow Museum has divided the space on its third level among three exhibits: *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*, *Native Cultures from the Four Directions*, and *Niitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life*. The latter is an exhibit on the Blackfeet of Alberta, in which representatives of the Blackfoot communities formed an integral part of the planning and design processes.¹³

These are, however, only two examples of museums in Canada that have reinvented their portrayals of Aboriginal cultures. Many other museums also present Aboriginal histories to their visitors, and do so in the context of the fur trade – that formative period of Canadian history that I am so passionate about. This study focuses on two museums: the Canadian Museum of Civilization, in Gatineau, Quebec, and the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, where the interweaving of Aboriginal histories and national (and provincial) historical narratives is particularly fascinating. Both museums feature displays on the fur trade and displays and exhibits on diverse groups of Aboriginal people. My intention is to examine what these two museums teach their respective visitors about Aboriginal participation and influence in the fur trade, and how

¹² The conference, “Preserving Our Heritage: A Working Conference Between Museums and First Peoples,” was held at Carleton University, November, 1988. A result of the conference was to convene a nation-wide task force, called the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, that was jointly organized by the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations. *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples* was published in 1992, but the discussion was also supplemented (before and after the report's release) by many forums, journal and newspaper articles on the subject.

¹³ Glenbow Museum, “Permanent Exhibitions,” <http://www.glenbow.org/exhibitions/permanent.cfm> (accessed 25 September 2009).

effectively the value and extent of those contributions are communicated to visitors. The issue is an important one, since museum learning can have a lasting influence on visitors' ideas and images of the world – and people – around them.

A growing body of scholarship has been exploring how Canadian museums have improved their relationships with and portrayals of Aboriginal people since the 1980s.¹⁴ The questions of how much their representations have improved, and whether present museum representations are satisfactory, still need to be asked. By examining specifically those parts of museums which pertain to Aboriginal histories and cultures, we can gain some sense of how a wide audience of Canadian museum visitors receives and reflects upon information and ideas about Aboriginal people. We can track a collective movement toward pride in, respect for, and mutual understanding of Canada and its diverse citizenry.

¹⁴ See, for example, Stephanie Bolton, "Museums Taken to Task: Representing First Peoples at the McCord Museum of Canadian History," in *First Nations, First Thoughts: The Impact of Indigenous Thought in Canada*, ed. Annis May Timpson (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 145-169; Gerald T. Conaty and Beth Carter, "Our Story in Our Words: Diversity and Equality in the Glenbow Museum," in *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*, ed. Robert R. Janes and Gerald T. Conaty (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 43-58; Jacqueline A. Gibbons, "The Museum as Contested Terrain: The Canadian Case," *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 309-314; Robert R. Janes, "Personal, Academic and Institutional Perspectives on Museums and First Nations," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* (summer 1994), 147-156; Moira McLoughlin, "Of Boundaries and Borders: First Nations' History in Museums," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 18, no. 3 (1993), 365-385; Katherine Pettipas, "'Turning the Page': Museums and First Nations: A Manitoba Case Study," *Manitoba Archaeological Journal* 3, nos. 1 and 2 (1993), 86-97.

CHAPTER ONE

SYMBOLS OF “INDIANNES,” SYMBOLS OF THE FUR TRADE

Museums, wrote Robert Janes, former director of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, have an obligation to “help to build a fairer society” and “confront the responsibility of what it means to provide meaning to people.”¹⁵ That role, however, goes unfulfilled as long as museum portrayals of Aboriginal people are produced according to the dominant society’s stereotypical interpretations of Aboriginal cultures, without collaboration or consent from the people being represented. For decades this was the case, and museum displays about Aboriginal people were presented with “the usual lessons about the importance of such anthropological inventions as culture, kinship, ecology and ritual.”¹⁶ In history museums, Michael Ames and Claudia Haagen wrote, Aboriginal histories were “significant only as ... record[s] of what existed before the White man.”¹⁷

This is consistent with Benedict Anderson’s characterization of museums as part of a colonial process by which Indigenous histories and material cultures are appropriated by the nation-state and decontextualized to suit newly-constructed national histories, identities and imagery.¹⁸ Since, as Anderson argued, museums’ representations of pre-colonial cultures were used to legitimate colonial presence,¹⁹ the historic disposition of Canadian museums to favour portrayals of pre-contact Aboriginal cultures encouraged

¹⁵ Robert R. Janes, *Museums and the Paradox of Change: A Case Study in Urgent Adaptation* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1995), 14.

¹⁶ Michael M. Ames and Claudia Haagen, “A New Native Peoples History for Museums,” in *Readings in Aboriginal Studies*, ed. Joe Sawchuk, vol. 4 of *Images of the Indian: Portrayals of Native Peoples*, revised edition (Brandon, MB: Bearpaw Publishing, 1999), 185.

¹⁷ Ames and Haagen, “A New Native Peoples History for Museums,” 187.

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (London: Verso, 1991), 163-164, 178-185.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 181.

visitors to contrast representations of “savagery” with the agricultural, industrial and political “developments” associated with Euro-Canadian settlement. Moreover, Aboriginal people’s experiences with the newcomers would certainly have called the perceived legitimacy of the colonial project into question, making pre-contact representations the more politically useful for inclusion in museums. Eventually, the prevalence of these stereotypical representations gave rise to popular conceptions of Aboriginal cultures informed by what Robert Fulford has described as “the idea of prehistoric Native purity”²⁰ – a non-Aboriginal preoccupation with Aboriginal cultures as they existed before the arrival of Europeans, to the exclusion of subsequent centuries of continuity and change in those cultures.

In 1989, the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario, mounted a special exhibition, called *Fluffs and Feathers*, on the stereotypical images of Aboriginal people that have permeated Canadian popular culture. The exhibition’s curator, Deborah Doxtator, argued that the images of Aboriginal people presented in mass culture have been so completely absorbed by most Canadians that whenever they encounter

[t]eepees, headdresses, totem poles, birch bark canoes, face paint, fringes, buckskin and tomahawks... they immediately think of “Indians.” They are symbols of “Indianness” that have become immediately recognizable to the public. To take it one step further, they are the symbols that the public uses in its definition of what an Indian is. To the average person, Indians, real Indians, in their purest form of “Indianness” live in a world of long ago where there are no highrises, no snowmobiles, no colour television. They live in the woods or in mysterious unknown places called “Indian Reserves.” The Indians that people know best are the ones they have read about in adventure stories as a child, cut out and pasted in school projects, read about in the newspaper.²¹

²⁰ Robert Fulford, “Let’s Bury the Noble Savage,” in *Readings in Aboriginal Studies*, ed. Joe Sawchuk, vol. 4 of *Images of the Indian: Portrayals of Native Peoples*, revised edition (Brandon, MB: Bearpaw Publishing, 1999), 193.

²¹ Deborah Doxtator, *Fluffs and Feathers: An exhibit on the symbols of Indianness: a resource guide* (Brantford, ON: Woodland Cultural Centre, 1992), 10.

The consequences of perpetuating these misrepresentations are severe. Excluding Aboriginal people from creating representations of their cultures is, Doxtator maintained, a “form of social control.”²² This control manifests itself in the denial of Aboriginal self-definition, and by its characterization of Aboriginal cultures according to how they deviate from – or are exotic to – that of the dominant society.

The disservice done by stereotypical and inaccurate representations of Aboriginal people is acutely experienced by Aboriginal peoples, but it also affects Canadian society as a whole. As Jocelyn Létourneau has argued for Quebec history, a “well-told, well-communicated history” is integral to a group’s collective identity.²³ Such an identity, which Létourneau defines as “the given narrative in which a community of communication recognizes itself,” determines the extent to which a community shares a specific set of “cultural facts, interpretations, and explanatory models.”²⁴ Thus, when critical aspects of Canada’s history and its peoples are misconstrued, the goal of a well-communicated history is forfeited, as is an opportunity for mutual understanding and unity.

Turning the Page

For more than two decades, Aboriginal people have voiced their dissatisfaction with museum displays developed according to stereotypical interpretations of Aboriginal histories and cultures in protests, consultations, conferences, reports, and critical

²² Doxtator, *Fluffs and Feathers*, 14.

²³ Jocelyn Létourneau, “The Current Great Narrative of Québécois Identity,” in *Nations, Identities, Cultures*, edited by V.Y. Mudimbe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 61.

²⁴ Létourneau attributes his definition of a “community of communication” to Jürgen Habermas, describing it as “a group of people who participate, by way of communicational activity, in an interaction which coordinates their projects in accordance with their shared perception of the world;” Létourneau, “The Current Great Narrative of Québécois Identity,” 61.

exhibitions such as *Fluffs and Feathers*. In 1988, Georges Erasmus, then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, responded to the controversy surrounding the Glenbow Museum's *The Spirit Sings* exhibition (which opened at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in July 1988) by inviting CMC director George MacDonald to co-sponsor a conference for Aboriginal people and museum professionals to explore issues of representing Aboriginal histories and cultures in museums. The conference was held at Carleton University, Ottawa, in November 1988 and concluded with resolutions to continue its explorations through the creation of a task force. Consisting of thirty members, seven associate members and numerous other supporters,²⁵ the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples held meetings, attended conferences and invited input on what needed to be done in order to develop and improve working relationships between Canadian museums and Aboriginal people. In the publication of its findings in 1992 in *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*, the task force aimed to promote presentations of Aboriginal cultures as being more than teepees and headdresses, buckskin and tomahawks. It also advocated a return of these symbols – and their potency – to Aboriginal hands, whether through the repatriation of artefacts, or through collaborating with Aboriginal people to determine what kinds of histories these artefacts should be used to tell.

In its consultations and its recommendations, the task force focused “on the interpretation of First Peoples culture and history in public exhibitions. It was agreed that the role of First Peoples in Canadian history should be stressed.”²⁶ This new approach,

²⁵ Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples*, eds. Tom Hill and Trudy Nicks (Ottawa: Canadian Museums Association and Assembly of First Nations, 1992), 2-3.

²⁶ Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, *Turning the Page*, 7.

with its emphasis on the ongoing contributions made by Aboriginal people, mandated a departure from the older-style museum displays and dioramas that lacked references to recent history or contemporary contexts and were presented to museum visitors as authoritative interpretations of history. Implementing the task force's recommendation of "[i]ncreased involvement of First Peoples in interpretation"²⁷ had direct implications for how Aboriginal people were represented in museums, and what museum visitors learned about Aboriginal histories and cultures. In museums across Canada, symbols of "Indianness" have been increasingly questioned and replaced with more meaningful displays.

Representing the Fur Trade

Other symbols that represent Aboriginal people in history museums have also been mainstays of the displays on fur trade themes in particular, but their connotations have not been investigated as thoroughly as those symbols of "Indianness" identified by Doxtator.²⁸ The beaver pelt on a stretcher and the birchbark canoe are, perhaps, the most iconic of these. As symbols, their associations with the fur trade are particularly complex, since their Aboriginal contexts can easily go unrecognized by museum visitors if they are not explicitly acknowledged in the displays. For example, a beaver pelt on a stretcher may evoke only the beaver itself, an animal so well-known to Canadians it appears on the nickel, on coats of arms, in cartoons and in countless other contexts. It also evokes the raw materials from which felt hats, which were so fashionable in Europe

²⁷ Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, *Turning the Page*, 4.

²⁸ In addition to Doxtator, the stereotypes invoked by teepees, headdresses, face paint, tomahawks and other traditional objects have been explored in Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000); and John L. Steckley, *White Lies about the Inuit* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2008).

from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, were made. Less recognized are the Aboriginal skills and labour of hunting, skinning and stretching the beaver and other pelts that were critical contributions to the fur trade. Loaded with multiple meanings, the prepared beaver pelt is considered one of the most popular symbols of Aboriginal involvement in the fur trade used by museums and historical sites,²⁹ and yet its identification with Aboriginal people is not nearly as forceful as Doxtator's stereotypes.

Doxtator did include the birchbark canoe among the images that immediately evoke ideas about "Indians." However, these iconic watercraft are also popularly associated with other participants in the fur trade. They were an Aboriginal technology that drew on the resources of the environment – birchbark for the body, cedar for the spreaders and ribs, spruce roots for sewing and pine spruce gum for sealant³⁰ – to produce a vehicle ideally suited to a land full of waterways. Birchbark canoes were essential to the fur traders, who "hired Aboriginal people to construct canoes for the crew... [and] reclaimed old canoes left by Aboriginal people."³¹ Europeans and Canadians adopted and eventually enlarged this type of craft to produce canoes that measured up to thirty-six feet in length and were paddled by a crew of up to twelve voyageurs.³² As a result, within Canadian museums, birchbark canoes are often overlooked as examples of Aboriginal traditions and technologies, having been effectively co-opted as symbols of the voyageurs.

²⁹ Laura Peers, *Playing Ourselves: interpreting Native histories at historic reconstructions* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 96-97.

³⁰ John Jennings, *Bark Canoes: the art and obsession of Tappan Adley* (Richmond Hill, ON: Firefly Books, 2004), 136-37.

³¹ Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 241.

³² Jennings, *Bark Canoes*, 141; Peter Labor, "The Canot du Maître – Master of the Inland Seas," in *The Canoe in Canadian Cultures*, eds. John Jennings, Bruce W. Hodgins and Doreen Small (Winnipeg: Natural Heritage/Natural History, Inc., 1999), 93.



Figure 1. In the Royal Ontario Museum's Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada, a display of European goods – notably including guns, axe heads, a copper pot and a felt hat – are contrasted with a beaver pelt on a stretcher. Photo by author.



Figure 2. An overturned voyageur canoe is part of the fur trade display in *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary. Photo by author.



Figure 3. A birchbark canoe is also the focal point of this recreated voyageur encampment that visitors to the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, Ontario, can enter and explore. Photo by author.



Figure 4. This canoe, made by renowned Attikamek canoebuilder César Newashish, is used in a display to emphasize the amount of cargo voyageurs loaded into their craft. Canadian Canoe Museum, Peterborough, Ontario. Photo by author.

Canadian public memory is affected by museums' use of fur trade imagery that privileges associations with Euro-Canadian traders while containing only muted references to Aboriginal people. As surveys conducted for a research project called "Canadians and Their Pasts" revealed, Canadians rate museums as the most trustworthy source of historical information, above books, family stories, historic sites and the internet.³³ Museum narratives that emphasize Euro-Canadian participation in the fur trade accordingly contribute to the prominence of Euro-Canadian traders, clerks and voyageurs in Canadian public memory and diminish the roles of Aboriginal people who made the trade possible. There are alternative approaches to understanding the fur trade, including John Ralston Saul's observation that Aboriginal people responded to the appearance of French fur traders and the Hudson's Bay Company by "welcom[ing] the other."³⁴ Acknowledging the power and agency of Aboriginal peoples in historical contexts encourages a tolerant and respectful approach to Canada's diverse citizenry in the present: it is "a métis civilization".³⁵

The severe implications of rejecting Saul's interpretation and favouring Euro-Canadian perspectives are illustrated by Timothy J. Stanley in "Racisms, Grand Narratives, and Canadian History." Stanley stated that, with regard to themes and narratives present in public memory, "inclusions and exclusions racialize the people in Canada – that is, they make normal the idea that there are innately different kinds of people who can be sorted hierarchically on a scale from the most Canadian to the least,

³³ Gerald Friesen, Del Muijs and David Northrup, "Variations on the Theme of Remembering: A National Survey of How Canadians Use the Past," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (2009), 221-248.

³⁴ John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 65.

³⁵ Saul, *A Fair Country*, 1.

from those who naturally and unproblematically belong in the country and those who do not.”³⁶ When museums perpetuate public memory of this sort, they provide an exclusive group of Canadians with a national grand narrative that inspires patriotic sentiments, but they deny all Canadians the type of “usable history” that Peter Seixas states people need

to be able to understand the meanings of the past for their lives in the present. But without notions of evidence, without the ability to assess contending interpretations, without a sense of the choices, both moral and epistemological, that go into constructing a historical narrative, they will not have the tools they need to take part in the ongoing discussions of the meanings of the past that are essential to building community in a fractured, dynamic, and rapidly changing set of cultural circumstances.³⁷

This provides some indication of the complexity of representing Aboriginal participation in the fur trade. Based on his experiences in Canadian museums, and in the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s Canada Hall in particular, Stanley stated museum narratives that foster nationalism and that confront racism are mutually exclusive.³⁸ Moreover, as Seixas noted, emphasizing the achievements over the tragedies in Canadian history robs Canadians of valuable historical lessons; it also alienates groups who cannot fully share a sense of pride in the national past and undermines museums’ authority as keepers of the past when their retelling of history is so selective. Tellingly, although the “Canadians and Their Pasts” surveys revealed that 32 percent of Canadians ranked museums as the most authoritative sources of information on the past (more than any

³⁶ Timothy J. Stanley, “Racisms, Grand Narratives, and Canadian History,” in *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory & Citizenship in Canada*, ed. Ruth W. Sandwell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 36.

³⁷ Peter Seixas, “What is Historical Consciousness?” in *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory & Citizenship in Canada*, ed. Ruth W. Sandwell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 21-22.

³⁸ Stanley, “Racisms, Grand Narratives, and Canadian History,” 40.

other source), only 13 percent of respondents in an Aboriginal sample group placed their trust in museums.³⁹

This disparity in how meaningful museum narratives are for most Canadians compared to Aboriginal people is one of the issues that Aboriginal communities, museum professionals and academics have been actively discussing for the past three decades. The report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples made recommendations to promote collaboration and improve representations, and was officially endorsed by the Canadian Museum of Civilization, with many other museums across Canada also benefitting from its influence. Several scholars and museologists have written about the strengths of exhibits created since 1992 relative to those made in previous decades, but we should consider whether these perceived improvements are reflected in the experiences of museum visitors as well.⁴⁰

What understanding of Aboriginal involvement and agency in the fur trade do visitors take away from their museum experiences? Scholarship on the fur trade has revealed its significance as the basis for many Native-newcomer relationships. The full complexity and significance of these relationships have often been overlooked, however, when the fur trade is featured for its role in Canadian economic development and nation-building. For decades it was the norm to explore the fur trade and the companies that participated in it with keen attention to their achievements of surviving in foreign lands,

³⁹ In comparison, 45 percent of the sample group's Aboriginal respondents felt family stories were the most trustworthy historical sources; Friesen, Muise and Northrup, "Variations on the Theme of Remembering."

⁴⁰ It should be noted that many museums and museum professionals had already developed strong working relationships with Aboriginal communities before the task force was created; Katherine Pettipas of the Manitoba Museum noted a diorama she curated for that museum in the 1970s had been created after consulting with Aboriginal people to make the display both historically accurate and responsive to the community's needs. On the other hand, constant struggles for funding have also prevented many smaller museums from adjusting old exhibits or creating new ones to reflect the task force's recommendations. The process of "turning the page" has, therefore, been a gradual but slow one.

overcoming intense competition from rival trading companies, and persevering in business ventures for which dividends were not always paid.⁴¹

More recent fur trade scholarship has displaced this Euro-centrism and shifted the political-economic focus to offer insight on the socio-cultural aspects of the trade, in which Aboriginal people figure prominently. The newer histories highlight Aboriginal hunters and trappers as important provisioners of fur-trading outfits, supplying furs and food.⁴² Aboriginal women made clothing and footwear, helped make snowshoes, processed hides, gathered food, and performed a host of other essential activities. For employees of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies, women were guides and translators, and for many they were also wives and mothers. The trade gave rise to the position of Aboriginal "middlemen" who acquired trade goods and then traded them for profit with Aboriginal groups that did not have access to or contact with Europeans. It also created a zone of contact in which Aboriginal people encountered diseases, such as smallpox, for which they had no immunity. Many Aboriginal groups adjusted their seasonal rounds to facilitate trapping, hunting and/or visits to trading posts, while others became known as "Homeguard Indians" by building semi-permanent encampments at those posts.

The challenge museums face in order to integrate the newer scholarship and make fur trade histories inclusive is an intimidating one. They must reconcile the "idealized and romanticized"⁴³ aspects of fur trade history – including the voyageurs and the

⁴¹ E.E. Rich's three-volume history of the Hudson's Bay Company is perhaps most classic example of this approach, as he even discusses British economic endeavours using the pronoun "we"; *Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870, Vol. 1: 1670-1763* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), 4.

⁴² See, for example, Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: their role as trappers, hunters and middlemen in the lands southwest of Hudson Bay* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).

⁴³ Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World*, 1.

teleological narrative of nation-building – that comprise the popular history that visitors have come to expect in museums, with the task of complicating the history with new actors and dilemmas. Furthermore, they must do this in a way that remains interesting and accessible to visitors.

While educating visitors on the socio-cultural complexities of the fur trade can be difficult, it is also necessary. Canadian museums are intended to serve ethnically and culturally diverse communities. When an Aboriginal person visits a history museum and cannot find any reference (or any accurate or positive reference) to her people and their historical perspectives, that museum has failed to provide meaningful representations of part of the community it serves. Museums have to be highly attuned to the needs and interests of the communities in which they exist, and to recognize that they also hold a position of power within their communities. Their exhibits organize, construct and mediate the historical knowledge and understanding of large audiences who generally perceive museums' historical and cultural narratives as being highly authoritative. Exhibits can, therefore, affect their audiences' awareness of historical actors, their conceptions of the Other,⁴⁴ or their recognition of different perspectives or controversial aspects of a history.

Assessing Museum Learning Experiences

Although, as I mentioned previously, learning is a personalized process that occurs over the long term, there are certain means available for determining whether museum visitors are recognizing and absorbing an exhibit's content. Occasionally,

⁴⁴ Michael Ames, "Cannibal tours, glass boxes and the politics of interpretation," in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), 98.

museums with sufficient resources will survey visitors, using questions and observations to gain a sense of how visitors' grasp of an exhibit and its messages compare to objectives and themes identified by curators, and to see which parts of an exhibit visitors find the most interesting. The Canadian Museum of Civilization performed such a survey for its gallery of Canadian history in 2002.⁴⁵

Other valuable insights into how learning occurs in museums can be found in the field of visitor studies. Research in this field explores the conditions and motivations for visitor learning, as well as the impact museums can have on visitors' knowledge and worldviews. John Falk and Lynn Dierking are at the forefront of this field, and have made many astute observations on why and how museum visitors learn that are relevant to this project. For example, they postulate that many people visit museums for entertainment, but that "The museum-going public's idea of entertainment, at least for that time when they are at the museum, is not the same as the theme-park-going or shopping-mall-going public's idea of entertainment."⁴⁶ They have also stated that, while the entertainment value of a museum visit is an important consideration, "Learning is the reason people go to museums, and learning is the primary 'good' that visitors to museums derive from their experience."⁴⁷ Their observations suggest that people who visit museums generally do so with an active interest in learning, provided that museums can offer content they consider both interesting and valuable.

Of the ways visitors can learn in museums, viewing and interacting with real objects and artefacts are most appealing to visitors, as an experience that cannot be

⁴⁵ Karen Graham and Heather Nikischer, *A Summative Evaluation of the "Canada Hall" Exhibition* (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, 2003).

⁴⁶ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 73.

⁴⁷ Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 2.

obtained through other media, such as books or the internet.⁴⁸ The beauty, rarity, significance and/or age of artefacts can elicit strong responses from visitors, and often dominate the visual and physical memories of their museum experiences. As Susan Crane wrote in *Museums and Memory*, visitors learn many things from the viewing of museum artefacts, one of the most important of which is cultural values: the museum's authoritative role as a memory institution ascribes significance to the objects it chooses to collect, and the significance of these objects is reaffirmed by the act of display.⁴⁹ Museum objects therefore communicate to visitors what is valued in the museum's community and culture.

The traditional role of museums, which George Hein described as “the display of objects for the edification and entertainment of the public,”⁵⁰ does, however, become problematic regarding the representation of Aboriginal cultures, since most museum collections were amassed by non-Aboriginal people in positions of power and privilege. These collectors selected objects on the basis of what they (or the institutions that sent them “into the field”) deemed the most curious or interesting. Another point of contention with past collections and exhibition policies was voiced by Michael Ames and Claudia Haagen, who noted “The museum habit of focusing on material culture and technology conveys a narrow view of Native life, limiting it to the objects of the past and favouring those societies (such as the North West Coast tribes) with decorative plastic arts.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 139.

⁴⁹ Susan Crane, “Introduction,” in *Museums and Memory*, ed. Susan Crane (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.

⁵⁰ George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998), 2.

⁵¹ Ames and Haagen, “A New Native Peoples History for Museums,” 185.

These issues of how lingering colonialist mindsets have affected the ways that museums portray – and visitors learn about – the racial and cultural “Other” are specific to history and anthropology museums. On top of these, Falk and Dierking have also outlined a number of general challenges museums face when trying to communicate specific messages to visitors. They note that even when museums portray inclusive and multivocal histories, “Ironically, visitors are much more likely to utilize museums to confirm pre-existing understanding than to build new knowledge structures. In short, learners within the museum context actively select what to attend to and what to ignore, what to learn and what not to learn.”⁵² Their observation is a sobering reminder of the complexity of issues of museum representation. The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples stressed the importance of museums including meaningful portrayals of Aboriginal people in their narratives, but there is no guaranteeing that these inclusive narratives will penetrate or change popular understandings of Canadian history.

The Roles and Potential of Museums

In the absence of guarantees, the potential for museums to influence their visitors’ conceptions of history is still considerable. Museums can exert their influence by presenting specific viewpoints in their text panels and making specific decisions about which objects to include or exclude from their exhibits, but the influence can also be more subtle. As Beth Lord noted in her essay on constructing history in museums, museum exhibits “do not only display objects, but display how objects are related to

⁵² Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 84.

words, names, and concepts: they display systems of representation.”⁵³ When museum visitors view examples of Aboriginal material cultures, then, they are presented with more than just the face value of an object, but also with coding that situates that object amongst certain concepts, values, and ways of relating the object to themselves and the world around them. According to Ivan Karp, cultural coding is not intrinsic to the objects on display; objects acquire significance through the museum’s “mode of installation, ... design, arrangement, and assemblage” of the objects, as well as the interpretations visitors apply to them.⁵⁴

This is all especially true of displays on Aboriginal cultures. Anthropology and ethnology museums often arrange objects, displays and dioramas according to the particular culture or society to which they are related. This practice, Richard Sandell has argued, highlights the differences among socio-cultural groups, thus emphasizing “exotic” traits and denying identification with a history common to many groups.⁵⁵ If, however, museums capitalize on their potential ability to communicate historical intersections, they can engage communities in discussions of the past and its meaning, and alert visitors to new perspectives.⁵⁶ As Trudy Nicks observed, Aboriginal people also offer different perspectives on fur trade artefacts such as glass beads, which were perceived to have “shared metaphorical qualities ... with local shell, crystal, and native

⁵³ Beth Lord, “Foucault’s museum: difference, representation and genealogy,” *Museum and Society* 4, no. 1 (March 2006), 6.

⁵⁴ Ivan Karp, “Culture and Representation,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 13-15.

⁵⁵ Richard Sandell, “Constructing and communicating equality: the social agency of museum space,” in *Reshaping Museum Space: architecture, design, exhibitions*, ed. Suzanne MacLeod (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 188.

⁵⁶ Trudy Nicks, “Dr. Oronhyatekha’s History Lessons: Reading Museum Collections as Texts,” in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, 2nd ed., eds. Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003), 481.

copper – materials considered to be empowering gifts from supernaturals to human beings.”⁵⁷ Increased emphasis on the multiplicity of perspectives is also advocated by Museums Alberta, a provincial museums association and publisher of an authoritative and widely-used exhibit manual. Speaking to the need for museums to collaborate with communities and cultural groups, its *Standard Practices Handbook* recommends that:

The museum’s commitment to public education should embrace learning in the broadest sense of the term. Exhibits and programs that focus simply on imparting information ignore a whole range of possibilities that involve learners on *both* sides of the equation: the museum *and* the community. By sharing the role of ‘expert’ with other community members, museums can relax their hold on their perceived responsibility of providing ‘correct’ interpretations. Rather than distilling facts, issues and opinions to come up with a seamless narrative, museums can expose visitors to the kinds of dilemmas that staff face in researching and/ understanding collections within their cultural and environmental contexts.⁵⁸

This proposed approach to presenting multicultural histories in Canadian museums is a valuable endorsement for involving Aboriginal people in the creation of exhibits about Aboriginal histories and cultures. Its expression of willingness to share authority within the museum as an institution is a similarly positive sign, and invites high expectations for the meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal voices.

Approaches and Components of Museum Display

Visitor studies findings and research on museum learning have had a critical role in shaping contemporary practices for creating museum exhibits. Manuals on exhibit design assemble information on the presentation techniques to which visitors respond best, and offer practical advice on how to position display cases, artefacts, text and

⁵⁷ Trudy Nicks, “Expanded Visions: Collaborative Approaches to Exhibiting First Nations Histories and Artistic Traditions,” in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, eds. Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagg (Hull, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002), 151.

⁵⁸ Museums Alberta, *Museums Alberta Standard Practices Handbook* (Edmonton: Museums Alberta, 2003), 37.

lighting in order to maximize the visitor's experience.⁵⁹ Some of this advice relates to the amount of text to include for visitors, and what font size and style to use. Other discussions relate to the use of various media and display approaches within an exhibit.

The two most common – and historical – components of museum exhibits are the display of artefacts and the use of descriptive texts. The use of objects and labels and/or text panels defined the curatorial approach of Western museums in the nineteenth century, and has older roots in the “cabinets of curiosities” used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by wealthy collectors to showcase the exotic artefacts and zoological specimens collected during their travels to the peripheries of “civilization.”⁶⁰ However, the similarities between contemporary artefact- and text-oriented museum exhibits and cabinets of curiosities pertain more to their shared emphasis on displaying beautiful and significant objects in glass cases than to any shared pedagogical values. As Krzysztof Pomian, author of *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, has noted, rather than focusing on widely disseminating knowledge and appreciation of a particular field, cabinets of curiosities “spontaneously fixed on all that was most rare and most inaccessible, most astonishing and most enigmatic.”⁶¹

Another medium for presenting content in museums has its roots in the nineteenth century. The diorama, according to Edward Alexander, was first used in a museum setting as “a life-sized exhibit with three-dimensional specimens or objects in the

⁵⁹ See for example, Museums Alberta, *Museums Alberta Standard Practices Handbook* (Edmonton: Museums Alberta, 2003); Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, eds., *The Manual of Museum Exhibits* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001); Communications Design Team of the Royal Ontario Museum, *Communicating with the Museum Visitor: Guidelines for Planning* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1976).

⁶⁰ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 40, 73.

⁶¹ Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 78.

foreground amid realistic surroundings and contained in a curved, painted background.”⁶² Alexander’s definition also describes many contemporary museum dioramas, although not all are life-sized, and some forego the use of painted backgrounds by instead surrounding the display objects with very detailed settings (thus blurring the line between dioramas and period rooms).

While Alexander described dioramas strictly within a museum context, Richard Hill, Sr., formerly the assistant director of Public Programs at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., has suggested that the diorama as a medium for portraying Indigenous cultures actually has its roots outside of the museum. Hill points to the spectacular displays of world’s fairs, specifically the Indigenous encampments of the Columbian Exposition of 1893, where organizers and anthropologists designed the encampments to portray pre-contact ways of life in order to capture “an elemental aspect of survival in a pristine environment.”⁶³ Despite the Columbian Exposition’s use of humans instead of mannequins to portray Indigenous cultures, the portrayals, like those in dioramas, were constructed to selectively reveal limited aspects or periods of Indigenous histories.⁶⁴

The values that dioramas are intended to communicate to museum visitors have certainly changed in the past century, but the potential for dioramas to conjure up vivid

⁶² Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 181.

⁶³ Richard Hill, Sr., “In Search of an Indigenous Place: Museums and Indigenous Culture,” in *The Native Universe and Museums in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C., and New York: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2005), 108.

⁶⁴ Frederick Ward Putnam, head of the Columbian Exposition’s ethnology department, insisted that all settlements and encampments be “as purely Indian as possible.” In practice, this amounted to insisting the Kwakwaka’wakw representatives from British Columbia forfeit their Hudson’s Bay Company blankets in favour of the cedar bark variety they had used prior to European contact, and to punishing Inuit performers for, at one point, wearing jeans instead of sealskin garments to cope with the warm Chicago weather. Paige Raimon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 37-39.

images of the past has ensured their continued popularity in history museums. One Canadian museum that has become particularly renowned for its use of dioramas and period rooms as media for capturing visitors' imagination is the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau (part of the National Capital Region). When the museum opened at its new location across the river from the Parliament Buildings in 1989, it revealed a gallery covering 1000 years of Canadian history whose design concepts were visibly influenced by the vision of museum director George MacDonald.⁶⁵ MacDonald, who became director of the museum when its creation was first announced in 1982 and held that position until 2000, wrote extensively of his vision for the future of museums and of the CMC in particular. He sought to combine the media insights of Marshall McLuhan with the entertainment savvy of the national pavilions in Disney's Epcot Center.⁶⁶

McLuhan, the eminent communications theorist, was interested in issues of (re)presentation in museums, and specifically in how museum exhibits succeeded or failed at engaging their visitors. He posited that the taxonomic and label-heavy organization of exhibits was exhausting to visitors, who would experience "museum fatigue" after touring exhibits that offered things to look at and read, but did not stimulate their sense of touch or hearing.⁶⁷ MacDonald took up McLuhan's ideas as informing the

⁶⁵ As a testament to his impact on the museum, Robyn Gillam refers to him as the "originator of its overall concept": Robyn Gillam, *Hall of Mirrors: museums and the Canadian public* (Banff, AB: Banff Centre Press, 2001), 137.

⁶⁶ Enthusing about the environmentally engaging (and marketable) experiences offered in this area of the Epcot Center, MacDonald stated that "Each national pavilion works on a formula model that stresses an integrated multimedia approach. These include a shell of distinctive national architecture for general ambience; a state-of-the-art movie theatre for context and information delivery; live interpreters and performers for the human touch and authenticity; a restaurant for sensory appeal; a shop or market for the purchase of memory objects (souvenirs); and last but not least, a climate-controlled and secure museum space for National Treasures from around the World"; George MacDonald, "The future of museums in the Global Village," *Museum News* 155 (1987), 213.

⁶⁷ The preference for visual representations was, according to McLuhan, a distinctly Western tendency, and one which failed to do justice in exhibiting artefacts from non-Western cultures; Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), 196.

new museum's use of "entertainment forms as packaging for information transmission" since "McLuhan, like many educators today, appreciated that enjoyment is often a prerequisite for learning."⁶⁸ The CMC was striving to provide an exciting venue for learning to occur. According to Robyn Gillam, "For George MacDonald, the solution to these problems was the environmental exhibit," an enveloping, full-scale diorama.⁶⁹

The CMC's environmental exhibits highlight the extent to which history dioramas can vary in scale and function. Many museum dioramas are small and are used to present artefacts in facsimiles of their original settings and contexts. Alternatively, dioramas such as those at the CMC use replicas of historical objects to create spaces visitors can enter, thus enabling them to "step into history."

In addition to the dioramas' potential for visually reconstructing specific places and periods in history, they are also increasingly deployed as a medium for recreating exhibits of decades or centuries past. The Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg contains a diorama re-creating certain displays in the Hudson's Bay Company's Historical Exhibit at its Winnipeg store in the 1920s. The value of such displays is that they provide opportunities to critically examine past paradigms for constructing and understanding historical knowledge. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England, is particularly faithful to this approach, partly because maintaining Victorian principles of organization and display was a stipulation that Augustus Henry Pitt Rivers included in his Deed of Gift to Oxford in 1884.⁷⁰ The museum still displays its collections in crowded glass

⁶⁸ George MacDonald, "A Ten-Year Perspective on the Museum for the Global Village," *McLuhan Studies* 1 (1991), 174.

⁶⁹ Gillam, *Hall of Mirrors*, 143.

⁷⁰ William Ryan Chapman, "Arranging Ethnology: A.H.L.F. Pitt Rivers and the Typological Tradition," in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 15-16.

display cases and still arranges many objects by typology; of those objects, many still have the “[p]ainstaking labels hand-written by Henry Balfour [who became the museum’s first curator in 1891].”⁷¹

Other cultural institutions and curators have reassembled collections of art and artefacts to make these statements. For example, the special exhibition, *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, mounted by the Vancouver Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Canada in 2006, revisited the origin of Carr’s public appeal by re-staging a portion of the first major exhibition to include works by her. According to Charles C. Hill, the curator for this portion of the exhibition, the recreation of the 1927 *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* allowed Carr’s paintings to be reconsidered as part of a contrast between “the [primitive] art work of the Canadian West Coast tribes with that of our more sophisticated artists.”⁷² The commentary offered in this re-creation posited that although Carr’s paintings offer beautiful renderings of West Coast Aboriginal villages, those renderings supported Euro-Canadian perceptions of the art and images created by West Coast Aboriginal people as being primitive in comparison.

This technique has also been used by the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., which includes a critically re-imagined version of the Indian Gallery artist George Catlin had created in the nineteenth century using his art and the

⁷¹ Julia Cousins, *The Pitt Rivers Museum: A Souvenir Guide to the Collections* (Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, 1993), 23, 9.

⁷² Charles C. Hill, “Backgrounds in Canadian Art: The 1927 *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*,” in *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, ed. Charles C. Hill, Johanne Lamoureux and Ian M. Thom (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), 113. The insertion of “primitive” into the quotation is Hill’s.

Aboriginal artefacts he had amassed during his travels.⁷³ The critique is presented on videoscreens that show a recording of Floyd Favel, the Plains Cree playwright, explaining that “[t]his gallery is about history and the past – two different things. What they all have in common – They were not created by Native Americans.”⁷⁴

In addition to artefacts, texts and dioramas, audio-visual effects have, more recently (as the technology has developed and increased in sophistication), become mainstays of museum exhibits. Televisions and video screens can show slideshows of historical images, original footage, oral history interviews and the preservation of traditional skills such as birchbark canoe construction.⁷⁵ Audio effects can use music or sound effects to set the tone of an entire exhibit and the topic or period it covers, or can be accessed in small areas using speakers, headphones or receivers to offer stories and narratives in a way that appeals to auditory learners, those people who retain and comprehend information most effectively when it is delivered aurally.

Finally, museum exhibits can contain displays or devices that enable visitors to interact with the exhibit and its content. Interactive elements of an exhibit encourage visitors to actively participate in exploring and learning exhibit content, and can integrate aspects of any of the aforementioned exhibit media. One example of how artefacts and text can be experienced interactively can be found at the Manitoba Museum, which

⁷³ Royal B. Hassrick, *The George Catlin Book of American Indians* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1977), 23.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Ruth B. Phillips, “Inside-Out and Outside-In: Re-presenting Native North America at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Museum of the American Indian,” in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, ed. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 424.

⁷⁵ Video technology is used for all of these purposes at the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, Ontario. One video follows Attikamek canoebuilder César Newashish as he constructs a birchbark canoe using traditional techniques and tools; Bernard Gosselin, *César’s Bark Canoe*, VHS (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1971). A similar video shows how CCM staff, led by Jeremy Ward, built a 25-foot Montreal canoe in the same manner.

sometimes uses sets of drawers that allow visitors to discover their contents on their own, viewing artefacts and labels describing them. Another type of interactive display popular with museum visitors uses maps (or images) that light up to indicate particular locations, routes or points of interest when visitors push a set of corresponding buttons.

The Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) and the Manitoba Museum are both outstanding examples of Canadian museums that use a variety of display techniques and approaches to portray Aboriginal histories and cultures. They are also two of the largest, best-known and most respected museums in the country. With regard to their representations of Aboriginal people, these two institutions offer interesting case studies. Each contains exhibits that were created before the report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples was released in 1992, along with later exhibits that reflect the report's recommendations. Furthermore, staff from both museums served as members of the Task Force: Andrea Laforet and Gerald McMaster from the CMC, and Katherine Pettipas from the Manitoba Museum.

The scope of these two museums varies. The CMC contains permanent galleries covering Canadian history, Aboriginal histories, West Coast Aboriginal peoples, postal history and a children's museum. The Manitoba Museum, on the other hand, focuses on the human and natural history of Manitoba, and most of its exhibits are devoted to exploring the province's different regions and ecosystems. Both museums do, however, have exhibits and displays on the Canadian fur trade and Aboriginal roles within it. By examining the CMC and the Manitoba Museum's respective fur trade displays with an eye for whether they teach visitors about how Aboriginal people contributed to and were affected by the trade, we can gain some sense of how museums, and the communities

they serve, are dispelling Aboriginal stereotypes and replacing them with cross-cultural understanding.

For the Canadian Museum of Civilization, I have chosen to focus on the two history galleries whose scope encompasses the entire country: the First Peoples Hall and the Canada Hall. Since the opening dates, time frames and objectives of the two galleries differ, their comparison serves to illustrate some quite different approaches to the representation of Aboriginal and fur trade histories. The Manitoba Museum's displays on the fur trade are spread across multiple galleries on the regions of Manitoba, and in special galleries on the Hudson's Bay Company and a replica trading ship. Because I consider the impact of these displays to be cumulative, I examine them with an eye for their individual content, and how the information and ideas conveyed reinforce those of other displays that touch on the fur trade.

The most immediate indicator of how effectively this goal is realized in a given exhibit or display is whether those "symbols of Indianness" identified by Deborah Doxtator continue to dominate representations of Aboriginal people. Then, the portrayal of the fur trade itself must be considered: are visitors only encouraged to understand the trade as an economic enterprise carried out by Euro-Canadian traders and trading companies? If so, it is unlikely Aboriginal people will be presented as playing a role beyond that of providing Europeans with the furs they desired. Even when the overarching interpretations of Aboriginal people and the fur trade avoid these pitfalls, the selection and presentation of artefacts, and the content of labels and text panels also retain the power to perpetuate outdated conceptions of Aboriginal people, and therefore also require critical examination.

To illustrate the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal people, displays on the fur trade should strive to balance the material cultures of Aboriginal people and the Euro-Canadian newcomers. Beaver, bison, muskrat, fox and other furs could represent part of what Aboriginal people had to offer French, HBC, NWC and independent traders, but their role in procuring and preparing furs should be explicitly stated to maximize the display's educational value for visitors. Recognition of how Aboriginal people also furnished their trading partners with food, clothing, canoes, snowshoes and other goods is similarly important. The European goods for which Aboriginal people traded can also illustrate the impact of the fur trade on their lives and cultures, but it is a disservice to visitors to imply that Aboriginal people were consumers only. The power they exercised as hunters, trappers, middlemen, friends and family members demands inclusion in museum narratives, and the ability of Aboriginal people to adapt new technologies to their own needs is also a significant aspect of fur trade history.

Museologists frequently debate whether didactic and descriptive labels belong in museums.⁷⁶ Critics of their use insist that museum artefacts are capable of speaking to visitors without the mediation of texts that apply curatorial interpretations. Advocates of labelling argue “labels, and other printed materials [text panels, information sheets, curatorial notebooks, etc.] are considered as means of reinforcing, clarifying or conveying additional information to the visitor.”⁷⁷ Since labels are used in the CMC and the Manitoba Museum, I have decided to focus on whether their labels maximize visitors' understanding of Aboriginal participation in the fur trade.⁷⁸ For displays to advance

⁷⁶ ROM, *Communicating with the Museum Visitor*, 130.

⁷⁷ ROM, *Communicating with the Museum Visitor*, 132.

⁷⁸ Although the majority of objects in the Manitoba Museum have descriptive labels, there are some objects – such as the Native-made pieces shown in one of the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery's tableaux –

visitors' understanding of the roles Aboriginal people played in the fur trade and how those roles affected them, text panels should draw attention to how the fur trade's success depended on multiple, culturally diverse groups of people.

To offer a more complete view of the fur trade, however, exhibit text panels should also acknowledge the negative effects of the fur trade on Aboriginal societies. For example, inducements to trap large amounts of beaver and other animals eventually led to depletions with disastrous results for local ecosystems and the people who depended on them. Furthermore, contact with Europeans introduced new diseases to Aboriginal people, while competition between companies led to excessive trading and abuse of alcohol. These aspects of the fur trade cannot be denied. The text panels that offer visitors the most insightful histories of these events will acknowledge the darker moments of fur trade history and the dissenting viewpoints some people hold about the role of the fur trade in history. They will do so without victimizing Native people, and without reprising stereotypical – and horribly inaccurate – themes of the “noble savage” struggling to survive the onslaught of “civilization.”

It has taken decades of challenge for Aboriginal people to penetrate the dominant society's historical narratives in Canada, to make their voices heard and their experiences represented in Canada's museums. Finally, it is widely recognized that Aboriginal people have an undeniably significant place in Canadian history. To fail to acknowledge this is to skew the history of Canada. The following chapters explore museum representations of what is widely considered a formative period in Canadian history, to explore and

that have no such labels, while those for other objects – including those in the Dene and Caribou Inuit displays – do not contain information on the origin, age or provenance of objects.

assess their treatments of Aboriginal contributions and influence in the context of the fur trade.

CHAPTER 2

A NEW VIEW OF THE FUR TRADE:

THE CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION'S FIRST PEOPLES HALL

After eleven years of consultations, planning and construction, the Canadian Museum of Civilization's First Peoples Hall officially opened on 31 January 2003.⁷⁹ The gallery covers over 50,000 square feet, and contains over 1,500 artefacts (including works of art and videos).⁸⁰ The perspectives and presentation of the FPH distinguish the gallery from others in the museum – the Canada Hall in particular – and were the result of collaboration between the museum's curators and its Aboriginal Consultation Committee. Consisting of “thirty or so Native scholars and Elders,”⁸¹ the committee was appointed as part of the CMC Board's endorsement of the *Report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples* and worked with curators to identify the gallery's four themes, each of which illustrates the significance of Aboriginal perspectives in this gallery. Appearing on banners hanging just inside the gallery entrance, these themes are: “We are still here. We are diverse. We contribute. We have an ancient relationship with the land.” It is also worth noting that these themes, and the FPH as a whole, were meant to reach “both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences... [to] dispel stereotypes and underline the value of Aboriginal cultures and traditions.”⁸² The result is a museum

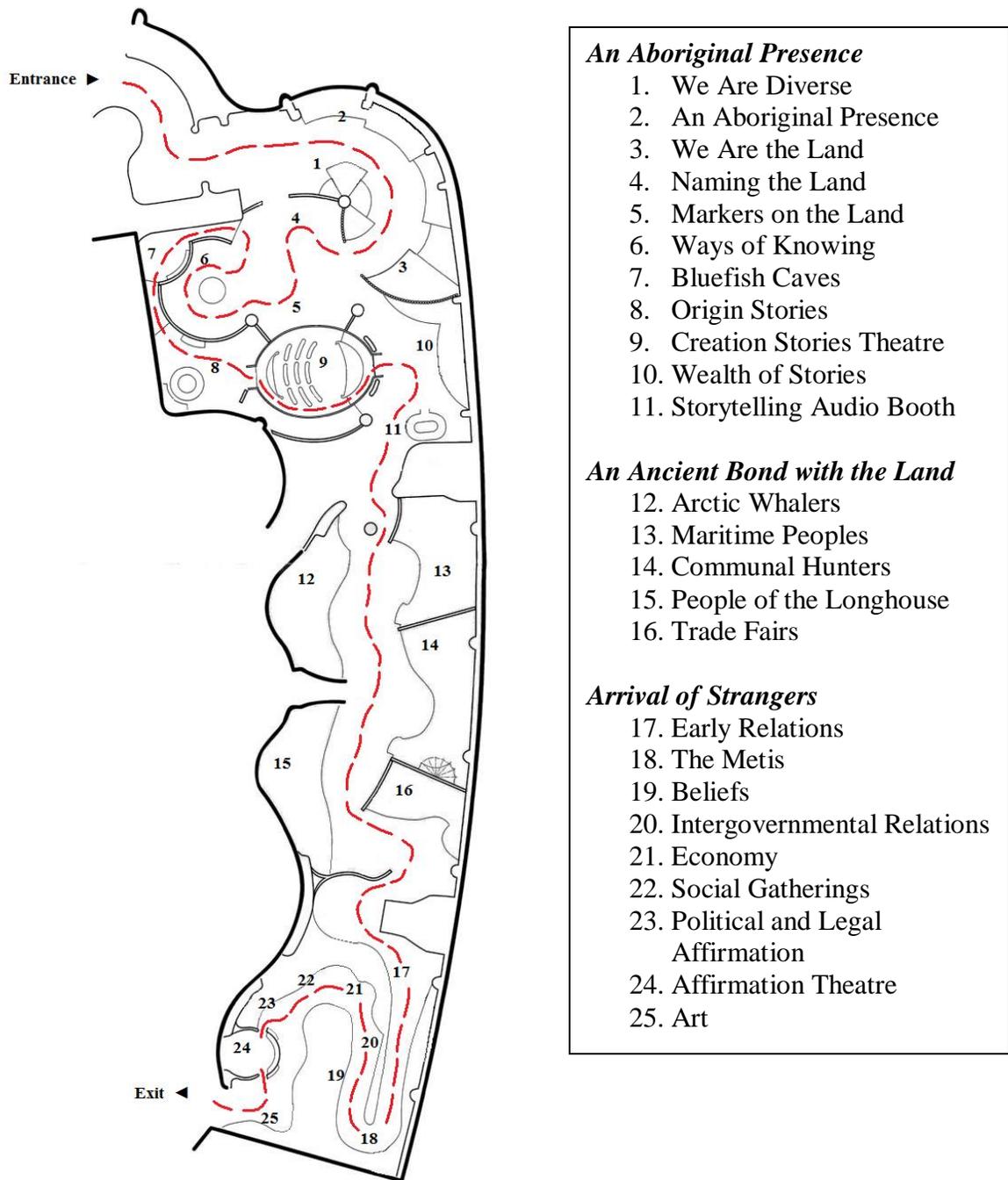
⁷⁹ Julia Harrison, “Museum review: Listening for the conversation: The First People's Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization,” *Anthropologica* 45, no. 2 (2003), 293.

⁸⁰ Ruth B. Phillips and Mark Sabler Phillips, “Double Take: Contesting Time, Place, and Nation in the First Peoples Hall of the Canadian Museum of Civilization,” *Museum Anthropology* 107, no. 4 (2005), 696.

⁸¹ Harrison notes that the committee members were well-qualified for their task, since many had backgrounds “either as employees of cultural centres within their own communities, as artists and craftworkers, or as professional archaeologists”: Harrison, “Listening for the conversation,” 293.

⁸² “CMCC Principles for Development of the First Peoples Hall (created 1998; edited 2002),” quoted in Harrison, “Listening for the conversation,” 294.

The First Peoples Hall



An Aboriginal Presence

1. We Are Diverse
2. An Aboriginal Presence
3. We Are the Land
4. Naming the Land
5. Markers on the Land
6. Ways of Knowing
7. Bluefish Caves
8. Origin Stories
9. Creation Stories Theatre
10. Wealth of Stories
11. Storytelling Audio Booth

An Ancient Bond with the Land

12. Arctic Whalers
13. Maritime Peoples
14. Communal Hunters
15. People of the Longhouse
16. Trade Fairs

Arrival of Strangers

17. Early Relations
18. The Metis
19. Beliefs
20. Intergovernmental Relations
21. Economy
22. Social Gatherings
23. Political and Legal Affirmation
24. Affirmation Theatre
25. Art

Figure 5. Floor Plan of the First Peoples Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization, based on a brochure given to visitors; Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Floor Plan – First Peoples Hall* (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2009).

gallery that presents its visitors with a powerful new framework, developed through a consultation-based planning process and an innovative approach to artefact display, for viewing Canada's histories and civilizations.

The gallery itself is divided into three "zones": An Aboriginal Presence, An Ancient Bond with the Land, and Arrival of Strangers.⁸³ The third zone is a winding hallway with images and text panels to the visitors' right, and an extended window for artefacts on the left, supplemented by more text and a number of information binders. To present the five hundred years of history covered in the Arrival of Strangers zone as a flowing, manageable narrative for visitors, the Arrival of Strangers focuses nine subsections: (1) Early Relations, (2) The Metis, (3) Beliefs, (4) Intergovernmental Relations, (5) Economy, (6) Social Gatherings, (7) Political and Legal Affirmation, (8) an Affirmation Theatre, and (9) Art. The displays in these subsections blend together (unlike some exhibits where separate glass cases or modules neatly contain all the content on a particular topic), highlighting the recurring themes of change, continuity, adaptation and power struggles. The FPH's fur trade content dominates the Early Relations subsection.

The First Peoples Hall has maximized its ability to communicate the significance of Aboriginal participation in the fur trade by striking a balance between emphasizing potentially new ideas to visitors and providing them with an accessible and familiar presentation format. Unlike many other museum exhibits and galleries – such as the CMC's Canada Hall or the Glenbow Museum's gallery on Albertan history – in which

⁸³ Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Floor Plan – The First Peoples Hall* (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2009). When Harrison reviewed the gallery in 2003 its entrance and orientation area was considered a fourth "zone"; Harrison, "Listening for the Conversation," 295.



Figures 6 and 7. Two views of the FPH's orientation area, in the zone called An Aboriginal Presence, where banners introducing the gallery's themes hang. Photos by author.

the presence of Aboriginal voices is inconsistent and peripheral,⁸⁴ Aboriginal perspectives and contexts are allowed to dominate the FPH's narrative. This is evident from the outset in the Arrival of Strangers zone where the gallery's fur trade content is located. Although large text panels and the shift from a dark, dimly-lit hallway to a stark white one signify to visitors their departure from one zone and entry into another, there is a bridge in content between the Ancient Bond with the Land and Arrival of Strangers zones.

The final display of the Ancient Bond with the Land area is "a re-creation of a trade fair between two Native groups in southern Saskatchewan, as it might have looked 500 years ago."⁸⁵ The groups represented are Mandan and Assiniboine. The Mandan trade offerings included in the display include dried squash rings, catlinite, reed mats, arrow points, obsidian chipping stones and corn. The Assiniboine goods include moccasins, dried plant tubers, arrows and pots. A text panel for this section describes the significance of trade fairs as a means of meeting and exchange that has survived, in some form or another, into the present. Trade fairs, it explains, provided opportunities for "people to share resources and ideas, and contributed to an exchange network that spanned North America."⁸⁶ The fur trade with Europeans, and the goods acquired from them, then, became part of these traditions.

⁸⁴ Ruth Phillips and Mark Sabler Phillips, "Double Take: Contesting Time, Place, and Nation in the First Peoples Hall of the Canadian Museum of Civilization," *Museum Anthropology* 107, no. 4 (2005), 698; Frances W. Kaye, "A Review of 'Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta,' Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB," *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (March 2009), 147.

⁸⁵ CMC, *Floor Plan – First Peoples Hall*.

⁸⁶ First Peoples Hall, "Trade Fairs" (text panel), Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Early Relations

The continuity of Aboriginal traditions is reiterated in the Arrival of Strangers zone. The panels introducing the zone note that the fur trade was rooted in traditions that existed well before North America was “discovered”. The first panel states,

First Peoples occupied the whole of North America and used its resources for millennia before the arrival of the first Europeans in the “New World,” just 500 years ago. From the Arctic to the tropics, North America was home to millions of people, and hundreds of nations and societies, each with its own distinctive accomplishments and way of life.⁸⁷

Here, European contact is portrayed as only the latest chapter in a history of North America that spans millennia. Euro-centric depictions of the “New World” are subtly challenged through the strategic use of quotation marks around the early European term for the Americas, and emphasis is placed on the cultural diversity of Aboriginal peoples. These ideas are further developed in the text of the next panel that visitors encounter as they move through this section. Visitors are informed that

Aboriginal and European people saw each other for the first time from entirely different cultural viewpoints. But they found common ground in the exchange of goods and greetings, in hospitality and the minor transactions of everyday life. Each took for granted that they held basic ideas in common, such as the nature of land and the place of human beings on the earth. Now, centuries later, their descendants work to understand one another better. As the implications of their different cultural perspectives become clear, first meetings continue on a new and deeper level.⁸⁸

The themes of this text panel are a continuation of the first, and together they signify another “moment of rupture” like that which Phillips and Sabler Phillips

⁸⁷ First Peoples Hall, “North America in A.D. 1500” (text panel), Canadian Museum of Civilization.

⁸⁸ First Peoples Hall, “Arrival of Strangers” (text panel), Canadian Museum of Civilization.

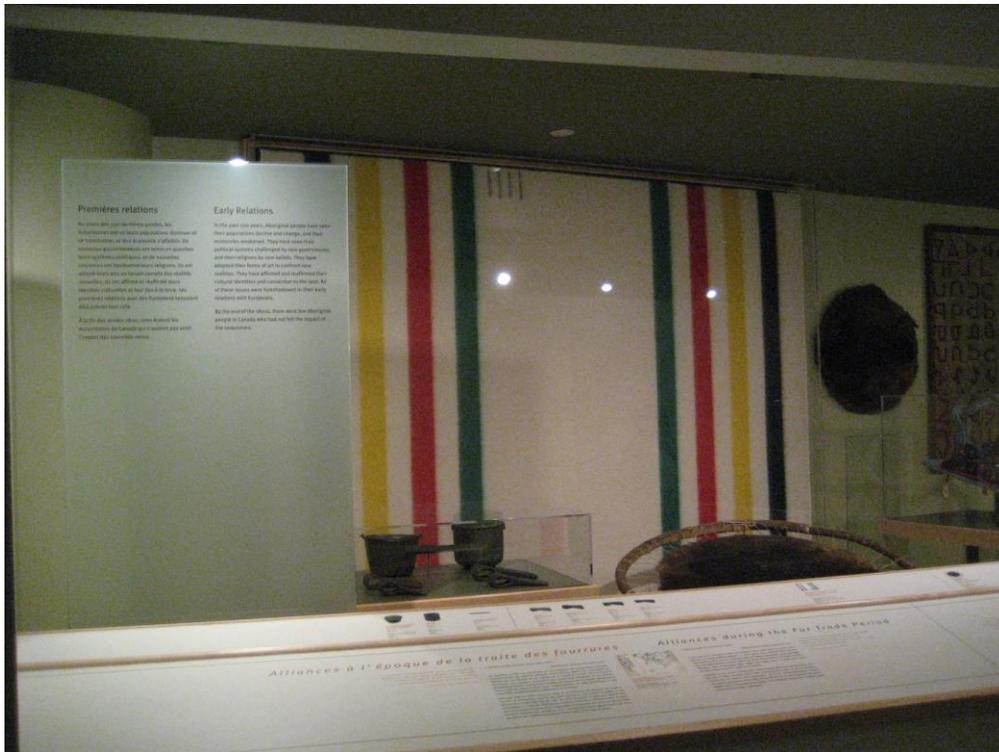


Figure 8. Fur trade display, First Peoples Hall. The HBC blanket and beaver pelts are the first things visitors encounter, but the range of artefacts quickly diversifies. Photo by author.

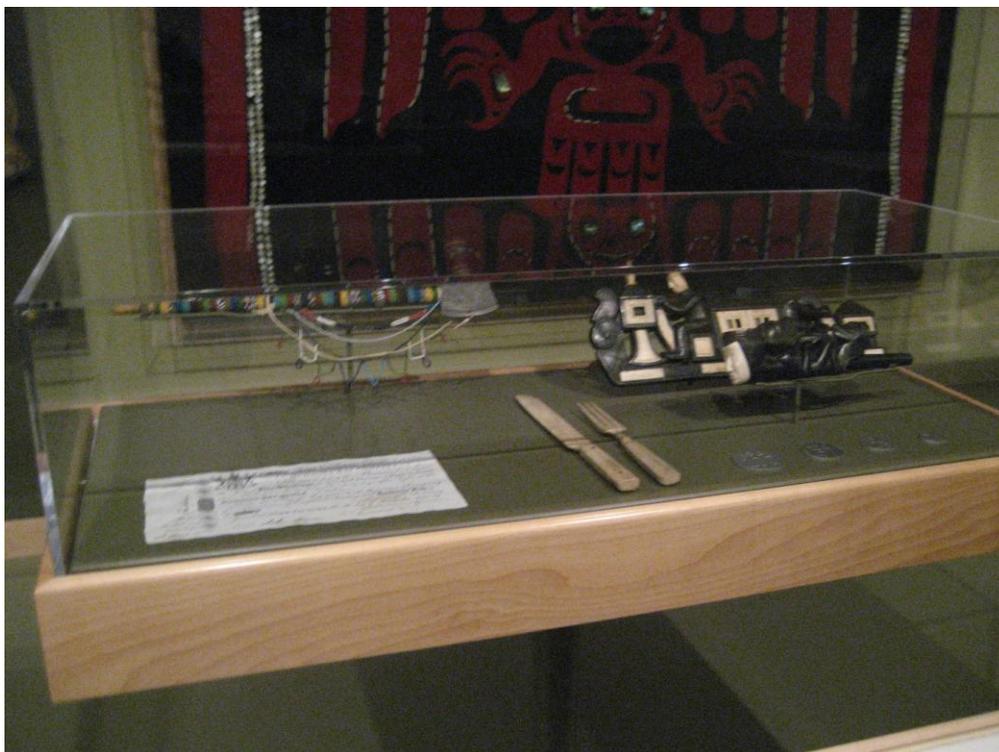


Figure 9. Artefacts of the Fur Trade as a Zone of Contact. First Peoples Hall. Photo by author.

identified in their review of the FPH as surfacing in the gallery's welcome greeting.⁸⁹ The content of these panels calls to mind a particular comment Phillips and Sabler Phillips made in their review of the FPH as to why the gallery sheds many of the CMC's modernist traditions, stating that "[t]he installations invert the proportions of gallery space that had been devoted to Western and Indigenous knowledge in preceding exhibits."⁹⁰ Indeed, the combined message of these panels is that Aboriginal perspectives on the "Arrival of Strangers" do exist (since an absence of these perspectives in other galleries might lead visitors to think otherwise). More importantly, these perspectives differ from the ones European explorers and traders expressed in their written accounts (the same records that are usually key primary documents for historians).

The effect these panels have on visitors is an intensely constructive one. They introduce visitors to the primary subjects and messages of the Arrival of Strangers zone and encourage visitors to connect the events and issues covered to contemporary contexts. This last effect is achieved by the second panel's suggestion that understanding varying worldviews and their implications is a process that must be continued by Canadians – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike – in the present to overcome cultural barriers that were erected in the past.

Following these two panels is the portion of this gallery devoted to "Early Relations" between Aboriginal people and Europeans. Fur trade history dominates much of this segment – in both text panels and artefacts (the media used in this zone) – but one of the first texts visitors encounter in this display situates the fur trade within the "early

⁸⁹ The museum's welcome greeting appears on a panel that overlaps an historic image of Aboriginal people living on the Ottawa River centuries ago, and a contemporary image of the Parliament Buildings on the river's far shore; Phillips and Sabler Phillips, "Double Take," 694.

⁹⁰ Phillips and Sabler Phillips, "Double Take," 700.

relations” context, emphasizing the trade’s importance as a zone of contact. Referring to events that occurred centuries ago, in a way that reaffirms the gallery theme that “We are still here,” the panel states:

In the past 500 years, Aboriginal people have seen their populations decline and change, and their economies weakened. They have seen their political systems challenged by new governments, and their religions by new beliefs. They have adapted their forms of art to confront new realities. They have affirmed and reaffirmed their cultural identities and connection to the land. All of these issues were foreshadowed in their early relations with Europeans.

By the end of the 1800s, there were few Aboriginal people in Canada who had not felt the impact of the newcomers.⁹¹

The fur trade display that follows these text panels expresses the fur trade in terms that transcend the industry’s most conspicuous purpose of supplying Europe with furs. The display deconstructs conventional characterizations of the fur trade, informing visitors that the fur trade was so much more than “Canada’s Earliest Industry”;⁹² it was a site of prolonged Aboriginal-European contact in which these groups found common ground through trade, alliances and kinship ties. Since this might amount to a radical revision of those histories of the fur trade advanced by historians like E.E. Rich that focus on European activity and the successes and failures of the trading companies, it is highly significant that this narrative maintains certain aspects of the “classic” fur trade histories that many visitors have already learned and internalized. Those aspects which provide a sense of familiarity to visitors are the material objects first presented in the fur trade display, and are historic icons of the industry: a Hudson’s Bay Company point blanket, a beaver pelt on a stretcher and metal trade goods (specifically cooking pots and axe

⁹¹ “Early Relations” (text panel), First Peoples Gallery, courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibition, 2010.

⁹² This is the heading offered for a photograph (from the Library and Archives Canada, PAC C-001229) of Colin Fraser as he sorts furs at Fort Chipewyan that is included in a “sourcebook” on the fur trade included in this display.

heads). These well-known symbols evoke traditional conceptions of the fur trade as a point of reference for visitors, but are juxtaposed with texts and artefacts that express perspectives, concerns and controversies that had long gone unrepresented in Canadian museums.

It is here, in the display's complication of fur trade history, that the FPH's four themes call visitors' attention to a reality of fur trade relationships that is often overlooked: Aboriginal people, and their roles in the fur trade, *are diverse*. Whereas the Canada Hall's exhibit on the fur trade tells visitors, via an interactive cylinder roll that reveals text when turned, that Aboriginal women "prepared skins ...[and] acted as interpreters or intermediaries between the traders and voyageurs and the members of their community,"⁹³ FPH displays clarify the range of Aboriginal women's experiences, acknowledging their aforementioned roles but also noting women had significant roles in the development of "more personal and enduring" relationships with traders.⁹⁴ Other distinctions that affected Aboriginal people's experiences, such as the regions they inhabited, are also addressed.

The content of the First People's Hall emphasizes that Aboriginal cultures are not homogenous and defy sweeping generalizations; the fur trade display embraces the diversity of the trade's Aboriginal participants. A text panel describing activities at York Factory specifies that the local Aboriginal population was Swampy Cree, while a book of laminated images and quotations describes the experiences of the Aboriginal men who crewed York boats, the Nuu-chah-nulth chiefs who provided Europeans with sea otter,

⁹³ "Aboriginal women" (text on cylindrical panel), Canada Hall, courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibition, 2010.

⁹⁴ Untitled text panel, First Peoples Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

the Nisga'a who were photographed by anthropologists and the Haida who produced exquisite works of copper or argillite.

This approach provides a distinctive museum experience for visitors; it contrasts with that of museums, such as the Canadian Canoe Museum, and museum exhibits, such as the CMC's Canada Hall and the Glenbow Museum's *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* exhibit, which follow a chronological order. After the gallery's introductory showcase of Aboriginal craftsmanship, the FPH also follows a general chronology in its organization, but the progression of the FPH's fur trade display is organized according to the ideas its curators and advisory committee were seeking to communicate. The text panels in the Early Relations subsection discuss various aspects of Native-newcomer relations by focusing, one at a time, on the different roles Aboriginal people played during this period. In sequence, the panels inform visitors of how Aboriginal people were allies, middlemen, craftsmen, and kin to European traders. A final section of text addresses issues that were present throughout the fur trade and situates it within a larger context of Native-newcomer relations, while also challenging the notion enshrined in Canadian public memory that the fur trade played an estimable role in creating the Canadian nation. Offering a final verdict on the effects of early relations, including the fur trade, it reads, "The devastating effects of disease and colonization ultimately overwhelmed the positive benefits of the new technology and economic opportunities brought by European traders."⁹⁵

The text panels conveying these ideas are placed much closer to the visitors than the artefacts, and at optimal reading level. The ideas they present are developed in quotations from primary historical sources (such as a speech that HBC trader James

⁹⁵ Untitled text panel, First Peoples Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Isham observed one Aboriginal leader make to his European partners after bringing his people to do business with them) and binders full of photographs and early images of life in North America made by European traders and explorers (such as Isham's sketches of various types of snowshoes).⁹⁶ Whereas some museum exhibits display artefacts in ways that allow visitors to lean in, crouch down, or press up against a glass case to examine objects more closely, here, it is the ideas presented in the texts and represented in the artefacts and images that visitors are encouraged to examine.

The privileging of ideas over objects is consistent with the goals of the FPH. As a planning document for the gallery stated, "we are working with ideas. While we recognize the skill, knowledge and aesthetic quality represented in the objects in the collections, in exhibits the role of objects will be to illustrate ideas."⁹⁷ This is precisely what has happened in the FPH's fur trade display. The first idea of the fur trade that is presented is the iconic one, and curators have re-worked this conception of the industry until it produces a dialogue that covers a more diverse array of issues – including the role of middlemen, the sale of Aboriginal arts and crafts to Europeans, the spread of disease, and European efforts to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity. Emphasis is therefore placed on the historical significance of the fur trade, rather than on the visible remnants of its material culture.

To take an example of how the FPH broadens the scope of ideas about the fur trade that are typically presented in museums, one text panel offers some reflective insights on

⁹⁶ Isham's record of the speech and sketches of snowshoes can be found in James Isham, "Observations on Hudson's Bay, 1743," Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, E.2/2 fo. 5 and James Isham, *Observations on Hudson's Bay*, ed. E. E. Rich (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1949), 85-87.

⁹⁷ "CMC Principles for Development of the First Peoples Hall (Created 1998, edited 2002)," quoted in Harrison, "Looking for the Conversation," 294.

the fur trade – and museums’ collections of artefacts from this period – by discussing the luxury goods Aboriginal people produced for sale to their trading partners:

Besides furs, the non-Aboriginal traders on the west coast bought wood, ivory and argillite carvings, woven baskets and hats, and other items. Many of these objects ... eventually became part of museum collections in places as diverse as Boston, London, St. Petersburg and Madrid.⁹⁸

The panel is untitled and uses small type but, for any visitors who read it, the panel’s message will have significant repercussions for their viewing of both museums and their representations of the fur trade. First of all, it directs attention to the origins of many museum collections and how some of their earliest artefacts were gifts from well-to-do travellers who had acquired exotic souvenirs over the course of their service in the “New World.” Jeanne Cannizzo articulated the implications of such collections held by the national museum in a conference paper she delivered in 1989, stating “[e]thnological collections, including those at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, represent what Europeans, what white people found interesting about the lives of native peoples of this country. Thus, we might have plenty of moccasins, baskets and peace pipes but not a lot in between.”⁹⁹

By explaining how some of the CMC’s most treasured objects were originally purchased as souvenirs, this text panel urges visitors to think critically about the conceptions of the “Other” that made Indigenous art appeal to collectors because they

⁹⁸ Untitled text panel, First Peoples Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

⁹⁹ Jeanne Cannizzo, “Reading the National Collections: Museums as Cultural Texts,” *Towards the 21st Century*, ed. Leslie H. Tepper (Hull, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989), 158. Cannizzo herself has experience as a curator, with her work notably including the controversial *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition, which was criticized for attempting to challenge – but eventually reaffirming – Western conceptions of colonization in Africa; see Shelley Ruth Butler, *Contested Representations: Revisiting Into the Heart of Africa* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1999).

considered it exotic.¹⁰⁰ It also suggests a more complex and sophisticated role for Aboriginal people in the fur trade. Once again, visitors are reminded that furs were not the only items of value that Europeans traded for, making the term “fur trade” a problematic description despite its coinage of an industry, a social climate, and a field of historical inquiry. Furthermore, this text panel’s discussion of the fine – and highly desirable – crafts produced by Aboriginal people of the West Coast highlights their advanced artistic traditions, creating a contrast to earlier portrayals of Aboriginal people which depicted them as the primitive suppliers of an unworked, raw material: furs. These interpretations may not be grasped by every visitor who reads this particular text panel, but it still presents more issues – and promotes more critical thinking on the part of the visitors – than some of the text panels found in the other galleries I examined.

These are significant aspects of the fur trade that are covered in the First Peoples Hall. In the FPH’s fur trade displays, the European-made goods offer new views of the fur trade by representing aspects of the industry that have historically received less attention in museums, scholarship, or in popular memory.¹⁰¹ For example, the display

¹⁰⁰ According to Ruth B. Phillips, the aesthetic values held by Indigenous peoples were not the same as those of Europeans; they did not necessarily share the same notions of what made something beautiful. As Phillips wrote in her essay on Woodlands Native material culture for *The Spirit Sings*’ exhibition catalogue, “Early observers often spoke of Woodland Indians’ dress as gaudy. To their eyes, the contrasting patterns, colours, and textures characteristic of native costume and other art forms lacked the qualities of clarity and unity of medium that were ideals of the European classical tradition.” This suggests that some European collectors would have cherished their Indigenous crafts more for their status as curiosities than for the beauty and sophisticated craftsmanship that characterized these objects; Phillips, “Northern Woodlands,” in *The Spirit Sings: artistic traditions of Canada’s first peoples*, ed. Julia D. Harrison (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1987), 87.

¹⁰¹ When economic behaviour and systems of exchange are discussed in the Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery at the Manitoba Museum and in *Nisitapisini* at the Glenbow Museum, rates of exchange are illustrated by numbers of furs, without referring to the later use of currency. An educational programme at the Canadian Canoe Museum, called “the Fur Trade Game,” also focuses on the role played by furs. As for fur trade scholarship, many of the seminal works on the fur trade conclude with the HBC’s sale of Rupert’s Land to Great Britain in 1870. See, for example, Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: their role as trappers, hunters and middlemen in the lands southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Sylvia Van Kirk, “*Many Tender Ties*”: *Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980); E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*

case shown in figure 9 contains four Hudson's Bay Company trading tokens. Departing from the "early relations" theme of the fur trade display, these tokens date from approximately 1946 and illustrate how the fur trade was pursued in some parts of the North in the twentieth century. Shown alongside the HBC tokens is a stunning example of the calumets, or peace pipes, that played a central role in the ceremonies that preceded trading, one of the Aboriginal traditions that influenced how the fur trade was conducted. The trading tokens and the calumet are only two examples of the types of artefacts included in the fur trade display (other cases in the display hold jewellery, a musket, a steel trap and other significant artefacts), but their historical significance and the ideas they communicate are indicative of the care and insight that have gone into the design and artefact selection of this part of the FPH.

Another text panel in this section broaches the issue of how the fur trade affected Aboriginal populations and their identities. This panel is one of the last that visitors see before moving on to other displays and topics in the Arrival of Strangers zone, and it has a lot to say about the socio-cultural changes ushered in by sustained contact with Europeans:

Through Aboriginal families' adoption of Europeans, and through marriage, European and Aboriginal populations became permanently linked.

Every Aboriginal language has a term for people of mixed ancestry. Some children born to European men and Aboriginal women were considered Aboriginal. Other considered themselves European, or simply of dual ancestry. Still others came to identify themselves as Métis. Not all people of mixed ancestry are Métis.

Over time, Aboriginal-European political relationships changed dramatically. Because Europeans had a poor understanding of Aboriginal group names, they

(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967); E. E. Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, 3 vols (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960). However, a few significant works focus on the Canadian fur trade into the twentieth century, such as Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

ignored or modified these names in official discussions. The generic term, “Indian,” came into use. As Aboriginal territories were mapped, Europeans defined Aboriginal societies as groups based on common languages and cultural practices. Aboriginal peoples’ ancient kinship groups and alliances, the foundation of centuries of political interaction, thus became less visible.¹⁰²

This commentary calls attention to European perceptions and mindsets that took root in the fur trade (and other areas of Native-newcomer relations). It reiterates the linguistic and cultural diversity amongst Native groups, while also describing how group identities have been threatened by newcomers’ and governments’ tendencies to conceive of, and treat with, Aboriginal people as members of a single, homogenous group.

Like the introductory panels to this section of the FPH, this text establishes connections between historical developments and present situations to increase the fur trade’s visibility as relevant and interesting to museum visitors. It addresses kinship ties, alliances, and the power dynamics of Native-newcomer relationships. It presents visitors with information about the Métis, while also carefully pointing out that the name “Métis” does not apply to everyone of mixed ancestry. Although the text is longer than any included in the text panels of the Canada Hall’s fur trade module, it is presented as an entry point into complex issues of identity and self-determination. Visitors are invited to consider the damage done by ignoring or replacing names for Aboriginal groups and by imposing outsiders’ terms.

The text does not, however, specify when and by whom these labels were used. Instead, visitors are left to fill these gaps for themselves, with the intended result that they may scrutinize their own vocabulary for labels that they use. According to Amy Lonetree, it is a rare achievement for a museum exhibit to address the negative

¹⁰² “Population and Identity” (text panel), First Peoples Hall, courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibition, 2010.

repercussions of contact from an Aboriginal perspective, much less acknowledge their longstanding legacy. Drawing from her extensive work in museums, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, she found "that most contemporary museums are successful in producing exhibits that challenge the vanishing-Indian stereotype by emphasizing contemporary survival and sustained presence; but they have had limited success in presenting a hard-hitting analysis of colonization."¹⁰³ The Early Relations section of the FPH does, for its part, tackle processes and effects of colonization.

Displays that provoke critical thinking as well as disseminating facts help to foster the type of self-directed learning that may occur in museums because they engage visitors.¹⁰⁴ Some interactive displays allow visitors to manipulate levers, buttons or computers to involve them in the learning process; text panels such as the one mentioned above allow visitors to manipulate ideas. Since assimilating new information and ideas into existing worldviews and conceptions requires more time than the reading of a brief text, museologists suggest that thought-provoking displays and dialogues will inspire visitors to reflect on their encounters well after they have left the museum's physical space. The winding white hallway of the FPH's Arrival of Strangers zone does not offer much aside from the laminated binders that provide visitors with opportunities for "hands-on" object manipulation, but it is replete with visual and textual cues for "minds-on" learning.

¹⁰³ Amy Lonetree, "Museums as Sites of Decolonization: Truth Telling in National and Tribal Museums," in *Contesting Knowledges: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*, ed. Susan Sleeper-Smith (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 326.

¹⁰⁴ As prominent museologist George Hein noted, activities that become monotonous (which, in museum contexts, may include viewing objects and reading label copy) are essentially "'mindless' actions [and] are not particularly conducive to mental changes associated with this form of learning." To avoid this dilemma, Hein and others have argued that museum activities need to engage visitors by being "hands-on" and "minds-on": *Learning in the Museum*, 31.

Critical Responses

Some critics of the First Peoples Hall have expressed disappointment with the design format and appearance of the gallery.¹⁰⁵ It is true that some of the displays in the Glenbow Museum's *Nitsitapisiini* exhibit and the Royal Ontario Museum's *Gallery of Canada: First Peoples* are more colourful and exciting than the white hallway of the FPH's Arrival of Strangers zone. Regardless, the First Peoples Hall is an achievement of thought-provoking collaborative exhibit design. In 1994, Deborah Doxtator characterized the historical narratives of most museum exhibits as presenting "the history of someone else fitting me into their history" because even when Aboriginal experiences were portrayed, it was in the context of the dominant society's influence.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, the First Peoples Hall and its fur trade display maintain their focus on Aboriginal experiences and perspectives, acknowledging the breadth of these to emphasize the crucial point that Doxtator described so compellingly: "We're human beings, and we shouldn't have to try to live the 'noble savage' stereotype that has been forced on us for a long time."¹⁰⁷

Newer approaches to exhibits such as that taken in the FPH do not find favour with all visitors or reviewers. For some exhibits, the hard work put into collaborating between curators and Indigenous communities is not recognized by visitors, and sometimes an exhibit's key themes and messages can be misunderstood. Miriam Khan, a curator at the Burke Museum in Seattle when it launched the special exhibition *Pacific*

¹⁰⁵ Over the course of my research, I most often heard these criticisms as off-the-record personal opinions that the large space and financial resources of the Canadian Museum of Civilization were not put to full use.

¹⁰⁶ Deborah Doxtator, "The Implications of Canadian Nationalism for Aboriginal Cultural Autonomy," in *Curatorship: Indigenous Perspectives in Post-Colonial Societies* (Hull, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1996), 58.

¹⁰⁷ Doxtator, "The Implications of Canadian Nationalism for Aboriginal Cultural Autonomy," 58.

Voices, admitted both were true for that exhibition. A summative evaluation of that exhibition revealed that “one-third of the visitors thought that the exhibit was about people of the past and only one-third realized that it was a collaborative effort with community members.”¹⁰⁸

Other museums and exhibitions have faced outspoken criticism from reviewers. Such was the case for the National Museum of the American Indian. The NMAI is an institution in which Aboriginal curators and consultants have determined how their histories and cultures are conveyed. When the museum officially opened in 2001, its exhibits in Washington, D.C., drew fire from some disappointed reviewers. In his review for the *Washington Post*, Paul Richard mused, “The museum owns about 800,000 Indian objects. Where are they? Mostly absent. Mostly absent, too, is the brain food one expects from good museums.... The eye should have been offered a feast of many courses. Instead it’s served a stew.”¹⁰⁹ Another reviewer, Edward Rothstein of the *New York Times*, complained that “One does not learn what daily life is like or even what the tribe’s religious ceremonies consisted of.”¹¹⁰

Ruth Phillips disagreed with these viewpoints in her essay, “Inside-Out and Outside-In: Re-presenting Native North America at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Museum of the American Indian.” She argued that the exhibits were empowering for the cultures represented since the portrayals were created on Aboriginal people’s terms by Aboriginal curators and consultants. Richard’s and Rothstein’s respective critiques are, however, relevant for their illustration of how museum visitors

¹⁰⁸ Miriam Kahn, “Not Really Pacific Voices: Politics of Representation in Collaborative Museum Exhibits,” *Museum Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (2000), 70.

¹⁰⁹ Paul Richards, “Shards of Many Untold Stories,” *Washington Post*, 21 September 2004, C1-2.

¹¹⁰ Edward Rothstein, “Museum Review: Museum with an American Indian voice,” *New York Times*, 21 September 2004, p1.

can feel alienated or disappointed when exhibits do not meet their expectations or offer the knowledge that they seek. According to Cory Willmott, even the ROM's Aboriginal history gallery faced this type of criticism, when visitors who were looking for updated dioramas instead found none at all.¹¹¹

The First Peoples Hall, on the other hand, has received some very positive feedback and has been credited with challenging visitors to conceive of Canadian history differently while still making that history accessible. This last bit of praise was offered by an anonymous reviewer for the *Ottawa Citizen* in 2003, who stated the FPH “walks a fine line between offering its content for consideration and pushing it as an argument.”¹¹² Ruth Phillips and Mark Sabler Phillips have also spoken highly of the gallery, as has Olive Dickason.¹¹³ Julia Harrison, an anthropologist and an experienced curator herself, found certain shortcomings in the gallery, but many of these were more technical in nature, such as her criticism that a gallery as large as the FPH requires seating areas in its later sections.¹¹⁴

Harrison also noted that the correlation between the historical events or developments being discussed and the artefacts used to illustrate these histories is not always evident to visitors with limited advance knowledge of the subject matter. One object that is displayed in the Early Relations segment that might be conceived as unrelated to early Native-newcomer relationships after a cursory viewing is a cradle board made using modern fabric and plastic decorations. The cradle board is identified

¹¹¹ Willmott, “Visitors’ Voices,” 67.

¹¹² Anonymous, “Hall Honours First Nations,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 2 February 2003, C4.

¹¹³ Phillips and Sabler Phillips, “Double Take”; Olive Dickason, “First Peoples Hall: A Walk through a Rich History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (June 2004), 357-360. Dickason’s praise might, however, entail a conflict of interest, as Dickason herself is one of the thirty significant Aboriginal people showcased in the gallery’s first zone.

¹¹⁴ Harrison, “Listening for the Conversation,” 297.



Figure 10. A cradle board in the Early Relations display. Canadian Museum of Civilization, First Peoples Hall. Photo by author.

as such by an accompanying label, but the label only identifies the object, lists the materials from which it was made, and provides an accession number, without explaining to visitors that it was a traditional item employed by Aboriginal women from many communities to carry their infants. Visitors unfamiliar with the construction and use of cradle boards might not realize that this particular artefact combines contemporary materials (patterned fabrics and plastic buttons) with a traditional Aboriginal design. This combination is more evident when the newer cradle board is compared to others in the CMC's collection,¹¹⁵ some of which are located in the gallery's first zone, An Aboriginal Presence, but no other examples are shown alongside the cradle board in the Arrival of Strangers zone. Though anachronistic with the "Early Relations" theme of the surrounding displays, the colourful, contemporary cradle board is a realization of one of the FPH's Aboriginal Consultation Committee's exhibit principles that:

Artistic creativity in both traditional and contemporary expressions is recognized as an important means of interpreting and communicating First Peoples' cultures. Forms of artistic expression from all periods will be used as a means of presenting First Peoples' cultures throughout the Hall.¹¹⁶

However, one text panel on early relations does offer visitors some explanation of how the cradle board is relevant to a predominant theme of the Early Relations segment, noting Aboriginal people "have adapted their forms of art to confront new realities." Placed amongst the segment's selection of recognizably fur-trade artefacts, the cradle board is one of the artistic pieces described with minimal text, and testifies to the gallery's emphasis on ideas over artefacts.

¹¹⁵ See, for example "James Bay Cree cradle board, Waswanipi, Quebec, collected 1915, III-D-24," *Canadian Museum of Civilization*, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/collect/artifact/a8028014.shtml> (accessed 19 November 2009) and "Algonquin cradle board, Quebec, collected 1913, III-L-183," *Canadian Museum of Civilization*, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/tresors/treasure/293eng.shtml> (accessed 19 November 2009).

¹¹⁶ "CMCC Principles for Development of the First Peoples Hall, created 1998; edited 2002" quoted in Harrison, "Listening for the Conversation," 294.

Overall, the First Peoples Hall's representation of the fur trade is a profoundly useful one for teaching visitors about fur trade history, especially those aspects of it that shed insight and encourage reflection on Aboriginal participation in the trade. Moreover, by communicating to visitors how the fur trade was made possible by the interactions of multiple groups with varying interests and worldviews, it creates opportunities for discussing the conflict and power struggles between those groups as pervasive historical themes. Acknowledgement of those conflicts will be a prerequisite for reconciliation and for preventing recurrences of such misunderstandings, struggles, oppression and alienation in the future. The fur trade represents only a brief period in the long Aboriginal history of the northern half of North America, but the First Peoples Hall draws from its history key lessons and themes that visitors can apply to their overall understandings of history and the present.

CHAPTER 3

SNIPPETS IN A MONTAGE:

THE FUR TRADE IN THE CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION'S CANADA HALL

The Canada Hall is the most popular permanent exhibition in the country's most popular cultural institution.¹¹⁷ Its depictions of Canadian history reach some 1,000,000 visitors each year. They conform to an overall narrative invoking patriotism and a sense of progress, which is presented to visitors in an introductory panel posted at the entrance to the gallery on a text panel that describes Canada as “a community of innovative vitality and unique character.”¹¹⁸

This message is reinforced across the twenty-three separate modules that comprise the gallery, each one covering a different episode or aspect of Canadian history or culture, connected by a snaking pathway that takes visitors on a journey through 1000 years of Canadian history (since the arrival of the Vikings) and across the country from east to west and north. Each module or period area is created according to a general exhibit model in which some combination of artefacts, text panels, videos and interactive elements is anchored by a large and dramatic re-creation – a period room, a diorama or even a streetscape – that immerses visitors in another time and place.

¹¹⁷ Graham and Nikischer, “A Summative Evaluation of the ‘Canada Hall’ Exhibition,” 2; Christy Vodden and Ian Dyck, *A World Inside: a 150-year history of the Canadian Museum of Civilization* (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2006), 1.

¹¹⁸ Canada Hall, “A Journey Through Time” (text panel), Canadian Museum of Civilization.

The Canada Hall

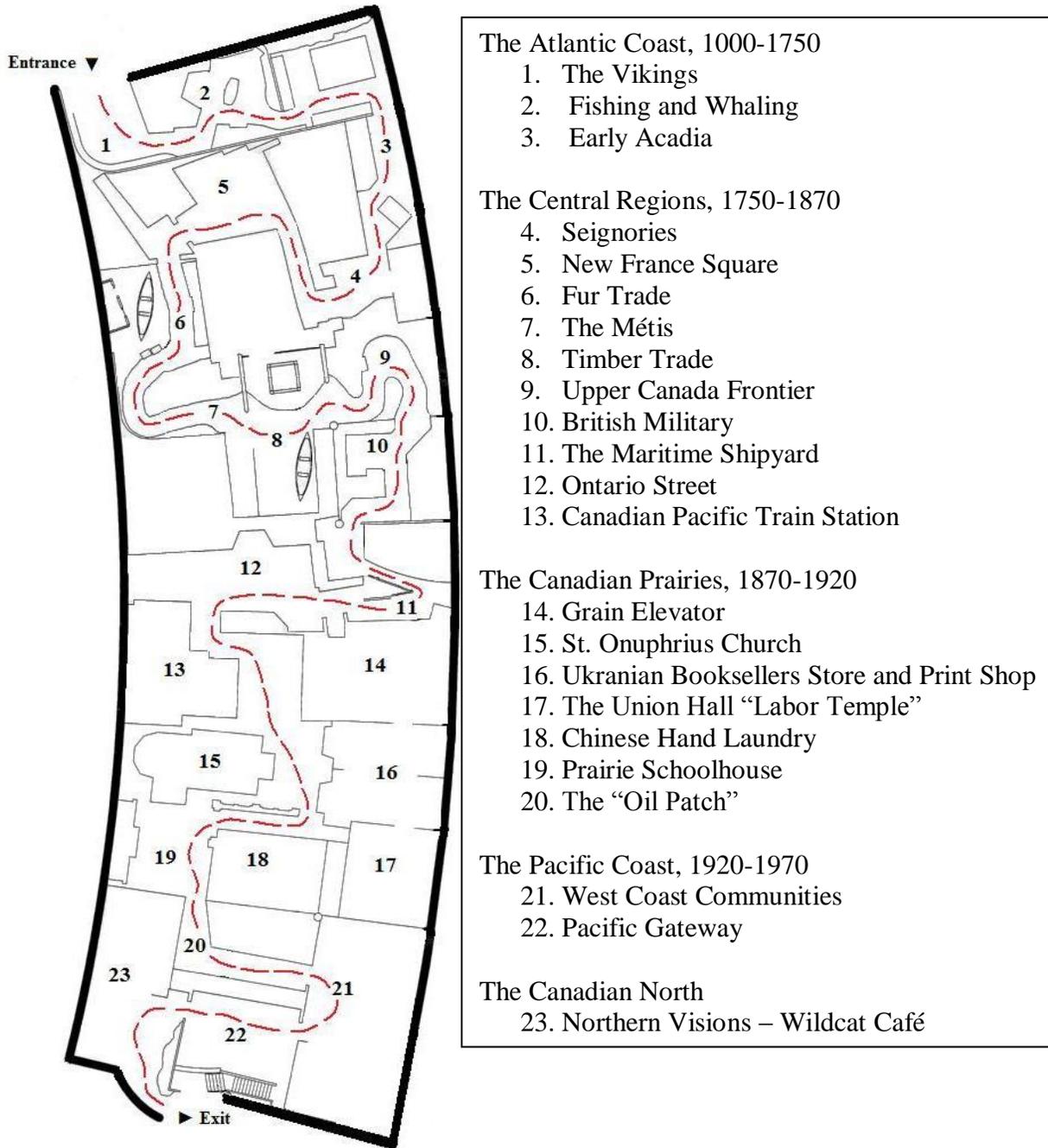


Figure 11. Floor plan of the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s Canada Hall, based on a brochure given to visitors; Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Floor Plan – Canada Hall* (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2009).

Visualizing the Coureurs de Bois

The sixth of the Canada Hall's twenty-three exhibition modules is devoted to the fur trade, and its immersive re-creation is a full-scale, three dimensional rendering of a *coureurs de bois* encampment – complete with a log cabin and an overturned canoe – which re-creates an “eighteenth century Upper Great Lakes [campsite that]... is representative of those found throughout the country.”¹¹⁹ Best described as a diorama, the encampment dominates the module. It occupies well over half the space devoted to addressing the fur trade and each time I visit the gallery I notice that the diorama is the most photographed part of this particular module. Since so much of the fur trade area's available space is consumed by the diorama, it places limits on the amount of information, artefacts and ideas that can be presented in the accompanying displays and text panels. The module, then, seeks out a middle ground between an entertainment-driven display and the more text- and object-heavy approach traditional in museums which McLuhan critiqued as being ineffective in the promotion of learning. An examination of the Canada Hall's fur trade module offers an opportunity to explore the impacts of this negotiation between entertainment and the dissemination of information and to consider how successfully an exhibit using this approach can communicate Aboriginal involvement in the fur trade to its visitors.

Since the *coureurs de bois* encampment is the first thing that captures visitors' attention upon entering the Canada Hall's fur trade module, it seems an appropriate place to begin a review of this exhibit. Recent collaborative projects between museums and

¹¹⁹ Canadian Museum of Civilization, “Canada Hall: The Fur Trade,” <http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/canp1/ca12eng.shtml> (accessed 20 November 2008).



Figure 12. The environmental exhibit in the Canada Hall's fur trade module depicts an eighteenth-century coureurs de bois encampment. Photo by author.

Aboriginal peoples have proved that dioramas are not just a dated mode of representation with an inherent power imbalance favouring the dominant culture.¹²⁰ It is the content of the dioramas, however, that will have the greatest impact on museum visitors' understanding of Aboriginal involvement in the fur trade. A diorama designed with a strong commitment to inclusivity will promote an awareness of how different societies perceived the fur trade. Falk and Dierking have noted that people visit museums to learn not just facts, but ideas and concepts as well.¹²¹ This suggests that if the Canada Hall's fur trade diorama could offer an alternative to Euro-centric conceptions of the industry, many visitors would be interested in knowing more.

Fostering such understanding amongst visitors has increasingly become an important goal for museums, since the 1992 *Report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples*.¹²² Enhancing public awareness about Aboriginal perspectives on – and contributions to – Canadian history is a long and involved process because, according to Falk and Dierking, visitors are “much more likely to utilize museums to confirm pre-existing understanding than to build new knowledge structures.”¹²³ This means that museum-goers who have spent years – sometimes decades – visiting the types of exhibits criticized by the Task Force, may not even think about seeking out information on Aboriginal histories and perspectives, and therefore miss out on the opportunity to learn

¹²⁰ Through collaborative exhibit planning, museums and Indigenous peoples are, in fact, reclaiming dioramas as a legitimate medium. There are dioramas – complete with figures modelled after real Native individuals from local communities – at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in Connecticut, the Mille Lacs Indian Museum in Minnesota, and the Milwaukee Public Museum in Wisconsin. These museums' dioramas depicting Indigenous history “are popular among members of their respective [Native] communities who speak with pride of the models.” Cory Willmott, “Visitors' Voices,” 67.

¹²¹ Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 84.

¹²² Of the three major issues the Task Force sought to address, the first was promoting “increased involvement of Aboriginal peoples in the interpretation of their culture and history by cultural institutions”; Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, *Turning the Page*, 1.

¹²³ Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 84.

about the Aboriginal presence in the fur trade. To initiate change in this regard, museums can promote visitor learning on this front by presenting Aboriginal histories in a way that penetrates visitors' consciousness. The CMC's Canada Hall is particularly well positioned to achieve this with its eye-catching approach to history.

Does the re-created coureurs de bois encampment manage this? The display lacks the kind of liveliness one would expect in a gallery whose objective is to convey how "everyday people" shaped Canada's history, while the Canada Hall's vibrant blue lighting exacerbates this impression by giving the scene a surreal quality.¹²⁴ The encampment's unseen inhabitants are described only in an accompanying text panel, which describes the coureurs de bois as:

Sons of farmers, artisans and merchants [who] obtained permission from the governor of New France to trade their imported goods for furs from the Indians. They then left for their trading posts in the Great Lakes region, their canoes filled with axes, knives, copper pots, tools and blankets, as well as casks of wine and *eau-de-vie* (an alcoholic beverage).

Throughout the summer, they worked from sunrise to sunset, breaking camp, paddling on rivers and lakes, portaging around dangerous rapids and making camp at nightfall. Their diet consisted mainly of fish, game, maize, wine and *eau-de-vie*.¹²⁵

This characterization contradicts the accepted definition of the coureurs de bois, and does so in a way that undermines the strength of their connections with Aboriginal people. While the text panel states the activities of the coureurs de bois were sanctioned by the governor, historical sources indicate the opposite was true. Georges-Hébert Germain wrote in his social history of the fur trade, *Adventurers in the New World* (which,

¹²⁴ Other displays in the Canada Hall employ mannequins, costumed actors, or soundtracks to reinforce the human aspect of their histories, which is more in line with the gallery's objective of emphasizing "the social and cultural aspects of Canadian history; everyday people and especially the family (men, women, and children)"; Linda Champoux-Arès, "Communication Plan, History Hall," Canadian Museum of Civilization, Part A 9 October 1987, Part B 12 June 1989.

¹²⁵ "The Fur Trade ca. 1750" (text panel), Canada Hall, courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibition, 2010.

ironically, was published by the CMC), that the coureurs de bois were the “500 to 800 young men [who] were slipping off to the woods each year” despite the fact that they “risked fines or a flogging if they engaged in trade without a licence.”¹²⁶

The other quality for which the coureurs de bois are often remembered, but which is absent from the Canada Hall’s four-sentence description, is their closeness with Aboriginal people, and the complexity of their relationships. In William Kingsford’s 1887 history of Canada, the coureurs de bois are described as rebellious, high-rolling individualists who, while in the interior, lived alongside Aboriginal people and were accepted into their families through marriages *à la façon du pays*.¹²⁷ According to Harold Adams Innis, relations between these groups were complicated by the fact that the coureurs de bois provided Aboriginal people with illegal alcohol. Furthermore, by traveling into the region around Lake Superior, the coureurs de bois helped secure French power in the trade, making it unnecessary for Aboriginal people to travel to British posts to exchange their furs for merchandise.¹²⁸

Until the rise of the coureurs de bois, Aboriginal people were traveling to the French posts along the St. Lawrence to trade their furs, and sometimes those of their neighbours, for merchandise. Thomas Wien has pointed out that, recognizing an opportunity for profit in the middleman role of these Aboriginal traders, the French “joined and all but supplanted them over three or four decades.”¹²⁹ The Canada Hall

¹²⁶ Georges-Hébert Germain, *Adventurers in the New World: The Saga of the Coureurs des Bois* (Hull, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003), 58-59.

¹²⁷ William Kingsford, *The History of Canada* (Toronto: Roswell & Hutchison, 1887), I: 375.

¹²⁸ Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History, Revised Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 59-60.

¹²⁹ Thomas Wien, “Coureurs de bois,” *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, edited by Gerald Hallowell (Don Mills, ON: Oxford Canada, 2004), 160.

overlooks this aspect of *coureurs de bois* activity in stating simply that “The *coureurs de bois* traded with the Indians.” In fact, they also sometimes *competed* with the “Indians.”

There is an appealing mythology surrounding the *coureurs de bois*, according to which they enjoyed great freedom and flourished in a harsh wilderness. Germain’s opening paragraph on them encapsulates this popular sentiment:

One could not fail to hear the call of the woods. The forest was everywhere, beckoning at the end of every trail and waterway, offering its mysteries, charms, and inexhaustible but forbidden riches.... A few young men in Quebec, Trois Rivières and Montreal sometimes heeded the call and went off into the woods – usually without a licence – to seek their fortune and adventure, something other than the limited and predictable life of working the land.¹³⁰

This notion of the *coureurs de bois* is consistent with the presentation objectives of the Canada Hall, since the hall strives to communicate “the sense of spirit and adventure that moves Canadians from one frontier to another.”¹³¹ Thomas Wien relates such mythology to the tendency of many Canadians “to see the *coureur de bois* as a veritable emblem of French colonization rather than as the transitional figure he was. Hence his prominence in popular memory.”¹³²

Although these mythic figures are well suited to expressing the “spirit and adventure” the CMC wishes to highlight in Canadian history, their presence in fur trade history is limited to a specific period of time and a specific role in the industry. The re-created *coureurs de bois* encampment is, according to a text panel, a depiction of the fur trade as it existed circa 1750, but Wien states that the *coureurs de bois*’ heyday had ended by 1715. Although the fur trade shaped the Canadian economy for over two centuries, the *coureurs de bois* were a significant presence for approximately fifty years. And while

¹³⁰ Germain, *Adventurers in the New World*, 58.

¹³¹ Linda Champoux-Arès, “Communication Plan, History Hall,” Canadian Museum of Civilization, Part A 9 October 1987, Part B 12 June 1989.

¹³² Wien, “*Coureurs de bois*,” 160.

the Canada Hall exhibit does direct attention to the coureurs de bois' essential and physically demanding task of bringing imported merchandise to Aboriginal people in the Great Lakes regions, it does not use their participation in the fur trade to initiate a discussion of the industry's complex workings.

Discussions of complexity are, however, increasingly sought after by museum visitors, for whom discourses of difference resonate according to their own positions in ethnically and culturally diverse societies. Visitors experience and derive meaning from exhibits according to their own cultural values, and look to identify with the values espoused by exhibits. As Eileen Hooper-Greenhill notes in *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*,

Although audiences want to find the visual narratives of the museum both accessible and enjoyable, they are equally concerned about the content of those discourses. Within societies that are increasingly diverse in ethnicity, cultural traditions and historical experience, people within differentiated social and cultural communities respond to museums and their collections according to their own perspectives.¹³³

As museums acknowledge the diversity of their visitors, they increasingly seek to offer content that is significant and engaging from a variety of perspectives (rather than privileging a single worldview) in the interests of serving diverse – and fairer – societies. In this regard, the particular historical construction found in the coureurs de bois encampment falls short, omitting any reference to the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal people. Nearly twenty years have passed since the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples made its recommendations for how museums could better tell the histories of groups that were consistently under-represented within these institutions. And yet, the Canada Hall's environmental re-creation for the fur trade undermines the

¹³³ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 7.

entire exhibit's inclusivity: as the coureurs de bois encampment highlights one group of participants in the fur trade, it barely alludes to the contributions of others.

In her writing on the representation of Aboriginal people at living history sites, Laura Peers has made some observations on the significance of props and artefacts that ring true for museum dioramas as well. As Peers notes, “the insistent use of furs (and especially... the use of individual furs as pelts or on stretchers)”¹³⁴ acknowledges an Aboriginal presence at trading posts – or, in the case of the Canada Hall, temporary camps used by the coureurs de bois. However, the emphasis on furs as material evidence of Aboriginal involvement in the trade minimizes the full scope and importance of that involvement. Peers highlights the full range of activities through which Aboriginal people supported the fur trade, stating “The trading of local foods and country goods at these sites – meat, wild rice, grease, corn, fish, pitch, tumplines, and snowshoes – was far more important than the furs actually traded, as was Native and Métis labor to hunt, fish, paddle, make canoes, guide, translate, mend snowshoes, and perform other skilled tasks.”¹³⁵

Peers takes trading-posts-turned-living-history-sites as her subjects, but they appear to have a great deal in common with the Canada Hall's fur trade module with regard to their portrayals of Aboriginal people. Like the sites of interest to Peers, the coureurs de bois encampment's most apparent signs of trade with Aboriginal people are the pelts: one is casually tossed over the birchbark canoe, another is on a stretcher propped against the cabin. The bales of goods on which the canoe rests may consist of

¹³⁴ Peers, *Playing Ourselves*, 96-97.

¹³⁵ Peers, *Playing Ourselves*, 97.

bundles of furs, but they lack any identifying marks¹³⁶ and the accompanying text panel makes no mention of the bales or their possible contents. What the panel does offer is information on the *coureurs de bois*' foods: fish, game and maize. Once again this information falls short of acknowledging the significance of Aboriginal people in the fur trade, since the panel fails to explain that, while in the interior, the *coureurs de bois* likely acquired most of these items from Aboriginal people since their rigorous travels severely limited the time they could fish, hunt or harvest.

Innis, in contrast, highlighted the acquisition of food supplies from Aboriginal people in his description of the *coureurs de bois*, as it illustrated their economic impact on life in the interior and shed light on Aboriginal-French relations. Innis quoted Baron de Lahontan's description of Green Bay as a gathering place for Aboriginal people who provided "Indian Corn, which these Savages sell to the *Coureurs de bois*, as they come and go."¹³⁷ In fact, Innis's writing would have provided excellent material for text panels with more historical authenticity, since he cited a number of relevant passages from primary documents. In particular, M. de Clairambault d'Aigremont in 1710 offered an excellent description of how the *coureurs de bois* fit into the various negotiations of power that characterized the fur trade – especially French-English competition and European-Aboriginal trading relationships – stating:

The *Coureurs de bois* are useful in Canada for the fur trade, which is the sole branch that can be relied on, for it is certain that if the articles required by the Upper Nations be not sent to Michilimackinac, they will go in search of them to the English at Hudson's Bay, to whom they will convey all their peltries, and will

¹³⁶ Since furs were pressed into bundles that typically weighed ninety pounds, the shape and size of fur bales was generally consistent. The Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company and the XY Company also stamped their fur bales with the respective company's name and the fort at which the furs were collected.

¹³⁷ Louis Armand de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North-America*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Chicago: 1905), I:146, quoted in Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 61.

detach themselves entirely from us, which would inflict a notable prejudice on that colony...When these Indians will be obliged to go a great distance to get their necessaries, they will always go to the cheapest market; whereas, were they to obtain their supplies at their door, they would take them, whatever the price may be.¹³⁸

The inadequacy of the fur trade module's environmental exhibit stands out especially because of its status as the exhibit's *piece de résistance*. Falk and Dierking have noted that museum learning is heavily influenced by a sense of the physical environment in which that learning occurs.¹³⁹ In the Canada Hall's fur trade display, visitors' sense of their physical surroundings is dominated by the environmental exhibit; it is the first thing visitors see when they approach the module, and the CMC uses its image to represent the fur trade module in its promotional materials.¹⁴⁰ This means that the prevailing feature of the Canada Hall's fur trade exhibit represents only a narrow range of time and a specific group of historical actors. While the role of Aboriginal people in the fur trade is implied by the presence of furs in the display, and gets a brief mention in the accompanying text panel, the Aboriginal presence is subtle and uninformative.

Frustratingly, the *coureurs de bois* encampment has already been altered once since the Canada Hall opened in 1989, but the change achieved little from a narrative standpoint. On my visits to the museum, the canoe in this re-creation was overturned and

¹³⁸ *Documents relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York, procured in Holland, England and France, by John Romeyn Brodhead, Esq., agent, under and by virtue of an act of the legislature...*, ed. E.B. O'Callaghan, vol. 9 (Albany: 1856-1857), 852-53, quoted in Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 59.

¹³⁹ Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 54.

¹⁴⁰ A volume of photographs of the CMC, the Canada Hall floor plan and the CMC website's page devoted to the fur trade each include a single image of this exhibit, and in every case the image depicts the *coureurs de bois* encampment. *The Canadian Museum of Civilization: Photos by Malak* (Hull, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002); Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Floor Plan – Canada Hall* (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2009); Canadian Museum of Civilization, *The Fur Trade*, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/canp1/ca12eng.shtml> (accessed 20 November 2008).

resting on bales of goods or furs. Older images of the environmental exhibit¹⁴¹ indicate that it had previously contained a different canoe, which was positioned upright and loaded with goods.¹⁴² The first canoe to be used in this display was built by a renowned Aboriginal canoebuilder, César Newashish. It is now part of a fur-trade display at the Canadian Canoe Museum,¹⁴³ but the beauty of the relief decorations painstakingly scraped onto the hull and the practical, easy-to-repair design could, if brought to visitors' attention, illustrate the significance of Aboriginal cultural and technological contributions to the fur trade. The canoe that is currently in the coureurs de bois encampment has a painted decal on its bow that resembles the Basque lauburu designs depicted in the paintings of voyageurs' canoes made by Frances Ann Hopkins in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁴ The application of imported paints¹⁴⁵ to an Aboriginal technology is another example of how different cultures influenced one another through their relationships in the fur trade. However, the canoe is not identified as being significant in this respect, and the example is underwhelming compared to the dramatic image of a small isolated cabin surrounded by the tools, supplies and trading goods of the coureurs de bois.

¹⁴¹ See, for example, [Coureurs de bois encampment], *Canadian Museum of Civilization*, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/canp1/ca12eng.shtml> (accessed 20 September 2009).

¹⁴² The canoe was overturned for structural preservation, and to indicate to children that the cabin structure was not meant to be entered; Jean-Pierre Hardy, personal communication, 2 April 2010.

¹⁴³ See figure 4. The canoe is also referred to as part of the Canadian Canoe Museum collection on the Virtual Museum of Canada website; "Living Traditions: Museums Honour the North American Indigenous Games – The Canoe and Kayak," Virtual Museum of Canada, http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Traditions/Francais/north_america_canoe_racing_06.html (accessed 4 April 2010).

¹⁴⁴ Labor, "The Canôt du Maitre," 94.

¹⁴⁵ Although Aboriginal people also produced their own paints, trade with Europeans offered them access to new paints and pigments; Innis, "The Fur Trade in Canada," 27; Gilman, *Where Two Worlds Meet*, 33.

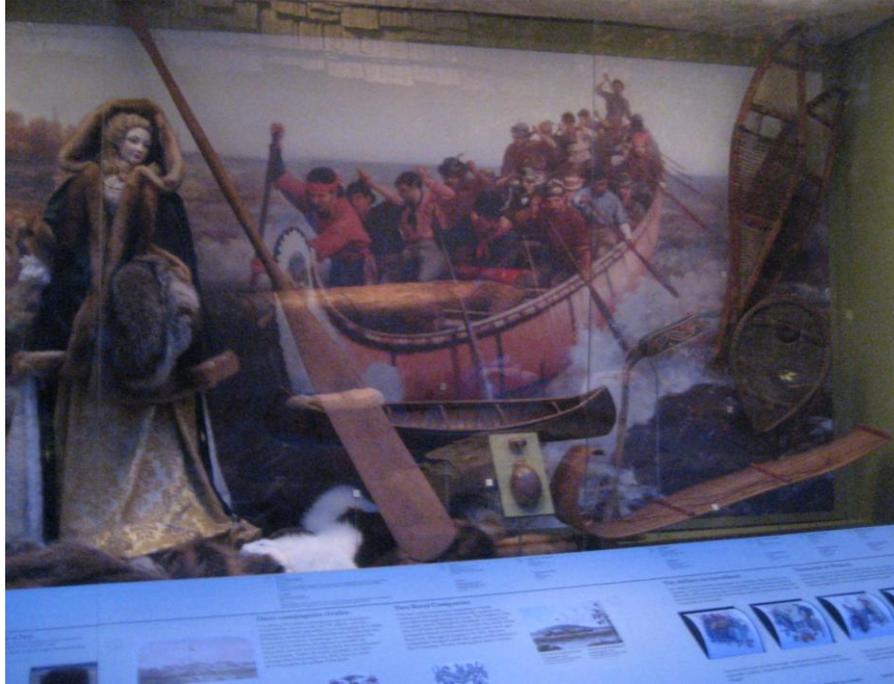


Figure 13. The first of two display cases visitors encounter in the Canada Hall's fur trade module. To the left, an assortment of different furs is shown, while a mannequin models a fur-trimmed cloak. The right half of the case holds snowshoes, a carrying strap, a model toboggan and a model birchbark canoe to represent Aboriginal contributions to the fur trade. On the text panel below these objects are cylinders that visitors can roll to reveal how different groups of people participated in the fur trade. Photo by author.



Figure 14. The second large display case in the Canada Hall's fur trade module. Like the other, its backdrop is from a painting by Frances Ann Hopkins, but the contents of this display case are mostly trade goods and artefacts associated with the voyageurs of earlier times. Photo by author.

Despite the fact that it is large and visually commanding, the re-created coureurs de bois encampment remains but a single component of the Canada Hall's fur trade exhibit. The exhibit's main substance is to be found opposite the encampment, where a series of display cases and interactive elements provide visitors with artefacts and information. The displays cover the European administration of the fur trade (punctuated by felt hats, a fur cape, and information on the Hudson's Bay Company), the animals whose furs were collected in the trade, the people who participated in the fur trade and the roles they played, the dispersion of trading posts across Canada, and the impact the fur trade had on Aboriginal people.

While this portion of the exhibit offers visitors a significantly greater amount of content, it shares one of the coureurs de bois encampment's major failings in that it includes too little information. Brief text panels gloss over the more complex aspects of the fur trade, and since the economic, political, social and cultural roles assumed by Aboriginal people who traded with Europeans were essential, interwoven and often in flux, Aboriginal participation in the fur trade hardly gets the attention it deserves. This is not to imply that the curators of the Canada Hall were ignorant of Aboriginal perspectives. Rather, the issue illustrates how museum exhibits represent a series of negotiations between sometimes competing goals and needs, and demonstrates how portrayals of a particular group's experiences may be impacted by these negotiations.

Two components of the Canada Hall's fur trade exhibit are worth mentioning in this regard. The first is an interactive map, and the second is a text panel entitled "Fur and Native People." Both are in the fur trade module. The interactive map is preceded by another map that makes use of text and labels for key posts to identify which regions

and posts were controlled by the French, the North West Company, or the Hudson's Bay Company. Building on this geographic context, the interactive map shows the locations of trading posts according to the spread and decline of the fur trade from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. It invites visitors to push buttons that trigger lights on the map that indicate where and when posts operated. A block of text situated above the map briefly contextualizes fur trade activity with the following description by noting its gradual north- and westward expansion and the role trading posts played in shaping early settlement patterns. In sum, it states, the fur trade ("in search of new markets") and the role trading posts played in shaping early settlement patterns. In sum, it states, the fur trade "strongly influenced the social geography of Canada."¹⁴⁶

The information provided is correct: many Canadian cities have been founded at the sites of former trading posts and some still bear the names of the posts erected there. This statement is, however, misleading in its attribution of current settlement patterns to the fur trading companies because it fails to locate these forts within an Aboriginal as well as a fur-trade context. After all, the "new markets" referred to in the map's explanatory text were Aboriginal communities, and it was proximity to these communities that often determined where trading posts were situated. Furthermore, Aboriginal people were not only sources of furs and consumers of trade goods, they also supported trading posts with their labour, provisions, skills and the personal ties they forged with traders who developed relationships with Aboriginal women according to "the custom of the country."¹⁴⁷ The interactive map, in this respect, represents a missed opportunity for illustrating the settlement and/or migration patterns of Aboriginal people,

¹⁴⁶ Canada Hall, untitled text panel, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

¹⁴⁷ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1986), 28-52.

and to complement the territorial map by illustrating how the locations of trading posts and the locations of Indigenous communities overlapped. Though it does not include the boundary lines Europeans imposed on the North American continent either, the module's overall emphasis on Euro-Canadian roles in the fur trade needs to be balanced with Aboriginal influences on the fur trade, which the depiction of Aboriginal territories could have helped achieve.

Still, an effort has been made to include Aboriginal histories in the Canada Hall's fur trade exhibit. One of the ways the significance of Aboriginal participation in the fur trade is communicated is through a text panel that discusses the industry's positive and negative impacts on Aboriginal ways of life. Bearing the heading "Fur and Native People," the text panel states that

The fur trade profoundly transformed the lives of Canada's Native people. From their earliest contact with Europeans, they contracted fatal diseases – measles and smallpox – that decimated entire populations. Then came the missionaries, calling traditional beliefs and customs into question.

Aboriginal peoples quickly adopted European trade goods, for better or for worse. Cooking pots, axes and metal tools made life much easier for them. But firearms, which made hunting easier and more effective, also transformed the traditional balance of power between First Nations.¹⁴⁸

The content of the panel points to significant issues, but loses some of its impact for want of depth and specificity. To visitors unfamiliar with the fur trade, it might not be clear how firearms "transformed the traditional balance of power"; the fact that certain Aboriginal groups gained access to firearms before their rivals as a result of trading alliances, or the East to West diffusion of trade goods that occurred (since the Canada Hall's fur trade exhibit primarily covers the Great Lakes region) as Europeans traveled farther inland is not spelled out. Further, the panel's discussion of measles and smallpox

¹⁴⁸ "Fur and Native People" (text panel), Canada Hall, courtesy © Canadian Museum of Civilization, on-line exhibition, 2010.

associates the spread of these diseases specifically with the fur trade. From its opening sentence, the text portrays the fur trade as causal and transformative. But did the fur trade play a significant role in causing the spread of disease? Cole Harris noted in *The Resettlement of British Columbia* that some fur traders used Aboriginal people's intense fear of smallpox as leverage meant to secure their place in a foreign land,¹⁴⁹ but the lack of experience with, or immunity to, European diseases made them devastating for Aboriginal communities, regardless of how those communities came into contact with Europeans.¹⁵⁰ The impact of measles and smallpox on Aboriginal populations and cultures is an important topic to cover in a gallery of Canadian history, but it cannot be explained without mentioning the roles of explorers, Christian missionaries, early settlers or the coastal fisheries. The panel links the spread of European diseases with the fur trade to a degree that is misleading.

The "Fur and Native People" text panel is not, however, displayed in isolation. Its surroundings have the power to reinforce (or undermine) its theme of Aboriginal participation in the fur trade. The artefacts in its display case are arranged so that those situated closest to the text panel – the trade blanket, the axe heads, the metal traps and the cooking pots – represent valuable trade items that Aboriginal people acquired by exchanging goods with Europeans. The descriptions of these artefacts reiterate their appeal for Aboriginal people, as for example in the description of the cooking pots which notes their transformative impact on cooking methods – replacing the traditional method of heating meals by dropping rocks that had been warmed near a fire into bark, hide or

¹⁴⁹ Cole Harris, "Strategies of Power in the Cordilleran Fur Trade," in *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 57-58.

¹⁵⁰ The spread of disease was not limited to regions where Aboriginal people participated in the fur trade, rather, it occurred throughout the Americas; Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The "New World" through Indian eyes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 14.

clay vessels. “Metal pots eased women’s work,” the descriptive label goes on to note, and worn-out pots “could be cut up and made into tools and jewelry.”¹⁵¹ For museum visitors who do not read these artefact descriptions, the relationship between the “Fur and Native People” panel and the artefacts displayed is not clarified: the artefacts closest to the text panel are commercially manufactured goods, while the artefacts on the right (a violin, a ceinture fléchée and a man’s jacket) are presented as the material legacy of the voyageurs. The visual impact of this case’s artefacts – and the image of a Frances Anne Hopkins painting that constitutes the display’s background – tend to emphasize the significance of European- and Canadian-made goods while minimizing the visibility of Aboriginal participation.

The agency of Aboriginal people in the fur trade would have been more conspicuous if the “Fur and Native People” text panel had been surrounded by the toboggans, snowshoes, and model canoe from the first display case. The placement of this text panel within a glass display case also undermines the likelihood it will influence visitors’ understanding of the fur trade. According to Beverly Serrell, “Labels next to dimensional elements in exhibits get read more than flat label panels on the wall,” while the absence of images on the panel itself is equally discouraging for visitors.¹⁵² This suggests that the important topic of Aboriginal people’s experiences in and perspectives on the fur trade should have been addressed in a more prominent location, perhaps in one of the panels adjacent to the re-created encampment. These angled, back-lit panels are located approximately a metre from the ground and are illustrated by historic images of

¹⁵¹Untitled text panel, Canada Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

¹⁵²Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 235.

the fur trade, reflecting all of Serrell's advice for making readable panels that encourage visitor engagement.

The challenge of conveying Aboriginal perspectives in a manner that has the best possible chance of reaching visitors can be addressed in a number of ways. Some museums have been remarkably innovative in finding ways to show they represent and involve their local communities. The Glenbow Museum's display on the fur trade as a feature of Albertan history includes a circular panel, placed and lit so that it stands out, that offers an Aboriginal take on the fur trade, stating "We hardly noticed when the first Europeans visited us.... [They were] uninvited guests [who] came to trade, but trade was not new to us." The panel mentions some of the trade goods Euro-Canadians offered, but counters their appeal by also noting the newcomers "brought us diseases: smallpox, measles, whooping cough, tuberculosis. We had no resistance to these. Often whole camps died from an infection. These diseases changed our lives more than any other thing brought by the newcomers."¹⁵³

By characterizing the fur trade in these terms, the Glenbow's text panel speaks in an Aboriginal voice (using the pronoun 'we,' although it is problematic that authorship is unspecified), describing Europeans as "guests" on a continent whose original inhabitants had established trading networks and were able to integrate the Europeans' technological advances into their own way of life. Similarly, in Peterborough, Ontario, a text panel in the Canadian Canoe Museum's fur trade exhibit dares to debate the merits of the fur trade in Canadian history, challenging visitors to consider whether the negative effects it had on Aboriginal people outweighed its positive contributions:

¹⁵³ "An Aboriginal Perspective" (text panel), *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*, Glenbow Museum.

For Aboriginal men, guns, telescopes, metal arrowheads, traps and tools saved time and labour. Metal cooking pots, needles, scissors, twine for fishnets, broadcloths and blankets eased life for the women.

The trade in liquor damaged Aboriginal society, but to a lesser extent than did contact with European diseases. Liquor was not only traded, but was part of the ceremonies that accompanied negotiations. It accounted for 5% to 12% of the value of trade shipments, highest where competition was most intense.

Despite this, Aboriginals showed little evidence of dependency on Europeans, and remained confident and vital communities. The people readily incorporated European goods into their lives in ways that strengthened their cultures.¹⁵⁴

These examples illustrate how museums can discuss and debate Aboriginal perspectives in ways that can broach darker aspects of history while recognizing the agency of Aboriginal people.

Stacking Up

The Canada Hall's fur trade exhibit has its strengths. Each time I visit the exhibit I notice how visitors react to the vibrancy of the diorama and the opportunities for hands-on interaction: children admire how realistic the water in the re-created *coureurs de bois* encampment looks and how soft the different animal furs feel, while virtually every visitor – regardless of age – pushes the buttons that cause the trading post sites to light up on the map of Canada. Indeed, with this exhibit the CMC's staff has excelled in its effort to get visitors more involved in the way they experience, and learn from, museums.

What visitors learn from the fur trade exhibit, especially with regard to Aboriginal roles in, and perspectives on, the fur trade, is far less certain. Beaver pelts constitute the encampment's primary visual cues for suggesting Aboriginal involvement, while its accompanying text panel overlooks the dependence of the *coureurs de bois* on Aboriginal

¹⁵⁴ “Richer or Poorer? The historians debate” (text panel), Fur Trade Gallery, © Canadian Canoe Museum.

provisions and knowledge. Aboriginal people are also peripheral to the histories conveyed in the module's other text panels, its glass display cases, and its interactive elements. These deficiencies lead one to wonder whether the dissemination of information must, to a certain extent, be sacrificed in galleries that make entertainment value a priority. Since the interpretive objectives for the Canada Hall are to convey "a sense of adventure, discovery and expectation,"¹⁵⁵ aspects of the fur trade that confirm these ideals are privileged over other divergent histories.

What do the differences between the fur trade displays in the First Peoples Hall and the Canada Hall tell us about issues of representation and inclusion? The FPH's superiority with regard to its portrayal of the fur trade as a complex zone of contact between Europeans and Aboriginal people is an indication of museum exhibits gradually becoming more inclusive. Planning for the FPH did occur in the wake of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples releasing its findings. The Canadian Museum of Civilization's board of executives endorsed the Task Force's report, and its recommendations factored heavily into the development of the FPH. In contrast, the Canada Hall opened in 1989, so much of its design and construction was already completed when the Glenbow Museum's *The Spirit Sings* exhibition opened in 1988 and its boycott by the Lubicon Cree prompted museologists, scholars, and Aboriginal communities to re-examine issues of inclusion in Canadian museums. In the three years between the opening of the Canada Hall and the beginning of the FPH's serious planning, a significant new body of research explored how museums could tackle issues of inclusion by collaborating with Aboriginal people. Perhaps the Canada Hall's

¹⁵⁵ Linda Champoux-Arès, "Communications Plan, History Hall," Part A, 9 October 1987, Part B, 12 June 1989 (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization), 41 and 90.

representation of Aboriginal experiences and perspectives would have been more comprehensive if there had been more resources – such as *The Report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples* – available for the gallery’s curators.

The disparate degrees of Aboriginal inclusion in the two fur trade displays could also be attributed to the differing narratives and museological approaches of the FPH and the Canada Hall. The First Peoples Hall displays Aboriginal artefacts and tells Aboriginal histories according to four themes (“We are still here. We are diverse. We contribute. We have an ancient relationship with the land.”). It calls attention to the distinctiveness, vibrancy, significance and continuity of Aboriginal cultures. The gallery uses a variety of media to achieve this goal and to communicate its four themes. The FPH’s approach to using these media and creating installations have been described, both in planning documents for the gallery and in scholarly reviews of its finished product, as taking a fresh stance on the role of artefacts and on the articulation of Aboriginal perspectives. The First Peoples Hall has been characterized by its emphasis on doing – and viewing – things differently, and this made the gallery’s creation into an intense, eleven-year project.

The Canada Hall tells Canadian history using a different narrative, and a different presentation style. The gallery takes a patriotic approach to telling the history of Canada and its regions and is very upfront about it: the welcoming text tells visitors that “Through diverse traditions, institutions, and skills a community of innovative vitality and unique character has been created.”¹⁵⁶ Such an approach to communicating history has, however, been critiqued as outmoded and lacking in meaningful discourse. Ronald Grimes, a religiologist who was invited to offer advice to CMC staff on the

¹⁵⁶ “A Journey Through Time” (text panel), Canada Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

representation of Aboriginal cultures at a workshop in 1987, suggested that the museum is one of many which “are designed to reassure visitors of their perceptions of reality, so they typically only tell one story, not multiple, dissonant voices. Why is the CMC called the Canadian Museum of Civilization (in the singular), not Civilizations (in the plural)? Probably because the illusion of unity tranquilizes and reassures us.”¹⁵⁷

The creation of the new museum was announced in 1982 and the Canada Hall was completed for its 1989 opening, so its design and construction were completed on a tighter schedule and without the benefit of an Aboriginal Consultation Committee to offer guidance and feedback on the direction of Aboriginal inclusion. It was always the CMC’s intention to create a First Peoples Hall,¹⁵⁸ so the scope and narrative of the Canada Hall may have been affected by the understanding that Aboriginal histories would eventually be represented in a gallery of their own. Unfortunately, the Grand Hall of the CMC is principally concerned with the representation of west coast Aboriginal cultures, and the FPH did not open until 2003. That means that for more than a decade, the CMC made little headway in countering the observation Julia Harrison had made in 1987, stating that “Among mainstream Canadians, there is only a very generalized understanding of the native population. Only when we choose to parade images of Indians in an attempt to portray something unique about being Canadian are native peoples given significant recognition.”¹⁵⁹ Phillips and Sabler Phillips suggest this is how Aboriginal peoples are portrayed in the Canada Hall, but they do not consider the fur

¹⁵⁷ Ronald L. Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 83. Oddly, however, the word “civilization” is plural in the museum’s French title.

¹⁵⁸ Ruth B. Phillips and Mark Sabler Phillips, “Contesting Time, Place and Nation in the First People’s Hall of the Canadian Museum of Civilization,” in *Contested Histories in Public Space*, eds. Lisa Mayer Knauer and Daniel Walkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 49-70.

¹⁵⁹ Julia Harrison, “Introduction,” in *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 11.

trade module as offering even this kind of glossy, patriotic inclusion.¹⁶⁰ It seems, then, that in the context of the Canada Hall, George MacDonald's description of the CMC as revolutionarily post-colonial refers to its use of entertainment forms to engage a wide range of museum visitors, and not to revolutionary inclusion of Aboriginal roles and perspectives in the fur trade.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ When Phillips and Sabler Phillips wrote about the CMC in 2005, they stated Aboriginal presence in the Canada Hall is limited to the exhibits on the Métis buffalo hunt and the Nisga'a fishers of British Columbia; Phillips and Sabler Phillips, "Double Take," 698.

¹⁶¹ George MacDonald, "Native Voice at the Canadian Museum of Civilization," in *The Native Universe and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: The Significance of the National Museum of the American Indian* (Washington, DC, and New York: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2005), 43.

CHAPTER 4

SNAPSHOTS FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES

THE MANITOBA MUSEUM'S PORTRAYALS OF THE FUR TRADE

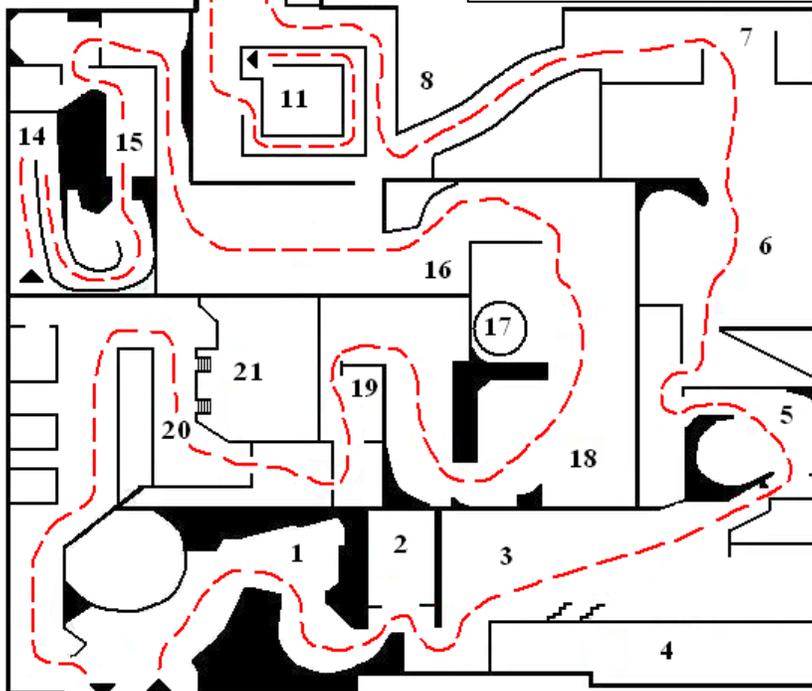
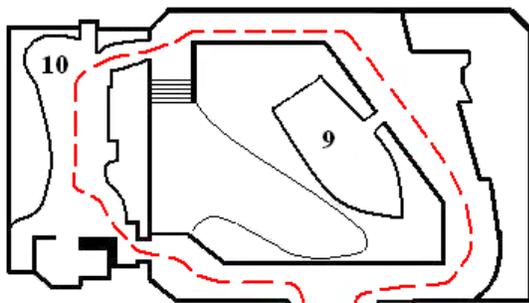
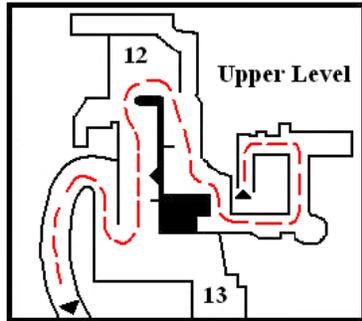
In the Manitoba Museum, the fur trade, rather than being discussed exclusively in a single, specialized exhibit, is something of a recurring theme. This is fitting, since the fur trade factors heavily in the history of the Manitoba region. Its Cree, Ojibwa, Dakota, Dene and Inuit peoples were important players in trading operations in the North and on the Plains. Stocks of beaver, bison, caribou, moose, marten, fisher, lynx, otter, mink, muskrat and fish¹⁶² were enticing resources for European traders looking to survive in and, especially, to profit from the region. Numerous posts and trade routes were located within the current provincial boundaries, and a number of the province's cities and towns – including Winnipeg, Brandon, Dauphin and Churchill – were built on the locations of former trading posts.

The fur trade surfaces in several exhibits as a result of the Manitoba Museum's interpretive approach. Katherine Pettipas, the museum's Curator of Native Ethnology, described that approach as “an interdisciplinary cultural ecological one whereby both natural and human histories are interpreted in an interrelated manner.”¹⁶³ This approach was implemented when the museum first opened in the 1970s and, with minimal modifications, the original structure and organization remain intact. The few modifications include additions made to increase museum space to house the full-scale replica of a seventeenth-century trading ship, the *Nonsuch*, and the Hudson's Bay

¹⁶² Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 117.

¹⁶³ Katherine Pettipas, “‘Turning the Page’ – Museums and First Nations: A Manitoba Case Study,” *Archaeology Today* 3, nos. 1 & 2 (1993), 87.

The Manitoba Museum



Entrance / Exit

1. Orientation
2. Discovery Room
3. Earth History Gallery
4. Earth History Gallery, Upper Level
5. Entrance to Arctic/Subarctic Biome Gallery
6. Dene and Caribou Inuit Displays
7. Entrance to Boreal Forest Gallery
8. Life-size Forest Diorama with Four Cree
9. Nonsuch Gallery
10. Hudson's Bay Company Gallery
11. Ramp to Upper Level
12. Entrance to Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery
13. Programming Space
14. Ramp to Lower Level
15. Fort Ellice Display
16. Entrance to Grasslands Gallery
17. Tipi
18. Red River Settlement Displays
19. Entrance to Urban Gallery
20. 1920s Streetscape
21. Two-Storey Pharmacy and Boarding House

Figure 15. Map of the Manitoba Museum galleries, based on an online interactive map; "Interactive Map," *Manitoba Museum*, <http://www.manitobamuseum.ca/main/plan-your-visit/museum-map/> (accessed 18 November 2010).

Company historical collection. Consistent with the museum's interpretive approach, five of the museum's eight galleries explore "Manitoba's history, culture and natural world"¹⁶⁴ in the context of the province's different "biomes" (the term used on the museum's website and in its text panels to describe a regional ecosystem). Of the other three galleries, one is devoted to the Earth's early history, while the other two, the *Nonsuch* Gallery and the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, form a detour from the path that connects the biome galleries and signify a departure from the overarching theme of how humans relate to nature. With regard to representations of the fur trade, the Manitoba Museum can be thematically divided into two key sections: the biome galleries which provide cultural ecological overviews of Manitoba's regions, and the history-driven *Nonsuch* and HBC galleries.

Exhibits on the Arctic/subarctic, Boreal forest, parklands/mixed woods, grasslands and (to a lesser extent) the urban regions of Manitoba all contain extensive displays on the Aboriginal people who inhabit the respective areas, and their displays on Aboriginal histories and cultures portray the fur trade as a significant zone of contact between Indigenous peoples and Europeans. Fur trade history is also presented in the *Nonsuch* Gallery, where a series of text panels describes the fur trade as an industry aimed at satisfying Europe's demand for a particular luxury that fuelled the exploitation of its North American periphery. Beyond the *Nonsuch* is the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, opened in 2000,¹⁶⁵ which conceives of the fur trade as the original *raison d'être*

¹⁶⁴ Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, "Our Mission," in *Annual Report 2000/01* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, 2001), 2.

¹⁶⁵ Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, *Annual Report 2000/01*, 4.

of “one of the oldest commercial enterprises still in existence.”¹⁶⁶ The Manitoba Museum’s depictions of the fur trade are communicated through compelling displays, well-written texts and discursive contexts. This chapter contains a review of how these depictions were developed, what they represent and how they affect visitors. The Manitoba Museum, like the Canadian Museum of Civilization, has seriously confronted the challenges of representing Aboriginal cultures in museums. The Manitoba Museum has evolved its own responses to these challenges over the last two decades.

The Biome Galleries

The biome-oriented organization of the Manitoba Museum has been in place for decades, and was implemented when the museum was still known as the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.¹⁶⁷ Individual components have been revised and renovated, but the general interpretive approach has remained consistent. As a result, the regional galleries contain variegated representations of Indigenous cultures that range from dioramas of pre-contact Cree societies created in the 1970s, to a showcase of Aboriginal ceremonial regalia that was only completed in 2004.¹⁶⁸ The presentation of these displays is also non-chronological – they are grouped according to their regional associations rather than forming cohesive historical narratives. Despite the separate installations of these displays over an extended period and their dispersion across several galleries, the museum’s representations of Aboriginal cultures consistently highlight the

¹⁶⁶ Manitoba Museum, “The Hudson’s Bay Company Museum Collection,” http://www.manitobamuseum.ca/mu_hudson_bay.html (accessed 15 October 2008).

¹⁶⁷ The museum’s name was officially changed in 1996 to reflect a new corporate identity and its inclusion of a planetarium and science gallery and to provide gender neutrality; Manitoba Museum, “The Manitoba Museum: Encouraging Discovery,” http://www.manitobamuseum.ca/gi_logo_history.html (accessed 2 September 2009).

¹⁶⁸ Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, *Bi-annual Report, 1977-79* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, 1979), 6; Katherine Pettipas, personal communication, 5 May 2009.

history, significance and vitality of Aboriginal people in all parts of Manitoba. There are, however, inconsistencies in how galleries refer to Aboriginal peoples – whereas “Anishnaabe” and “Nakota” are used in a recently completed gallery, “Ojibwa” and “Assiniboine” are used in an older gallery farther along the museum’s intended route. Presentation styles – the general appearance of exhibits, their focus, and their integration of interactive learning tools – also differ between newer and older installations. Accordingly, Aboriginal roles in the fur trade are presented in multiple contexts, which in turn are key determinants for how visitors experience the information, ideas and messages presented within the exhibits.

Fur trade history is a recurring feature in the biome galleries, but visitors’ first exposure to it is in the displays on the Dene and Caribou Inuit. Located in the Arctic/Subarctic Gallery (the first of the biome galleries), these displays focus on pre-contact Dene and Caribou Inuit cultures, but also identify certain impacts of European contact, thus highlighting how the theme of adaptation connects past and present ways of life. To this end, rifles, glass beads and metal tools – items acquired through trade with European newcomers – appear alongside bone tools, garments made from animal skins and other objects that reflect Aboriginal ways of life that predated first contact. Some artefacts, such as the beaded pouch included in the display on Dene people (see figure 18), are materializations of the cultural and technological exchanges that the fur trade facilitated. Information on each object’s origin, creator and age would have been helpful for offering a sense of their individual histories; instead, the objects are left to speak for themselves. It is nonetheless impressive that these artefacts are used to discuss the adaptability of Aboriginal cultures by illustrating how Aboriginal people were able to

integrate new products and designs into the creation of traditional crafts made according to their own understandings of decoration and beauty.

The new products that became available to Aboriginal people through trade with Europeans included metals, commercial aniline dyes, cloth, ribbons, and beads. As the label for the smoking bag (figure 18) explains,

With access to new and colourful trade materials such as cloth, silk ribbons, thread and beads, Native women reduced much of the labour involved in preparing traditional materials such as quills or caribou hair. Under the influence of traders and missionaries, new patterns and techniques for manufacture and decoration were developed as illustrated by the eight-tabbed 'octopus' smoking bag.¹⁶⁹

Alluding to the impact of the fur trade on Aboriginal cultures, this description acknowledges how trade resulted in a proliferation in the use of imported goods while highlighting the presence of a strong decorative tradition among Aboriginal people.

The juxtaposition of manufactured artefacts that Aboriginal people acquired from the Europeans with Native-made objects that made use of imported materials and with those Native-made objects which are representative of pre-contact technologies provides a sense of continuity. The exhibits pay attention to the kinds of changes that the fur trade catalyzed, but they also recognize the histories and merits of pre-contact Aboriginal cultures. A question arises, however, about the extent to which visitors appreciate this continuity.

The placement of an early rifle alongside a bow and arrows should indicate to visitors that these depictions of Aboriginal life in Manitoba are not limited to the pre-contact period. Visitors who give the Dene and Caribou Inuit displays only cursory

¹⁶⁹ Untitled label, Arctic/Subarctic Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.



Figure 16. Displays on the Dene and Caribou Inuit peoples in the Arctic/Subarctic Gallery. Photo by author.



Figures 17 and 18. Left, a display on hunting and fishing places a rifle alongside traditional tools. Right, imported glass beads were used to decorate an eight-tabbed “octopus” smoking bag. Photo by author.

glances or superficial readings may overlook their fur trade content,¹⁷⁰ but this distinguishes the Dene and Caribou Inuit displays from other displays with fur trade content: the primary emphasis is on Aboriginal cultures, so they will not be overlooked. For example, the texts describing Dene and Caribou Inuit ways of life (which are large and well-placed) invoke the past tense for their descriptions. While statements explaining how “The Inuit world was not only inhabited by humans and animals, but also by a highly active spiritual [realm]”¹⁷¹ do establish an Aboriginal relationship with the Arctic and subarctic regions of Manitoba that has existed since time immemorial, the limited reference to recent events in these texts (specifically, the reference is in a single text: a panel describing how the Caribou-Eater Chipewyan were affected by technological changes)¹⁷² may reinforce visitors’ assumptions that the cultures in question are confined to a distant, almost mythological, past. Moreover, the artefacts on display are accompanied by excellent descriptions of each artefact’s function and significance, but the absence of labels describing each item’s age, production and acquisition deprives visitors of information that would help them connect to the artefacts and the exhibit as a whole.

The fur trade is revisited in the Parklands Gallery, this time with a focus on the history of Fort Ellice, an HBC trading post that operated from 1832 to 1890. The display

¹⁷⁰ Other references to contact with Europeans could also be overlooked by visitors that only briefly examine these displays, since some of the most powerful symbols of a developing relationship with Europeans – such as a crucifix and a hymn book, are in the display’s remotest corners.

¹⁷¹ “The World of Humans and Spirits” (text panel), Arctic/Subarctic Gallery, The Manitoba Museum.

¹⁷² Although the scope of this précis is limited to the twentieth century and refers to the relocation that “befell the Duck Lake band” without noting the federal government’s imposition and administration of this relocation, it does succeed in describing the many obstacles and hardships the Caribou-Eaters (Sayisi Dene) have faced. For an account of the multiple relocations experienced by the Duck Lake band, see Ila Bussidor and Üstün Bilgen-Reinart, *Night Spirits: the story of the relocation of the Sayisi Dene* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997).

shows daily life at a trading post as seen through the eyes of clerks, blacksmiths, missionaries, carpenters, and Aboriginal women labourers. Indeed, the history of Fort Ellice is cast in socio-cultural terms, with special emphasis given to Aboriginal contributions to sustaining the post:

The Hudson's Bay Company post of Fort Ellice was strategically located on the southwestern edge of the parklands region. Built to prevent the loss of Native trade to American Missouri River posts, Fort Ellice provided new economic activities to Native peoples.¹⁷³

Unlike the fur trade module in the Canadian Museum of Civilization's Canada Hall, in which the text panel acknowledging Aboriginal participation in the fur trade is inconspicuous in its placement, Aboriginal histories are central to the Manitoba Museum's display on Fort Ellice. An audio commentary on Aboriginal women labourers plays firsthand accounts of post life when visitors press a particular button, and a row of four drawers opens to show objects and information pertaining to the Santee (Sioux), Anishnaabe (Ojibwa), Nakota (Assiniboin) and Ne-Hiyawak (Plains Cree), and the Nuweta (Mandan) peoples of the area surrounding the trading post. The Fort Ellice display is also located in a section of the Parklands Gallery devoted to communicating Aboriginal histories and cultures and is situated between two sets of displays portraying the historic and present artistic and ceremonial traditions of different Aboriginal groups. Accordingly, it provides a transition from the "old" into the "new"¹⁷⁴ – serving to illustrate how the newcomers' fur trade and prairie settlement affected Aboriginal ways of life.

¹⁷³ "New Opportunities for Trade – Fort Ellice: 1832-1890" (text panel), Parklands Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.

¹⁷⁴ The Fort Ellice display is preceded by a glass case containing arrowheads and pottery shards from millennia ago, and a display called "New Beginnings" that explores the impact of European contact on Indigenous decorative traditions. It is followed by text panels titled "Negotiating a Future" and "Learning from the Past" that explore the ramifications of European contact and colonization through legislation, residential schools and processes of revitalizing Aboriginal ways of life.

The displays on the Dene, the Caribou Inuit, and the HBC's Fort Ellice share an important trait that also characterizes the CMC's First Peoples Hall. In all of these, Aboriginal contexts are in the foreground, and the fur trade is one of many activities that can be understood from Aboriginal perspectives. When considered in this way, visitors can gain a sense of how profoundly different Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worldviews can be: the "fur trade" has been coined as such because furs were the foremost desire of Europeans trading with Aboriginal people. Scholarship, museum exhibits and school curricula continue to use this term. However, displays that focus on Aboriginal perspectives do not differentiate the fur trade from other aspects of Native-newcomer relations, and the artefacts they contain reveal that what Aboriginal people desired from their trading relationships were guns, metal goods, beads, tobacco, and blankets, to name a few examples.

Situating Fur Trade Displays

When the cultural and technological exchanges that resulted from Aboriginal interactions with Europeans (and subsequent participation in the fur trade) are mentioned in these displays, the discussions are nuanced and insightful. But do they adequately command visitors' attention and disseminate their messages of intercultural exchange and integration? Or do the many images of pre-contact Aboriginal cultures dispersed throughout the biome galleries run interference with the themes of adaptation and integration and impede the ability of these displays to communicate how Aboriginal people were affected by the fur trade?



Figure 19. Display on Fort Ellice, in the Manitoba Museum's Parklands Gallery. Photo by author.



Figure 20. Miniature diorama of an Anishnaabe village. Boreal Forest Gallery, Manitoba Museum. Photo by author.

As Charlotte Gray observed in 2004, when she and curator Sara Angel produced a virtual “Museum Called Canada,”¹⁷⁵ Indigenous peoples had already inhabited present-day Canada for millennia when the first Europeans arrived, and those millennia constitute an important part of Canadian history. The inclusion of pre-contact Aboriginal histories in the museum offers an essential context for understanding subsequent historical developments because Native-newcomer relations were not forged in a vacuum: Europeans arrived on a continent whose inhabitants already had well-entrenched traditions, alliances, and antagonisms. The First Peoples Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization successfully situates the arrival of Europeans in North America within the context of pre-contact Aboriginal histories by beginning its historical narrative with a display of stone tools recovered from archaeological digs at Bluefish Caves, Yukon. At the Manitoba Museum, however, pre-contact Aboriginal cultures are covered at several different points in the museum, and most forcefully in the Grasslands Gallery, with its sizeable display on the atlatl (an early spear-thrower). Coverage in multiple galleries helps to stress the significance of Aboriginal histories to visitors. But it also means that displays addressing Aboriginal cultural adaptation are followed by older displays that tend to objectify Aboriginal people as “Others.” The displays on the Dene and Caribou Inuit and on Fort Ellice are both followed by older ethnology displays in adjacent galleries.

The two prominent displays on pre-contact cultures which visitors encounter shortly after leaving the Arctic/Subarctic Gallery’s displays on the Dene and Caribou

¹⁷⁵ Charlotte Gray, *The Museum Called Canada: 25 Rooms of Wonder* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2004), 69. It is also highly illustrative of the challenges museums face in communicating history that, even though Gray and Angel would not have experienced the same curatorial constraints of space, resources and visitor attention spans faced by curators of physical exhibits when producing their 700-page volume, millennia of pre-contact Aboriginal histories occupy only one of the twenty-five “rooms.”

Inuit are dioramas in the Boreal Forest Gallery. Both dioramas were produced in the 1970s. The first diorama shows a miniature Anishnaabe settlement located on a body of water, in which figurines are engaged in different activities – such as hunting, cooking and caring for children – that characterized daily life. The second diorama is of a forest setting (complete with animals hiding in the underbrush and a trickling creek) and presents models of Native people who are variously painting pictographs, gathering food, skinning rabbits and playing with a dog. Though it is also an old, full-scale diorama depicting pre-contact Aboriginal life, the diorama in the Boreal forest gallery is very different from the displays described by Cory Willmott and Michele Landsberg, which perpetuated stereotypes about the “noble savage.”

The Manitoba Museum’s curators had originally planned to create a diorama of Aboriginal men engaging in the hunt, with the moose in a nearby diorama as their intended prey, but later rejected this design as perpetuating Aboriginal stereotypes rather than educating visitors on Cree culture.¹⁷⁶ Instead, the design they chose was largely informed by the needs and interests of an Aboriginal community, the Cree of Nelson House. The activities portrayed in the life-size diorama were based on discussions with them regarding, for example, how a woman skinning rabbits might position her hands, and the pictographs on the rock face are recreations of “the footprints of the demi-god creator figure, Wesukechak... [since the originals] were about to be flooded by Hydro’s South Indian Lake Diversion Project.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Katherine Pettipas, personal communication.

¹⁷⁷ *Annual Report, 1977-1979*, 6; Katherine Pettipas, personal communication.



Figure 21. Two of four models in the full-scale diorama. Boreal Forest Gallery, Manitoba Museum. Photo by author.

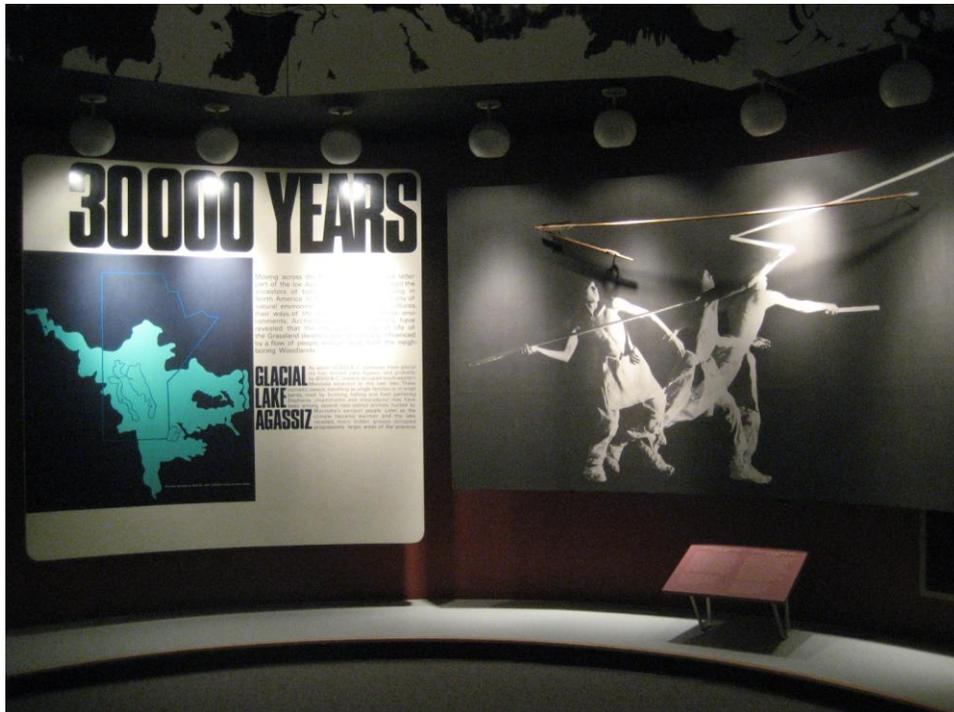


Figure 22. The first display in the Manitoba Museum's Grasslands Gallery showcases early Aboriginal cultures and the use of spear-throwers. Photo by author.

The pre-contact Aboriginal histories that follow the inspired displays of the Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery also date back to the 1970s. Some elements of the gallery, such as a fully-assembled and painted tipi, have been added more recently, but all the Aboriginal history displays in this gallery are contextualized by a large and insistent text panel proclaiming its focus on “30000 YEARS” of history, including the period of “8000 B.C. [when] *Indians* occupied south-western Manitoba.”¹⁷⁸ While the Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery was recently renovated to become one of the Manitoba Museum’s most engaging and educational galleries, the adjacent Grasslands Gallery has yet to receive such an update. The unfortunate result is that their portrayals of Aboriginal histories sometimes conflict and confuse. Peoples described as “Dakota” in the Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery are referred to as “the Sioux” in the Grasslands area. These discrepancies challenge visitors to make sense of different terms and time frames, since the museum’s organization leaves visitors to grope for chronology and narrative on their own. Falk and Dierking suggested visitor learning requires a certain level of challenge, but the content presented in exhibits – in this case Aboriginal histories and the fur trade zone of contact that initiated sustained contact with Europeans – is rendered inaccessible if format and presentation style are confusing.

These displays all cover important periods and aspects of Indigenous histories. That each display deserves a place in the museum is unquestionable, but the present ordering decreases their effectiveness for encouraging visitors’ learning and enjoyment. In their exploration of the conditions and methods for museum visitor learning, Falk and Dierking argued that visitors absorb the most ideas and information when a museum

¹⁷⁸ “30000 Years” (text panel), Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery, The Manitoba Museum. Emphasis added.

becomes a comfortable atmosphere presenting intriguing – but manageable – challenges.¹⁷⁹ Aboriginal histories of the fur trade are thoughtfully represented in the biome galleries but the fur trade displays are situated in a mélange of non-chronological representations. As a consequence, their significance may be lost on visitors.

The *Nonsuch* and Hudson’s Bay Company Galleries

The fur trade history presented in the biome galleries may come across as a mere sidenote to Aboriginal pre-contact ways of life that are emphasized in the displays and dioramas, but the significance of that history comes to the foreground in the *Nonsuch* and Hudson’s Bay Company galleries. The *Nonsuch* Gallery is, unsurprisingly, dominated by the detailed replica ship in its mock-harbour setting, but before visitors view the ship itself, they pass through an antechamber full of artefacts and information that portray the fur trade as the basis of a European luxury industry. Displays focused on the production and consumption of beaver felt hats in Europe inform visitors of how class divisions played out in the fur trade. But then, as visitors are directed by a period-appropriate sandwich board sign toward the Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery and its “Curiosities from the New World,” the first artefacts they encounter signal a shift in how the fur trade is situated and in the perspectives used to tell its history.

Immediately inside the entrance of the Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery are two display insets. To the left is a Cree woman’s hood, navy blue in colour and beautifully accented by ribbons and glass beads. The accompanying description explains that the hood dates from the late nineteenth century and, except for the sinew thread used in sewing, was entirely made from trade goods. Similarly exquisite is the artefact displayed

¹⁷⁹ Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 24-25.



Figures 23 and 24. A “Northern Cree woman’s hood” and an “Epergne-candelabra” stand on either side of the entrance to the Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery. Photos by author



Figure 25. Hudson’s Bay Company Historical Exhibit. Tableau recreating an HBC display from 1922, with the curatorial notebook in the foreground and the framed descriptive text on the far left. Photo by author.

in the inset on the right side of the gallery's entrance. The object in question is an epergne-candelabra which, was given to Governor George Simpson in 1860 from the HBC's chief factors and traders to celebrate his forty years of employment by the Company. Its accompanying description informs visitors that "the representations of North American Aboriginal peoples are romanticized and depicted in Greco-Roman classic forms of poses and clothing," as was typical of art from that period.¹⁸⁰ Together, the two objects present the fur trade as a zone of contact in which people with profoundly different cultural backgrounds and worldviews interacted, with effects so pervasive that they even extended to each group's forms of artistic expression.

The Cree hood and George Simpson's candelabra, because they together exemplify the range of material culture associated with the fur trade, are effectively placed within the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery. But their particular position, as the first encountered in the gallery, is especially significant. Those visitors who examine the hood and the candelabra and read their descriptive labels find that the relationship between Euro-Canadian traders and Aboriginal people is portrayed as being based on mutual contributions and cultural influences. The placement of these objects at the entrance to the gallery, where they can jointly act as a focal point that orients visitors to the ideas presented, illustrates the gallery's portrayal of the fur trade and the HBC as being built upon the contributions of culturally diverse peoples.

Beyond the archway, a small alcove contains artefacts whose mode of display is deliberately reminiscent of the history displays that became a feature of the HBC's largest stores beginning in the 1920s. The displays were the Company's way of sharing

¹⁸⁰ Untitled label, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, The Manitoba Museum.

its rich historical collections with customers, using them to celebrate the fur trade and the Company's own long history. Mounted on the guard rail that cordons off the alcove, a binder of archival images of previous HBC historic exhibits indicates that the Manitoba Museum's tableau represents the historical display the HBC opened in its Winnipeg store in 1922.¹⁸¹ The tableau itself is replete with beautiful Native-made crafts that cover every surface of the walls, cabinets and desk. This contrasts sharply with the remainder of the HBC Gallery, which uses dark colours and dramatic lighting to accent its arrestingly displayed, well-labelled artefacts. By standing out in this way, the recreated historical display also aims to raise visitors' awareness of how museum narratives usually reflected cultural values and modes of display specific to the time when they were produced.

The Manitoba Museum's tableau also offers some analysis of the period and display styles it is depicting. A framed description, inconspicuously placed to the left of the alcove, states,

The Hudson's Bay Company's Historical Exhibit is presented in this tableau as it appeared in the Company's Winnipeg store at York and Main in the 1920s. Initially limited to a small display area, the "Historical Exhibit" consisted of a room of cabinets of curiosities with little interpretation.

After its relocation to the Portage Avenue store, the exhibit was improved and the collection came alive through the use of historical scenes, or tableaus. The Hudson's Bay Company's Historical Exhibit attracted thousands of shoppers, curious visitors and school children before it was dismantled in 1959.¹⁸²

Despite this commentary on the evolution of the HBC's historical exhibits, the tableau more closely resembles a period room, immersing visitors in a recaptured past rather than

¹⁸¹ Manitoba Museum, *The Development of the HBC Museum Collection, 1922-1960* (curatorial notebook, 2000).

¹⁸² Untitled text panel, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum.

explicitly interpreting the museological standards of the 1920s, as evidenced by the decision to forgo object labels.

Native-made objects account for approximately half of the HBC collection's 10,000 artefacts,¹⁸³ and approximately forty of those have been packed into the alcove. Providing descriptive labels for each object might have cluttered the space with an overwhelming amount of text (though the information could also be presented in a binder, as with the black and white photos of the HBC's early historical displays), but the information is, in this case, incredibly important. As Robert Coutts and Katherine Pettipas explained in an article they wrote on the HBC collection in 1994, many of the objects in the collection – including those of Aboriginal origin – were acquired from former employees of the Company.¹⁸⁴ Such objects are emblematic of Europeans' interest in Aboriginal crafts as exotic souvenirs, an interest that constituted an important aspect of the relationship between European traders and Aboriginal people.

The curators for the CMC's First Peoples Hall made this aspect explicit in that gallery's fur trade displays by noting, with the experiences of West Coast Aboriginal people as an example, that European traders considered their Indigenous allies as not only partners in an economic endeavour, but also as the producers of an attractive, and culturally intriguing, material culture. "Besides furs," one text panel in the FPH explains, "the non-Aboriginal traders on the west coast bought wood, ivory and argillite carvings, woven baskets and hats, and other objects."¹⁸⁵ Since Aboriginal crafts were often purchased by these traders for their curiosity as well as their beauty, becoming the exotic

¹⁸³ Robert Coutts and Katherine Pettipas, "Mere Curiosities are not required... The HBC Collection," *The Beaver* 74, no. 3 (1994), 19; Katherine Pettipas, "Curiosities of the Country," *The Beaver* 80, no. 2 (2000), 40.

¹⁸⁴ Coutts and Pettipas, "Mere Curiosities," 13.

¹⁸⁵ Untitled text panel, First Peoples Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

evidence of how far from the edges of European “civilization” the purchaser had travelled, a museum object’s history – and whether it was acquired through purchase or received as a gift – is essential to fully understanding the object, and it is unfortunate that such information is not readily available for the artefacts included in the HBC Historical Exhibit tableau.¹⁸⁶ In addition to leaving visitors uninformed about the objects being showcased, the lack of descriptive labels also undermines the tableau’s historical accuracy. In the original HBC Historical Exhibit in Winnipeg, artefacts were “liberally supplied with descriptive labels.”¹⁸⁷

Calling attention to these critical viewpoints is essential for making visitors aware of the silences or misrepresentations that might have existed in the original exhibition. Re-contextualizing past exhibitions and examining them as historical artefacts in their own right is a process that is gaining momentum in museums and art galleries as these institutions strive to provide representations of and meaning for a diverse society.

Compared with other museums’ use of larger historical displays, such as the National Museum of the American Indian’s re-staging of George Catlin’s Indian Gallery or the multitude of displays at the Pitt Rivers Museum whose original Victorian presentation approach has been preserved, the HBC Gallery’s 1922 Historical Exhibit tableau offers little space in which to develop a critical context. The text that explains the tableau is hardly visible in its photo frame, hung on the edge of the display, and the

¹⁸⁶ A computer kiosk at the end of the Hudson’s Bay Company Gallery is intended to provide additional information on the collections, but was out of order at the times that I visited.

¹⁸⁷ Hudson’s Bay Company, *HBC Historical Exhibit Guide* (Winnipeg: Hudson’s Bay Company, 1928).



Figure 26. A large map in the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery is used to illustrate the locations of trading posts and animal populations, while also showcasing artefacts and videos. Photo by author.



Figure 27. A line of display cases recognizes major contributors to, or themes within, the HBC historical collection by grouping artefacts accordingly. To the right, an original York boat is loaded with cases display objects related to voyageurs and the transportation of trade goods. Photo by author.



Figure 28. Another view of the gallery shows a trading-post display where visitors can handle furs, with a display on muskrat trapping beyond it. Photo by author.



Figure 29. The gallery's second tableau is of Hudson Bay House. Photo by author.

content of this text focuses almost exclusively on the history of historical exhibits in Winnipeg's HBC stores, rather than highlighting the different meanings attributed to the display between 1922 and 2000, when its re-creation was first revealed with the gallery's opening.

The HBC Gallery contains another tableau near the gallery exit. Recreating a fragment of Hudson Bay House, the HBC's headquarters in London from 1928 to 1948, the tableau contains a portrait of Prince Rupert, an imposing wooden desk, ornate mouldings and a selection of the Company's historical artefacts and curiosities. The objects on display present a wonderfully ironic twist on the colonial tradition of filling "cabinets of curiosities" with Aboriginal crafts acquired in distant places, since the most curious object in the Hudson Bay House tableau is undoubtedly the ram's head that was converted into a snuff box by Governor George Simpson.¹⁸⁸

The historical exhibit and Hudson Bay House tableaus are set in alcoves adjacent to the HBC Gallery's primary exhibition space. This main area is full of artefacts covering a wide spectrum of the HBC Collection, creatively displayed and supplemented by music, videos, and hands-on displays. The north wall of the gallery is dominated by a hand-painted map of Canada, showing the locations of posts and the distribution of animal populations. Inserts contain small artefacts relating to the Aboriginal cultures or Company activities in different regions. A preserved York boat runs nearly the entire length of the gallery's far wall. The boat, which is set before a mural and is angled to reveal its cargo of display cases, was among the last in use and was restored and reassembled in the museum after being shipped from a storage shed in northern

¹⁸⁸ Pettipas, "Curiosities of the Country," 40.

Manitoba.¹⁸⁹ The opposite wall uses sliding drawers to aid visitor discovery about the changing goods, values and currencies in the HBC's trade with Indigenous peoples in a simulated trading post setting, while farther down, another display discusses the trade in muskrat (or "Hudson Bay Seal," as it was marketed in Europe). Paintings in the series "The Epic of Western Canada" by John Innes hang in any free corners, but are most concentrated in an area at the back, near the Hudson Bay House tableau and the gallery's exit.

In the midst of these dramatic and interactive displays is a series of glass display cases, arranged in a zigzag pattern that divides the gallery into two sides and encourages visitors to tour the gallery by taking a circular route. Each case holds an assembly of treasures and texts pertaining to some aspect of the Hudson's Bay Company, respectively including the HBC's collection of Inuit art, historic methods of exploration and navigation, operations on the West Coast, the Red River Settlement, and the fur traders Frederick Mackenzie, George Simpson, McTavish, John Halkett and William Kempt (who contributed to the HBC collection). The cases, like the gallery's other components, provide snapshots from different angles of HBC and fur trade history. Their combined effect is to call attention to some interesting cultural, political, economical, ecological, social and class dynamics.

What are not given sufficient attention are the negative aspects of these histories.¹⁹⁰ Misleadingly rosy historical representations fail to convey the complexities

¹⁸⁹ Manitoba Museum, *The York Boat* (curatorial notebook, 2000).

¹⁹⁰ According to curator Katherine Pettipas, the content of the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery was not influenced by its receipt of funding from the HBC. Limitations on what the gallery could communicate were mostly linked to holes in what aspects of the fur trade could be illustrated by artefacts in the collection, the available space in the gallery, and the funding allocated for maintaining and updating the gallery; Pettipas, personal communication.

of these histories, which, as Frances Kaye noted of the comparable flaws in the Glenbow Museum's *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* exhibition, short-changes visitors by presenting them with narratives that focus on achievements and victories when "a complicated understanding... would probably be more useful."¹⁹¹ Not only would portrayals of the HBC and the fur trade that acknowledge mistakes and tragedies be more useful, they would also produce more accurate representations. A text panel in the section devoted to muskrat trapping refers to "the decimation of seal herds in the late 19th century," but only insofar as it motivated "fur dyers and dressers in Leipzig, Germany [to] develop... an imitation seal fur from sheared and dyed **muskrat pelts**. This fur was marketed as 'Hudson Bay seal' and was used for coats and **muffs**."¹⁹² The HBC's innovation in creating a new product is highlighted, but overlooked are the negative impacts, social and ecological, of the seal population's decimation. While the HBC was able to bounce back by developing a new product, adaptation was more difficult for northern Aboriginal populations since, according to Claudia Notzke, who explored changes in Aboriginal ways of life in her book *Aboriginal Peoples and Natural Resources in Canada*, "Commercial sealskin production was... in many arctic villages, virtually the only source of cash income" and seal meat was one of the most reliable food sources throughout the winter.¹⁹³

Critical acknowledgements of the hardships associated with the fur trade are similarly absent from other displays: the Hudson Bay House tableau signifies the opulence of HBC stockholders without noting how low wages for clerks and labourers

¹⁹¹ Kaye, "Review of *Mavericks*," 144.

¹⁹² Untitled text panel, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum. Bold in original.

¹⁹³ Claudia Notzke, *Aboriginal Peoples and Natural Resources in Canada* (North York, ON: Captus University Publications, 1994), 128.

contributed to the Company's profits. Likewise, a text panel discussing the role of Aboriginal "middlemen" ignores the complexities of intertribal relations and Aboriginal influence over Company traders precipitated by Aboriginal middlemen anxious to maintain their highly profitable positions.¹⁹⁴

Some of these shortcomings can be attributed to persisting funding challenges that the Manitoba Museum has had to endure. According to Katherine Pettipas, curator of the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, the display cabinets in the center of the gallery were designed to be changeable, and to accommodate new or updated objects and text panels on a regular basis. This feature was to provide the gallery with the flexibility to integrate new perspectives on the fur trade and the history of the HBC, including – to use Pettipas's example – those of women. However, since the gallery's opening in 2000, the gallery's central displays have yet to be altered. Display cases specifically devoted to exploring how some of the historiographically marginalized participants in the fur trade – such as Aboriginal people and women – supported and were affected by the HBC throughout its existence would counteract the gallery's tendency to present the HBC and the fur trade "through rose-tinted glasses" and better encapsulate the heterogeneity of historical perspectives.

¹⁹⁴ According to Arthur Ray, the Cree and Assiniboine who visited HBC posts along Hudson Bay in the eighteenth century exercised significant influence over the terms of trade since they were the two largest groups with whom the Company traded. As the provisioners of European trade goods to Indigenous peoples who did not make the trek to the bay, the Cree and Assiniboine were able to control which goods plains groups were able to acquire (kettles, for example, were rare because they were bulky and therefore costly to transport) and at what cost (while the HBC charged ten made beaver for a firearm, the cost was raised to thirty-six by Native middlemen, though Ray is quick to remind his reader that this higher cost would, in part, be necessary to offset costs incurred by travel, damage the goods incurred in transit, and gift-giving ceremonies); Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 68-70.



Figure 30. A casset used as a display case holds clothing, embroidery and other handicrafts, while a text panel inlaid in the lid describes the role of Aboriginal women in the fur trade. Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, Manitoba Museum. Photo by author.

The HBC Gallery's present, and regrettably superficial, display on Aboriginal women's contributions to the fur trade is presented on a text panel accompanying a selection of moccasins and gloves and states:

Aboriginal women assisted European traders as interpreters, guides, peacemakers, seamstresses and housekeepers. Others portaged cargo alongside their husbands. Their labour was essential for processing furs, food and hides for trade. Some had their own traplines for smaller animals. The **production of clothing and handicrafts** for sale to commercial traders was an important source of income for Aboriginal households.¹⁹⁵

The panel represents a first step towards providing meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal women's experiences in the fur trade by acknowledging the diversity and significance of the roles women played. However, the opportunities and empowerment afforded to women as interpreters, guides, peacemakers and wives came with certain constraints imposed by cultural norms and racism. As Sylvia Van Kirk has shown in her research, acting as the "women in between" European and Aboriginal societies in North America sometimes also entailed being "forced to adjust to the traders' patriarchal views" and eventually forfeiting hard-won social status to mixed-blood and white women.¹⁹⁶ Addressing the differing experiences (without skirting the negatives) of specific groups of participants in the fur trade – factors, clerks, labourers, Aboriginal people, and women, to name just a few – would facilitate discussions of the power imbalances that existed between and amongst these groups. Educating museum visitors about historical inequalities and prejudices is also valuable for fostering socio-cultural understanding in current contexts: stereotypes can give way to cooperation and mutual respect.

¹⁹⁵ Untitled text panel, Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, © The Manitoba Museum. Bold in the original.

¹⁹⁶ Van Kirk, "*Many Tender Ties*", 7.

While Pettipas suggested that changing the displays in the glass cases should be a relatively inexpensive way to add variety and new insights to the HBC Gallery, she also noted that much of the museum's current funding (and fund-raising) is committed to the conservation of the *Nonsuch*, whose decks require refurbishment after thirty years of visitors' boarding. The HBC Foundation was a generous supporter of the gallery's creation, but its provisions for maintenance costs are much smaller.¹⁹⁷ The Manitoba Museum is currently considering a capital campaign to provide the necessary funding to upgrade and expand its facilities, but plans and priorities are still being established.¹⁹⁸

Restrictions imposed by funding shortages are visible in other fur trade displays at the Manitoba Museum. As previously mentioned, the critical commentary offered on the HBC Historical Exhibit tableau loses much of its force as a result of its presentation in an inconspicuous photo frame. Other information on the HBC and its collections is similarly difficult to access, as the computer at the gallery's exit (which ideally enables visitors to learn more about individual artefacts off interest to them) appears to be chronically out of order.¹⁹⁹

On a larger scale, a lack of funds has also confined the Manitoba Museum to an interpretive approach that has been in place since the 1970s, and which no longer meets the needs of the museum for portraying the province's rich histories and cultures. The museum's current, biome-oriented organization emphasizes how humans interact with

¹⁹⁷ Pettipas, personal communication.

¹⁹⁸ Bartley Kives, "Museum wants revamp," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 29 May 2009, A3.

¹⁹⁹ Maintaining technology in museum exhibitions is a challenge many museums face. As Frances Kaye noted in her review of the Glenbow Museum's *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* exhibit, its computer kiosk was not functioning on the day of Kaye's visit. The Canadian Canoe Museum's fur trade exhibit also offered computers for visitors to access additional content at one point, but its kiosks now sit empty.

nature, sometimes at the cost of ignoring interpersonal relationships – alliances, family ties, trade, competition or conflict.

These critiques of the Manitoba Museum are intended to form part of a constructive examination of what is at stake when representing Indigenous histories that are set in or pertain to the fur trade. The perspectives of Aboriginal people demand inclusion in museum displays and narratives on the fur trade, as does the adversity Aboriginal people encountered as a result of the trade and the colonial systems of power that accompanied it. Another important consideration is how visitors react to and interact with the Manitoba Museum, and here the fur-trade-related displays are incredibly well-received. Any time I visit the museum, I see visitors casting appreciative glances at the clothing, tools and jewellery in the display cases on the Dene and Caribou Inuit, and stopping to read its (larger) text panels.

The Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery's Fort Ellice display draws visitors' attention through its interactive tools. Also of significance, visitors' patterns for viewing the display, as I have observed them – with the Fort Ellice display being approached after visitors have looked at the finds of archaeological digs and the crafts of different Aboriginal groups of the parklands/mixed woods region but preceding visitors' examinations of displays on the Indian Act, residential schools, and conversions to Christianity – support the Aboriginal contexts for viewing this HBC trading post.

In the Hudson's Bay Company Gallery, visitors look, touch and talk about what they see (thus demonstrating the most observable behaviours associated with engagement with museum content).²⁰⁰ Museum staff and volunteers have also developed educational programming that uses the gallery's resources (such as its map, its display on the muskrat

²⁰⁰ Graham and Nikischer, *A Summative Evaluation of the "Canada Hall" Exhibition*, 3.

trade, and its display on rates and items of exchange) to teach school groups about the fur trade. The popularity of all these exhibits and programmes indicates an impressive level of visitor satisfaction with what already exists within the Manitoba Museum. Complexities, controversies and voices can be added to the museum's fur trade displays, but the Manitoba Museum remains a first-rate example of how museums can meet the various challenges of presenting inclusive histories.

CHAPTER 5

RE-PRESENTING, RE-EVALUATING AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Histories of Aboriginal peoples and histories of the fur trade have certain things in common: both are significant to museums' narratives of Canadian history, and both are inscribed with contesting ideologies and notions of power. The history of the fur trade has often been written as a singular narrative that followed the endeavours of Euro-Canadian trading outfits as they amassed trading empires and traversed the continent in search of greater profits. Sometimes the companies were in conflict – notably, over the creation of the Red River Settlement, and at the Battle of Seven Oaks and its aftermath, as North West Company sympathizers protested Hudson's Bay Company restrictions on the export of pemmican and Lord Selkirk's seizure of the NWC's Fort William while the NWC was, in turn, accused of inciting the Métis to violence against the settlement.²⁰¹ Regardless, the focus generally remained on the interests and endeavours of the trading companies and their elites without factoring in the less well-known and poorly understood experiences of Aboriginal people, women, the Métis, and – despite their prominent positions in popular memory – voyageurs and coureurs de bois.

When the history of the fur trade was told in this way, Rupert's Land was portrayed, to quote Douglas MacKay's *The Honourable Company*, as a land of "wealth

²⁰¹ Douglas MacKay displayed favouritism for the HBC in *The Honourable Company*, describing the NWC's actions towards the Red River Settlement as "calculated and savage," "organized vandalism" and a form of "terrorism"; (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1966), 139, 141, 142. An earlier history, by Beckles Willson, described the NWC's conduct as "treachery" and "the most wanton acts of aggression," and referred to the Métis as "Half breed hordes" and "wild hunters of the plains" who had the utmost contempt for the settlement's "peaceful tillers of the soil"; *The Great Company* (Toronto: Copp, Clark Company Limited, 1899), 398, 400, 410. I offer these examples not to imply that fur trade historians are biased in favour of either the HBC or the NWC, but to highlight a contentious topic in fur trade literature. Historians' contentions are, however, unsurprising in light of how passionately biased their source material (specifically the abundance of pamphlets written by interested parties on both sides of the issue) on the Red River Settlement was.

for those who had the courage of flesh and blood, and capital for speculation.”²⁰² Fur traders were brave, hard-working adventurers who embraced life in the Canadian interior with a “spirit as pure as patriotism” and for whom “the Hudson’s Bay Company was not a thing of charters and dividends, but a living religion, a family circle, a brotherhood of service.”²⁰³ Moreover, those fur traders paved the way for Confederation in the Canadian West because

They had not only pioneered the routes, mastered the techniques for the break-out through the Shield, and learned how to approach the prairies from the Bay as well as the St. Lawrence; they had also made it seem normal and acceptable to live and to travel in the Northwest, and they had dreamed their dreams of a route from coast to coast and had made them come true.²⁰⁴

These interpretations of fur trade history are, however, only a few of the ways the trade and its historical significance can be understood. The challenge of portraying fur trade history in museums, then, stems from the difficulty of deciding which interpretations to follow, and how to balance multiple perspectives. The histories of the fur trade that MacKay, Robert Pinkerton and E. E. Rich authored tell their readers how the fur trade helped shape the country (both politically and geographically) as it exists today. It also pays homage to some of the brave individuals whose efforts in London, Montreal, and the Canadian interior made the fur trade a reality. These historical narratives are, however, best told alongside other interpretations to provide context.

In *Where Two Worlds Meet: The Great Lakes Fur Trade*, the catalogue for a special exhibition mounted by the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul in 1982, Carolyn Gilman offered alternative characterizations of the fur trade that balance teleological narratives of nation-building while reiterating the trade’s overall importance. According

²⁰² MacKay, *The Honourable Company*, 15.

²⁰³ Robert E. Pinkerton, *The Gentlemen Adventurers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1931), 5-6.

²⁰⁴ Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, 296.

to Gilman, the fur trade was described “as a model of the extractive industries that systematically depleted our continent of most of its natural resources, as a mechanism of acculturation, and as an example of intercultural economics.” She adds,

It was all of these things, of course. But if we distill these descriptions down to one word expressing why the fur trade should be important to every schoolchild, truck driver, and bureaucrat in North America, the word would be *communication*. The fur trade is an example of how two radically dissimilar cultures establish a common ground of understanding without sacrificing their unique characteristics and without annihilating one another. The fur trade is a story of how people act when they meet the Other: the stranger, the puzzling change in accepted wisdom, the rapid onslaught of the future. People invent solutions, some predictable and some astonishingly creative, but all very human. Above all, in the face of pressure people cling to their humanness and adopt strategies to make the forces of change respect them.²⁰⁵

Gilman’s scope includes the United States and Canada, but her themes resonate with those presented in the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s First Peoples Hall. Gilman argues that the fur trade should be understood as an exchange between multiple cultures with valuable contributions made by all sides. Not only is “we contribute” one of the FPH’s four central themes, but its text panels on the fur trade highlight the complexities of the relationships Aboriginal people and Euro-Canadians negotiated.

The First Peoples Hall provides a rich context for understanding how different Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian worldviews were at the outset of the fur trade. The Canada Hall, two stories above the FPH, tells the history of Canada as though its existence began with European “discovery,” and emphasis is commonly placed on settlement and industry. The First Peoples Hall, on the other hand, offers visitors displays on how Aboriginal people have inhabited North America continuously for millennia, how Aboriginal cultures have developed their own cosmologies and creation stories, and how these vibrant, diverse cultures stretch across the country. In the face of

²⁰⁵ Gilman, *Where Two Worlds Meet*, 1.

public memory that focuses on Euro-Canadian trading companies and the voyageurs, the First Peoples Hall communicates how fully-developed Aboriginal worldviews produced different perspectives on the fur trade. It also illustrates how Euro-centric narratives do not cover Aboriginal experiences involving new technologies, diseases, missionization, mixed-blood families, the depopulation of wildlife and other profound changes associated with the fur trade.

The First Peoples Hall, then, represents a new standard for portraying Aboriginal histories in museums. In exhibits that meet this standard, museum objects are no longer “symbols of Indianness,” they are striking examples of rich material cultures used to illustrate ideas; ideas that were determined through consultation with Aboriginal people. Simplified explanations of how Aboriginal people sold furs to European traders no longer suffice for describing Aboriginal participation in the fur trade. Instead, portrayals of Aboriginal people in this context encompass the full scope of their roles: as hunters, trappers, middlemen, wives, allies, family members, provisioners, and competitors. The First Peoples Hall thoroughly examines the diverse roles played by Aboriginal participants in the fur trade and accentuates its narratives by drawing on a variety of artefacts, images, and primary documents. A wealth of information and ideas is made available to visitors. As for its discussion of the fur trade, it rejects the typical points of interest for McKay and other earlier historians in favour of the insightful socio-cultural analyses found in contemporary scholarship, and has continued to reflect the critical perspectives of the most recent scholarship, a decade after its opening.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ See, for example, Carolyn Podruchny and Laura Peers, eds., *Gathering Places: Aboriginal and Fur Trade Histories* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

However, the full impact of the FPH's display on early relations may elude visitors. On its website and in its orientation guide, the CMC recommends visitors budget forty-five minutes to an hour for their tour of the First Peoples Hall. Presuming most visitors spend an hour in the gallery and divide their time equally between the FPH's four sections, that would leave fifteen minutes to absorb the 500 years of history covered in the Arrival of Strangers zone.

Similar challenges impede the educational objectives for the Canada Hall. The orientation guide suggests that this gallery can be viewed in an hour, but the CMC's in-house evaluation in 2003 revealed that the average time spent in the Canada Hall was thirty-six minutes.²⁰⁷ If visitors observe the *recommended* visit length, and spend equal amounts of time in each of the hall's twenty-three modules, they spend less than three minutes in the fur trade module. While visitor studies research has revealed that visitors are most likely to read and view content selectively according to their own interests (meaning the amount of time spent in a given module varies according to the visitor's own interests), and tend to move more quickly through an exhibition after their first half hour in it, my own observations have suggested that three minutes is a generous average for how long visitors remain in the fur trade module. Moreover, since Aboriginal contributions to the fur trade are left unstated in the module's *coureurs de bois* encampment, the text panels for these displays become the main means of conveying an Aboriginal presence to visitors. However, when CMC staff and volunteers surveyed visitors in the summer of 2002, "50% [of respondents] said that they had read 'some' or

²⁰⁷ Graham, *A Summative Evaluation of the "Canada Hall" Exhibition*, 2.



Figure 31. A large, three-dimensional map at the entrance to the Canada Hall is a recent addition to the gallery, and promises to help orient visitors and inform them of the gallery's themes. Photo by author.



Figure 32. By including people in the image representing the fur trade, this map of Canada emphasizes the relationship between Native people and Euro-Canadians. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Canada Hall. Photo by author.

‘very few’” of the Canada Hall’s text and labels, while “11% admitted to not having read any at all.”²⁰⁸

Fortunately, there are signs of change in the Canada Hall, and the promise of more to come. A recent addition to the gallery is a large map of Canada, placed at the gallery’s entrance to highlight the history and geography visitors will cover in their “Journey Through Time.” The map’s depiction of the fur trade offers visitors an image of cross-cultural cooperation as representative of the industry. Although this image is a limited representation of the fur trade that leaves much unsaid – for example, with regard to the participation of Aboriginal women, or the conflicts that also occurred during the trade – it suggests that visitors perceive the fur trade as involving multiple groups. Further changes can also be hoped for, since updating the Canada Hall has been identified as a goal by Victor Rabinovitch, CEO of the museum. In *A World Inside*, a CMC publication celebrating the original museum’s 150th anniversary, Rabinovitch referred to environmental exhibits in the Canada Hall and the Grand Hall’s display of West Coast Aboriginal cultures as:

tremendously effective in creating a style of constructed environments that contextualize artefacts in broader narratives. Over time, these installations face a risk of stagnation. During the next ten years, the Museum must refresh and revise its core exhibitions – incorporating new information, applying new techniques of interpretation, considering alternative viewpoints, and modernizing visual designs.²⁰⁹

The strong evidence for the effectiveness of large displays in attracting visitor attention and shaping memorable museum experiences suggests that the environmental

²⁰⁸ Graham, *A Summative Evaluation of the “Canada Hall” Exhibition*, 3.

²⁰⁹ Victor Rabinovitch, “Looking to the Future,” in *A World Inside: A 150-Year History of the Canadian Museum of Civilization*, Christy Vodden and Ian Dyck (Gatineau, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, 2006), 89.

exhibit in the Canada Hall's fur trade module offers an opportunity for advancing a historical narrative in which Aboriginal people can also play significant, positive roles. To accomplish this, the display would represent the fur trade as a zone of contact in which a sustained relationship of cross-cultural negotiations and influence between Aboriginal people and Euro-Canadians developed. Since Aboriginal people played essential roles in providing European and Canadian fur traders with pelts, supplies, knowledge and allies, there is no shortage of moments in fur trade history that could effectively illustrate the nature and significance of their relationships. Without making significant changes to the present display, one such moment could be achieved by introducing models of an Aboriginal woman working alongside her fur trader husband. Another could elaborate on the image appearing on the map at the entrance to the Canada Hall: Aboriginal trappers arriving to do business with a Euro-Canadian trader. Models and dioramas are being reclaimed as media for depicting Aboriginal histories and cultures, and are considered empowering for Aboriginal people when developed accurately and in collaboration. The Canadian Museum of Civilization already contains one such display; its vivid re-creation of a fully outfitted dogsled and two Inuit (see figure 33) is the first thing visitors see as they approach the museum's box office.

Adding human likenesses to the *coureurs de bois* encampment in the Canada Hall would harness the environmental exhibit's potential to create an attention-grabbing and photogenic image that visitors remember, and use that potential to communicate messages about diversity, cooperation, and the roles and contributions of Aboriginal people. Because the encampment *is* the fur trade module's most prominent display, the explicit presence of Aboriginal people within it would deliver the type of "hard

inclusion” that provides meaningful recognition of a marginalized group. It would make a poignant statement that the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the Canada Hall is not a “token” gesture of political correctness – as periodic and superficial representation in exhibits is often perceived²¹⁰ – but that the fur trade cannot be conscientiously portrayed without full acknowledgement of Aboriginal participation and experiences.

The Canadian Museum of Civilization’s First Peoples Hall and Canada Hall offer contrasts between a relatively new gallery (developed after the release of the *Report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples*) and an older gallery, between a gallery of Aboriginal histories and a patriotic gallery of national history, between a gallery of ideas expressed in copious text panels and an entertainment-driven gallery meant to excite. By comparison, the examination of the Manitoba Museum (Chapter 4) illustrates how individual museums can be in a transition state between these variations. Some of the Manitoba Museum’s biome galleries date back to the 1970s; others are less than a decade old. Constraints on resources are commonplace in museums, so the approach of updating museum exhibits one at a time has become a necessity. However, museum practices have undergone many changes since the 1970s, creating a visible difference between how history is conveyed in old and new galleries.

As I mentioned previously, the juxtaposition of updated galleries and displays that are decades old can sometimes create inconsistencies in the representation of Aboriginal people, and in museums’ portrayals of Aboriginal roles in the fur trade. More broadly,

²¹⁰ Lee-Ann Martin, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: contemporary native art and public art museums in Canada: A report submitted to the Canada Council* (Ottawa: Canada Council, 1991), 25; Lynda Jessup, “Hard Inclusion,” in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, eds. Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bragg (Hull, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002), xiii; Richard Sandell, “Constructing and communicating equality: The social agency of museum space,” *Reshaping Museum Space*, ed. Suzanne Macleod (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 185-200.



Figure 33. A realistic, life-size display of two Inuit guiding a dogsled sits atop the Canadian Museum of Civilization's box office. Photo by author.

museums across Canada retell Aboriginal history and inform public memory about the fur trade in widely different ways. The Canadian Museum of Civilization has been reasonably well-funded and contains state-of-the-art displays, even if some need further attention. Small, community museums, in contrast, rely on volunteers and donations. When these have Aboriginal material cultural objects in their collections, James Nason wrote, they are often displayed together and “Often the display is the entirety of the museum’s Native American collection and is commonly representative of what early non-Indian families collected within the local region.”²¹¹ As Nason notes, such displays portray Aboriginal people “as elements from the community’s past – elements that no longer have any importance or bearing on current life in the community.”²¹² These messages about how Aboriginal people fit into national and/or local historical narratives conflict with and overlook the themes of valuable cross-cultural interaction that are presented in museum portrayals of Aboriginal histories and the fur trade that have benefitted from the best of recent interpretive advice and support.

That being said, museum exhibits are becoming increasingly inclusive in their representations of history. At the Manitoba Museum, new displays on Aboriginal cultures depict recent history and contemporary cultural celebrations, and displays on the fur trade acknowledge the involvement and agency of Aboriginal people. The Manitoba Museum offers an encouraging perspective on new directions in museum exhibition, and can even serve as a model to other museums in Canada. The beautiful displays on Aboriginal ways of life that form part of the renovated Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery

²¹¹ James D. Nason, “‘Our’ Indians: The Unidimensional Indian in the Disembodied Local Past,” in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: museums and native cultures* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2000), 35.

²¹² Nason, “‘Our’ Indians,” 37.

illustrate this, beginning with a full-wall display of arrowheads and culminating in a performance space and multi-media centre surrounded by displays on contemporary Aboriginal cultural celebrations. In the Grasslands Gallery, a large and colourfully painted tipi, originally created to honour Elder Solomon Hall, a member of the Sioux Valley Dakota First Nation, was installed near the display on the atlatl and Lake Agassiz in 2007. Its colourful decorations reminds visitors that Aboriginal creativity and innovation endure in Manitoba.

Enhancing the Exhibit Experience

The placement of objects in relation to one another and the selection of objects, texts, videos and display components for each exhibit shape visitors' experiences. They are also the least variable aspects of an exhibit: visitors may revisit the same physical displays, making the learning experiences they offer the most universal and reproducible. Interpretive programmes, on the other hand, offer more flexibility; they can change according to the size of a group, the purpose of the visit, the group's levels of collective interest and understanding, the questions asked and the interpreter(s) with whom the group interacts. Since not all museum visitors participate in interpretive programmes, their impact is limited, but interpreters do have the advantage of tailoring an exhibit's content to promote understanding (and, where applicable, to fulfill curriculum objectives).

The Canadian Museum of Civilization offers school programmes focusing on New France and the fur trade geared toward students between grades three and eight. Since the tour includes a stop at the fur trade module's coureurs de bois encampment, the

program presents an opportunity for interpreters to supplement the information presented on the display's text panels by presenting more detailed information about the coureurs de bois and the Aboriginal people with whom they traded. The First Peoples Hall is not a scheduled component of this programme, though for much of 2010 it did include "a 30-minute self-guided exploration" of a special exhibition on the North West Company, *Profit and Ambition: The Canadian Fur Trade, 1789-1821* in which Aboriginal participation in the fur trade does receive more attention than in the Canada Hall (see Epilogue).²¹³ One of the expressed learning objectives of this programme is to provide students with "[a]n understanding of the impact the fur trade had on First Peoples and the role it played in the settlement of Canada," but the situation of Aboriginal people's experiences in the fur trade within a larger narrative of "settlement" suggests Aboriginal people are still relegated to the margins of a colonial historical narrative.²¹⁴

The Manitoba Museum's fur-trade programmes excel in describing the fur trade in terms of an inclusive social history. Interpreters emphasize the value of the contributions made by Aboriginal people, women and company servants in their presentations and present an assortment of trading goods provided by Aboriginal people and Europeans, respectively, and allow students to handle them. With inclusive historical narratives being presented in the Manitoba Museum's newer galleries and figuring prominently in its educational programming, it promises that future renovations to other

²¹³ "Canadian Heritage and Citizenship: New France and the Canadian Fur Trade," Canadian Museum of Civilization, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmhc/education/school-programs-brochure/canadian-heritage-and-citizenship#1> (accessed 15 March 2010).

²¹⁴ Canadian Museum of Civilization, "New France and the Fur Trade: School Program Teacher Overview," http://www.civilization.ca/app/DocRepository/1/Education/Teachers_overviews/nouvellefrancee.pdf (accessed 18 November 2010).

galleries will only increase the recognition of Aboriginal histories and cultures in museum displays.

Both museums also include information on the fur trade on their respective websites that visitors may consult. In the case of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, however, the page devoted to the fur trade may be a greater source of confusion than of answers. The images of the *coureurs de bois* encampment are outdated and do not reflect the display's current arrangement. This is exacerbated by the website's statement that the encampment belonged to *voyageurs*, thus creating inconsistencies or falsely implying "*coureurs de bois*" and "*voyageurs*" are interchangeable terms. Trade with Aboriginal people is the subject of the page's final, brief paragraph. Although more information is required, it mentions how the *coureurs de bois* "adopted Native ways, including the clothing, food, lodging, modes of transportation, languages, and customs."²¹⁵ This exceeds the references to Aboriginal people in the text panels for the *coureurs de bois* encampment, but to learn more about this relationship on the website, visitors must follow a link called "The Indian an Indispensable Partner [sic]" which leads to a similar page offering three additional paragraphs on how trade was conducted and what was traded with Aboriginal people.²¹⁶ The page concludes with a (now-defunct) link to the Manitoba Museum's website. At present, the Manitoba Museum's website provides gallery overviews with a selection of images, rather than information and resources that enhance visitors' experiences, but it is in the process of developing virtual gallery tours.

²¹⁵ Canadian Museum of Civilization, "Canada Hall: The Fur Trade," Canadian Museum of Civilization, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/hist/canp1/ca12eng.shtml> (accessed 20 November 2008).

²¹⁶ Canadian Museum of Civilization, "Canada Hall: The Fur Trade – The Indian as Indispensable Partner," Canadian Museum of Civilization, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/hist/canp1/ca12beng.shtml> (accessed 12 September 2008).

Conclusion

The best of the displays at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Manitoba Museum illustrate how inclusive representations of the fur trade that draw attention to Aboriginal contributions and perspectives present museum visitors with opportunities to understand the diversity of actors in Canadian history. Yet many barriers confront museums' attempts to foster cross-cultural understanding: resource constraints, difficulties accommodating a variety of learning styles, superficial text descriptions, under-representation of the material culture of "Others," narratives that communicate a single perspective, and exhibits created without consultation with source communities, to name just a few. These challenges are, for museum professionals, compounded by the reality that museum exhibits are only viewed by those who choose to visit, and they are free to view and interpret exhibits as they wish once inside the museum.

The long list of challenges associated with developing meaningful and inclusive exhibits that appeal to visitors might seem daunting, particularly when two of Canada's most impressive museums continue to encounter these barriers. However, the findings of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples were clear in their expression of Aboriginal people's need for inclusion and empowerment in Canadian museums, and museums will be expected to do everything in their power to deliver these changes. Deborah Doxtator described the alienation that Aboriginal people experience when their cultures are misrepresented by inaccurate stereotypes and "symbols of Indianness" are presented as history in cultural institutions. As Michele Landsberg noted, those symbols perpetuate historical and cultural ignorance among visitors, effectively alienating

Canadians from their history by presenting such a constructed, one-sided version of it. How Aboriginal people are represented in Canadian museums is a critical issue for institutions looking to share history and expand public memory. Including Aboriginal experiences and perspectives creates better-rounded, more diverse museum narratives. Those narratives, as Carolyn Gilman illustrated, highlight how past events, such as the fur trade, are built on the contributions of many different actors, and the communication and creativity that allowed them to manage provide valuable lessons museum visitors can apply to their present realities.

EPILOGUE

On September 2009 to September 2010, a special exhibition was featured at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Called *Profit and Ambition: The Canadian Fur Trade, 1779-1821*, the exhibition offered a detailed look at the history of the North West Company.²¹⁷ It surveyed the company's leadership, its servants and voyageurs, its competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, its business acumen and the vast area of its operations. It also examined the NWC's relationships with its Aboriginal trading partners.

The displays describing NWC relations with Aboriginal people were located in a section of the gallery devoted to the social history of the NWC. Text panels along one wall explained the terms and conditions of voyageurs' contracts, and compared their wages and qualifications with those of trading clerks. Another wall was lined with paintings and sketches of life in the fur trade by such renowned artists as Peter Rindisbacher and Frances Ann Hopkins. Most of these works fell outside of the exhibition's temporal scope and did not depict events or experiences specific to the NWC. For example, Rindisbacher, a Swiss artist, immigrated to Red River (in present-day Manitoba) in 1821,²¹⁸ the year of the merger between the North West and Hudson's Bay companies. Frances Ann Hopkins's works were painted decades after the merger; the well-known *Canoes in a Fog*, for example, was painted in 1871.²¹⁹ However, it is understandable why these works, despite being produced after the NWC had ceased to

²¹⁷ Canadian Museum of Civilization, "Profit and Ambition: The Canadian Fur Trade, 1779-1821," <http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/whats-on/event-detail&EventId=307> (accessed 20 November 2009).

²¹⁸ Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Artist Was a Young Man: The Life Story of Peter Rindisbacher* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1970), 17.

²¹⁹ Two other famous works by Hopkins, *Expedition to Red River* and *Lake Superior*, were painted in 1870 and 1877, respectively; Alice M. Johnson, "Edward and Frances Hopkins of Montreal," *The Beaver* (Autumn 1971), 8, 11, 16, 18.

exist as such, were included in this exhibit: they provided a rare and beautiful visual record of the voyageurs, clerks and Aboriginal people who made the fur trade possible.

Prominently situated between these walls was a series of glass display cases containing the respective outfits, accessories and tools of different participants in the fur trade. Aboriginal trappers and women are two of the types of contributors represented. The display on Aboriginal trappers contained beautiful, well-crafted samples of clothing and tools that illustrated the trend, identified at the outset of the exhibition in a text panel on the NWC's "Aboriginal Trading Partners," to "incorporate commercial trade items, such as glass beads or metal," into Aboriginal clothing, tools and accessories. The text panel accompanying the display on Aboriginal trappers noted the fur trade's appeal for Aboriginal people and their own work as traders and middlemen. It finishes by informing visitors:

Since most Aboriginal people benefitted from the fur trade, relations with the NWCo were generally good. However, the fur trade brought new diseases from Europe and increased levels of warfare, as First Nations quarrelled over access to trade routes and important posts.²²⁰

This panel broadly describes some of the significant changes precipitated by contact with traders, even if the last sentence is rather simplistic. The display on Aboriginal women built on the discussion of cooperation and change by drawing attention to the relationships they developed with company employees. It provides a description of "country wives" and their role in the NWC and notes that their "marriages ran the gamut from the most temporary liaisons to lifelong commitments."²²¹ Its discussion of country marriages does not meet the standard set by the First Peoples Hall, where a text panel

²²⁰ "Aboriginal Trappers" (text panel), *Profit and Ambition: The North West Company and the Fur Trade, 1779-1821*, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

²²¹ "Aboriginal Women" (text panel), *Profit and Ambition: The North West Company and the Fur Trade, 1779-1821*, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

discusses the household responsibilities of Aboriginal wives and the more complicated task of rearing their children – sometimes as Aboriginal, sometimes to fit in with white society, and other times embracing their mixed heritage. Still, it provided a basic recognition of Aboriginal women’s contributions to the NWC’s success. A lengthier body of text could have provided more detail and context, but the CMC’s exhibit evaluations suggest many visitors would not read it all.

These displays were transformed into three-dimensional portrayals of Aboriginal people by the video playing on a nearby television. When I entered this area of the exhibition, the video was showing two or three Aboriginal women engaged in a conversation about their relationships. The on-screen image was an historical sketch of three Aboriginal women gathering rice together, with subtitles translating the voice-over dialogue. Other short first-person narratives and conversations followed, giving voices to other fur trade actors. This gesture is a significant step forward in how museums represent Aboriginal people because the humanizing of historical figures from the fur-trade era is a marked departure from the once-prevalent displays of stereotypical “Indians.” The video can be seen as somewhat problematic, since the recorded narratives and conversations were drafted by a professional script writer²²² as opposed to being written by Aboriginal people so as to have power over the retelling of Aboriginal histories. Its strength, as curator David Morrison has noted, is that it presents valuable Aboriginal and female perspectives into the history of a company owned and controlled by Scots-Canadian males.²²³

²²² The themes and information were provided to the script-writer by the exhibition’s curator, and the interpretive programmer assisted in ensuring the product was accessible to a wide audience; David Morrison, personal communication, 6 April 2010.

²²³ Morrison, personal communication.

Profit and Ambition opened two decades after the Canada Hall and almost seven years after the First Peoples Hall. The NWC exhibition successfully combined certain strengths of these two galleries, providing a range of learning activities to engage visitors and ensuring that Aboriginal people are given visibility, agency and voice. It is particularly significant that distinctions among different Aboriginal groups were made within the exhibition. Amongst the first displays visitors encountered within the exhibition was a large map of the Great Lakes region and present-day Manitoba, indicating which Aboriginal groups inhabited certain areas. Elsewhere in the exhibition was a similar map for the Mackenzie Valley region. Text panels describing the social, political and economic experiences of the Aboriginal people who had contact with the NWC used “Native” and “Aboriginal” rather than specifying whether people were, for example, Cree or Slavey, but this highlights certain common aspects of Aboriginal people’s experiences in the fur trade. Although the NWC’s years of activity were relatively brief, the socially inclusive scope of *Profit and Ambition* was about more than the history of one company – it captured the relationships between societies and cultures that helped shape the course of Canadian history. The fact that Aboriginal people figured so prominently within this narrative is a promising sign that Canadian museums will continue to devote serious attention to how they represent Aboriginal people and their many roles in the fur trade.

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