

Preserving Canadian Heritage [Session]

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Submitted by Moderator: Jennifer Garland

Culture/History Wars in Canada: a Museum Library Perspective

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This is section 4.4.2, entitled ‘Teaching, speaking at conferences and other personal engagements’, which states that such activities have been identified as “high risk to Library and Archives Canada and to the employee with regard to conflict of interest, conflict of duties and duty of loyalty”. “High risk”! My colleague Mary Kandiuk will have more to say about the recent history of LAC, but in the meantime I can tell you that a toned-down code of ethics was happily introduced in December 2013.

What I hope to do in this paper is to give an impression of the broadly ‘political’ issues that have arisen in recent years in working in an art library in a federal museum in a national capital which is more associated with government and politicians than it is with artists and the arts. Given the fact of working in an art museum library, we may ask the following questions:

What is the Canadian government view of libraries?

What is the Canadian government view of art?

What is the Canadian government view of museums?

- what is the Canadian government view of libraries?
- what is the Canadian government view of art?
- and: what is the Canadian government view of museums?

Firstly, what is the Canadian government view of libraries?

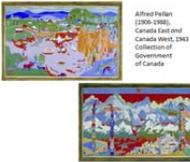


Here is a sad picture, from a media report in January 2014. Over the past 2 years, more than a dozen federal government libraries have closed or merged, and others have been significantly downsized, as a cost-cutting measure. Controversy has arisen not only about the justification or otherwise for the cuts, but also, and especially, about the manner of their implementation. Some government departments, Health Canada for example, appear to have implemented cuts while following the guidelines for stock disposal set out in the legislation relating to Library and Archives Canada, who are expected to coordinate the overall 'national' collection. Others, such as Environment Canada, one of whose collections is featured in this image, seem to have either been unaware of their obligations or quite simply to have disregarded them.

I should point out that different rules apply to the libraries of the four federal museums in the National Capital Region, namely the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of History (until last year, known as the Canadian Museum of Civilization, another story which I shall touch upon later), the Canadian Museum of Science and Technology, and the Canadian Museum of Nature. The museums are all arms-length Crown Corporations and not government departments, with more flexibility to manage their library collections.

Secondly, what is the Canadian government view of art?

Here are three, let's call them, 'episodes' which may allow you to form an impression.



Episode 1: These two large paintings are by the Quebec artist Alfred Pellán (1906-1988), entitled Canada West and Canada East. The paintings were originally commissioned for the first Canadian mission in Brazil for its opening in 1944. For the best part of forty years they were hanging in a very prominent position above the reception desk at Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada headquarters in Ottawa. In late June 2011, however, they were suddenly removed to storage and replaced by a different work of art which looks like this.



Ironic really, because the Pellán paintings were hung in the Foreign Affairs building in 1973 when it was brand new precisely for the grand opening by the Queen herself.



Episode 2. Staying back in the 20th century for a moment, here is the logo that was produced in 1967 by designer Stuart Ash for the celebrations of the centenary of Canadian confederation in 1867, a striking construct of 11 multi-coloured equilateral triangles representing the 10 provinces and the territories, forming a stylized maple leaf.



And here, in marked contrast, is the selection of 5 logos recently proposed by the Department of Canadian Heritage for the 2017 sesquicentennial celebrations (that's 150 years). One can only suppose that the designers were so possessed by the notion of the Prime Minister's sporting obsessions that their collective imagination failed to come up with anything not resembling a hockey badge. (For those who do not follow such matters, Stephen Harper recently published a book about hockey.)



Finally, episode 3. Now, far be it from me to stand up in Washington, of all places, and make a big deal about the War of 1812. Nevertheless, the Canadian government has been making a huge deal of celebrating the apparently nation-building significance of this conflict from 200 years ago. Laura Secord may not be a household name, but if you think of her in relation to the War of 1812 as a female Canadian version of Paul Revere in relation to the American War of Independence you won't be too far off, except that he was commemorated in a poem by Longfellow and she just got to be on a box of chocolates. Anyway, Laura Secord is one character in an officially-funded mini-movie which the government put out as part of the bicentenary celebrations.

Here is how the story of government micro-management of the video was written up in the *Globe and Mail* for 27 April 2013 (I quote):

Records obtained under access to information law show the senior echelons of the federal government took a particularly close interest in how Secord was portrayed in the 1812 ad. In a series of e-mail exchanges last year, Canadian Heritage bureaucrats informed the advertising agency supervising the trailer that the "Centre" feels Ms. Secord's dress is too drab. The "Centre" is short-form in Ottawa for the Prime Minister's Office or the Privy Council Office, the bureaucratic arm that carries out the PMO's wishes. "The Centre asks if Laura Secord's costume could have a little more colour," the Heritage bureaucrat writes. She points out that the project

does not have all the approvals needed from the minister and the “Centre” and adds it would be helpful if she can tell the PCO that Laura Secord “can be more colourful.” The ad agency replies by saying that they used a Canada Post stamp featuring the 1812 heroine as the basis for their Secord costume. It notes the stamp shows her wearing an orange-coloured cape that “gives her a bit of colour.” The agency cautions against going overboard, saying it tried to make Secord’s dress faithful to the few pictures that exist of what women wore between 1812 and 1814, the period of the war. “We need to avoid making her look like Little Red Riding Hood!”. Who knew that the Prime Minister’s Office was so creatively engaged?

This ‘episode’ also relates to the answer to the third of the three questions posed above, namely, what is the Canadian government view of museums?

“Key Milestone Anniversaries
on the Road to 2017”

Here is an indicator of what the government thinks the national museums should be busying themselves with right now. A document entitled ‘Key Milestone Anniversaries on the Road to 2017’ was circulated to the national museums back in 2012, and it lists the War of 1812 as just the first in a series of events in Canadian history deserving of commemoration in the form of museum activity. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, 9 of the 20 milestone events listed, so almost half, are wars and battles, including the Medak Pocket Battle (hands up anyone who knows the date of that one? [1993]). Equally unsurprisingly, none of the milestone events has anything to do with the arts. Perhaps there were no up-coming round-number anniversaries of an artistic flavour? Though in fact the National Gallery of Canada has identified the centenary of the death of Group of Seven inspiration Tom Thomson as a possible commemorative event. Unquestionably if Tom Thomson had contrived to die at the battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917 instead of drowning in Canoe Lake in northern Ontario he would have been a shoo-in. Bad career move on his part. For the record, he was turned down for military service on medical grounds. But in any case, I digress.

So, what are the lessons for art museum libraries, in Canada and maybe elsewhere?

Broadly, the ‘political’ aspects of changes occurring in Canadian museums and museum libraries can be divided into two areas.

On the one hand, there is the spectre of direct political intervention in the programming of the federal museums. Commentators in the media have been more ready to discern such developments for example in the re-naming of the Canadian Museum of Civilization as the Canadian Museum of History. But all such insinuations of political control have been officially denied by the museum and by the Department of Canadian Heritage. After a good discussion with a library colleague at the Canadian Museum of History, I can see no evidence of this directly affecting the library, though the collecting activities of the library have been influenced by the mandate change from a broadly anthropological museum to one with a more historical

focus, naturally. The changes in the library at the Canadian Museum of History have come from a different quarter, as we shall see.

It is possible, though challenging, to imagine what such an exercise of government influence on the federal art museum, namely the National Gallery of Canada, might look like. For example, for Canada's 150th Anniversary of Confederation in 2017, the Gallery is planning a special exhibition, as one would expect, to mark the occasion. One might conjecture that if the planning of the exhibition were left up to the Government the result would tend toward a triumphalist presentation of the hardy pioneering Group of Seven taming the wilderness in the name of art, with a nod to Emily Carr, a disproportionate dose of war art from the two World Wars, some Inuit and First Nations content - oh, and how does Quebec fit in, exactly? But it's also fair to say that, under present Gallery direction at any rate, the exhibition will likely to take on a very different and more nuanced flavour, and rightly so.

Sometimes, however, the effects of such an environment on the life of the museum may not be explicitly articulated but are nevertheless visible to the observer.



For example, here is a snapshot of the website of exhibitions on offer at a Canadian national museum in Ottawa in April 2013, so just over a year ago. Now, given the existence of the Canadian War Museum, it seems to me that someone could be forgiven for thinking at first glance that this was the exhibition line-up at the Canadian War Museum.



But in fact this was the website of the National Gallery of Canada in April 2013. You may draw your own conclusions.



Nor can I pretend that we in the National Gallery Library are immune to this kind of influence. For example, earlier I referred to the 'Key Milestone Anniversaries on the Road to 2017' document which circulated to the Gallery and other federal museums in 2012. In response to this the Library suggested including an exhibition in 2017, within our own exhibition space, of archival materials documenting the construction of the Vimy Memorial in Northern France by sculptor Walter Allward, which are housed in our Archive and of which you can see an example here.

Then, on the other hand, there is the ‘political’ aspect of diminishing resources and government under-funding. This has to be seen in the context of an environment which is not only generally hostile, as we saw above, to federal government libraries, but in which Library and Archives Canada, instead of being a champion of the national documentary heritage, has at times seemed more like its nemesis. All aspects of the museum come under increasing scrutiny in terms of expenditure, but museum libraries are perhaps especially vulnerable. Here it may help to consider three roles or functions of the art museum library.

Museum libraries

- traditional library role
- Information Management
- ‘curatorial’ role

Firstly, there is the traditional information-serving function of a museum library, a kind of handmaiden to the research carried out by curators, just as an academic library supports the research carried out by university faculty. Given the diminishing role of research in many museums, and probably also the changing role of unmediated technology in supporting research, this is a role in decline, quite frankly.

Secondly, there is the function of information management, as opposed to simple channeling of information, that has seen libraries take on expanded roles as metadata advisers, record-keepers, and so forth. This is certainly one area where museum libraries have been able to carve out territory, expanding their role in particular to cover collections metadata, search and retrieval in relation to information about the art and artifact collections of their parent institution. This is a role gathering in importance, but one which depends to a high degree on an information technology component which museum libraries are not always in a position to control.



The information management role is broadly the one that has been adopted by the Library at the Canadian Museum of History, not so much by choice but more as the result of a re-organization imposed from above. It is probably fair to say that there are both pluses and minuses as a result. On the plus side, library staff are firmly embedded in the process of harmonising metadata standards for different collections including the artefact and art collections, not just library catalogue records; and the status of information management within the organization has been recognized and enhanced – not least because of a notorious incident in which a small boat in the museum’s collection was over-hastily earmarked for de-accessioning as a result of the mandate change, without sufficient attention being paid to the circumstances and documentation surrounding its accession. The resulting furore in the west-coast donor community caused the decision to be reversed and a much greater emphasis to be laid on information-gathering as part of the decision-making process in the future.



On the minus side, this is now the sign on the door of the Canadian Museum of History's Library, previously open to the public without appointment. In case that's not legible, it says 'open by appointment', with a telephone number and email address. As an aside, access by appointment only is now the rule at the library of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, and a similar option was also considered at high levels for the National Gallery of Canada Library but was, thankfully, rejected.

So: traditional library role; Information Management role; and, thirdly, there is the 'curatorial' role. It is ironic, in a way, given that in wider discourse the verb 'curate' has been perhaps devalued by being applied to data, as in data curation, and other less-than-museum-worthy objects – I am sure many of you are familiar with the joke about people 'curating' their spice racks – that museum librarians and archivists approach the c-word with a certain defensiveness and air of apology. But probably that is precisely because we work alongside people for whom the word curator actually is their job title. A little sensitivity is in order. Nevertheless, museum libraries and archives do frequently house museum collection materials, such as rare books, illustrated books, ephemera, archival and manuscript collections, sketchbooks, historical photographs, and so forth. And from these materials a great deal of curatorial activity can be generated, such as exhibitions, publications, web projects, seminars, talks, and the like. Such activities usually have a clear public-service dimension, which sits well with the current ethos according to which curators are expected to generate value for the visiting public rather than engage in pure 'research' for its own sake. This to some extent mitigates the risk of aligning the museum library and archives too strongly with the curatorial component of the museum, when the influence of curators may be seen to be in relative decline, compared to the role of marketing, visitor services, community engagement, audience champions, and so forth.

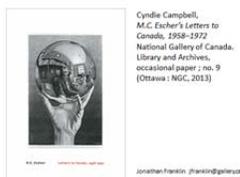
I also think there is a discernible trend here from which museum libraries can benefit. The heyday of the blockbuster exhibition of paintings and sculpture seems to be past. Museums are turning to formats which are cheaper and easier to circulate, notably photography, to plug gaps in their exhibition schedules. In fact, for example, the historic photographic collections of Library and Archives Canada are now on rotating public display at the National Gallery of Canada. This reflects the current lack of interest on the part of the powers-that-be at LAC in exhibiting their treasures in-house, and the readiness of the National Gallery to profit from this indifference. Likewise, the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives has seen virtually entire exhibitions created from its own rich archival holdings by way of loans to other institutions. Our acquisition last year of the archives of painter Alex Colville is expected to play a significant role in future exhibition planning. In other words, this is a wave that museum libraries and archives can ride.



At the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, as some of you will be aware, there were significant cuts in staffing levels in early 2013, part of a drastic cost-cutting exercise which extended across the entire museum. In passing, I would like to acknowledge the vocal and articulate support of the ARLIS Canada chapter in responding to those events by writing to the Director of the Gallery. This was very warmly appreciated by me and my colleagues. As a result of the cuts, we changed our public hours for Library readers to stay open more afternoons but not in the mornings, reflecting the habits of our visitors and requiring less staff time to administer. We have also, reluctantly, but in line with most other institutions, introduced fee structures for inter-library loans, previously free, except where reciprocal agreements apply; and for exhibition loans from the library and archives collections, as a means of managing the demand and reducing the pressure on an over-stretched staff. At the same time, we are maintaining our program of 3 library and archives exhibitions per year as well as our publications program, and looking to increase the level of public programming and contributions to web resources.

Our active 'curatorial' profile is therefore probably as high or higher within the institution than it has ever been. This does not come without a cost, mainly in terms of a loss of autonomy. Two years ago a new Library and Archives Collection Development Policy was approved by the Trustees introducing stricter control on the procedures for acquiring materials for the Library and Archives, still distinct from, but more in line with, the procedures for curators acquiring works of art. Similarly, the Library and Archives exhibition program, which until last year operated pretty much independently of the rest of the Gallery, must now pass through a process of approvals from the same committee that vets all other exhibition proposals.

Our publications program also, most notably our series of Occasional Papers, is now subject to increased pressures from the need to support or complement museum programming. None of this is easy to navigate, and there is always the concern that the need for approval for one instance of something, a single exhibition, say, will turn out to be the occasion to withdraw support for the whole series. But this has not happened in practice, and I would like to close on an encouraging note, with an example of the reverse effect.



The credit for this belongs with my colleague Cyndie Campbell, Head of Collections in the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. Just to give you the background, the artist M.C. Escher had 4 sons of whom one, George, emigrated to Canada and now, in his mid-eighties, lives just outside Ottawa. George has donated to the Gallery not only prints by his father but also copies of family correspondence. Literally decades ago, Cyndie began to involve volunteers in translating the letters from the original Dutch and editing them

for publication. Last year, we were able, with support from the Gallery's donor circle, to publish the text of selected letters, in English and French, illustrated with family photographs, as an Occasional Paper. Not only has the publication sold surprisingly well in the bookstore and through the Gallery's distributor, ABC Books, it has also been picked up by the MOMA Bookstore in New York and by Barnes & Noble. This would be satisfying in itself, but the point of my recounting this story is that the Gallery decided to deploy a ready-made touring exhibition of M.C. Escher prints from its collection to a vacant slot in its programming in Ottawa, in order to capitalize on the existence of the published Occasional Paper. In other words, rather than being pulled passively into line with wider Gallery programming, on this occasion we in the Library and Archives actively created the opportunity for others.