MUSEUMS FACING TRUDEAU'S CHALLENGE:

The Informal Teaching of History

ABSTRACT

While museums' previous concerns revolved principally around the creation of knowledge with little emphasis on visitors needs, many are now reshaping their mission as one that should provide the general public with more accessible opportunities for learning Canadian history. The author illustrates this shift – from creation of knowledge to dissemination of knowledge – through the example of the relocation of the Canadian Museum of Civilization to new facilities in the 1980s, and to the changes that were made to exhibitions in order to enhance the quality of the learning experience by targeting both the intellect and the emotions of the visitors.

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VICTOR RABINOVITCH

Victor Rabinovitch is the President and CEO of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, which is responsible for both the Civilization Museum (Canada's largest and most visited) and the Canadian War Museum. He has had a long career in many departments of the federal government, and also worked for the Canadian Labour Congress and the Manitoba Government. He is a graduate of McGill University, and Sussex University in England, a fellow of Queen's University School of Policy Studies, and is involved as a volunteer in Canadian cultural organizations

It is worthwhile to start with the words of Pierre-Elliot Trudeau, written shortly after his election as Prime Minister of Canada:

> "In the past the teaching of history in our schools has been dominated by traditions inherited from Europe. On that continent history has been filled with battles, and the lives of national heroes. In Canada we have had few decisive battles and not many dominant leaders. Much more important to our history has been the struggle of nameless Canadians to improve their lives in our often hostile environment. This struggle has produced its share of adventure and heroism. But perhaps this lesson is best learned outside the classroom."[1]

How ironic that Trudeau's words contradict his own evolution as he later became the type of leader he said Canada does not produce – a leader of mythical proportions, a national hero to many, a political villain to some. Soon after Trudeau, Prime Minister Mulroney also became a leader of historic proportions, with a profound impact on Canada's relations with the world, especially America.

Do we therefore conclude that Trudeau's populist version of Canada is simply untrue? Clearly, this country in its pre-Confederation days and its more recent configurations has been shaped by many exceptional leaders – political, social, aboriginal, military, labour and industrial. The real challenge in Trudeau's words is aimed at how we learn about the past, whether such learning should be focused on 'heroes,' and what role informal learning should play in our education.

Trudeau expressed a view that very much reflected the spirit of the 1960s. He believed Canada had evolved a unique identity that was more than the sum of values and traits inherited from Europe. He felt that in Canada – a nation reliant on immigrants and pioneers, rather than on dominant aristocrats and military adventurers – the history of the common person is central to our national narrative. Trudeau also challenged the dominance of old-fashioned school-room teaching, favouring instead a process of learning through in-the-field experiences.

In the late 1960s, as well, the teaching of history in both formal and informal settings moved towards the theme of social movements. The stories of great heroes and pivotal events were downplayed in favour of the narratives of communities, social conditions, lesser-known individuals and movements of many kinds. Those historians who continued to espouse the "great man" view of history sometimes saw themselves as voices in the wilderness.

There is a current perception of Canadian youth lacking a knowledge of their country's history (a problem which has also been noted in the United States and the United Kingdom). Perhaps what we see is not a lack of interest in history, as such, but a lack of interest in learning history in the schoolroom. Informal learning experiences are increasingly sought out, as is seen in the growth of tourist-oriented attractions – such as heritage centres and heritage theme parks. Museums have also benefited from expanding public interest, and the competition from commercial attractions and their high quality of visitor relations has defined new standards for "client service". Museum popularity among Americans has grown along with tourism as a whole; about 60% of Americans now

report visiting a museum annually, compared to 25% in the early 60s.[2] Museums are perceived as reputable places for learning trustworthy information, and for doing so in an entertaining way. That there has been a corresponding growth in the use of engaging heritage interpretation techniques (such as re-enactments, reconstructed historical environments, multimedia presentations) suggests that Trudeau was right in his belief that most people prefer to learn about history experientially, and in easy doses.

The purpose of this article is to look at what museums do in providing opportunities for learning Canadian history. In particular, what can a national museum do in responding to the challenge of providing quality learning experiences for a wide range of age groups? The educational role of a museum is mainly informal. Museum-visiting is not an obligation or a necessity; the motivations for coming and learning are quite different from those in a school situation.

What Do Museums Really Do?

If we distill its activities down to basics, a modern large-scale museum has three fundamental tasks: to create knowledge, to disseminate knowledge, and to provide services to visitors.

The creation of knowledge requires activities that are generally behind-the-scenes; the public tends to be unaware of them, even though within the museum community these activities are central to the profession. I am speaking of collecting, storage, conservation, and research. Although there are exceptions to this rule, most museums have at their core a collection of artifacts. In a history museum, the process of collecting assumes a knowledge of the past that guides decisions on what objects are significant to help us understand that past. Storage requires us to organize artifacts in a way that imposes knowledge structures on collections. Conservation contributes to our understanding of those artifacts, the people who made or used them, and their societal role. Research provides a more detailed context for understanding the objects and what they tell us. While some of this research is derived from secondary sources, much of it is direct and primary, possibly involving archaeological excavation, oral interviews, archival work, as well as study of the objects themselves.

Prior to the 1970s, these knowledge-creation processes absorbed the bulk of museum resources. Exhibitions did provide for some public access, but without much emphasis on visitor needs. The dissemination of information was relatively small-scale. The shift of museums towards mass cultural tourism is largely a product of the past thirty years. To take the example of my own institution, the Canadian Museum of Civilization was able during the 1980s to entirely renew itself in preparation for its move to new facilities, purpose-built to meet the needs of many museum visitors.

Museums today place less emphasis on showing artifacts than on helping people create meaning. Exhibitions in the past typically consisted of long rows of display cases crowded with artifacts on a theme. Labels provided sparse information because museums saw themselves as educational institutions for a select few. It was assumed that



Museums use various interpretive techniques to communicate knowledge of history; in the case shown here, a scripted drama in the context of a reconstructed New France town square, with an audience comprising students and adults.

Photo by Stephen Alsford, © Canadian Museum of Civilization

visitors would have sufficient educational background to appreciate, with minimal aid, the artifacts on display.

Museums today are more popular in their communication styles, even though the largest portion of visitors still come from the more educated segment of the population.[3] This popular approach recognizes that an effective visit, in terms of visitor learning, relies heavily on the overall quality of a visit. Factors such as helpful staff, fast processing of line-ups, accessible spaces within buildings, physical amenities (parking, cafeteria, rest areas), and opportunities to purchase souvenirs are all elements that reinforce a pleasant experience. By dealing effectively with such needs, museums can make visitors more receptive to a meaningful learning experience.

Contemporary museums make themselves more appealing through the way exhibitions are designed. In the past, physical objects –artifacts – were often presented in large numbers, with similar objects shown for comparative purposes. We might call this a 'parking lot' approach to display. Today's exhibitions are highly selective in showing objects to illustrate themes. More space is assigned to interpretive aids, explanatory texts, photographs, audiovisual presentations, or entire settings reconstructing the historical environment in which objects were used.

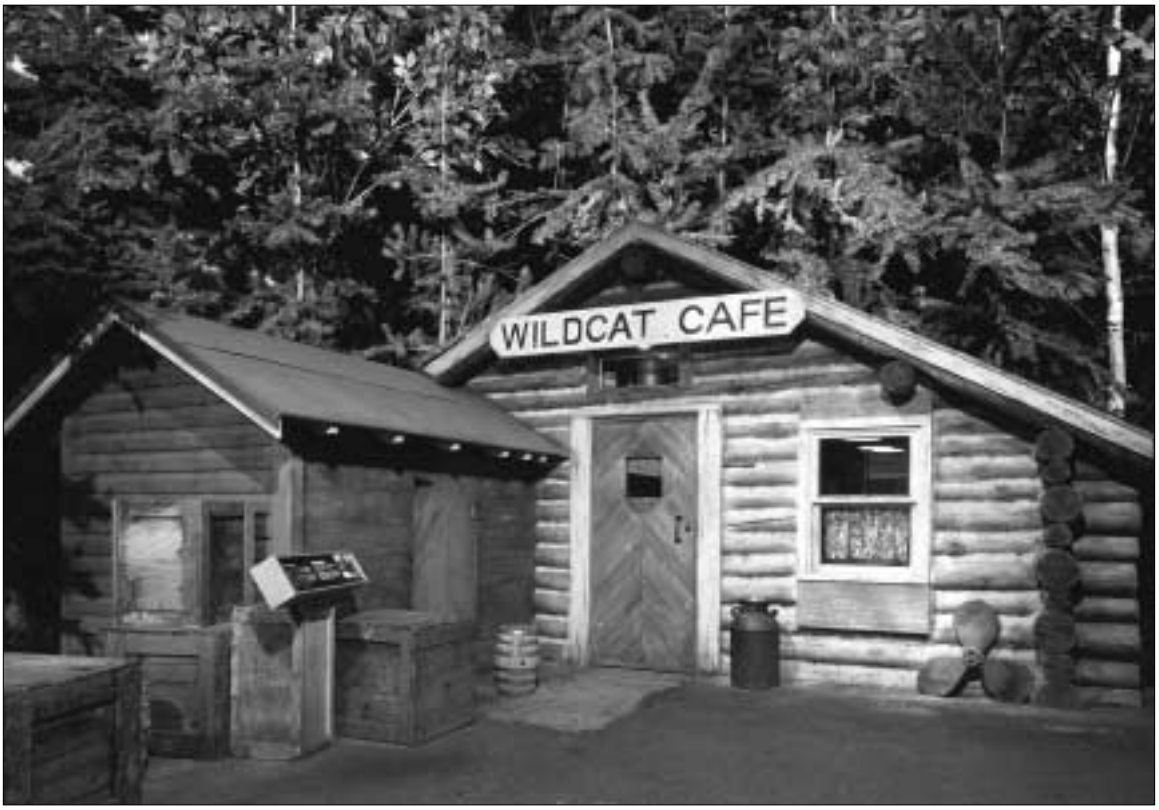
Museum exhibitions therefore seek to communicate by targeting a range of senses, as well as the intellect and the emotions of visitors. The learning process occurs through the assimilation of impressions; this affective learning is an informal, often unconscious, process. The range of media used, combined with interactive opportunities, cater to a variety of learning preferences. Visitors choose which elements they examine with care, and which they gloss over, based on individual preferences such as what makes a personal connection, what is exotic, or intriguing.

Museums also use some techniques of formal learning, but do so as a supplement to their informal information roles. Their major interest is to act as adjuncts to the classroom. At the Museum of Civilization, we have facilities catering specifically to school group visits – reception area, classrooms, lunchroom. There are also structured programmes to support curriculum themes, outreach programmes for interpreters to bring hands-on artifacts into schools, and guided visits geared to provincial curricula.

What About History Museums?

History museums increasingly recognize that although physical artifacts are their 'medium of specialization', they are really multimedia institutions that use documents, photographs, artwork, sound and video recordings. These media support the interpretation of artifacts, reflecting the fact that history is manifested through processes, personalities and ideas, as well as through physical objects.

While various interpretive media are important, I suggest that at the heart of a meaningful experience in a history museum are two particular qualities: authenticity and imaginative engagement. *Authenticity* means that a museum must try to show the "real thing", whether from its own collections or others. It must also ensure that the



An exact reproduction of a legendary cafe in Yellowknife, used by the museum in illustrating the theme of northern resource exploration. Inside the cafe, visitors can sit and listen to twenty recorded interviews with contemporary historical figures who have been active in social, religious, aboriginal or industrial affairs in the Northwest Territories.

Photo by Harry Foster, © Canadian Museum of Civilization

information it communicates is truthful and comprehensive, balanced and in context. *Imaginative engagement* means that the visitor, through the exercise of personal imagination, constructs meaning from objects, contexts and narrative interpretation. This approach to learning and entertainment is very different from watching TV or films where a product is delivered at such speed and with so many images that the viewer has little time to think and thereby interpose his or her own creative analysis.

The primary reaction that a TV production seeks from its audience is emotional; audiences expect to be assaulted by a rapid succession of high-powered dramatic scenes. For example, the average length of a scene in *Star Wars* is calculated to be 11 seconds.[4] Museums present a very different learning atmosphere. Visitors are invited to move at their own pace to look, admire, read, think, and reconstruct historical scenes in their own minds. Museums provide an intellectual breathing space in the learning process. The pedagogical challenge for museums is to persuade visitors to shift from watching films or fantasy PlayStations in order to actively construct, challenge, learn and enjoy.

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In our national museum we have approached this learning challenge by presenting history and social commentary through two exhibition strategies. Our first strategy is to present *meta-narratives*, meaning large-scale narratives that set out an integrated telling of history through several perspectives. For example, an Aboriginal perspective on continuity, survival and cultural wealth is presented through the First Peoples Hall which we recently opened. It is a huge installation, with multiple sets of images, artifacts, recordings and texts. Another meta-narrative is found in our Canada Hall which presents a metaphoric journey across Canada, from east to west, over 1000 years of European contact with North America. This exhibition hall receives over a half-million visitors each year – it is the most popular historical learning activity in Canada.

Our second strategy is to offer a *diversity of choices*, large and small. During 2003, we presented Canada's first-ever exhibition on Inuit woven tapestry; an international exhibition looking at peoples in ancient north-western Europe; an exhibition produced by Montreal's McCord history museum on men's clothing fashions over the centuries; an ethno-cultural exhibition on the Italian-Canadian community; two children's–themed exhibitions; a postal exhibition on retail catalogue sales; and several types of art exhibitions.

All these exhibitions, both permanent and special, speak to elements of our national identity. The focus is not exclusively on the hero, nor the common person. We look at many types of people, and especially at the social and economic conditions forming the contexts of our lives.

Narrating History in a National Museum

No museum can be all things to all people; there are always limits on space, resources and collections. A national history museum has particularly difficult challenges, as it has a broad primary audience coming from many regions, and a secondary audience that is international in origin. It is essential for such a museum to affirm the "national" component of its identity and be true to its national mandate. In part, this flows from the location of the museum in the capital, which acts as cultural pilgrimage site. Visitors come to the capital to obtain a particular perspective on their country, to see up close the national symbols of government, and to examine how they are reflected in the national mirror.

Some of the challenges facing a national history museum are similar to those of local and regional museums; some are unique. The first is that the institution must meet visitor expectations. It must provide a wide range of interesting, high-quality exhibitions and programmes to leave people satisfied that the hours invested in the visit were a worthwhile use of their limited time. It must provide visitors with substantive information about the country in which they live, and its historical relationship with other societies.

A second challenge is to make available, beyond the museum's walls, a range of knowledge products to complement formal learning available from other institutions. For example, we have a major programme of travelling exhibits for which we bear the full costs of production; recipient museums cover only the direct costs involved in travelling. There is also a research publishing programme in which we collaborate with commercial publishers. Most important, we have developed a very large and knowledge-rich Web site, which has proven very useful to both teachers and students. Virtual visits to the Web site fluctuate in parallel with the school-year calendar. In other words, the "virtual exhibitions" on the Web have become a major learning tool for schools and the public, with over 5,400,000 unique visits in the current year.

A third challenge is to remain relevant to the formal educational system. Since the majority of visiting school groups come from Ontario and Quebec, our focus is on the curricula of those two provinces. But the resulting programmes are clearly relevant to curricula in other provinces.

A fourth challenge is a particularly difficult one in a country as regionally focused as Canada, for it involves

selecting and presenting elements of a national perspective. Canada's national museum of human history should not try to tell the detailed story of Nova Scotia, or Alberta, or Upper Canada. What it is uniquely positioned to do is to present a national narrative and express an overview of Canadian history. We seek to provide insights into national identity, portray relationships of the different parts to the whole, and provoke thinking on reciprocal influences between Canada and world.

"When You're Dead You're Still Teaching"

While museums are able to support school curriculum-based learning, they can also provide an opportunity for students to stretch their knowledge and their imaginations beyond the boundaries of the formal curriculum. When a museum offers a diversity of viewpoints and exhibition topics, it opens a door which leads beyond the curriculum boundary. A brief period of time, even as short as 30 minutes, can enable students to experience something new, intellectually broadening and visually stimulating.

This taste of something different, even exotic, can stimulate interest in cultures, history and other peoples. It can be the unexpected add-on, the unplanned supplement. The words of one anonymous adult visitor who evaluated our history exhibition on rituals and sacrifice in ancient Europe ("The Mysterious Bog People") expressed her museum learning experience beautifully:

> "The main theme is how much the present, past and future are all intermingled. Amazing. Whoever thought all these people who lived centuries ago would be on display? Even when you're dead you're still teaching people. I guess that's what museums are about, aren't they?"

Footnotes:

1 Pierre Trudeau, Foreword to Eric Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada*, University of Toronto Press, 1969.

2 Reported by John Falk at the American Association of Museums annual conference, 2003.

3 Average education profile of Canadian Museum of Civilization visitors: 48% with some university or higher; 22% with pre-university college; 22% with high school; 8% with elementary school.

4 Reported by M. Sylvester at the American Association of Museums annual conference, 2003.



In this reproduction boat shed ca.1970 a variety of media – video, text panels, original artifacts and historical reproductions – combine to help evoke the multicultural setting of the Steveston fishing port near Vancouver. The issues of aboriginal fisheries and Japanese internment during WWII are introduced in this exhibition.

Photo by Steven Darby, © Canadian Museum of Civilization