

### History Museums, Media Coverage and Material History

*There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.*

Oscar Wilde

The 1995 Canadian Museums Association annual meeting was marked by a small ceremony staged to mourn the reduction in federal funding for museums. The podium draped in black provided an effective symbol of both the Canadian museum community's urgent need for greater public attention and appreciation (this action was aimed at and consumed by, the media), and the uncertain place of museums within the wider framework of Canadian cultural policy. Following the coverage received by this event, I could not help reflecting on how rare such widespread attention from the national media is, especially for history museums. In fact, when it comes to media coverage, history museums are without doubt the neglected children of Canadian culture.

This observation, admittedly unscientific, is based largely on a dedicated following of two of English Canada's major "national" media: the arts section of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* and the arts programming of the CBC Stereo network. That these media are indeed less concerned with history museums is perhaps most readily apparent by the absence of any dedicated columnists or critics. Of course, history museums do occasionally receive some coverage, especially when they first open (and thus can be viewed as architecture). But this only underlines the general neglect. At both the *Globe and Mail* and CBC Stereo, special reporters or correspondents exist for a remarkable range of specialized arts and culture subjects, but no-one has been assigned to discuss regularly the mandates, exhibits, programs and problems of Canada's many history museums.

Indeed, the lack of concern or critical coverage for history museums is so striking that, excluding the possibility of outright indifference, one cannot help but wonder why this is

so? The question is made all the more vexing in light of the fact that the same neglect is not suffered by art museums, which generally do enjoy the attention of dedicated visual arts columnists and critics. The essential point here, however, is that the grouping together of museums, galleries, literature, and visual and performing arts all under the single federal rubric "heritage" renders such apparent prejudice irrelevant for all practical purposes; responsible media coverage of publicly funded cultural institutions simply ought to include critical concern for history museums.

Even allowing for my own obvious self-interest as a history museum curator, I am convinced that this absence of national coverage for history museums and their programming does a grave disservice to the public's understanding and appreciation of Canadian arts and culture. While this point might be debatable, there can be little doubt that neglect by the national media denies history museums — most of them reliant on public funds and increasingly measured by their level of attendance — of much needed support, interest and exposure. Yet, if an argument is to be made for increased coverage, it is perhaps best made on the grounds of cultural relevance rather than fiscal urgency. Fortunately, the argument is an easy one to make and, in fact, ought to be self-evident among journalists in the arts. To understand a particular narrative in literature, drama, painting, film or even poetry, it is very often essential to appreciate the historical persons, events, processes and things behind it. Thus, artists and critics alike are often required to provide an interpretation of historical context when discussing their work and ideas. Yet, as things now stand, a novel by a well-known Canadian author that deals with characters living through the Winnipeg General Strike is far more likely to receive national media coverage than an exhibit on the same subject — such as that which opened last year at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature (and

which incidentally was scarcely noticed by the national media, though it was deemed important enough to receive serious consideration by a number of scholarly journals).

The fact that history museums and their exhibits occasionally do receive coverage suggests that, whatever the reason for their general neglect, the media do, at least, recognize the place of museums in the cultural life of Canada. But this occasional acknowledgement really only serves to beg the question: why is the coverage so sparse? The issue here, of course, is not that history museums are entirely ignored, rather that their cultural relevance is greatly underrated. Certainly it is not a matter of discriminating against history museums as "low" culture, since popular forms of expression and entertainment (Hollywood films, television, detective fiction etc.) usually do receive attention — in some cases a great deal of attention — from the national media. Nor should there be any doubt that history museums, as places where material culture is preserved, studied and interpreted, are any less important a source of information and insight into our cultural identity than art galleries, theatres, films, music or books. Indeed, the first principle of material culture studies is the assertion that all artifacts — whether *objet d'art* or simple tool — may serve as historical evidence and can be interpreted to reveal insight into the individuals and societies that produced, adapted and used them. Ideally, then, history museums are the places we go to see artifacts interpreted through exhibits and programs aimed at enlarging our understanding of ourselves as a nation and a culture. Significantly, this very same function — understanding ourselves — is often cited as the primary value of the arts in society and so here, at least, we may claim some common purpose to justify our shared accommodation in the house of the Minister of Canadian Heritage.

In *The Russian Album* Michael Ignatieff, himself both a historian and a novelist notes that:

historians are supposed to believe that they can transport themselves in time to recapture experience swept away by the death of earlier generations. In even the most rigorous scientific history, there is a resurrectionary hope at work, a faith in the power of imagination and empathy to vault the gulf of time. To do their work, historians have to believe that knowledge can consummate desire — that our dull and patient immersion in the records of the past can ultimately satisfy our desire to master time's losses. The historical imagination emerges from loss, dispossession and confinement, the same experiences which make for

exile and migration. It is roused when the past can no longer be taken for granted as a felt tradition or when the past has become a burden from which the present seeks emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this reference to "records of the past" includes material culture (Ignatieff himself identifies a number of salient family objects in the book, chief among them, of course, the album, with its evocative images). Indeed, as anyone who treasures a family heirloom knows, objects are often the most powerful and valued reminders of past relationships and events (and what is culture if not concerned with the memory of relationships and events?). Ignatieff's moving definition of the historian's aspirations applies also to history museums as public institutions dedicated to collective memory; the memory inherent in material culture.

How then can the national arts media ignore the collection, study and interpretation of historical objects? How, if we take Michael Ignatieff's words and ideas seriously, can the media maintain a prejudice in favour of art galleries and against history museums, in favour of the artistic and against the historical imaginations? Are they not really two sides of the same coin?

To embark on a sermon preaching the value of history is perhaps to risk becoming lost in a fog of clichés. Suffice it to say that historical consciousness is a necessary and essential component of personal, cultural and national identity. History museums promote this consciousness among the general public and in recognition of this service they receive public funding. This functional and financial link to the public is significant, for just as museums must serve the public, it is equally the responsibility of the media to monitor and measure their activities according to the appropriate cultural and educational criteria. The absence of regular, well-informed national coverage seriously limits history museums in their efforts to promote their social function and value at a time when the need for increased support, both public and private, is particularly acute. If this remains unchanged, the result will surely be a diminishment of culture, however the media may choose to define it.

Garth Wilson,  
English Language Review Editor

#### NOTE

1. Michael Ignatieff, *The Russian Album* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 5.