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Phillips, Ruth B. (Ruth Bliss), 1945-

The Canadian Historical Review, Volume 86, Number 1, March 2005, pp. 83-110 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

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CHR Forum

Re-placing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age

RUTH B. PHILLIPS

The very existence of an object in a museum demonstrates that the past (and what we have made of it and in it) does not die.¹

An object is best viewed as indicative of process, rather than static relations, and this process is ongoing in museums as elsewhere, so that there is a series of continuous social relations surrounding the object connecting ‘field’ and ‘museums.’²

INTRODUCTION: THE SECOND MUSEUM AGE

The beginning of the twenty-first century is turning out to be a second ‘museum age.’ In Canada, as elsewhere, new museums are being created, and older ones – the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the National War Museum, and the UBC Museum of Anthropology, to name just a few – are gearing up for major expansions that are financed by an unprecedented investment of public and private funds. Directly or indirectly these museums are all products of the first ‘museum age,’ a period identified by Smithsonian anthropologist William Sturtevant as lasting from about 1840 to 1920, during which time the public museum became a normative institution of Western modernity.³

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In city after city across Europe, North America, and their colonies, imposing new buildings rose up, their monumentality and their architectural references to classical temples, medieval cathedrals, and contemporary legislative buildings clearly signalling their prestige and the Western intellectual traditions in which they were grounded. The mandate of these museums was encyclopedic, universalist, and democratic. They were expected to conduct advanced research on human and natural history and to expose that research to broad audiences through the creation of public exhibitions.

After the First World War, however, although the museum establishment continued to grow and evolve, the originary and organic bonds that linked academic disciplines to museums as sites of research and teaching began to erode as the mother disciplines – especially the social and natural sciences – moved away from the direct study of artifacts and specimens. In Canada, as elsewhere, many museums loosened or completely severed their structural links to the universities that had helped to give them birth. The situation began to reverse during the last two decades of the twentieth century under the combined momentum of post-colonial and post-structuralist critiques in the academic community, and political pressures for decolonization outside it. Together, these forces have dramatically raised the profile of museum-based research, radically altered the environment in which it is conducted, and stimulated the development of a range of new institutional practices. Material and visual culture are being re-theorized by scholars in anthropology,
history, art history, cultural studies, and new interdisciplinary fields of visual studies and material culture studies are being established.5

Yet despite these dynamic developments, the public is being invited to consider the grand new museum projects primarily as spectacles of architectural virtuosity, whose realization will bring major economic benefits to Canadian cities. Few of them appear to be informed or shaped by the intellectual energies unleashed during the past twenty years or by the social agendas that have achieved broad acceptance during the same period. Rather, I sense a dangerous disconnect between current academic and museological theory and practice, and museum planning.6 I want to argue here that the truly exciting and innovative potential of the second museum age lies in the advanced programs of socially responsible research and representation that they can support and embody. An invitation from the Canadian Historical Review to consider the museum as a site of historical practice is thus not only timely but urgent. If we are to realize the full potential of the resources that are suddenly being made available for the reinvention of the Canadian museum, it is essential that theory and practice come together.

Private and public collecting projects of an unprecedented scale were integral to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phase of museum

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building. They transformed the trickle of objects that had been flowing into Euro–North American collections from the time of contact into a flood tide, in the process emptying many Aboriginal communities of objects now viewed as critical to the continuity of ancestral traditions and local historical memory. These objects included natural history specimens, artifacts, works of art, documents, films, audio recordings, photographs, bodies, and body parts. Displaced from their original contexts and re-placed in museums, these things became, as Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett has argued, ‘objects of ethnography,’7 to which were assigned new meanings derived from evolutionist, scientific, historical, and aesthetic paradigms of Western knowledge. (Terms such as object, work of art, or specimen are, of course, themselves artifacts of these processes of detachment and fragmentation.) In late nineteenth-century terms, the exhibition of these objects projected ‘object lessons’ about universal patterns of human history across time and space.8

Colonial collections and the museums that have exercised curatorial authority over them have emerged as a key area of contestation in the post-colonial political activism of indigenous peoples. Nowhere has this been more true than in Canada, where the reform of museological practices was invested with particular urgency by a series of national controversies that arose during the 1980s and 1990s. The most comprehensive and influential of these debates developed around two large

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anthropology exhibits. The 1988 boycott of the Glenbow Museum’s The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples (1988) was initially called in support of the land claim of the Lubicon band of Cree, but rapidly expanded to encompass a comprehensive critique of power relations and representational practices that had been common to Western museums for much of the twentieth century. A year later, equally fierce debates erupted around the Royal Ontario Museum’s Into the Heart of Africa. In retrospect, the boycott of this exhibit seems to have been sparked as much by racial tensions in Toronto as by the content of the exhibition itself, which put forward a post-colonial critique of the colonial origins of the ROM’s African collections and the complicity of Victorian Canadians in the British imperial project. Though painful, both episodes were turning points for Canadian museology. The Spirit Sings controversy led directly to the formation of a national task force and to the formal articulation of a new, pluralist, museum ethos.

In the aftermath of these and several other related episodes of contestation, Canadian and US museums and Aboriginal people have established collaborative models of collections research and exhibition development based on respectful partnerships between museums and indigenous communities. These days, the lessons that objects teach in museums are accomplished not by fixing their positions within unitary sequences of temporal change and geographical variation, but by a post-structuralist recognition that objects are capable of generating multiple meanings through the interaction of their material traits with diverse individual subjects.

One of the topics addressed in the report of the Task Force on Museums and First Nations was the repatriation of museum objects. Its sponsors, the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations, ratified guidelines for the return of human remains, objects that had been illegally obtained, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. In addition, provisions for the return of ‘cultural property’

10 For an excellent case study, see Shelley Ruth Butler, Contested Representations: Into the Heart of Africa (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1999).
from national and provincial museums are part of the treaty process that was revived in the early 1990s. These processes have moved and will undoubtedly continue to move portions of museum collections out of museums and into private hands or community repositories, but it also seems clear that substantial numbers of objects will remain in museum custodianship and that much of what is returned will enter new museums or cultural centres established in Aboriginal communities. The number and scale of the building projects of the second museum age, not only in large cities but also in small communities, testify to the continuing desire for museum experiences of objects. Furthermore, since over half of Aboriginal people in Canada now live in cities, urban audiences are potentially Native as well as non-Native. I want, therefore, to bracket the subject of repatriation per se in the discussion that follows, and to focus on the ways in which new approaches to material and visual culture – with their promise of access to multi-vocal understandings of objects, and indeed object-ness – can inform the bricks-and-mortar containers we are building. I want also, however, to complicate what I see as a tendency in the new, revisionist approaches to material culture study to throw out the baby with the bathwater, and I will argue for the need to combine aspects of the older approaches with the new conceptualizations of objects.

Practices of historical research in the museum can be aligned along a spectrum that extends from empirical research to the conceptual analysis and theorization of historical process and representation. As a site of empirical practice, the museum operates as an object archive or repository, which makes available to researchers unique collections that can lead to the development of data not retrievable from other sources. Such research requires specialized skills of description, technical and stylistic analysis, documentation, and attribution. In a second sense, however, museums today function as interactive theatres where spectacles are produced and staged for increasingly diverse audiences. Here practice refers to the honing of representational skills through repeated application and has significations of preparation, rehearsal, and performance. The measure of success is the efficacy of the exhibits and other programs as gauged by their reception by different publics in specific times and places. The controversies that periodically erupt around museum exhibitions – though feared by museum professionals and sensationalized by the press – offer valuable opportunities for research into these performative and public dimensions of professional practice. As a space in which political and social conflicts that have a much wider resonance can be acted out in microcosm, the museum as theatre offers a site where cultural processes and divergent constructions of the past can be
observed and where the reception of particular historical representations can be studied.12

In the following pages I will consider the museum first as a repository and then as a theatre. I will argue that access to museum collections and the application of classic approaches to material culture study are more necessary today than ever, but that they must be practised in relation to new theorizations of materiality and visuality. I will also argue for the value of the museum as a performative space in which to develop new practices that meet the ethical, political, and representational challenges posed by pluralism. Finally, in response to the challenges posed by the second museum age, I will offer the concept developed by the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology (MoA) for the renewal of its research infrastructure. In the pages that follow, I take advantage of the format of a CHR Forum essay to use my own experiences as a traveller between academic and museum worlds – an art historian whose preserve has most often been the anthropology museum, and an academic who has recently completed a term as a museum director – as points of departure for these arguments. I will draw most of my examples from the milieu I know best: museums of art and anthropology and issues specific to the First Nations.

THE MUSEUM AS REPOSITORY (1): SEARCHING FOR CHIEF HIAWATHA

I am in a featureless storage building in a warehouse district of Liverpool. An array of objects is spread out on tables in front of me, pulled from the shelves in response to my request to see the First Nations objects from northeastern North America in the Liverpool Museum’s collection. The still bright colours of the objects sparkle against the grey walls and the long rows of metal storage cabinets. From the eighteenth century there are moccasins, bags, and knife sheaths, some encrusted

12 Although the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 controversial exhibition Primitivism and 20th-Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern is usually identified as the starting point for critiques of appropriation, Canada had begun to work through similar debates almost twenty years earlier during the planning for Expo 67. As I have argued elsewhere, the political struggles within the Department of Indian Affairs that resulted in the building of a separate Indians of Canada Pavilion not only foreshadowed later conflicts, but also produced a radically innovative exhibition, the first major show to be controlled by Aboriginal people and to tell history from a First Nations perspective. See my ‘Show times: De-celebrating the Canadian nation, De-colonising the Canadian Museum, 1967–92.’ in Making History Memorable: Past and Present in Settler Colonialism, ed. Annie E. Coombes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).
with porcupine quills densely woven into intricate, endlessly varied geometric patterns, others embroidered with delicate garlands of leaves and flowers in the demanding medium of moosehair embroidery. From the nineteenth century there are beaded hats and bags made for Victorian tourists at Niagara Falls, their shapes echoing the neo-gothic contours of the ‘chatelaine’ bags found in the fashion plates of women’s magazines and the Glengarry bonnets made fashionable by Queen Victoria. From the early twentieth century there is a fine gustoweh headdress, a large silver gorget, and a turtle-shell rattle – a set of objects that signifies the authority of an Iroquois political or spiritual leader.

I am here on a fishing expedition, one of many I have undertaken over the past twenty-five years in museums from Russia to New Zealand in search of objects long thought of as pieces of a kind of giant jigsaw puzzle of Great Lakes artistic traditions. Ethnographic objects from North America have been dispersed all over the world in the course of the past three centuries through global flows of travel, tourism, and ethnographic collecting. During the first museum age, curators dreamed of finishing the puzzle – of filling all the spaces in their comprehensive taxonomic chart of material culture to reveal specific and general histories of evolution and cultural diffusion. No one today, however, thinks that the puzzle can be completed, because we have come to understand that the picture that museum collections were designed to form during the first museum age was drawn from the perspective of the colonizer and can admit the other vantage points that are important to us today only partially and with difficulty. I agree with Richard White that ‘historians make maps of vanished countries. There are only the maps; the past is gone and cannot be recreated.’ Why, then, am I here? Are there still important things to be learned by surveying and closely studying such collections?

The Liverpool Museum collection illustrates the historical contingency and partiality of ethnographic collections with a particular poignancy, since much of it was destroyed by bombs during the Second World War. Yet among these objects are marvels of taste and design, examples of virtuoso technical mastery, and labours of love. They are survivors twice over, and they insist on their own importance. The oldest objects come from the milieu that White has described as the ‘middle ground,’ a social world peopled by refugees, survivors of violence and demographic

catastrophe imaginable only through images of the contemporary horrors of Sierra Leone, Rwanda, or AIDS-ridden southern Africa. Yet they also attest to the creativity and inventiveness necessitated by the historical interdependence of the diverse peoples who inhabited the pays d’en haut. Does this material deposit of the northeastern contact zone offer a way of ‘facing east’ – of telling history from the point of view of indigenous peoples that Daniel Richter has recently urged on us? What more fundamental questions might be answered by meditating on the relationship between the aesthetic refinement and invention they display and the experiences of social and political dysfunction lived by their makers?

The farther back one goes in such collections, the more the lack of documentation frustrates attempts to solve basic problems of attribution. For this reason I am excited to find an old label bearing the name ‘Master D. Cotman’ on a small heart-shaped pincushion of birchbark, moosehair, and silk that was obtained by transfer from the Norwich Castle Museum. On the basis of earlier research I conclude that this pincushion was almost certainly made during the late eighteenth century by a nun in a Quebec convent for sale to a British traveller or army officer. The label seems to illuminate not the lives of the Wendat living near Quebec City (to whom such eighteenth-century objects were long attributed), but rather the life of a young boy living in East Anglia whose education about a New World of strange plants and peoples was fostered by the gift of a father, uncle, or brother influenced by Enlightenment philosophical histories.

The Iroquois beaded hats and purses from the Victorian period are old friends. In the early 1980s, when I began to study Great Lakes collections, objects like these, fashioned into long-outmoded European shapes ornamented with floral motifs, were relegated to the limbo of the acculturated, the impure, and the ‘degenerate.’ Yet research for a recent exhibition conducted together with colleagues from Kahnawake, Tuscarora, and several Canadian and American museums has radically

changed this assessment.\textsuperscript{7} The academics on the curatorial team drew on recent theories of cultural translation and hybridity to rethink older judgements of authenticity.\textsuperscript{18} A combination of archival research and comparative study of museum collections yielded rough chronologies of stylistic development and understandings of the borrowings and exchanges between Native and non-Native needlewomen that had produced the characteristic Iroquois forms. Equally important, consultations with groups of contemporary Iroquois beadworkers in museum storerooms in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto generated rich information about the economic factors, histories of family production, cosmological associations of particular motifs, and individual creative processes that had helped to shape each example.

The curator at Liverpool, Joanna Ostapkowicz, is particularly interested in the Iroquois headdress, rattle, and gorget, which are recorded as having been given to the museum by a man named Chief Hiawatha from the Six Nations reserve, who visited Liverpool around the time of the First World War. She is researching them for a new permanent installation that will counteract still widespread stereotypes of Native North Americans and educate the public about the local specificity and performative aspects of modern First Nations identities. Was Chief Hiawatha a travelling entertainer, or a soldier? What does the fineness of these objects – and their deposit in an English museum – say about the survival of traditional Iroquois artistry and spirituality during the period when assimilationist pressures were at their highest? The period that the inquiry will explore is well adapted to oral history research, and I am optimistic that more will be learnt about the donor from newspaper archives and contemporary Six Nations people.

A few of the pieces on the table reflect a past tendency to link indigenous and folk arts, both defined as ‘traditional’ within modernist discourses. The two carved and engraved powder horns on the table are not, in fact, Native made, but rather the work of non-Native, semi-professional folk artists. One, engraved with a bird’s-eye view of eighteenth-century Havana, belongs to a genre of eighteenth-century military sou-

\textsuperscript{7} The exhibition, Across Borders: Beadwork in Iroquois Life, was organized by the McCord Museum of Canadian History in collaboration with the Castellani Art Gallery of Niagara University. My co-curators were Kanatakta, Kate Koperski, Moira McCaffrey, Trudy Nicks, Sandra Olsen, and Jolene Rickard.

The other, deeply carved with compass work designs, resembles the decorative English woodcarving known as treen. Similarly, two boxes inlaid with bird quills are examples of a central European folk art tradition. Such juxtapositions and occasional confusions raise interesting questions about the classification systems we have inherited from an earlier era and problematise the continuing need, embedded in the deep structure of the museum system, to assign objects to mutually exclusive collections of ‘History,’ ‘Ethnology,’ ‘Art,’ or ‘Folk Culture.’ Considered in terms of newer constructs of colonial contact zones and transculturation, there are other ways in which these objects are part of the same historical world. Like the convent-made birchbark pincushion and the Iroquois beaded Glengarry bonnet, the majority of the objects spread out on the table are products of dialogic processes and intercultural exchanges among diverse visual and material traditions. The compass work on the powder horn was designed with the same manufactured instruments used by the Mi’kmaq artist who made the two quillwork and birchbark chair seats that lie near it on the table, destined to ornament chairs in a Victorian parlour. The soldier who bought the second powder horn was part of the British expeditionary force that occupied Havana in 1762 after service in North America during the Seven Years War, and he may well have served alongside Aboriginal warriors and/or have collected Indian curios. (A contemporary powder horn collected at Lake George is attached to an Iroquois moosehair embroidered strap.) Rather than facilitating an inquiry into unique stylistic characteristics or describing patterns of historical diffusion from bounded and stable communities, then, this assemblage of objects exhibits the mobility and transmutability produced by the lively traffic in concepts of the folk, Indianness, and Europeanness that was conducted in the Great Lakes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through visual and material exchanges.

22 The powder horn is dated 1758 and is in the United Services Museum, Edinburgh (unnumbered).
And it also reveals the evolutionist and dialectical habits of Western thought that have constructed a structural opposition between ‘traditional’ societies (‘primitive,’ ‘folk,’ or ‘ethnographic’) and those considered ‘historical’ and ‘modern.’

We can begin to address these interesting questions, however, only after applying traditional techniques of connoisseurship and archival research that allow us to identify the provenance of the objects. This basic research is still at a very preliminary stage for the majority of Native North American museum objects, yet the questions of style and periodization that it illuminates have an importance that goes beyond the purely academic. They have been rendered urgent by First Nations movements of cultural renewal and claims for the repatriation of museum objects, both of which depend on the ability to establish local histories of production, use, and exchange. A well-known Northwest Coast artist and community leader with a degree in anthropology once remarked, for example, that if museums cannot provide basic information about the attribution of objects in their collections, they have no right to continue as custodians. In this sense, collections-based research and the sharing of its results with originating communities is itself a form of repatriation, as was affirmed several years ago when the UBC Museum of Anthropology organized a gathering of the descendants of famed Haida carver Charles Edenshaw (1839–1920) in connection with a small exhibit of his work in the museum’s collection. The ability to identify Edenshaw’s oeuvre was the result of years of painstaking curatorial research and the application of traditional techniques of stylistic analysis and connoisseurship. The more than sixty members of the Edenshaw family who gathered to hear museum curators present Edenshaw works in their collections regarded the event as a restoration of knowledge of lineage history to which they have a right. Such knowledge is highly important to the traditional Haida system of historical narrative and inherited privilege. Other recent examples can be cited, such as the work of curator Bill McLennan and Haisla artist Lyle Wilson in recovering previously unknown painted house-front designs from now-demolished Northwest Coast houses through stylistic analysis and photographic research, or the work of Robin Wright and Haida consultants that has resulted in the identification of museum objects with named late-nineteenth century Haida artists, or the work of Janet Berlo

23 Museum of Anthropology curators Rosa Ho, Bill McLennan, and Karen Duffek organized the event on 29 August 1998 with the participation of Robin Wright from the University of Washington’s Burke Museum and Martha Black from the Royal British Columbia Museum.
Techniques of connoisseurship and material and visual analysis developed within art history and anthropology, though they have come to be associated with old-fashioned elitist and positivist paradigms of these disciplines, are necessary elements of practice in the museum-as-repository. They can open mute objects to the possibility of meaning, even in the absence of documents. For more historically remote objects, for which there are no continuously remembered traditions of interpretation, comparative art historical methods of stylistic and iconographic analysis can reveal semiotic references or signifi catory intents in abstract motifs that have been regarded as merely decorative. The progress of this research depends both on the continuing availability of collections and multiple examples, and on the availability of training in the identifi cation of historical techniques, materials, and styles. We will need to reverse the progressive deskilling that has resulted from anthropology’s turn away from material culture study and art history’s turn away from connoisseurship during the second half of the twentieth century. It will also be necessary to counter the suspicion of material culture study still harboured by many anthropologists.

The case for the value of collaborative, museum-based material culture research conducted both by academically trained researchers and by community experts needs to be made, then, to two sets of potential critics, one indigenous and the other academic. The application of art historical interpretive techniques can lead to the ability to recognize

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meaning in what has been regarded as opaque, decorative, and meaningless, and, more broadly, to the acknowledgment of the intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual depth of indigenous traditions. But we must also recognize that, as the venerable art historical tradition of iconology teaches, interpretation always changes over time. As Christopher Tilley has pointed out, this is also one of the most important contributions of hermeneutic theory to the study of material culture. Quoting Gadamer’s statement that ‘interpretation is, in effect, always a process of reinterpretation, something which takes place from the vantage point of the present, of the here and now,’ Tilley writes,

This, for Gadamer, is an ontological maxim that cannot be questioned. It is part of the nature of human existence and by no means implies that we move inexorably between a position in which we realize that the text has no ultimate, fully grounded or certain meaning to one in which any meaning is claimed to be as good as any other, a hyperrelativism in which there is no way of choosing between one interpretation and another.28

At the end of my day in the Liverpool Museum’s storeroom I am moved by an irresistible urge to break the rules, to take off my white gloves and touch the velvety surface of the eighteenth-century deerskin moccasins. I pick them up, and a delicate tinkling ruffles the dead air of the storeroom. Touch and sound pull other kinds of historical memories out of the object, memories to which it provides unique access – how it felt to wear the butter-soft hides tanned with such consummate skill by eighteenth-century Anishnabe women, how it sounded to walk and dance in them. The primary meanings of these moccasins cannot be accessed through the static contemplation of their formal attributes and decorative motifs, but rather by imagining them in motion, activated by sound and movement, as Gerald McMaster showed us several years ago when he installed dozens of pairs of moccasins from the National Museum of the American Indian’s collection in a spiral, their toes and heels bent and tilted into the positions of dancing feet.29 The new models

29 The installation was part of All Roads Are Good, which opened in 1991 at the museum’s Custom’s House venue in New York City. See National Museum of the American Indian, All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Art (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).
of partnership and collaboration that have become normative in Canadian museums are creating ever more opportunities for Aboriginal intervention into the traditional orientation of the Western museum toward visual inspection and experience. When an elder lifts up a moccasin or a mask in a museum storeroom and begins to sing a song or recount a story, we realize the unique potential of museum objects to trigger memories of and offer access to aesthetic and cognitive systems that are not, in the first instance, visual, but have to do, rather, with hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting.

THE MUSEUM AS REPOSITORY (2): OF SEWING MACHINES
SNOWMOBILES, AND BRASS KETTLES

Down the street from my former house in Vancouver is the city’s oldest building, once the company store of the old Hastings Mill. It is now a little museum that displays the collections of the Native Daughters of British Columbia.30 Crowded in among the Victorian carriage, the stone axes and arrowheads, the Salish baskets, and the old wedding dresses, are several antique sewing machines. One bears the label

This old sewing machine has travelled far and at last reached the beautiful shores of the Pacific Ocean. It is one of the very first C. Raymond machines put on the market and was bought by my mother, Mrs Donald Matheson, 85 years ago (1868) in Milverton, Ontario. Then it was shipped to Selkirk, Manitoba. From there by boat to Fisher Bay on Lake Winnipeg, then back to Selkirk in 1888. After a number of years in Saskatchewan, it was sent to Vancouver in 1949. Now, in the Old Hastings Mill Store building, which stands as a monument of the past, it at last comes to rest, its work well done. Related by Mrs M. Rowland, June 15th, 1953.

A second machine’s label reads,

Sewing Machine Donated By: Mrs Mary Landrigan to the Native Daughters of BC, Post #1. This sewing machine manufactured by Grover and Baker was one of three which came around Cape Horne from England in 1867, purchased by

Sir James Douglas. One was for his wife; another for his daughter Mrs Dallas and the third purchased by Adam Grant-Horne, who at the time was Hudson Bay Factor at Fort Simpson and Great Grand Parents of Mrs Mary Landrigan.

Several hundred miles to the north, at Alert Bay off the coast of Vancouver Island, another sewing machine is exhibited in the Umista Cultural Centre, which serves several Kwakwaka’wakw bands. It sits between a glass case containing traditional Northwest Coast objects and another case that displays a ceremonial Chilkat blanket. Its label reads,


And in Havana, Cuba, a fourth sewing machine occupies a corner in a room in the Museum of the Revolution. The visitor encounters it after having walked through numerous galleries that present a detailed chronology of the Cuban revolution through the testimony of different kinds of artifacts – guns, old newspaper photographs, letters, printed manifestos, and uniforms stained with blood. The machine’s label reads, in English and Spanish: ‘Singer sewing machine that belonged to Elena Rodriguez de Rey, mother of revolutionary Melba Hernandez. It was used to tailor oversized uniforms like those of Fidel and Gildo Fleitas López.’

The sewing machine is an iconic object of industrial modernity. When domestic machines came on to the market in the mid-1850s, as one historical study explains, they rapidly achieved ‘extreme popularity and desirability ... as a consumer product.’ Like the beached piano in the eponymous film about nineteenth-century New Zealand, sewing machines travelled throughout the empire, landing in places far from the factories that produced them and acquiring new and local meanings. In the Hastings Mill Museum the sewing machines become projections and personifications of the travels of the early white settlers of British
Columbia, embodiments of their heroic deeds, and signs of the systems of patriarchy, social status, and commodity culture they brought with them. The presence of a sewing machine in the exhibits of the Umista Cultural Centre, in contrast, is probably surprising for non-Native visitors conditioned by standard ethnographic exhibitions to expect to see in museums devoted to First Nations cultures only ‘authentic’ handmade artifacts that illustrate indigenous technologies. The incompatibility of this construct of authenticity with objects like sewing machines was clearly stated in 1911 by Edward Sapir in his call for the establishment of research collections at the newly founded National Museum of Canada. ‘Now or never is the time in which to collect from the natives what is still available for study,’ he wrote, for, ‘with the increasing material prosperity and industrial development of Canada the demoralization or civilization of the Indians will be going on at an ever increasing rate.’

As James Clifford has shown, the Umista displays have a different purpose. They are structured to commemorate a history of colonial oppression and are governed by Kwakwaka’wakw traditions for the display of objects. Founded to house the collection of potlatch regalia illegally confiscated in 1923 and returned by the National Museum of Canada sixty years later, the centre’s installations order objects in a manner similar to the potlatches for which they were originally made and, as in potlatches, their display affirms and validates the status of high-ranking families. The genealogical information featured in the sewing machine’s label establishes that its owner is an ancestor of prominent contemporary community leaders and artists and therefore serves the same purpose. (That the label does not mention that Anisalaga was also the mother of Franz Boas’s collaborator George Hunt, a man illustrious in the non-Native world, is further evidence that the museum’s primary references are local.) As one of the most valuable objects given away at nineteenth-century potlatches, the sewing machine is appropri-

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ately positioned next to the Chilkat blanket (a traditional sign of high rank). The installation assimilates an exotic Western object to a traditional context of material display.\textsuperscript{36} References to the specific roles played by women in nineteenth-century Kwakwaka’wakw and Canadian societies are embedded in all three displays, but at the Museum of the Revolution in Havana the role of women as sewers becomes a primary referent. With great economy the label suggests at once a characteristic contribution of women to the revolution and the heroic scale of two prominent male revolutionaries whose physical stature required industrial-strength sewing.

The underlying commodity culture of industrial modernity also informs all three of these displays, creating unexpected interconnections among peoples who have in recent years frequently stood in confrontational relationships to each other. In Cuba an object manufactured by a major American corporation is recruited to the service of a communist cause. Like the vintage cars that cruise the streets of Havana, it reminds the visitor of the shared material culture that shapes the lives of peoples around the globe in ways that are often more similar than different. In both the Hastings Mill Museum and the Umista Cultural Centre the sewing machine is deployed to signal prestigious ancestry and social rank (and both use references to the service of ancestors in the Hudson’s Bay Company for the same purpose). Manufactured objects, circulated globally through immigration and trade, provided a common material language in the nineteenth century as they do today. These objects became signs with widely understood references to social status, gender, and value, a kind of Esperanto of materiality that enables rough forms of cross-cultural translation. Some years ago, while giving a tour of the Royal Ontario Museum’s ethnology storage to my students, curator Ken Lister neatly indicated the slippage between inherited museum practices and these global experiences of modernity when he pointed out that if his museum were to accurately represent the technology of the twentieth-century Inuit, it would have to collect snowmobiles. Although I don’t know of any museums that have done so, the common modernity of peoples is increasingly appearing in exhibitions.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} The label of the Chilkat blanket acknowledges its non-Native donor, Vancouver art collector Lorne Balshine, who returned it to Alert Bay because he felt that ‘it belonged in its right place with the rightful owners.’

\textsuperscript{37} In 1988, for example, during the Preserving Our Heritage conference held at Carleton University that led to the establishment of the national Task Force on Museums and First Nations, Aboriginal representatives held up for special praise the British Museum’s Living Arctic exhibit, which featured tableaus of contemporary Inuit life, complete with televisions and computers. See \textit{The Living Arctic: Hunters of}
Problems of transcultural circulation, modernity, and authenticity are addressed by recent theory that seeks to replace the older model of acculturation with the more dynamic and diachronic tracing of the ‘cultural biographies’ of objects advocated by Igor Kopytoff. Laurier Turgeon’s deft and elegant essay on the brass kettles that figured so significantly in the early contact-period fur trade illustrates the value of this approach. By following ‘the trajectories of objects to find out how they are used in the shaping of group identities,’ Turgeon shows how the brass kettle was transformed by seventeenth-century northeastern Natives to serve both pre-contact purposes and the new needs that emerged from contact with Europeans. Critically, his analysis comprehends the eventual re-appropriation of the brass kettle by museum archaeologists. ‘Unearthed, inventoried, coded, classified, and placed elsewhere for safekeeping,’ he writes, ‘it becomes part of a new order and acquires new meanings.’ In contrast to older approaches that positioned the object as a self-contained information packet from which a limited range of data could be retrieved, Turgeon’s study exemplifies the new focus of material culture study on the cultural biographies of objects and the transformations of their meanings as they circulate through different cultures, local and academic.

The study of objects can yield insights into histories of social relationship because objects are both solid and porous. Their autonomous solidity is the necessary condition of the transaction, and their porosity of the translation. As Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles point out, the metaphors used by recent theorists – biography, entanglement, agency – express active notions of influence, movement, and mutability. They caution that ‘the physical presence of objects makes them appear direct representatives of the past in the present, but existing now in new contexts they are objects with new significances. These significant others are significant in ways we make them to a large extent.’ In their discussion of collections from New Guinea the authors attend in particular to the operation of objects in colonial contexts and to the value of colonial collections as objects of contemporary study. They argue compel-

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40 Ibid., 21.
41 Gosden and Knowles, Collecting Colonialism, 22.
42 Ibid., 23.
lingly for the value of studying the ‘chaines operatoires’ of objects that link people belonging to different social groups within colonial societies and to the present through the movements of objects through museums. The task they set for themselves serves as a good statement of the kinds of problems museum-based material culture research is now addressing.

We shall show how chains of action involving production, exchange and use linked together objects and people stretching from New Guinea to museums. Which objects were collected, their processes of collection, and their subsequent use in a museum context can only be understood against the background of the originating set of relations in New Guinea. Looking back in time, we can now use museum objects, shaped as they were by the sets of aesthetic and social relations in New Guinea, to reflect back on those relations and their relations through time.43

THE MUSEUM AS THEATRE

It is a day in February 2000. The UBC Museum of Anthropology has agreed to a request from the Union of BC Indian Chiefs to lend its Great Hall – a soaring, majestic, glass and concrete walled space that represents Arthur Erickson’s modernist reinterpretation of traditional Northwest Coast post-and-beam wooden architecture – as a venue for a large conference on the protection of traditional indigenous knowledge.44 A panel is taking place on the repatriation of cultural artifacts, and the large audience has just listened to Kim Recalma Clutesi, who represents the Numbalees Cultural Society of the Cape Mudge Band of Kwakwaka’wakw, make a powerful and impassioned speech. The society administers the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Centre, built, like the Umista Cultural Centre, with federal funds in fulfillment of the government’s requirement that the community’s share of the repatriated Kwakwaka’wakw potlatch treasures be housed in museums.

Clutesi has argued that the existence at Cape Mudge of a public museum that labels and interprets objects according to standard ethnographic practices has destroyed traditional Kwakwaka’wakw structures of authority and systems of knowledge management. It has intervened, she says, in a traditional system according to which authority over the display and interpretation of important cultural artifacts is assigned to individu-

43 Ibid., 22.
44 The session was part of Protecting Knowledge: Traditional Rights in the New Millennium, organized by the Union of the BC Indian Chiefs, held at the University of British Columbia, 24 February 2000.
als who have inherited rights to the knowledge and who have been selected by elders to receive traditional knowledge. The museum, in contrast, exposes and explains things and statements that would in former times have been seen only in the controlled conditions of a potlatch, giving the young the idea that they ‘know it all’ and undermining the authority of the respected hereditary elders like the three who sit by her side, Dora Siwid Cook, Daisy Sewid Smith, and Chief Adam Dick.

A week earlier, Museum of Anthropology staff had agreed to Clutesi’s request to make available for her presentation a ceremonial Kwakwaka’wakw ‘copper’ and a copper fragment from its collection. Coppers are the most valued possessions of high-ranking Northwest Coast families. When presented or given away at potlatches they embody enormous amounts of wealth. When purposely destroyed in public rituals by the cutting away of a panel with a ceremonial copper cutting knife, they offer the most aggressive possible challenge to a rival. The power of this act is such that, when the communal Big House was built at Alert Bay in the 1960s, providing the first traditionally designed venue for ceremonial events in a Northwest Coast community since the early twentieth century, the assembled chiefs announced publicly that there would be no more breaking of coppers in the potlatches that would take place there. Breaking a copper, they said at the time, is like wishing somebody dead.45

After Clutesi finishes, she announces that Chief Adam Dick, a man whose family had managed to prevent him from being sent to residential school and whom they had chosen to receive the traditional training and knowledge appropriate to his rank, will now perform the rarely seen ceremony of the breaking of a copper. She reiterates that the performance of this ritual is the ultimate insult that a Kwakwaka’wakw leader can offer to a rival and states that Chief Dick is breaking the copper on the government of Canada, the province of British Columbia, and the museums to challenge them to deal with the outstanding issues of repatriation.

I find it hard to convey the effect of the Kwakwala oration Chief Dick then delivered. I sat in my chair, watching him hold up the copper and bring his ‘copper breaker’ knife toward it, thinking that he would actually cut off one of its panels – certainly the ultimate crime against a museum object – and wondering if, as the director of the museum, I should do something. And I remember thinking in the next instant that I would not, because if Chief Dick were actually to alter the state of the object, its

materiality would then reflect a new layer of history, one imbricated in the processes of decolonization that is altering many traditions of museum practice, including paradigms of conservation and preservation.46 But Chief Dick mimed the action, holding aloft the already broken panel from our collection. Although he left the museum’s copper intact, he left his auditors nonetheless shaken and moved – permanently, I think – by the sense of a narrow escape and by the unforgettable power of his action and his words.

I have come to think of performances such as this as rehearsals, the acting out of ‘real’ political dynamics in the museum-as-theatre. The auditors that day were students, Aboriginal activists and cultural workers, survivors of residential schools, and professors of law, history, art history, and anthropology. They would go off and lobby governments, add to websites, write scholarly articles for journals, and prepare briefs to the United Nations forum on indigenous peoples. Eventually some of these writings would be consulted by policy makers at Heritage Canada, journalists, and treaty negotiators, and assigned as readings to university students. Over time these accumulated actions and reactions would cause shifts in public opinion and changes in institutions, laws, and professional practices. The boycotts and controversies that boil up around museum exhibitions are also ‘rehearsals.’ In 1988 the decisions of the Assembly of First Nations to divert time and funds to support the boycott of The Spirit Sings and the conference that led to the Task Force on Museums and First Nations were clearly interventionist and strategic. A federal election was imminent, and the entrenchment of Aboriginal sovereignty was on the table. As Chief Adam Dick’s performance suggests, museums are useful stand-ins and convenient surrogates for governments that are much harder to engage directly. In this context the museum offers a different kind of site for historical practice, a performative space in which it is possible to observe and analyse the ways in which people think about the past and negotiate its legacy in the present.

When the copper lent to Chief Adam Dick was returned, it was put back with other Kwakwaka’wakw coppers in the museum’s collection in a glass-fronted case in the publicly accessible ‘Research Collections’ area where any visitor could see it. The creation of this ‘open’ or ‘visible’ storage was an epoch-making innovation introduced in 1976 when the Museum of Anthropology moved from crowded rooms in the library basement to the new Erickson building. According to the often-told story, the concept was the result of fraught discussions about how to provide

differential levels of collections access for faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates. The breakthrough came when the planners realized they could circumvent these hierarchies by placing all the objects that could safely be exposed to light in glass-fronted storage cases and Plexiglas-topped drawers in the public area of the museum, accessible to everyone.47 In the years since, open storage has been much imitated by other museums in Canada and around the world. Yet, at the same time, the practical limitations and conceptual problems posed by the current system have become increasingly evident. The glass cases allow only partial views of the objects, and the books of computer printouts provide only minimal information. Open storage also effectively puts on display and exposes to critique the standard museum practices of classification by culture area and object type (all Salish baskets together, all Kwakwa’ka’wakw coppers together), practices that are themselves artifacts of Euro-centric and cultural evolutionist premises. Furthermore, the privileging of visual experience and the assignment of music, oratory, storytelling, dance, lineage histories, and other expressive forms to the discrete modes of inquiry that are imposed by the Western academic system inhibit the recovery of the more holistic understandings of the role of the material object in indigenous culture that are primary for community members.

The new models of collaboration and the ethics of respect for difference that have become established in Canadian museums during the past few years are hard-won achievements, the products of difficult and patient negotiation on the part of community partners and of passionate commitment on the part of museum professionals. These new practices, furthermore, reflect ideologies and values that have been broadly articulated in contemporary Canadian society. As Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin recently affirmed, ‘a universalized ethic of respect and accommodation’ and ‘a commitment to respect for all kinds of difference in an unknowable future’ are now ‘immutable aspects of our Country’s identity.’48 Yet more often than not, the fabric of our museum buildings and the structure of our research spaces make such accommodation difficult. As Clutesi and Chief Dick made clear, for example, the concepts of openness, universality, and freedom of information that are intrinsic

to the Western academy can conflict with the traditions of objecthood belonging to originating communities. These kinds of contradictions and conflicts ultimately lead us, of course, far beyond the walls of the museum building into larger arenas of negotiation. The understandings developed within the museum, however, can make these broader interactions more positive and constructive. Performances of identity politics may also seem to be very far from the other kinds of practices of technical description and object identification that I have discussed in this essay, but the distance between the two kinds of practices is no greater than the walk from the museum storeroom to the public gallery. They are integrally connected, mutually illuminating, and equally necessary to a successful politics of the museum.

THE MUSEUM OF THE SECOND MUSEUM AGE: TOWARD A NEW MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY

It is the winter of 2000. I am trying hard to sell the overworked staff of the Museum of Anthropology on the idea that we should develop an application to a huge new federal fund for the rebuilding of research infrastructure in Canadian universities and non-profit institutions, the Canada Foundation for Innovation, as a way of relieving the increasingly difficult physical conditions in which they work. Although no large grant has yet been given to a social science or humanities project, I have come to think that our needs for new research facilities might be turned into a successful grant proposal. The staff are understandably reluctant to take on the immense effort involved and are doubtful that we will be able to persuade UBC and the CFI of the importance and productivity of the research we do – or that it will be considered ‘research’ at all in a culture dominated by science and technology. We also wonder whether we will be able to raise the tens of thousands of dollars needed to develop the application from the university and various provincial funds also oriented to science and technology.

We decide to try and are heartened by the university’s financial and moral support. For months we think hard about what ‘innovation’ in museum research means in 2000, in comparison to what it meant in 1976. We convene a community advisory committee composed of representatives from different Lower Mainland cultural communities and First Nations and several academic disciplines. We talk to computer scientists and other futurists. We revisit our own traditions and our institutional experience across these past twenty-five years that have seen so much change in museum practices and ways of doing research. The moment of clarity comes when we realize two things. First, the locus of
‘innovation’ has been in front of us all along in the new collaborative and multivocal models of research with community partners that MoA has helped to pioneer. Second, we realize that although new technologies have the capacity to revolutionize access to and research on museum collections, the key applications have not yet been developed. We will base our grant application on the need to create two integrated kinds of infrastructure: one in real space and one in virtual space. First, we will provide for the expansion and redesign of our building specifically to support collaborative research with originating communities. Second, we will provide for the creation of an electronic network that will extend access to collections even more radically than did the 1976 plan for on-site open storage. It will reach beyond the walls of the building into First Nations communities and link them with each other and with museum and academic research partners. In April 2002 we receive the news that the CFI has awarded us a major grant from its Innovation fund, the second-largest given that year nationwide.49

The standard work spaces of contemporary museums – the laboratory-like research rooms, the warehouse-like storages, the security systems and the uniformed guards – are alienating and intimidating for many non-traditional researchers. Most are clinical and disrespectful spaces in which to spend time with objects that are spiritually powerful and resonant with family and community history. The architect of the new Museum of Anthropology will be briefed to work with academics, museum professionals, and community users to create research and storage spaces that are welcoming and adapted to their diverse needs.50

The shapes and furnishings of the new research rooms will need to accommodate culturally different styles of teaching, learning, and transmitting knowledge. The research rooms will be integrated with open storage to further facilitate access, and they will be sized to accommodate not only individual researchers, but also the larger interdisciplinary and collaborative research teams that increasingly use the museum.

The design of the new open-storage cases will also be more flexible, providing the possibility of grouping and storing objects not only according to Western classificatory schemes, but also to those of the originating communities – by maker, lineage group, or village, for example.

49 The CFI grant was 17.1 million dollars, representing 40 per cent of the cost to be matched by a further 40 per cent from the British Columbia Knowledge Development Fund and 20 per cent from UBC.

50 The Cultural Resources Centre of the Smithsonian Institution’s Native-run National Museum of the American Indian provides an important and pioneering model that is one of the inspirations for MoA’s plans.
It will have rooms equipped for simultaneous research into language, music, and material culture, so that the complex elements of an expressive tradition can be reintegrated in and through the research process, and it will have small alcoves where the historic interrelationships among diverse peoples or apparently disparate kinds of objects can be explored and revealed. It will integrate computer access to the electronic records for the objects, records that can, over time, be enriched in many ways — with images of comparable or related examples in other collections, with multiple narratives of meaning, and with digital video of objects being made, used, and danced.

Perhaps most radically, MoA will work with three First Nations partners — the Musqueam and Sto:lo Nations and the Umista Cultural Society — to create the virtual space facility, the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN). The RRN will link the collections databases of major ethnographic museums in North America and Europe with researchers who have different kinds of expertise. It will make it possible to assemble the ethnographic fragments that are scattered around the world in virtual space and also to accommodate culturally diverse ways of organizing knowledge and notions of copyright and ownership. The high-quality digital images of objects that are rapidly being added to many museum databases and that will be created for all the MoA objects will provide a first level of access in home communities and museums, allowing certain kinds of research questions to be answered, and making real space research more focused and productive. As one First Nations advisor commented, the RRN will constitute a kind of virtual repatriation. While not replacing the need for the real repatriation of objects, it will nevertheless restore connections to the collections that remain in museums, reopening channels of knowledge that were closed off by the massive collecting projects of the first museum age and to which community members have a moral right.

CONCLUSION: RE-PLACEMENTS

Historical objects are witnesses, things that were there, then. They bear their makers’ marks in their weaves, textures, and shapes, and have a compelling agency to cause people living in the present to enunciate their relationships to the past. They also accumulate life histories that can be researched and examined in order to understand more fully the different intellectual, social, economic, and political worlds of their various owners and users. I have argued for the irreplaceable value of museum collections as resources that can help to fill in blanks in the historical record caused by the absence of textual documentation, but I
have also argued for the necessity of re-placing objects in new kinds of interpretive contexts that draw both on the local knowledge of originating communities and on new theories of historical materiality and visuality. I make these arguments in order to dispel a miasma of uncertainty that seems to cling to museum collections today, threatening their continuing accessibility and even their survival. These threats arise from a number of different places. The increasing power and attractiveness of electronic media, for example, has led government policy makers to make virtual technology a major focus of their funding programs in recent years and to query the continuing need to look after the real objects – or at least of the multiple specimens that reside permanently in the storage rooms.

Unresolved claims for repatriation are another source of uncertainty, and they also particularly reveal the deep ironies in which many museums are today caught. As noted earlier, repatriation claims almost always require a combination of exhaustive archival research, collections-based research, and community consultation. Like land claims research, this process can be highly productive in itself, bringing to light the historical specificity and cultural biographies of objects that have long been treated as static and generic. The number of comprehensive claims for the return of whole collections has grown during the renewed treaty negotiations that began in the early 1990s, which allow First Nations to claim cultural property in national and provincial museums as part of their settlements. Some government negotiators have shown a willingness to deal museum collections away before research has been conducted that could establish the histories of individual objects and without a consideration of the legitimate and mutual interests that both museums and originating communities often have in them.51 As these negotiations proceed, museums are also actively engaging in collaborative projects with members of indigenous and other communities. They are learning that they must modify the Western ideals of open access to objects and information on which public museums were founded, in order to respect other systems of knowledge management. In their exhibits and public programs they are finding ways to accommodate multiple narratives of history and culture based on different kinds of truth claims.52

51 For a provocative discussion of the discourse of the treaty table and the role of material objects in these discussions, see Andrea Laforet, ‘Narratives of the Treaty Table: Cultural Property and the Negotiation of Tradition,’ in Questions of Tradition, ed. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Shochet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

52 On the issue of academic freedom and community collaboration, see Michael M. Ames, ‘How To Decorate a House: The Renegotiation of Cultural Representations at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology,’ Museum Anthropology
The new demands being made of museums can appear paralyzing, but they also offer great opportunities. We will not be able to make best use of these opportunities or ensure that the promise of our new building projects is realized unless we articulate more clearly the value of museum-based research on the one hand, and the accommodations we are prepared to make in fulfilment of our national commitment to the accommodation of difference on the other. Both kinds of considerations should inform the new buildings we are putting up in this second museum age, and both should be foundational to the partnerships that will be formed in future years.

I am grateful to Sarah Casteel, Aldona Jonaitis, Ludmilla Jordanova, Andrea Laforet, Joanna Ostapkowicz, Mark Phillips, Ann Stevenson, and Judy Thompson for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper, and to Megan Smetzer and Aaron Glass for research assistance.