TRAINING TO WORK IN A CANADIAN MUSEUM: A MUSEUM APPROACH TO MATERIAL HISTORY STUDIES

by Marie Elwood

Let me begin by reading from a poem in which the poet, a poor landless farm labourer, gives an account of his house and an inventory of his possessions:

. . . . I never learn'd a trade.
But daily wield a flail or spade.
Endeav'ring to preserve in life,
Six naked children and a wife.
My mansion is a clay-built cot,
My whole domain a garden plot —
. . . .
But all its failings to declare,
Would waste more time than I can spare —
So, with your leave, I will begin
To tell what it contains within: —
A spade, by wearing much abus'd,
A spinning-wheel, but little used;
Three stools, one larger than the rest
Our table when we have a guest;
A basket variously employ'd,
Tho' nearly by old age destroy'd,
It holds potatoes raw, or boil'd,
And serves to rock our youngest child;
A leaky tub, a pot unsound,
With iron hoop encircled round;
A jug, in which we daily bring,
Our humble bev'rage from the spring.
In order, on a shelf of stone,
(For chest, or cupboard here is none)
A dish, and three old plates are plac'd;
Three noggins, much by time defac'd;
A mug, from which the ear is parted;
An old knife, by its haft deserted;
Two tea-cups, one of which is crack'd;
Three saucers, each with some defect;
A tea-pot, but the lid is lost;
And in a corner by the wall,
We have a bed which cannot *fall,*
But let not this create surprise —
Securely on the ground it lies;
. . . .
. . . . and o'er this bed,
The ruins of a quilt are spread.
Now nothing else to me belongs,
Except a broken pair of tongs;
. . . .

PHILIP McCLABBER
Cabin-comfortless, near Ballywalter
December 18, 1807

That is a description of material culture — the interior of a one-room house in County Down — written in 1807 by Andrew McKenzie, a poor Irish poet and farm labourer.[1] None of those meagre possessions is likely to have survived above ground; only the words are left.

This account is now worthy of attention because the history of ordinary life has become of interest to historians. The list of objects above provides an understanding of the domestic circumstances of the very poor. As a way of studying local history, material culture is a handmaiden of history, serving to bring objects into a historical context.

An essential part of material culture studies is to learn about objects. In the museum context of material culture, the object is central. Museum curators collect artifacts and facts. To use objects as historical evidence they must be correctly identified and described according to their function, material, construction, style, and history of ownership, if it can be ascertained. The object-historian places the object in its context of time and place, extending and enriching social history.

It is in local and provincial Canadian museums that the objects that contribute to the study of our material culture are to be found. These museums contain not rich and rare objects but representative objects, made or used in Canada. Their collections contain prehistoric artifacts and the material culture of native peoples; they contain examples of material folk culture — traditional objects made by pioneers and early settlers whose cultural sources we would seek in Europe. And these collections also contain factory-made objects — made locally or imported from distant distribution centres. Most Canadian collections of historical material contain, largely, nineteenth-century artifacts. To work with these representative, regional objects requires a broadly based system of training that should be museum-oriented. Universities have Chairs of History but do not have histories of chairs. We need to train historians of things. Professor Asa Briggs, in a lecture given at the University of Guelph in 1974, said that "I am often tempted to understand the Victorian experience solely through the things they made, distributed, enjoyed and treasured, after the fashion of an archaeologist."[2]

In Europe material culture is taught at a few universities but the courses are mainly addressed to the study of material folk culture. The folk of Europe became the pioneers of North America; thus a study of aspects of folk culture in Europe would be appropriate in the training of students of material culture in Canada. Folk culture is closely related to the physical environment since climate, geology, and vegetation influenced patterns of settlement and provided the materials — local clay, stone and wood — used in the region; thus, a study of regional geography would be of use in a material history training. Students of material culture should have an introduction to the archaeology of a region and the opportunity to work at a site.

Architecture is a part of material history and training should have reference to regional architecture and to vernacular and academic building styles, as taught by a cultural geographer and by an architect.

Since style is an important attribute of objects, the history of art should be represented in a training programme. Many Canadian collections contain nineteenth-century objects that are rich in the "revived" styles of that period and it is useful, for example, to understand Rococo when describing objects of Rococo-revival style.

Canadian collections are filled with the products of technology — manufactured objects — and students should be given an understanding of factory production methods and a history of technology.

A training in material culture should require a student to be aware of the many documentary sources, written and pictorial, that serve the study of objects: probate records, inventories, business archives, and the works of topographical artists and photographers. It would also be useful for a student to take a studio class in a craft.

A training to work with Canadian material culture requires a Canadian history course as background. A second part of this training should be object-oriented and for this a museum apprenticeship is essential — giving opportunity to see and handle objects. The student requires an introduction to materials, wood, glass, metal, ceramics, textiles, etc. and each material should be presented by a specialist. This contact with a specialist should accomplish more than a knowledge of materials — it should teach the student a way of thinking about objects and their conservation. It should also demonstrate the heightened sense of observation required for the study of objects. These are observations about a training to prepare students to work with objects. Historians use documents; by training they learn to deal confidently with documents, selecting the significant. Meanwhile, in Canadian museum collections the objects wait in silence — for the material culture historian to interpret them.

The ideal museum collection would be one assembled as the result of a programme of research. For example, a study of nineteenth century furniture factories in Nova Scotia is underway — factories and their range of production have been established. But the collecting of representative examples will take time and be opportunistic. Many objects have been collected and await research.

Three examples follow to illustrate a museum approach to the interpretation of objects — to which a training in material history is directed.

A Chinese Export Porcelain Cup ca. 1790–1810 (fig. 1)

This cup is made of an exotic material. From the earliest introduction of porcelain into Europe this substance provoked speculation. Europeans collected shells and were familiar with the cowrie shell, called *porcellana* after its shape, thought to resemble a little pig.

This cup is painted with a device imitative of an armorial bearing: it shows a shield surrounded by a blue mantling lined with ermine, the fur emblematic of authority and worn by kings, peers, and judges. Above the shield two heraldic birds regard each other — a design favoured by sea-captains.[3] On the shield is the gilt monogram of a Nova Scotia family. This design was available to families who were not entitled to bear arms — they could order the design from a pattern plate. These pattern plates, numbered with up to twenty-four designs, still survive; two are in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The design on this cup is one of the standardized armorial patterns.

This cup can be set in the wide context of the Oriental export porcelain market, its methods of production and distribution. It can become part of a study, sustained by other documented examples, of Chinese export porcelain brought to Nova Scotia and used there in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is material evidence of the prosperity of some settlers and a study in Canadian material culture.

Fig. 1. Cup, Chinese export porcelain with pseudo-armorial bearing, ca. 1795. Collection: Nova Scotia Museum, acc. no. 77.74.lc. (Photo: Nova Scotia Museum, neg. no. 8050.)

Fig. 2. Reed and rattan chair, ca. 1890. Made by the American Furniture Company, Woodstock, Ontario, ca. 1890. Collection: Nova Scotia Museum, acc. no. 78.105. (Photo: Nova Scotia Museum, neg. no. 8051.)

A Rattan Chair ca. 1890 (fig. 2)

From about 1870 to 1920 there was a large market in North America for furniture made of rattan, or "Rattan and Reed" as it is described in contemporary furniture catalogues. Furniture employing this exotic material was made in Canada and in the United States.

Rattan is a type of climbing palm that grows in the tropics to a great height. The bark is cut off in long strips that are woven to make "cane" seats[4] and wrapped around the framework of rattan furniture. The reed is the strong, fibrous core (rendered porous when the bark is removed); it is pliant and flexible. In chair manufacturing, the rattan is woven around a structural framework of hardwood. Upright and curved elements of the chair are constructed of rattan reed. As the reed is porous, the chair was varnished; a variety of finishes were available, including plain shellac, which enhanced the natural colour of the reed, and more expensive finishes described as "antique, cherry, and sixteenth century finishes."[5]

This ornate furniture was made in Canada. In 1881 the firm of A. Stephen and Son of Halifax was advertising rattan goods and claiming to be "the sole manufacturer of these articles in the Dominion. This is a new enterprise on our part . . . to all who wish to encourage Home Manufactures our exhibit cannot fail to prove worthy of inspection."[6] There were two factories in the town of Windsor, Nova Scotia, making rattan furniture in the 1890s. The reed and rattan chair in figure 2 bears its original paper label — "The American Furniture Co., Reed Dept." On the label is the list of workmen in this department employed in the manufacture of this chair: "Woodworker/Framer/Star-caner/Reedworker/Winder/Singer/Finisher/Upholsterer/Inspector/."

A study of these small furniture factories and their products exemplifies a museum's interpretation of material culture that begins with an object in its collections.

A Cabinetmaker's Mallet ca. 1890 (fig. 3)

This cabinetmaker's mallet was discovered through documentary sources — a letter and a drawing made by the cabinetmaker, Henry A. Holder.[7] In the drawing he showed the house where he was born as it looked on the morning of 1860 when Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, visited Halifax. Behind the house he drew his father's cabinetmaking workshop and beside the workshop wall, a plum tree.

In the letter Holder described how his father, after eating a plum, planted the plum-stone in a flowerpot and later transplanted the tree when he moved to this property in 1849. "I used to regale myself with the fruit," he wrote. When his father sold the property "the tree was felled, and from the trunk I made a couple of mallets and used them at my work for years and still treasure one of them, the sole tangible record of my childhood's 'little Garden Plot'."[8]

Fig. 3. Cabinetmaker's mallet of plum wood, ca. 1890. Collection: W. Harvey. (Photo: Nova Scotia Museum, neg. no. 6870.)

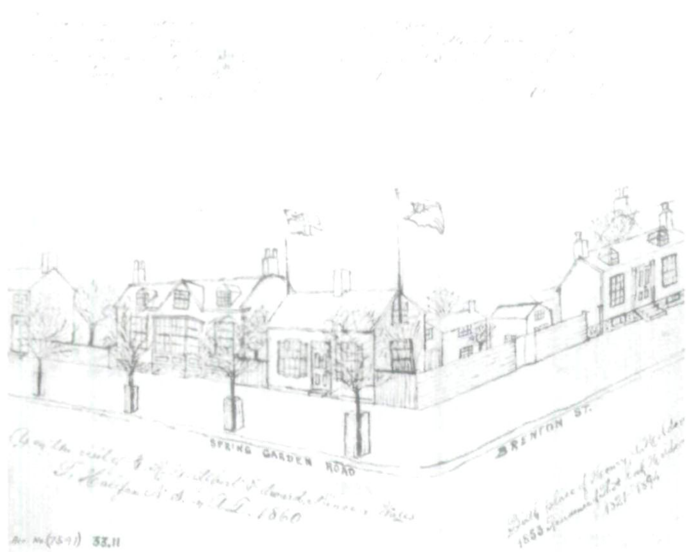

Fig. 4. "The house where I was born," as it looked on the morning of the visit of H.R.H. Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, to Halifax. Pen and ink sketch. The plum tree is shown growing beside the cabinetmaker's workshop at the rear of the residence. Collection: Nova Scotia Museum, acc. no. 7541. (Photo: Nova Scotia Museum, neg. no. 6871.)

Fig. 5. Henry Arthur Holder (1853-1935). A rather unusual posed "studio" photograph of a craftsman at work. (Photo: Nova Scotia Museum, neg. no. 6020, courtesy of Jean Holder.)

Almost one hundred tools belonging to these two cabinetmakers were located — but not the mallet — until two years ago when a descendant brought this tool to the Nova Scotia Museum; he had heard that we were looking for his grandfather's mallet. A microscopic analysis of the wood established that it was indeed plum wood.

Furniture made by these two cabinetmakers was studied, and their lives were revealed through family papers, oral history, correspondence, and daybooks. This is the content of a museum material history study that uses artifacts and documents to contribute to Canada's material history.

NOTES

1. Andrew McKenzie, *Meenagarragh Cottiers' House*, Ulster Folk Museum, H.M.S.O., 1974.
2. Asa Briggs, "The Victorian Experience," *Canadian Collector*, September/October 1975, p.10.
3. Personal communication from David Sanctuary Howard, November 1978, London, England.
4. *Montgomery Ward and Co. Catalogue*, no. 57 (1895), p.617.
5. Ibid.
6. *Halifax Morning Chronicle*, 20 September 1881.
7. Accession no. 7541, pen and ink sketch and accompanying letter, Henry A. Holder to Harry Piers, 17 January 1933, Nova Scotia Museum Collection.
8. Ibid.