

Collectors, Dealers, and Museums: Private Initiative and Public Responsibility

A Roundtable Discussion*

This session was chaired by Gregg Finley, curator of the New Brunswick Museum, and had as participants Marian Bradshaw, editor of the *Canadian Collector*; Donald Webster, curator of Canadiana at the Royal Ontario Museum; Barbara Riley, assistant chief (curatorial) of the History Division of the National Museum of Man and co-editor of the *Material History Bulletin* and Neil Rosenberg of Memorial University's Folklore Department who is now president of the Atlantic Canada Institute and was chairman of the colloquium.

Gregg Finley opened the session by pointing out that the Atlantic region's strongest claim to identity is embodied in its material culture but that while this culture has been under examination for some time it has been done without the benefit of "a clearly defined and sophisticated methodology for the study of objects."

Marian Bradshaw discussed the varying functions of the collector, dealer, and museum in the development of the cultural heritage. She said that everyone should remember that, as "we are only temporary custodians of what we possess and what passes through our hands, it is our duty to research and record to the best of our ability." Museums, she said, do this through exhibits, seminars, and the like. The collector researches his own collection and ensures that it eventually will fall into the proper hands — perhaps those of a museum or those of another collector who will continue her/his work.

Acting as a representative of the amateur and the man in the street, Neil Rosenberg nevertheless spoke as a professional folklorist when he commented on the distinction between the academic's and the collector's view of material culture. He contended that the academic was interested in the typical, in what was representative of the generality of the culture, and that the collector was interested in the atypical, in what was rare and representative of the uniqueness of the culture. He went on to point out that museums have an obligation to satisfy both views.

Barbara Riley took up this point by contending that "museum and hence its curator has a responsibility beyond private satisfaction," a responsibility which includes the development of the proper research methodology and an ability to evaluate evidence. But she stated that the final and crucial responsibility of the museum is to make all those who possess objects of consequence (be they buildings or furniture) aware that those objects are of value. This, she said, was important because all the museums, collectors, and dealers in the world could only preserve a minimal portion of what can be called "portable cultural property."

In addressing this latter situation Donald Webster stated that "time is always on the side of the museum," that the piece he has failed to get in his lifetime, his successors will eventually acquire. Webster presented a benign vision of the relationships between museums, dealers, and collectors. Dealers serve as seekers and hunters for the museum curators; private collectors are of course the basis on which most museums started and in part still rely.

When the session was opened to the floor, Charles Foss was quite vehement in protesting Donald Webster's patience. He spoke of the truckloads of antiques that regularly leave New Brunswick for America. Donald Webster replied that in fact once the goods turned up in the United States it would be possible to apply for a repatriation grant from the National Museum. Shane O'Dea then said that the grant would work if we were aware of the object that had gone over the border but that, in many cases, the objects were given American, Quebec, or Ontarian ancestry once they left the home territory because that made them more valuable.

Sheila Stevenson drew the topic back to the point by giving an account of the territorial or eco-museums of Quebec in which the local people themselves are more than passive visitors in the development and operation of the museum. The museum is seen as a tool to reflect the past and direct the future—a cultural *animateur*.

In discussing the role of artifacts in reflecting the past, Neil Rosenberg pointed out that in Newfoundland many people associate old artifacts with the "dirty thirties" and the dole — unpleasant memories — and view new artifacts

* The original tape and transcript of this session is deposited with the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA 82-090). The recording was done courtesy of Marjorie Whitelaw of the Atlantic Canada Institute.

in the positive light of post-confederation prosperity. But although many of the actual objects may have changed in the culture, their patterns of use may not. Only our own preoccupation with culture as object hinders us from seeing behaviour as culture.

In response to a question from Victoria Dickenson about collector-dealer-museum relationships Webster said that the museum person has to be careful with dealers who can be a political and secretive group of people. His contention was that the relationship should be a "more than arm's-length" one. This remark inspired a question from Ken Donovan about the possibility of recording the holdings of various dealers. Webster replied that, in fact, many dealers have recognized that it is in their best economic interest to

be as meticulous as possible in documenting pieces. Marian Bradshaw returned to Donovan's point about the records of holdings and their importance and Tim Dilworth insisted on the necessity of recording all, the great and the small. His point was that dealers are prone to record major items but ignore the minor. (And without such a record it becomes difficult to make general judgements about the typical culture of an area — judgements which can be made on the basis of a broad range of artifacts but are difficult to make from the exceptional. *Editor*)

The session ended with several general comments on the importance of educating not only the public but also the collectors, dealers, and curators.