

Forum / Colloque

In this section the *Material History Bulletin* publishes articles about material history in Canada by two museum historians. Each discusses the subject in a different way and each enlarges our perspective on this field of historical inquiry. The *Bulletin* welcomes other contributions to the continuing debate.

Cette section du *Bulletin d'histoire de la culture matérielle* présente des articles sur l'histoire de la culture matérielle au Canada qui sont l'œuvre de deux historiens attachés à des musées. Chacun examine le sujet sous un angle différent et chacun élargit notre vision de ce secteur de la recherche historique. Le *Bulletin* accueillera volontiers d'autres contributions au débat en cours.

The Limitations of Material History: A Museological Perspective*

Robert D. Turner

The limitations of a discipline or field of study are a positive consideration; by carefully defining boundaries, researchers are better able to explore what can be done and to undertake the work at hand. In this spirit, I intend to explore and elaborate on limitations in the study of material history from a museum perspective.

First, I offer a broad definition of material history: to me it is the material or artifact records of a society and the study of these records. As a field of study, material history is important, exciting and, in a Canadian context at least, largely untapped. There are limitations, however, on how objects, which are so fundamental to material history, can contribute to scholarly research. Moreover, they are further limited in their applications to public education and enlightenment.

Fundamentally, the study of material history relates to the study of objects or artifacts: the products of a culture. For such studies, having the artifacts at hand is not essential but it is certainly beneficial. Artifacts clearly are not the only research sources available nor are they always the best ones. It behooves any researcher, regardless of the goals of his or her activity — public education, scholarly publication, or exhibits — to consult as many relevant sources as possible, including archival documents and records, aural history descriptions, published records, historical photographs, and material history collections. Artifacts are highly significant because they are, in effect, a primary source but, like any other, they often are misleading.

The inherent limits of material history collections are significant to the limitations of the study of material history, and at present it is fair to say that these constraints are enormous indeed. In terms of cost effectiveness alone, the amount of information that can be drawn from artifacts to create a wider picture of society can be quite meagre. Two highly significant factors restricting the utility of material history collections are the ways in which collections are assembled and the ways in which they are managed once they are part of museum (or historic site) holdings.

Limitations from Assembling Collections

Collecting policies, or lack of them, have led to many museums having holdings that are unstructured, unsystematic, and fragmented. Without being too harsh, it is probably a fair description to characterize many museum collections as societal attics — repositories for things no longer used that we cannot quite bring ourselves to throw out. Material history collections relating to what is termed modern history, as opposed to anthropology or classical/ancient history, have been developed in many museums in fairly recent times. Many collections are new, assembled quickly and unsystematically for Centennial projects, historic sites, or park development projects and as a result their management and documentation often has been superficial and incomplete. Moreover, pragmatic decisions are made, based on limited time and resources, such as "It will do and we can fix it later," and then are seldom corrected. Other collections, while older, still suffer from limitations based on museological traditions and other considerations that I will elaborate on briefly below.

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(1) Collections are acquired unsystematically: Many museums do not pursue active collecting programmes, for a variety of reasons, and thereby build their collections from "what comes to the front door." Few collecting programmes have been based on a careful study of a region, industry, or other focus of interest to determine what artifacts are worthy of inclusion in museum collections and exhibits. Random collections have limited value except as a storehouse to draw on for generalized exhibit purposes.¹

(2) The *Guinness Book of Records* tradition: Many museum collections, preserved buildings, or historic sites, represent the biggest, oldest, first, last, ugliest, or most unusual examples available. For serious researchers, this presents severe limitations since such oddities exhibit a distorted, unrepresentative picture of material history in particular, and broader history more generally.

(3) Antiquarian collecting: This trend is really an elaboration of the above but more specific. Here the goals of private collectors often have been transplanted to museums and again produce bias in collections toward the rare, unique, decorative, and finely crafted. These qualities in themselves are not at all negative but they have often been pursued to the detriment of other collecting goals. Antiquarian collecting might also be termed "collecting to impress." Artifacts can be added to collections simply because of their individual impressiveness, rather than their value as documents of historical change. This last point is certainly true in architectural preservation. We have preserved many fine mansions, public buildings, and military posts in Canada, but it is more difficult to find many examples of preserved sawmills, sweatshops, slums, or miners' tiny cottages that at least would be equal in their inherent historical interest.

(4) Memento and finery collecting: All museums and most of society in general is affected by this notion of collecting. We generally save what we perceive to be our best objects or the ones for which we have the greatest sentimental attachment. To illustrate, there are ample examples of children's christening gowns, wedding dresses, formal gowns, dress suits, and top hats in museum clothing collections. These are the items of clothing many donors have treasured and saved for perhaps several generations. In themselves they can be excellent artifacts reflecting style, taste, materials, or traditions of other generations. The problem is that collections are so heavily weighted to this type of item. To cite two examples from the clothing collections at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (before some recent deaccessioning), there were twenty-eight top hats in the collection compared to only four hard hats and safety helmets. Similarly, there were twenty-three wedding dresses and twenty christening gowns and robes, but no maternity dresses.² If one were to draw conclusions from this

second case, it would seem that people got married, babies were christened, but no one ever became pregnant!

Where are the children's everyday clothes, men's or women's work clothes, maternity dresses, and industrial clothing? These become worn out and usually are not considered worth saving.³ They were certainly not expected to be of interest to a museum. How many curators, when trying to locate work clothes, have been told: "I never thought a museum would ever want THAT!" But in reality, these are the very items that could well be most significant in better understanding features of daily life for the majority of people in generations past. Two other collecting urges appear irresistible that further illustrate biases in collections: museums collect far more fire engines than garbage trucks and far more executives' railway business cars than once-common freight cars.⁴ Romance and finery almost always take priority over utility even if the latter, broadly speaking, had equal or in some cases greater impact.

Again collections are often unrepresentative of the periods that the artifacts represent. Moreover, we are not able fully to determine how, or in what directions, the collections are inaccurate in their representations. I am not advocating collecting only the typical, rather that the typical should be given a high priority in collections policies in institutions.

(5) Museums collect the cast-offs: People may enthusiastically donate precious family objects, but larger, less well-cared-for items in both the social and industrial areas of collections are often made available to museums as well. Unfortunately, these objects are usually at the end of their functional lives and may be in badly deteriorated condition. Museums may accept such artifacts because no better examples exist but the utility of worn-out, sometimes fragmentary artifacts is often very questionable for in-depth study. Faced with no option, a fragment is certainly better than nothing.

The cast-off problem is likely to remain serious, particularly in the industrial area, as artifacts become increasingly technologically complex and as their salvage value increases. Additionally, the rapid obsolescence of new technologies means that equipment acquired in the 1970s may be, functionally at least, a museum piece in the 1980s. Few museums are in a position to make considered choices about acquisitions for virtually contemporary items, yet the value of collections in the future will depend in no small measure on how well such choices are made.

(6) Eclectic collecting: Many museums have little if any focus or collecting policy so that their holdings contain such a broad sweep of artifacts that the value of individual items or collections is lost and resources are squandered on

items that either should be sent to a more appropriate institution or quietly forgotten. Working with such holdings is like working in an uncatalogued library. The material may be there but it can be impossible to find it. This is a malady that affects community museums particularly, but fortunately many museums are only too aware of the problem and are working, as resources permit, to improve the situation.

Many problem areas noted are complicated by the museum's or historic site's traditional and important role as keeper of symbols of national or regional identities — our culture's treasures and national keepsakes. Overall, however, the effect of collecting for these purposes is not great, as the artifacts usually form more or less discrete collections for exhibit purposes.

Limitations of Collections Management and Resources

A second area of concern with collections is what happens to artifacts once they are acquired by the museum or historic site. I am sure that nearly every museum or historic site would welcome a larger budget, so this is not the point of discussion. Rather, collections management policies and resources create severe limitations on the utility and representativeness of collections that may not be obvious. Some concerns are summarized below.

(1) Collections storage: Shortage of available secure, controlled, storage and exhibit space is one of the most serious constraints facing museums. Artifacts are often selected or rejected solely on the basis of their size. A somewhat facetious rule of thumb that we have used at the British Columbia Provincial Museum suggests that "If it is smaller than a breadbox, chances are it will be saved; if not, then it probably will not be." For large objects, particularly in the industrial and transportation areas, storage limits are severe indeed. When larger objects are saved, they are usually relegated to outside storage, where their long-term care is problematical.

(2) Conservation budgets, priorities, and dilemmas: With many large collections, there simply are not enough conservators to do the work. The relevance here is that over time the artifacts deteriorate and become increasingly less valuable as source material. What was once a fully intact locomotive becomes a derelict, rusted hulk, not reflecting a type of technology so much as community or museum neglect, disinterest, or poor conservation practice.

The condition of artifacts can also present dilemmas for museum workers and affect the value of artifacts for research or other purposes. Often, at the very least, stabilization is required, which can be carried out with little change to the artifact and little impact on its utility

as a historical source. But when a piece of equipment is in very poor condition, stabilization may not be sufficient. Does a stabilized derelict tell us very much? In itself, the artifact may well be more likely to reflect evidence of neglect, rather than evidence associated with the period of its productive use. On the other hand, complete restoration to like-new condition may be possible, but then the price may be the removal of any remaining evidence of use and original components that may be functionally or structurally unsound. Fortunately, careful documentation essentially can eliminate this problem by maintaining a record of the work done on an artifact and any evidence of past use. For artifacts in many collections, however, such records are not available or are fragmentary and their absence becomes a serious limitation on the value of collections for some types of potential research. While the dilemma facing curators and conservators of how to approach the care of any artifact will never be easily resolved and is certainly beyond the scope of this discussion, the result is that, for study purposes at least, what has been done to an artifact while in a museum collection is often as important as its earlier history.

(3) Collections documentation: Many collections are not fully catalogued and catalogues are not yet readily interchangeable through modern communications systems. As a result, information is not easily accessible for research. Moreover, what documentation there is is often fragmentary due to incomplete provenance of the artifacts being available to the cataloguer. Incomplete or lacking provenance, perhaps more than any other single concern, limits the utility of collections for research beyond the simple consideration of the artifacts at the generic level.

All the above points amplify one fundamental problem with material history collections as reliable sources for scholarly enquiry: the uncertainty of what collections and artifacts actually represent. To illustrate, I would like to cite one example in more detail. In British Columbia, logging locomotives were an important component of transportation systems in the forest industry. Twenty-four B.C. machines have been preserved, representing several manufacturers, sizes, types, and eras. On superficial examination, it would appear that the preserved machines would be representative of the types of equipment operated in the province, particularly considering the diversity of the preserved machines and the different parts of the province in which they are preserved. Examination of documentary evidence, albeit fragmentary, suggests the contrary, as Table 1 illustrates.⁵

Table 1 indicates that the artifact record is unreliable for determining what types of machines and in what proportions they were used. The Heisler, a significant type, was excluded from collections altogether and the percentages preserved relate closely to the actual number used in only one instance, the Shay. Others are out by significant

TABLE 1
 Preserved Logging Locomotives in British Columbia:
 A Comparison between Actual Occurrence and the Artifact Record

Type (manufacturer)	Number preserved	Total preserved (%)	Estimated number operated in B.C.	Actual % of total operated	Difference between total preserved and actual total operated (%)
Shay (Lima)-geared	9	38	82	39	-1
Climax-geared	3	13	53	25	-12
Heisler-geared	0	0	17	8	-8
Baldwin-rod	7	29	18	9	+20
Other manuf.-rod	5	21	27	14	+7
Totals	24		197		

amounts. It is clear that one could be misled by using the material history record alone. Moreover, there is no way of knowing from the surviving machines how many locomotives were used. This example illustrates some of the limitations of dealing even with large collections of artifacts which would appear to provide a reasonable sample.

Examination of an artifact can often determine the manufacturer, date of production, where it was made, what it was used for (if we have good intuition or if it is obvious), and the state of its completeness.⁶ We can also develop a description of its size, shape, and component materials, but often, that is about all. Depending on the artifact, there are inferences that can be drawn that reflect on the broader perspectives of history. Clothing, for example, may reflect style, colour preferences, materials, perhaps the standards of dress or moral attitudes of the period, or the level of craftsmanship, durability, and function of the artifact. From industrial clothing some conclusions on safety standards and working conditions might also become apparent. There are other more specific questions, however, that a researcher undoubtedly would like to explore and about which the artifact may well be mute.⁷ For example, how was it used? Who used it and for how long? Where was it used? What other similar objects were there that differed in purpose or detail or refinement? How many were used and how widespread was the use? What replaced it and what did it replace? Why was it used instead of some other object? Why was this particular specimen preserved? What was its impact (defined in a variety of ways)? What inferences about the state of technology or the culture as a whole can be drawn from the artifact? What can it tell us about the process of invention? Does it have religious, symbolic, or artistic significance?

Single artifacts or small collections have similar limitations to single documents and it is a fair generalization to suggest that the more complete a collection, the more likely it is to provide the answers we would ask of it. To use an extreme example, we can draw much information from a fully preserved warship from 1800, but we can find very little to remark about one cannon ball. The former is a fine primary source while the latter is virtually nothing other than a relic or curio.

Again, the main limitation I find in material history as a source for serious enquiry is the uncertainty over what, if anything, the artifact or collection is representative of. Beyond that, the uncertainty of provenance in many collections is frustrating. In disciplines such as archaeology or, sometimes, ethnology, the researcher has little to draw on beyond the artifact, as original documentary material is usually non-existent. In the study of a literate culture, however, there is usually no such limitation and it is foolish, inefficient, and frustrating to try to draw information from an artifact when published or documentary sources may be readily at hand that will reveal more.⁸

Experimental research using artifacts as a source can be carried out and is useful from a number of perspectives, as shown by a recent study comparing early types of underground mine lighting.⁹ Research using artifacts is often likely to be quite specific in its orientation and it will take some time before the accumulation of such studies will influence greatly our perceptions of overall historical themes. Yet, to carry out some types of research results, at least potentially, in a conflict with the basic museological function of artifact preservation. For example, only so much can be learned from a static, inanimate locomotive

in a museum gallery but if operation is possible other types of information can be extracted. The recent operation by Smithsonian staff of the 1831 vintage locomotive *John Bull* is a case in point.¹⁰ Operating a machine from an early period can produce significant information not otherwise available, not to mention the subtle effect seeing the subject of enquiry actually function can have on a researcher. As John H. White, curator at the Smithsonian, observed following the carefully supervised operation of *John Bull*: "I could no longer think of it exclusively as a symbol of America's industrial past or of the transfer of technology from Europe to the Western Hemisphere, and certainly not as anything like an ancient mummy. I now can perceive it as a working piece of machinery, one that was employed by ordinary people who used it as a tool in their everyday life. The people are long gone, but the locomotive remains a touchstone with a distant past."¹¹

Unfortunately, the opportunities for such use of artifacts are limited both because of costs, which can be very high, and also because of attitudes of museum community members who might be more concerned about the integrity of the original artifact than the information it could yield. Keepers of collections and collections researchers may not always agree on priorities. The laudable goal of artifact conservation should not normally preclude the intelligent monitored use of artifacts for research and study, although sometimes it can.

I would now like to turn briefly to the limitations of material history from the perspective of its application in an educational context. Museums and historical sites have long been considered important and significant resources for teaching young people and for general public enlightenment and entertainment. In these contexts, material history suffers from some of the same limitations outlined above for scholarly research. A number of them are given below.

(1) Unrepresentative collections: This fundamental problem also persists in the educational environment. Displays are not necessarily representative of periods of history and depict history through what might be called rose-coloured glasses. Exhibits and historic sites often present the impression of history as we would like it to have been or think it should have been. Seldom are the streets dirty, no one lives in poverty, battlefields are peaceful and grass-covered, and the less pleasant sides of life are seldom, if ever, presented except perhaps in a humorous context. This is not so much an inherent limitation in material history as it is a limitation in how curators, administrators, teachers, or interpreters use the collections and historical resources at their disposal.¹²

(2) Hands-on exhibits and conservation: This is a difficult point in museology since even with the best supervision a thousand eager-handed grade one students could cause wear to the most apparently durable ar-

tifact.¹³ Teachers increasingly must use replicas in their work but this is a severe constraint on the potential educational value of artifacts as teaching resources and a problem with no easy resolution.

(3) Appealing to the norm: Museums and historical sites appeal to a broad spectrum of the public.¹⁴ Indeed, it has been a policy of the federal government to "decentralize" and "democratize" museums in Canada. Consequently, museums are obliged to provide exhibits that are understandable and interesting to a great range of people from differing age groups, educational backgrounds, and interests. Unfortunately, this requirement often leads to exhibits that are superficial, very general in nature and, where funds permit, tending toward the spectacular. Content is sometimes subordinated to form and presentation. Still, lack of quality design or presentation can create another extreme: history is then prevented from being used or appreciated to its potential. Sterile, lifeless exhibits are boring to all but the most dedicated.¹⁵ This extreme occurs particularly when artifacts are presented out of context or setting. Like any fragment of historical information, an artifact is often left with little meaning.

Another problem of dealing with the norm is that an exhibit copy or text is usually minimized because it is recognized that few museum visitors will read lengthy descriptions. While this is certainly true, it complicates the problems of presenting meaningful displays with reasonable reference to broader pictures of history for the small percentage of visitors who are genuinely interested.

In conclusion, it is clear that the most serious limitations on using artifacts for studying material history and history in general are the uncertainty of what material history collections represent and the lack of basic provenance on so many objects in collections. It is clear that an artifact is seldom an adequate source for complete research although it can be a primary source and at times an informative one that should be consulted and used fully. Unfortunately, the artifact alone seldom provides answers to a researcher's broader, more essential questions: the why questions and the questions of broader context.

These same limitations apply in many ways to the public functions of institutions that house material history collections, although they are compounded by the broad audience for exhibits and displays. Exhibits often are limited by collections being presented out of context, and even where this is not the case, exhibits often are unrepresentative or incomplete, inaccurately portraying an era or setting.

Admittedly, these comments are harsh, but they are intended to be constructive. I do not see all these limitations as being fundamental to material history so much as to the way collections have been acquired, managed, and interpreted in the past. The directions being taken in collec-

tions management to look more critically at acquisitions policy, attempts being made to move into contemporary collecting of everyday goods, and efforts being made to provide better documentation of collections' provenance will all contribute to the reduction of limitations on material history and make collections a much more valuable resource.

NOTES

1. Daniel T. Gallacher, "The Numbers Game: Statistics and Experiments for Industrial History Acquisitions Strategy," *Canadian Museums Association Gazette* 13 (Spring 1980), pp. 20-30, and 13 (Summer/Fall 1980), p. 14-25.
2. Based on a preliminary survey of the catalogue cards in the Modern History Division, British Columbia Provincial Museum, and discussions with Zane Lewis, *Social History Curator*.
3. The Modern History Division has had an active programme to collect industrial clothing, work clothes, and the other types of apparel mentioned but has met with limited success. In some situations the only solution seems to be to collect contemporary materials so that at least in future our collections will be better balanced. Contemporary collection of industrial clothing has been an active programme of the History Division of the National Museum of Man as well.
4. See, for example, the inventory of preserved rolling stock in Canada by Raymond F. Corley, *Preserved Canadian Railway Equipment* (Montreal: Railfare Books, 1971).
5. This example and the table are condensed from Robert D. Turner, "Logging Railroads and Locomotives in British Columbia: A Background Summary and the Preservation Record," *Material History Bulletin* 13 (Fall 1981), pp. 3-20.
6. John Chavis, "The Artifact and the Study of History," *Curator* 7, no. 2 (1964), pp. 156-62.
7. Bernard Ranson, *Some Thoughts on Museology and the Profession of Arms*, Report to the Canadian Museums Association's Head of Professional Development and Standards. Ms. 8 pp.
8. See Robert G. Griffin, "The Shingle Sawing Machine in British Columbia, 1901-1915," *Material History Bulletin* 13 (Fall 1981), pp. 21-38, as an example of a study of machinery based primarily on documentary material but using both artifacts and interviews as further sources of data and information.
9. Gallacher, "The Numbers Game," Part 2.
10. John H. White, "John Bull: 150 Years," *Railfan and Railroad* 4 (January 1982), pp. 38-44, and see *Railroad History* no. 144 (Spring 1981).
11. *Ibid.*
12. Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1980).
13. An example of this is a large fish-butchering machine (called an Iron Chink) on display in the Modern History Galleries of the British Columbia Provincial Museum. When the machine was first placed on display in 1972 some fittings were secured so tightly that they could not be loosened by a wrench. Over a decade later, with museum attendance averaging one million or more each year, including many school tours, some fittings have disappeared.
14. Brian Dixon, Alice E. Courtney, and Robert H. Bailey, *The Museum and the Canadian Public* (Toronto: Arts and Culture Branch, Department of the Secretary of State, Government of Canada, Culturcan Publications, 1974).
15. A.E. Parr, "The Arrogance of Artlessness," *Curator* 7, no. 2 (1963), pp. 240-43.

The Concrete Clio: Definition of a Field of History

Peter E. Rider

What is material history and how does one study it? The questions are easy enough to ask, but answers are harder to come by. It is certainly one of the plethora of "new" histories which have sprung up since the 1960s. Equally as clear is the absence of consensus of what this history is trying to do and how one goes about doing it. In some recently developed branches of history, practitioners are engaged in fervent debate over definitions of the field and the methodology to be used, while in others, such as urban history, a variety of approaches is tolerated as long as the field's chosen focus remains central to the topic being studied. Treatment of material history is lodged between these extremes. Although various avenues are used to address the subject, considerable awareness has been expressed at scholarly gatherings and in writings of the need for an appropriate analytical framework.¹

Folk wisdom suggests that knowledge of the tree lies in the nature of its fruit. Acting on that principle, some insight into material history can be gained through a

review of one of the chief Canadian forums for the field, *Material History Bulletin*. In selecting the *Bulletin* for scrutiny, no attempt is made to argue that it alone represents all that can be learned on the matter. Nevertheless the journal has matured with its subject, and its pages have welcomed contributions from all parts of the public having an interest in the field. As such it is an adequate device to gauge trends that may suggest answers to the questions posed above.

Of one fact, there is little doubt: the physical development of *Material History Bulletin* reflects growing professionalism. Starting as volumes in the National Museum of Man's Mercury series, the first two *Bulletins* were presented in a format resembling a typed essay. Generous use of photographs resulted in over ten additional pages of illustrations. With the third number, the *Bulletin* became a regularly published series offered for sale on a subscription basis. To mark the change, a two-toned brown cover colour was adopted and issues became fatter. *Bulletin*