

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Concerning Work

"Concerning Work," Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature. Curator in charge: Sharon Reilly. Chief of Design and Production: Bill Little. Travelling exhibit. Opened: October 1983. National tour: March 1984-December 1986, 15 locations. Catalogue: Gerry Berkowski et al., *Concerning Work: Change in the Work Process in Canada 1850-2000* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, 1983). Free. Also available in French: *Parlons travail: évolution du monde du travail au Canada de 1850 à l'an 2000*.

The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature's travelling exhibit, "Concerning Work: Change in the Work Process in Canada 1850-2000," concludes an ambitious thirteen-month special educational and cultural project on the subject of "work." This project has sought "to examine the nature of work in Canada from an historical, a contemporary and a futuristic perspective and to consider the ways in which the work process and the social relations in the workplace have affected, and will affect, the lives of Canadian working men and women."¹

The in-house programme consisted of lectures, films, seminars, work-place tours, university courses, and an art competition dealing with such topics as attitudes toward work, work in early Canada, work in Manitoba, women at work, preparing for work, health and safety in the workplace, and the future of work. The travelling exhibit opened in Winnipeg in October 1983 and will be travelling to various centres across the country until the end of 1986.

Preparing an exhibit on a subject like the "work process" offers many challenges to the curator. The subject is so broad that it cannot possibly mention all the different types of work and also, to be comprehensible, a common theme must be established throughout. Once the latter has been achieved there then comes the question of choosing artifacts which will complement the theme as reflected in the labels and graphics.

The exhibit is divided into six chronological periods, each one dealing with a particular aspect of change in the work process. Although it is difficult to restrict certain activities to a particular time frame, the dates chosen for the exhibit do make sense, while allowing for some overlap. Topics such as Industrialization, Scientific Manage-

ment, the Depression, World War II, Transition, and Beyond 1984, are dealt with through labels, graphics, artifacts, and in three of the sections, by audio-visual presentations. (It should be noted here that while the exhibit was in Halifax, technical problems with the audio-visual equipment resulted in much "down time" for the slide shows.)

For the most part, the labels are short and concise and provide a clear statement of the subject being exhibited. The slide show in the Scientific Management (1900-30) section, with its accompanying musical track, is espe-



Fig. 1. Scientific Management Section. This early twentieth-century time clock symbolizes scientific management's concern for efficiency and speed in the work-place. (Photo: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.)

cially effective in portraying the theme. The role of women in the work-place is highlighted throughout the exhibit, including a slide presentation with music on working women in the "Transition" section.

In choosing artifacts for such an exhibit there is a danger of trying to include too much. The 120 or so objects chosen do not overwhelm the viewer, they are generally appropriate, and most important, they are allowed to speak for themselves with a minimum of labelling. The connection between the ideas contained in the text and the objects displayed is left up to the viewer. For example, no words can as effectively describe the consequences of unemployment during the Depression as the sugar-bag clothing included in the exhibit. Also, the complexity of early computer technology is readily understood by looking at a late 1950s Heathkit analog computer with its tangle of wires and numerous dials.

In a few instances, the sparse labelling on the artifacts can lead to confusion. It took a while, for example, to grasp the significance of including a fireman's helmet, hose nozzle, fishing rod, and fishing basket together with a modern computer terminal, telephone, and a Black Brant projectile. A closer reading of an accompanying label on robotics noted that despite the advances of technology, there are still some skills which require the ingenuity and strength of working people.

Some confusion also arises over the general layout of the exhibit. Except for the dates which are the titles for each section, there is little consistency in the display panels. This distracts somewhat from the order and clarity of the story line.

The text, graphics, artifacts, and slides involve the viewer but it is the programming potential which excites. The thirteen months of programming activities in Winnipeg only demonstrate how well and how fully, programming can be used to enhance an exhibit. In this case, however, it is the exhibit which has been used to enhance the programming activities. Those of us viewing the exhibit outside Winnipeg can only feel the loss at not having been able to participate in some of those varied activities. Institutions hosting the exhibit should provide such programming to make the exhibit more meaningful to their communities.

Despite the few drawbacks already noted, this is an informative thought-provoking, and innovative exhibit. It succeeds in both the material presented and the manner in which the text and artifacts interact to give a comprehensive view of the "work process." The catalogue accompanying the exhibit is well-written and informative.

Congratulations to the staff of the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature for their efforts.

NOTE

1. Berkowski, Gerry, et al., *Concerning Work: Changes in the Work Process in Canada 1850-2000*. Exhibit booklet, p. 1.

David B. Flemming

Curatorial Statement

"Concerning Work," which opened at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in October 1983 and which is now on tour across Canada, was influenced profoundly by, and intended as a contribution toward, the development of a new social history of Canada.¹ The exhibit was the second stage of a major public educational and cultural project sponsored by the Museum beginning in September 1982. Both the exhibit and the thirteen months of public programming that preceded it were designed to explore the many dimensions of the theme "Change in the Work Process in Canada 1850-2000."

The decision to explore this theme resulted largely from the realization that it is a subject that has received relatively little attention from museums in the past, despite the centrality of work to all of our lives. The reasons for this are to be found, in part, in the nature of the historiography from which our history museums are developed. Traditionally, historians have focused on the "great men" of the past and on the political and economic issues that have surrounded them. Seldom are the lives of ordinary working people, or of women of any class, considered. Rarely are the social and cultural dimensions of peoples' lives given serious attention. The "things that people leave behind," their material culture, are thus isolated from their past.

Social historian Michael Wallace discussed this problem as it relates to the museum world.² His study focused on American museums built since the mid-nineteenth century. Essentially, he found that many well established, highly acclaimed museums were actually quite limited in value because a number of common biases were reflected in them. Some, like John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s famous restoration project at Colonial Williamsburg, were found wanting because they concerned themselves exclusively with the elite of the society. In the case of Colonial Williamsburg, the black slaves who made up 90 per cent of the population of this eighteenth-century Virginia colony were virtually ignored. In other museums, like Henry Ford's 1929 re-creation of a pre-industrial

* "Concerning Work" was produced with financial assistance from the Museums Assistance Programme of the National Museums of Canada, the Manitoba Employment Action Programme, Department of Labour and Employment Action Services, and the Government of Manitoba.

American community at Greenfield Village, the lives of craftworkers, farmers, and domestic labourers were made the centre of attention, while bankers, politicians and others who constituted the upper stratum of society were excluded. In neither case were the political, social or economic realities of the society explored.

More recent museums have attempted to examine developments in agriculture or industry, but often they focus narrowly on the technology itself, instead of on the people who operated or manufactured it. Objects are divorced from the work process, and the social relations of production are ignored. An incomplete, if not misleading, interpretation of the past is thus presented.

Guided by the new social history, which seeks to examine all facets of society and the interrelationships among them, the "Concerning Work" project of the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature set out to explore the subject of work in Canada, from historical, contemporary, and futuristic perspectives. It focused on the labour process — the social relations in the work-place — to consider how the organization of work in our society has affected and will affect the lives of Canadian working people.

In the thirteen months of programming prior to the opening of the exhibit, an expansive array of topics was explored within monthly segments that focused on major themes like "Attitudes Toward Work" and sub-topics as diverse as "Alienation from Work," "The Theology of Work" and "Handicapped Workers." Other monthly themes were "The History of Work in Canada," which concentrated on the impact of the industrial revolution and on working life in the new factories; "Women and Work"; "Preparing for Work"; "The History of the Canadian Labour Movement"; "Living Without Work," which included unemployment, work-sharing, leisure and retirement; "Culture of Work"; and "Future of Work," especially the micro-electronic revolution.

Many different programming formats were incorporated into the project: theatrical and musical performances, films, work-place tours, university courses, lectures and other public presentations, workshops, festivals, demonstrations, and, of course, museum exhibits. Many individuals and organizations from the Winnipeg community and beyond became involved in the organization of these events. To some extent, therefore, the Concerning Work project was akin to conceptual art — the work and cooperation involved in making the project "work" was an accomplishment in itself.

The exhibit "Concerning Work" was seen as a final, summary statement of all that had gone before. The question of whether the exhibit should or should not coincide with the related programming was discussed at length. It was decided that, given the vastness and complexity of the



Fig. 2. Transition Section. The micro-chip intensified automation and the replacement of workers with machines, yet many jobs still require traditional skills and physical labour. Artifacts include Heathkit analog computer (top right), microprocessor module and computer circuit boards (middle right), computer memory core (centre), teletype machine (top left), and in the foreground, hammer, level, chainsaw, hardhat, lunchbox, and briefcase. (Photo: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.)

subject under consideration, it would be better first to explore the many issues involved and then to present the exhibit to a somewhat prepared audience.

This strategy was not without its problems. Clearly, not everyone who viewed the exhibit — even in Winnipeg — would have participated in the "Concerning Work" programmes. It was hoped, however, that widespread publicity about the project and the dissemination of the special "Concerning Work" bi-monthly Calendar of Events would help to prepare the wider audience. Also, to facilitate the interpretation of the exhibit, the Museum diverged from its normal practice and, with the assistance of the National Museums of Canada, produced a catalogue to accompany the exhibit. Carefully prepared by the curators involved, this document explored the primary themes of the exhibit, outlined the programme that pre-

ceded it, and explained the rationale for the project as a whole.

The "Concerning Work" exhibit could not begin to do all that the preceding programmes had done. But, for the first time in a museum context, it explored the major trends in technological development in the labour process in Canada. Technological innovation is often perceived as a liberating force, as the means "by which man progressively masters his environment."⁵ But history has shown that it has also generated serious social, political and economic problems. Industrialization in Canada in the nineteenth century meant dramatic increases in productivity and profits, and made a wide variety of labour-saving implements and products commonly available. The new factories created hundreds of thousands of jobs for Canadians, but the reorganization of the work-place

that was necessary for industrialization to occur also had less welcome implications for Canadian workers.

The "Concerning Work" exhibit focuses on the impact that change has had on the lives of working women and men in Canada since 1850 and examines the ways in which workers have responded to these developments. It concludes by casting ahead to the year 2000 to consider the possible effects in the work-place of the "second industrial revolution" of microtechnology.

Perhaps no exhibit ever fulfills all the expectations of those involved in producing it, or perhaps it is a high art form that takes many, many years of experience to achieve. As well, the various individuals involved in an effort of this kind obviously have different expectations and goals. In any exhibit, a compromise must be reached between content — what the curators want — and the limits imposed by design considerations.

From the curatorial perspective, "Concerning Work" succeeded in many ways. The overall concept, as presented in the catalogue, was controlled by the curators and met their expectations. Many themes and ideas which they considered important were presented in the exhibit. Artifacts that seldom see the light of day became a part of the display, and many excellent photographs, slides, and other graphic images were included.

Unfortunately, many artifacts initially intended for exhibit were excluded at various points throughout the development of the final product. Interpretive label copy deemed necessary by the curators was reduced, and reduced again, due to space limitations. An early interest in presenting the "sights, sounds, and smells" of the work-place was never realized. An attempt was made, however, through the designers' initiative, to create an appropriate work-related ambience by using a scaffolding structure and wooden crates.

The struggle to make form and function one was certainly played out in the production of this exhibit. All those involved, from the Curatorial Division, Design, Conservation, or elsewhere, made a sincere effort to produce the best possible exhibit. As the exhibit neared completion it became clear that, time and resources permitting, improvements could be made in terms of interpretation, design, and security. Some artifacts had to be removed from the exhibit before it travelled, for example, and one important item, an irreplaceable, ultra-modern "display phone," generously provided by Northern Telecom, disappeared from the exhibit during its final week in Winnipeg. We learned a great deal from the experience and hope to reflect this knowledge in the next such effort.

"Concerning Work," and the programme of which it was a part, was a unique project that represented a major undertaking on the part of the staff of the Manitoba



Fig. 3. Beyond 1984 Section. Computers and robots will alter most occupations though some jobs, like firefighting, will still depend on human strength and skill. The potential for easier, more productive work and increased leisure time is counterbalanced by the possibility of more tedious jobs and higher levels of unemployment. Artifacts are (top left to right) computer terminal, display phone, Black Brant 10 weather research rocket, and (bottom left) fishing rod and basket and (bottom right) firefighter's hat. (Photo: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.)

Museum of Man and Nature. While a formal evaluation has yet to be done, it is safe to say that it was a project of major importance in terms of contemporary efforts by historians and museum workers to "re-discover and re-interpret the world of work."⁴ The project achieved some important goals. It necessitated the sharing of work and decision-making among many staff members. It promoted the concept of integrated programming, both with groups outside the Museum and within it. It reached deep into the community, and involved many new faces in Museum activities. And, it brought working people into the Museum, both figuratively and literally.

It is hoped that "Concerning Work" will be recognized as a serious effort to contribute toward the development of a new social and material history of Canada, one that reflects the lives of all Canadians, and not just the few.

Curators: Sharon Reilly, Gerry Berkowski, Edith Burley

Designers: Bill Little, Eric Crone, Barb Roney, Cathy Wickett, David Hopper, Alan Einarson

NOTES

1. Many of the ideas discussed here were first presented by Sharon Reilly at the Canadian Museums Association's Annual Meeting (Halifax, May 1982) and at the Ontario Museum Association Heritage Conference "Industrious in Their Habits: Rediscovering

the World of Work" (Toronto, January 1983). See also the exhibition catalogue, *Concerning Work: Change in the Work Process in Canada 1850-2000*.

2. Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," *Radical History Review* 25 (1981), pp. 63-96.
3. T.K. Derry and Trevor Williams, *A Short History of Technology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 3.
4. In January 1983 the Ontario Museum Association organized a major heritage conference entitled "Industrious in Their Habits: Rediscovering the World of Work." The conference was based on the premise that although people spend much of their lives at work, this area of human history has remained relatively unexplored by museums. The conference brought together more than 25 speakers from the museum world and the academic community to examine the changing nature and processes of work in Canada over the past 150 years under the following subjects: Work in the Home, Work on the Farm, Work in Industry, Work in the Professions. The aim of the conference was to assist museum workers in using their collections to research and interpret this important facet of social history. A word-processed publication based on the papers delivered at the conference is available from the Ontario Museum Association at a modest cost. For more information please contact the OMA, 38 Charles St. E., Toronto, Ontario, M4Y 1T1 or call (416) 923-3868. (Editor's Note: The *Material History Bulletin* is publishing a number of the conference papers — No. 19: Hilary Russell, "Canadian Ways": An Introduction to Comparative Studies of Housework, Stoves, and Diet in Great Britain and Canada; Ian Radforth, *In the Bush: The Changing World of Work in Ontario's Pulpwood Logging Industry during the Twentieth Century*; W. John McIntyre, *From Workshop to Factory: The Furnituremaker*; Marilyn J. Barber, *Below Stairs: The Domestic Servant*. No. 20: Alison Prentice, *From Household to School House: The Emergence of the Teacher as Servant of the State*. Forthcoming: Ernst W. Stieb, *A Professional Keeping Shop: The Nineteenth-Century Apothecary*.)

Sharon Reilly

Of Men and Wood

"Of Men and Wood," National Museum of Man. Curator: Jean-Pierre Hardy. Designer: Leo Saccu. Travelling exhibit. Opened July 1982. National tour: December 1982-April 1986, 15 locations.

Veteran museum-goers often see exhibits that glorify the "marvels" of modern technology in this or that industry. Fortunately, this exhibit presents a less egregious interpretation of the history of the forest industries of eastern Canada because it reveals, as the others usually fail to do, how industrial capitalism has impinged upon the lives of workers caught up in the world of wood. The exhibit warns viewers that the reality of the lumberjack's life contrasted sharply with the romantic images spawned by songs and stories, although the reasons for this tend to remain buried in a montage of pictures, artifacts, and text. The fact that the human "commodity" in forest enterprise receives as much emphasis as forest products is certainly



Fig. 1. Exhibit "hub" on the left showing barrelmaking and caulking. (Photo: National Museums of Canada [NMC], neg. no. 82-9443.)