

## Rapports de colloques

### Museums and Women's History

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*"Teaching Women's History: Challenges and Solutions," a conference organized by the Canadian Committee on Women's History*

Approximately 120 individuals gathered at Trent University's Lady Eaton College in Peterborough, Ontario, from August 20–22, 1993, to share ideas and information about teaching women's history in Canada today. Most in attendance were university women, from senior professors to graduate students, along with a number of high-school teachers. Also present, and of particular interest to readers of *Material History Review*, was a group of museum curators and other material history specialists, who attended the conference both to learn about current issues in women's history and to share their perspective on the advantages of incorporating material history evidence into the study and interpretation of women's past.

A discussion on the role of museums, historic sites and other such public history venues at an essentially university-oriented conference was possible because of the unusual focus of the meeting. Rather than presenting academic research papers, the gathering focused on teaching women's history – the reasons for doing so and the methodologies involved.

The conference opened with brief, often personal, statements from a number of prominent scholars, which formed the basis for discussions that followed. Speakers addressed the need for feminist historians to move beyond the consideration of class, ethnicity and gender to the issues of race and sexual orientation; to create a truly national history of Canada, rather than being satisfied with less demanding, regional studies that segregate French Canadian scholars and French Canadian history; to place Canadian women's history into a context fully informed by contemporary issues

and conflicts on a global scale; and, finally, to remember the importance of not becoming isolated from the community of women outside the walls of academia, about whom those assembled have chosen to study and write.

Discussions during the conference focused on the continuing impact of the traditional marginalization of women's history and of women as scholars. Specific problems identified included the difficulty women experience in exercising authority in the classroom or in behaving assertively with colleagues. A more universal concern was that academia rewards publishing rather than teaching, professors receive little if any teaching training and academics seldom discuss or evaluate their own teaching practices. Although conference participants had difficulty in agreeing on a definition of 'feminist pedagogy,' confronting the issues they face as women in academia and demonstrating real concern for students and women trying to move into the profession were clearly identified as feminist goals.

Two sessions were organized by the museum group to discuss the use of material history in presenting women's history. The first was a workshop conducted at the Peterborough County Museum by Sir Sandford Fleming museology instructor Helen Knibb before the conference started. This event proved highly successful with the registrants, as most had never had an opportunity to visit a museum "behind the scenes," and all were fascinated with the Museum's diverse collection of artifacts related to the history of women.

Later during the conference, Knibb opened the "Museums as a Teaching Resource" panel session by describing one project she and her students carried out several years ago with the Peterborough County Museum. Although women's history had never been identified as

part of the Museum's collections development strategy, the group meticulously searched all written records and examined the collection itself, and discovered that a huge percentage of the artifacts did, in fact, speak to the history of women. Knibb and her students then transformed this material into an exhibit on the lives of women in Peterborough County. Working on the exhibit raised further questions for the researchers, including the role of women, both as collectors and as donors. The question, "Why this donation?" or, in the case of the curator, "Why this acquisition, at this particular time?" arose repeatedly. As Knibb pointed out, the researcher must be attuned to the social context of the donation, which may be as important as the object itself.

Alan McCullough of the Canadian Parks Service (CPS) discussed new initiatives of the National Historic Sites Program. Since 1919 the Board has commemorated sites and properties deemed to be of national historic significance. Until recently, the program has followed the lead established by traditional Canadian historical writing by commemorating sites reflecting a primarily male-oriented historiography. Most often these were sites related to the fur trade, to military events or personages, or to political leaders. However, according to McCullough, sites in the future are expected to take into account recent developments in Canadian historiography. As well, CPS staff are using recent historical writing to explore new ways to interpret existing sites. Thus, the incorporation of the history of women and of other previously marginalized groups into these interpretive centres is now a major concern, and CPS has invited university scholars and others to assist in developing a plan for the future. Nevertheless, as McCullough explained, a major obstacle exists in CPS's continuing focus on sites as opposed to themes, and on their insistence that these sites be deemed of national, rather than regional or local, significance. What is required, he argued, is a new conceptualization of what it is that makes a site significant.

Freelance curator Linda Dale identified two other barriers to presenting women's history that she has encountered in her work with major museums in the Ottawa region and in Newfoundland. First is the history of museums themselves, with their traditional ties to a prosperous and conservative elite who wish to see their possessions and history preserved. Second, but equally problematic, is the conviction museums have in their own objectivity and

ability to present "the truth," without recognition of their inherent biases or censoring tendencies. Dale argued that museums must be prepared to relinquish a measure of control over collections and exhibits, and the assignment of meaning to objects, to the community whose history is being interpreted.

Kerridwen Harvey, a recent graduate of the University of Toronto museology program, now working with the Canadian Heritage Information Network, echoed Dale's comment that she chose to work in museums because she believed they offered a meaningful and accessible way to deal with important issues. However, as she was disappointed to discover, museums are not 'bastions of radical thought,' and it is the small, privately owned, "eye level" art galleries, not museums, that dare to raise controversial feminist issues. As an example, Harvey cited the *Panache* exhibit at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) (see Exhibit Reviews/Comptes rendus d'expositions), which presented a collection of extravagant and beautiful antique dresses but failed to discuss the social or political context from which they came.

Tina Bates of the CMC also presented a material history perspective and co-ordinated the Museums Session. A relative newcomer to the CMC, Bates argued that the Museum's History Hall has marginalized women by focusing on major, male-dominated economies in which women have been included only sporadically and with little meaning. She questioned, for example, the absence of women and children in exhibits featuring the east coast fishery and lumbering in the inland forests. The limitations of such 'environmental displays' (large, life-like dioramas depicting a given place, time and activity with little, if any, didactic interpretation), Bates argued, are clear in these and other displays. Even where women are mentioned, the complexity of their lives remains unknown. A pioneer house presented with a spinning wheel in the parlour, for example, reinforces the ideology of women remaining in the home while men went out to earn a living. A different presentation might interpret spinning as one of a multitude of ways in which women contributed to the family economy, both within and outside the home. Bates argued that museums must overcome traditional assumptions about gender roles and use exhibits to raise questions as well as to make assertions. She described some of the plans now underway at the museum for achieving these goals, both in future exhibits and in existing displays.

I addressed similar problems with a number of exhibits at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, most of which predate developments in the fields of women's history and social history of the last 15 years. In the earliest exhibits, the role of women is simply subsumed within the history of "man," while later displays incorporate only fleeting images of women. However, recent additions to the permanent galleries are more successful in integrating the experiences of women, and the museum's final permanent gallery, now in the research and planning stages, is intended to go even further toward meeting this goal. As well, various temporary and travelling exhibits in recent years, along with related public and school programs, have directly focused on the experiences of women. One example is the National Museum of Science and Technology exhibit, "Women of Invention," an exhibit on contemporary inventions by Canadian and American women. In conjunction with this exhibit the museum presented its own display of historical inventions by women, as well as an exhibit of inventions by contemporary Manitoba women. The complementary programs, including workshops and guest speakers, proved highly successful, especially with high-school groups.

Most of those present at the Museums Session were curators, museum volunteers or high-school teachers interested in incorporating museum visits into their teaching. The discussion proved lively and resulted in a valuable exchange of ideas, including some planning for how those present might find ways to continue to 'network' or perhaps collaborate on projects in the future.

The greatest opportunity for the museum panelists to share their experiences in inter-

preting women's history with a wider group came in the final session, entitled "Making Women's History Exciting." The ideas introduced by museum speakers were received enthusiastically. Few university or high-school teachers had ever thought, for example, to have students critique a museum exhibit or historic site and consider its underlying assumptions or biases. Similarly, few had ever tried having students create their own small exhibit, or bring an object from home into the classroom, to use it to explore their own family history and relate their personal story to a larger historical picture.

In the final plenary session, a group of high-school presenters reminded the academics that, despite the marginalization they may have experienced as women, they are privileged in having the potential to influence younger women's lives. As feminists, the students pointed out, these teachers have a responsibility to use their authority and power in the classroom, to dare to be controversial and to integrate women of colour and other minorities into women's history. In the case of the museum, the same might be said with regard to collections development and exhibit work.

### **Acknowledgement**

*The author thanks the Canadian Museums Association for facilitating her participation in the Museums Session. The findings of "Teaching Women's History," including a summary paper from the Museums Session, will be published as a teaching manual by the conference organizers. For further information contact Dr. Joan Sangster, Department of History, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario.*

## **Material Culture, the Shape of the Field**

**ADRIENNE D. HOOD**

*A review of the 1993 Winterthur Annual Conference, Winterthur, Delaware, October 8-9, 1993.*

In October 1993, Winterthur Museum held its annual conference; this year's topic was "Material Culture, the Shape of the Field." Co-

organizers, Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison, did an admirable job of selecting 22 papers that drew on a variety of disciplines, with history, folklore, geography, archaeology, anthropology, decorative arts and museology all represented. They grouped these into seven thematic sessions: Perspectives on Material