

Placing Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Canada

Anne Whitelaw
University of Alberta

Abstract: In 2003, the National Gallery of Canada opened its new galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art. Through an analysis of the narrative of the display, this article explores the implications of the introduction of historical Aboriginal objects into the exhibition of Canadian art both for the evaluation of Aboriginal cultural production as art and for the construction of the discourse of Canadian art history. Although there are moments of rupture in the galleries' narrative, the introduction of Aboriginal objects does little to question the aesthetic assumption of the art museum, which frames all works within its walls in terms of Western conceptions of artistic value.

Résumé : En 2003, le Musée des Beaux-Arts du Canada a ouvert ses nouvelles salles d'exposition d'art canadien et autochtone. À partir d'une analyse de la trame narrative dans le processus d'exposition, cet essai explore les conséquences que peuvent avoir l'introduction d'objets historiques autochtones dans le contexte d'art canadien. Ceci, afin d'évaluer la production autochtone en tant qu'oeuvre d'art et afin de développer un discours canadien en ce qui a trait à l'histoire de l'art. Quoiqu'il y ait des instances de rupture dans ce récit, l'insertion d'objets autochtones remet peu en question l'hypothèse esthétique du musée qui situe toutes les oeuvres qui s'y retrouvent dans un contexte de valeur artistique occidentale.

Keywords: Cultural studies; Aboriginal art; Canadian art; Museums

In June 2003, the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) re-opened its Historical Canadian Galleries with a new display that included, for the first time in the institution's 125-year history, the exhibition of Aboriginal objects. For at least the past 50 years, the National Gallery's display of Canadian art has mapped out a conventional narrative of the development of art in Canada from colonization to the present. Aboriginal art was noticeably absent from the National Gallery's displays, making an appearance only in recent years when the Contemporary Galleries began to show the work of First Nations artists in the late 1980s. Although the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural objects was discussed in the planning stages of the new building, the manner in which this integration would be effected could

Anne Whitelaw is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2C9. E-mail: whitelaw@ualberta.ca.

Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 31 (2006) 197-214

©2006 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation

not be resolved, and the Historical Canadian Galleries remained the preserve of artists of Euro-Canadian descent. Under pressure from a number of sources, including the 1992 report of the federal Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, academics, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, the National Gallery—under the curatorial leadership of Denise Leclerc—convened a working group¹ to help design a curatorial program that would enable the integration of Aboriginal objects into the display of Canadian art. The result was *Art of this Land*: a title given to the exhibition on long-term view in the newly renamed Galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal Art.²

Operating from the premise that exhibitions tell stories through the presentation of objects within designated spaces, this article considers the production of art historical narratives in the newly rehung galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art. Specifically, it examines the impact that the introduction of historical Aboriginal objects has had on the existing narrative of Canadian art history presented in the Gallery, and on conceptions of aesthetic value. The relationship between objects of Aboriginal creative expression and Western conceptions of “art” has a long and troubled history that is wholly intertwined with Western systems of categorization and value. The “art-culture system” that James Clifford once described as a “machine for making authenticity” (Clifford, 1988) depended on the reification of differences between the aesthetic and the anthropological in terms of the classification of objects and the establishment of their relative value. But even as those distinctions have been subject to critique in academic literature, the institutions of art and anthropology have continued to maintain these frameworks as the lenses through which objects are viewed. In recent years, First Nations in Canada have fought for greater political representation, and museums of anthropology have reconfigured displays that presented objects as artifacts of vanishing cultures in order to create more accurate representations of First Nations as living communities. Art museums, on the other hand, have shied away from displaying historical objects and have focused their attention on works by contemporary artists of Aboriginal descent whose choice of media and style of execution fit more easily into their existing collections.

The National Gallery of Canada’s decision to venture into the display of historical Aboriginal objects acknowledges the place of First Nations within the Canadian state’s imagined nation, the insertion of these works into the existing narrative of Canadian art history signalling that Aboriginal objects have achieved the status of art that had previously escaped them. As I will argue, however, this rhetoric of inclusion has not been accompanied by a reconsideration of the terms within which “Canadian” art history has been constituted. The objects introduced into the Canadian galleries are presented in such a way as to conform to Western conceptions of aesthetic interest, with the result that the ceremonial character of many of these works is erased. Although the tapes of the consultation meetings (available in the NGC’s library) make clear that the curators recognized the importance of the use-value of these objects, the works themselves on display in the gallery remain overdetermined by the discourse of the art museum, which

privileges modes of seeing over methods of apperception that include the other senses. In a few rooms at the National Gallery, however, the Aboriginal works rupture the smooth flow of artistic development that characterizes the overall narrative of the display, suggesting the possibility of greater interventions into and disruptions of the conventions of Canadian art historical progress that characterize the National Gallery's exhibitions. In what follows, I discuss the new hanging of the Galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Canada and critically examine the place of historical Aboriginal objects within the narrative of the display and in the conception of Canadian art that such a narrative conveys.

Canadian and Aboriginal art on display

Before such an in-depth examination can be undertaken, a brief description of the exhibition for readers unfamiliar with the space is in order. Before 2003, the Historical Canadian Galleries presented the art of French and English Canada from contact to the 1960s. As I have argued elsewhere (Whitelaw, 2000), the works on display construct a coherent narrative of artistic progress from the portraits and religious works of transplanted French artists through depictions of a new frontier and the paintings of members of the Royal Canadian Academy. Artistic independence was achieved in the 1920s with the formation of the Group of Seven, whose evocative depictions of central Canada's "cottage country" led to their frequent celebration as Canada's "national school." The location of the Group of Seven's work in the northernmost corner of the Historical Canadian Galleries at the NGC signals their pivotal position in the history of Canadian art. In this display they constitute the moment when Canadian art is seen to have found its voice and to have broken with the mother countries in terms of both style and subject matter. That this moment of artistic becoming parallels the period most often identified as that when Canada itself achieves the transition from colony to nationhood only further underscores the significance of the Group of Seven and their elevated position as the turning point in the establishment of a distinctly "Canadian" art. From that point to the 1960s, Canadian artists have alternately embraced the landscape tradition enshrined by the group and resisted it by turning to the more international language of abstraction.

This narrative of Canadian artistic and national progress underpins the major Canadian art history texts (Harper, 1966; Reid, 1973). The sequential nature of the exhibition spaces at the National Gallery also makes manifest the developmental nature of this narrative by literally guiding visitors through time. While the openings in the gallery spaces arguably permit disruption of this sequence, the placement of the works of art themselves compel viewers to constantly move forward, enacting the trajectory of artistic and historical progress characteristic of most art museums. (For more on the narrative character of exhibition displays, see Bal, 1996, and Ferguson, 1999.) With the creation of the new galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art, Aboriginal objects have been introduced into the existing display. It should be noted at this juncture that the National Gallery itself does not have a collection of historical objects by Aboriginal producers, so the pieces on exhibit

have been borrowed from museums around the world, including the Canadian Museum of Civilization across the river from the NGC, the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, and the British Museum, London. The lack of collection of historical Aboriginal objects has proven to be both a challenge and an advantage for the curators of *Art of this Land*. On the one hand, it means that elaborate loan agreements need to be negotiated with outside institutions, a process that requires a great amount of time and administrative acumen. On the other hand, the Gallery's lack of collecting history reduces charges of colonialism that have plagued other institutions such as the Canadian Museum of Civilization and provides a tremendous opportunity for curators to select the most interesting works from around the world to incorporate into the display. Although a few Euro-Canadian paintings and sculptures have been removed to make space for the Aboriginal objects, there has been little modification of the dominant narrative of Canadian artistic progress.

Where the display had begun with eighteenth-century secular and religious sculpture from Québec, visitors now entering the galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art are greeted by an introduction to pre-contact objects from a diversity of Aboriginal cultures including Thule, Beothuk, Coast Salish, and Souris. The objects displayed in this first room can be categorized as decorative (a Dorset bear head c. 2,000 years old), functional (a Thule fishing lure c. 500 years old), and spiritual (Plains buffalo effigy c. 500 to 1,000 years old), and are displayed in two large cases on each side of the room, flanking a spotlighted chunk of granite carved with petroglyphs by the Coast Salish people some 5,000 to 8,000 years ago. Although distinct from the rest of the historical galleries in its exclusive presentation of indigenous production, this room functions very much as the introduction to the remainder of the display, both temporally, as it presents pre-contact (and arguably "pre-historic") objects from a diversity of Aboriginal cultures, and epistemologically, as it marks out the new content of the National Gallery's Historical Canadian Galleries.

The rest of the display is arranged both chronologically and geographically to investigate the connections between Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal peoples after contact. For example, the large gallery A-104 *Art in the Maritimes and Ontario 1800-1860* presents an Aniishnaabe bowl in the form of a beaver (c. 1790-1800) alongside landscapes by Robert Whale and genre paintings by Cornelius Krieghoff. In another part of the room, a Mi'kmaq quill box and a pair of Maliseet moccasins are visually paired with an early-nineteenth-century painting of a Mi'kmaq fishing party. The new display continues in this manner, showing beaded clothing from the Plains nations alongside the paintings of Paul Kane, an Algonquin Nation birchbark basket next to works by the Group of Seven, and Northwest Coast carvings and weaving in front of a display of early Emily Carr paintings. As the Canadian Galleries continue, the display shifts somewhat to incorporate works done in Western media—for example, a Daphne Odjig drawing, paintings by Alan Sapp and Alex Janvier—as well as the continuing production of objects in more traditional genres, for example, the magnificent headdress by Kwak-

waka'wakw artist Willie Seaweed that forms the centrepiece of a room dedicated to Modernist painting and sculpture of the 1950s.

For anyone familiar with the old Historical Canadian Galleries at the National Gallery, what is particularly striking about the new display and the accompanying wall texts is how extensive the integration of Aboriginal objects into the galleries has been. There are some exceptions: the galleries devoted to the 1930s and '40s displayed no Aboriginal objects on a winter 2005 visit, and the inclusion in a side gallery of an Anishnaabe decorative plate and a knife and sheath made by a Swampy Cree artist alongside the paintings of the Group of Seven suggests a parallel narrative rather than initiating a dialogue with existing work. In the next room (A-109a), devoted to the later work of the Group of Seven, however, an Algonquin birchbark basket and an Anishnaabe *Wigwas Mamacenawejegan* (bitten birchbark pattern) were placed in the more intimate space of the reconstructed MacCallum-Jackman cottage. As Ruth Phillips pointed out in the March 24, 2002, consultation meeting, this placement is entirely appropriate given that many such objects were created by these communities for the tourist trade and would very likely have been regular features of Muskoka cottage interiors. In addition—although this is likely to change—the displays from the 1950s and 1960s, when many artists of Aboriginal descent were working in “Western” media, have placed the smaller-scale drawings and paintings by Daphne Odjig and Alex Janvier in side rooms. In this latter case, it may be that the already existing “fine art” status of these works required less curatorial intervention in the process of integrating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal objects into the exhibitionary narrative than the historical objects in the 10 previous galleries.

One of the greatest challenges facing the curators of *Art of this Land* was the integration of objects of quite disparate media and with entirely different functions into the much more homogeneous display of Euro-Canadian paintings and sculptures. Aboriginal modes of creative expression encompass objects produced in a multitude of forms that are closely aligned to the traditions and values of the societies themselves. A recent book on Native North American Art (Berlo & Phillips, 1998) has organized its subject matter according to region of production, fully aware of the limitations and arbitrary nature of the selection that such a mode of organization entails. For the curators of *Art of this Land*, objects were selected with particular attention to the geographical proximity of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian cultural producers (e.g., the Mi'kmaq and the art from the Maritime provinces) and coinciding temporal parameters. In addition, the Aboriginal works were selected for the interesting visual comparisons they afforded with the existing Euro-Canadian paintings and sculptures on display, both formally and in terms of subject matter. The basis for the selection of Aboriginal works thus appears to be closely linked to how well they would fit in with the already existing narrative of Canadian art presented at the National Gallery. The territorial expansion and colonization that are the unspoken frameworks for the organization of the display further position the Aboriginal objects as subject to the overarching dis-

course of Canadian art, a position that does little to facilitate a reconsideration of the terms within which their value is assessed.

Exhibiting Aboriginal cultural production

To fully comprehend the significance of the new galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art, changes in the mode of viewing and evaluating Aboriginal art as well as the National Gallery's own collecting history of non-European materials need to be considered. Both topics have been addressed with greater complexity by other authors, but a review of the main tenets of both the intellectual and the institutional histories will frame my analysis of the possibility for a ruptured art historical narrative in the National Gallery's display. Since at least the mid-1980s, there has been a wealth of literature on the presentation of Aboriginal objects in the museum. Much of this literature has come from cultural anthropologists who have correctly argued that the presentation of Aboriginal objects in most institutions has relied on antiquated conceptions of the authenticity of pre-contact indigenous cultures, and the impossibility or undesirability of any link between this idealized, "authentic" past and the present. Representative of this literature is James Clifford's (1987) discussion of the "salvage paradigm" as a means of capturing the belief at the turn of the twentieth century that the vestiges of pre-contact "primitive" societies needed to be preserved as artifacts of the most authentic period of non-Western cultures' existence. Anthropologists in particular were concerned with collecting as many and as varied specimens from such cultures before the inevitable assimilation with European culture became too evident. While there was little desire to ensure the survival of the human members of such cultures, great care was taken to safeguard the more elaborate and significant objects these members produced.

Critiques of exhibitions such as the Glenbow Museum's 1988 exhibition *The Spirit Sings* charged quite rightly that the display of North American Aboriginal objects as artifacts of past civilizations perpetuates conceptions of the "primitive" and the "vanishing race" that underscored anthropological discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *The Spirit Sings*, the dominance of the salvage paradigm was apparent both in the exhibition's uncritical replication of the primeval or pre-"historic" nature of the Aboriginal objects on display and the corresponding inability to establish any relation to living First Nations societies. The critiques that followed *The Spirit Sings* reveal the two main points of contention for critical anthropologists: on the one hand, the lack of connection made in much of the anthropological literature and in museums between the historical objects that are under discussion and the lived experience of Aboriginal peoples in the present. In order to present objects as having value, their historical status and their uniqueness needed to be emphasized. In this view, if a Kwakwaka'wakw transforming mask is shown to have relevance to contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw culture, its value as a significant historical artifact is placed in question. For many anthropologists in the early twentieth century, the disappearance of a culture only served to increase the scholarly and monetary value of the objects that had been collected. The second contention underpinning the critique of the salvage para-

digim is the means through which museums around the world acquired the objects in their collection. Here the term “salvage” stands in for what has largely been the theft of objects from rightful owners, often with the assistance of governmental policies such as the ban of the potlatch ceremony on the west coast of Canada as a way for anthropologists to quickly acquire a broad array of objects of very high quality—what Douglas Cole (1985) has described as the nineteenth century’s “scramble for artefacts.”

Informed by critical anthropology’s analysis of the salvage paradigm, scholars in the early 1990s began to give greater consideration to the role of exhibitions in the constitution of the Aboriginal object as “art” or “artifact.” Many exhibitions since the beginning of the twentieth century have been subject to critical scrutiny, this time primarily by art historians interested in the role of museum displays in making sense of objects of cultural production. From the standpoint of writers on exhibitions, the focus of analysis is the manner in which Aboriginal objects have been put on display—and the frequently resulting disjuncture between these works as artifacts of a given culture and as works of art. As Jackson Rushing (1992) persuasively argues in his examination of the 1941 *Indian Art of the United States* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curators often had difficulty reconciling the aesthetic or visual interest of the objects selected for display with the “primitive” character they attributed to the cultures that produced them. For the curators of this and subsequent exhibitions, much effort was made to present the works in dramatic fashion, often using high-contrast lighting to create an effect of mystery that underscored the object’s assumed primitive status. Such display techniques further isolated the object by presenting it as autonomous from the culture that produced it, strongly conveying the impression of the object’s status as “historical” and thus entirely divorced from any sense of continuing existing society. As a result, the selected objects were presented as anonymous works of disappearing cultures, objects whose pastness was paramount to securing a putative pre-contact authenticity.

The presentation of the object in dramatic isolation also served to focus the viewer’s attention on the formal properties of the object, completing the erasure of any context of production or use from the display. By this strategy, *Indian Art of the United States* is strikingly similar to the Modernist art criticism of the period (Clement Greenberg’s is an obvious example), which emphasized the formal qualities of paintings and sculptures over any examination of the works’ production or reception. For critics and dealers intent on establishing the aesthetic value of non-Western objects, formal analysis enabled the kind of disinterested evaluation of works on the basis of a notion of pure aesthetic form whose evaluative methods, if not criteria, could be used to give relevance to both Western and non-Western works. As became dramatically evident in the now infamous 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Primitivism in the Twentieth Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Aboriginal art has value only insofar as it informs or can be assessed according to Western aesthetic criteria.

A similar set of issues underpins the National Gallery's own history of collecting and exhibiting Aboriginal objects, a history that is intertwined with that of what is now the Canadian Museum of Civilization (see Nemiroff, 1992). The first display of Aboriginal art in the Gallery was the 1927 exhibition *West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, produced in conjunction with Marius Barbeau and the Museum of Man. With its stated aim to "mingle" the work of First Nations and Canadian artists,³ the exhibition brought together a variety of objects including masks, blankets, chests, house posts, sculpted rattles, spoons and other implements, and paintings by Emily Carr, Edwin Holgate, and other Euro-Canadian artists. Although the exhibition is conventionally cited as the event that brought Carr into the mainstream of Canadian art history, it was also a formative moment in the establishment of the West Coast of Canada as the source of "aesthetically significant" Aboriginal cultural production.⁴ The National Gallery only bought one argillite pole from the exhibition, focusing the majority of their purchases on Euro-Canadian artists' representations of West Coast societies. A few exhibitions featuring First Nations art were held in the following decades, including *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada* of 1968, but for the most part responsibility for collecting and exhibiting historical Aboriginal objects remained with the Museum of Man, with the notable exception of Inuit art, which entered the gallery in the late 1950s with the acquisition of a suite of Cape Dorset prints.

Explanations for the Gallery's reluctance to systematically acquire historical First Nations objects bring us back to the fundamental tenets of the salvage paradigm and the broadly held view that Aboriginal objects are of ethnographic rather than aesthetic significance. As was discussed above, the value of Aboriginal objects lay in their ability to testify to the creative products of a vanishing culture, and to an imagined pre-contact authenticity that could not be recovered. As artifacts, then, such objects had no place in an art gallery, where the significance of works was based on a conception of the aesthetic that, although putatively universal in designation, is effectively both historically and geographically specific to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Euro-North American conceptions of artistic and economic value. For Aboriginal works to obtain aesthetic value under these terms would require a complete reinvention of the notion of the aesthetic and, more importantly, a reassessment of First Nations societies as themselves having value. As I suggested earlier, some efforts have been made to ascribe aesthetic value to so-called primitive art, primarily through a focus on the formal qualities of the object. This was the goal of the 1941 *Indian Art of North America* and the 1968 *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art* exhibitions, where the dramatic display of isolated objects served to emphasize design and decoration over contexts of production and use.

The increasing consideration of Aboriginal objects as "art" has occurred, I believe, in large part because of the increasing visibility of artists of Aboriginal descent working in "Western" media and seeking to exhibit their works in mainstream "high art" venues. I will return to the National Gallery to illustrate my point: in 1986, the National Gallery purchased Ojibwa artist Carl Beam's large

multimedia work *The North American Iceberg*, a work that incorporates historical ethnographic photographs of the “Indian,” multiple self-portraits of the artist, images of civil rights and international leaders assassinated for their efforts to achieve a measure of peace, and references to the measuring and data collection practices characteristic of museums and government departments, whose regular stock-takings of Native peoples have served to reinforce the classifications and stratifications originated by anthropologists in the nineteenth century.

The North American Iceberg is significant because it was the first contemporary work by a First Nations artist acquired by the NGC, and it would be several years before others entered the collection. However, since the early 1990s—perhaps most obviously since the 1992 *Land Spirit Power* exhibition—the Gallery has attempted to more systematically collect the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists, produced in both traditional and Western modes. For many years these pieces have been on regular, rotating display on the top floor of the Contemporary wing in what has colloquially been referred to as the “Aboriginal Room.” According to recently hired assistant curator of Contemporary Art Greg Hill, “the room” will soon be done away with as he attempts to integrate the display of contemporary art by Aboriginal artists into the Gallery as a whole (personal communication, March 4, 2005). Thus, the greater visibility of contemporary art by artists of Aboriginal descent at the Gallery and elsewhere in Canada—e.g., Edward Poitras was Canada’s representative at the 1995 Venice Biennale and Brian Jungen was the recipient of the first Sobey art prize in 2002—suggests that there is a way of thinking about Aboriginal work in artistic terms that are not necessarily subservient to Western aesthetics. When it comes to historical objects—the primary category of Aboriginal works in the new National Gallery display—any assessment of aesthetic value is complicated by the necessary attention to the object’s original use value, a consideration that rarely attends to contemporary works. Given that historical Aboriginal objects are conventionally exhibited in anthropological or historical museums, their presence in the National Gallery of Canada alongside works of Euro-Canadian art forces a reconsideration of the aesthetic terms within which historical objects of Aboriginal origin are evaluated.

The new Canadian and Aboriginal galleries and Canadian art history

The National Gallery’s new display of Canadian and Aboriginal art provides an opportunity to rethink the *narrative* of Canadian art history as it has been constituted by the Gallery and to reflect on the conceptions of aesthetic value—as they pertain to both Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian objects—that underpin that narrative. The collocation of objects in the National Gallery of Canada is significant, for the institution itself signals the dominance of the aesthetic in the categorization of all objects exhibited within its walls, at the same time as it lays claim to a certain authority in telling the story of Canadian art. For the curators of *Art of this Land*, the inclusion of historical Aboriginal objects is intended to expand the existing narrative of Canadian art history to include the hitherto marginalized cultural traditions of Canada’s First Peoples. The inclusion of objects without questioning the epistemological grounds on which Canadian art history is constructed,

however, does not automatically confer art historical status onto historical Aboriginal objects. In fact, the narrative of Canadian artistic development described earlier remains virtually intact despite the presence of objects produced by non-Euro-Canadian peoples throughout the exhibition.

A more in-depth analysis of one room in the display provides the opportunity to examine this issue in more detail. Room A-105, *Paul Kane and the Plains Artists*, is the fifth room in the galleries and explores the relationship between Paul Kane, Canadian artist, and the Plains Nations he encountered on his two ventures to the West. Paul Kane has long had a significant place in the history of Canadian art: an artist of Irish heritage who moved to Toronto as a young man, he achieved great fame through his written and visual records of his travels to the western prairie when it was still considered a wilderness to be vanquished. Along with Cornelius Krieghoff, whose genre paintings of happy French-Canadian and Aboriginal “folk” were popular with British soldiers in the mid-nineteenth century, Kane is considered to be the first major Canadian artist, the literal beginning of many histories of Canadian art written prior to the 1960s. In form as well as subject matter these two artists are viewed as the initiators of a visual language that produced a lineage of authentically Canadian painters: artists, that is, who derived an original non-imitative approach to the depiction of the Canadian landscape. Kane’s significance in particular is conventionally located in the directness of his sketches (all done *in situ*) and the authenticity of his representations of the prairies and its indigenous inhabitants.

This view has largely been preserved in the new galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art, except that objects produced by members of the Plains nations (Nakoda, Blackfoot, Peigan, Metis) have been introduced into the display. The relationship between these cultures is detailed in an extended wall text, which functions here and elsewhere in the exhibit to situate the encounter between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures, and to provide a framework for understanding the Aboriginal objects that have become part of the display. The panel is worth quoting in full:

In this gallery, the works of the Irish born, Toronto painter Paul Kane (1810-71) are grouped with objects from the northwest Plains cultures that he encountered on his travels across Canada in 1846-48. Inspired by American artist George Catlin (1796-1872) who painted and wrote about western Native Americans, Kane determined to make a visual record of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Canadian West and their customs.

In 1846, with the assistance of Sir George Simpson, the governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, Kane travelled to Fort William (now Thunder Bay) to Fort Vancouver on the Columbus River in present-day Washington State. In October of 1848, he returned to Toronto with some 700 sketches of Western landscapes, customs and visages from his meetings with over 800 different Aboriginal nations.

For thousands of years, the Plains peoples whom Kane depicted had roamed the sweeping grasslands of the prairies, following the seasonal migration of the buffalo that provided them with food, clothing, shelter, and tools. The arrival of

the horse in the 1730s greatly facilitated hunting, as did the firearms and metal tools obtained from trade with the Europeans. The Plains peoples expressed their aesthetics in the embellishment of everyday and ceremonial objects that affirmed the spiritual relation between humanity and nature. Women created geometric or abstract designs that were painted, beaded and quill worked on garments and containers. Men tended to use representational art to narrate dream visions or achievements in hunting and war.

The collocation of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian cultural production outlined in this wall panel is characteristic of the narrative that frames the exhibition as a whole. First, a connection is established between Kane (the dominant and named artist) and the First Nations cultures he would have encountered on the western prairie. This “contact” is visually established by the placement of three Kane paintings of native subjects on the wall directly facing the doorway leading into the room, in front of which is a large flat display case in which three items of clothing are laid out: Nakoda suit strips, a Blackfoot beaded bodice, and a Peigan beaded breast plate. Three more paintings are visible on the left wall as the room is entered, and an elaborately embroidered Metis vest and a brilliantly coloured Peigan roach headdress are presented on either side of the doorway. The wall text then goes on to provide a historical context for Kane’s paintings by recapping his travels and situating his paintings in terms of a larger desire on the part of nineteenth-century Western artists to produce a visual record of the Aboriginal nations on the Prairies.

The second half of the panel is devoted to the expressive culture of the Plains nations that were the subject of Kane’s paintings. Here the text begins with a brief assessment of the impact of contact on the culture of the Plains peoples (the introduction of the horse and firearms), then moves on to explicitly discuss the aesthetic character of the objects on display and the traditional ways of working among the First Nations in this area. In terms of providing a narrative framework for all the objects on display, the wall text is intriguing for the consistent historical framing of both Kane and the Plains cultures. Both the paintings and the beaded clothing are presented as the products of a historical period, and related to clearly defined functions: Kane’s paintings are a visual record of the western prairie and its inhabitants; the beaded garments of the Plains peoples are ceremonial objects that provide viewers with a glimpse into a whole way of life. Unlike earlier iterations of this room, where Kane’s paintings were the only representations of Plains societies, the complex patterns and beautiful beadwork of the Blackfoot, Peigan, and other First Nations’ objects offer a striking and insistent rebuttal to the Euro-Canadian view.

As in the rest of the exhibition, the text panel for *Paul Kane and the Plains Artists* seeks to frame the encounter between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples as a peaceable process of contact and interaction, a view reinforced by the co-presence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal objects within a single gallery space. While coexistence is certainly apparent in all the galleries, the interaction between works is much less evident. The Kane room remains the exception: access to the paintings is hampered by the presentation of Aboriginal objects in a

large display case around which viewers must move if they want to get close to the works by the Western artist. This mode of presentation can be read as a subversion of conventional art historical hierarchies since here it is the Aboriginal work that commands visual interest and enforces specific viewing patterns. As if to underscore this view, the only mention of aesthetics in the *Paul Kane and the Plains Artists* text panel is in reference to the Aboriginal objects, suggesting either that Western “art” aesthetics are immediately understood and assumed by the visitor to an art gallery or, more cynically, that the ultimate appeal or interest of the Kane paintings is historical rather than aesthetic. The rest of the rooms in the galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art, however, provide a markedly different experience in that while coexisting in space, Euro-Canadian works and Aboriginal works do not engage in the kind of dialogue that is occurring in the Kane room. The implications of this disjuncture are crucial for the development of a narrative of Canadian art history that seeks to establish a space for historical Aboriginal expressive culture; one of the main impediments to the formation of this narrative is the fundamentally distinct nature of both the objects themselves and the way they have been viewed historically and aesthetically.

Most written accounts of the history of art in Canada ignore the contribution of Aboriginal artists or include them in separate chapters that, while exploring the subject in some detail, effectively marginalize Aboriginal cultural production by isolating it from the larger narrative. Recently published books by Robert Belton (2002), Anne Newlands (2000), and Joan Murray (1999) include works by First Nations and Inuit artists; Joan Murray’s focus on the twentieth century even permits her to integrate art by Aboriginal artists within broader discussions of the interest in identity and politics by artists across Canada during the 1980s and ’90s. The broader temporal scope of Belton’s and Newlands’ books, on the other hand, has allowed for the inclusion of both historical and contemporary works, but the pictorial emphasis of these texts tends to isolate all the works included, with the result that the place of Aboriginal artists within the larger history of Canadian art is not explored in any detail.

For the most part, “Canadian art” as an academic object of study has largely ignored artistic production by Aboriginals—especially historical work—or has made them the singular object of analysis. Interaction or association has largely been restricted to the study of the impact of Euro-Canadian anthropologists, curators, and artists who have mined the expressive history of Aboriginal material culture for their own gain. One exception is the work of Ruth Phillips, whose 1998 book *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900* explores the interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Specifically, she argues that the expressive culture of First Nations communities across eastern North America evidence similar motifs and patterns, suggesting a high degree of cross-fertilization and influence amongst Aboriginal cultures in this region. In addition, the diversity of objects produced during this period—from ceremonial objects to curios and tourist items—as well as the number of objects

collected by non-Aboriginals suggests that there was a far greater level of interaction between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals than might be inferred by museum displays or art historical texts. Phillips' publication aside, the history of Aboriginal cultural expression has remained on the sidelines of narratives of Canadian art history except insofar as Aboriginal figures themselves have frequently been deployed as subjects of representation.

For its part, the history of Aboriginal art in the Canadian context has grown exponentially in the past two decades and has ranged from analyses of the formal aspects of Aboriginal cultural expression to the exploration of the social uses of specific ceremonial and cultural objects. Pre-twentieth-century objects in particular were difficult to integrate meaningfully into existing art history because of the continuing resonance of the salvage paradigm's conceptualization of these objects as relics of vanished civilizations. In contrast, work by contemporary Aboriginal artists—largely produced in the media of Western painting, photography, installation, or sculpture—is more easily assimilated into traditional art historical discourse because of a shared formal vocabulary that can be readily recognized as Art. Hence the relative proliferation of exhibitions of works by artists of Aboriginal descent in the 1980s and '90s.

By creating the exhibit *Art of this Land* and establishing the galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art, the National Gallery's curators sought to literally make room for the work of Aboriginal artists by incorporating it into the display narrative. Like the art historical accounts described above, however, the mode of exhibition isolates the objects from one another and largely prevents any kind of productive dialogue between works of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art. On several visits to the new galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art, I was intrigued to watch gallery goers move from display case to display case, entranced by the Aboriginal objects and virtually ignoring (at least until the room containing the works of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven) the Euro-Canadian artists whose works graced the gallery's walls. Although this mode of viewing might be explained by the novelty of seeing Aboriginal objects amongst Euro-Canadian painting and sculpture, it is the focused nature of the trajectory that is most suggestive here. Walking through the galleries, it is the *differences* between the Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian objects that are most striking: bowls, moccasins, spoons, garments are examined for their function as much as for their aesthetic character. Paintings and sculptures, on the other hand, are much more clearly objects of aesthetic interest, particularly given the inherent nature of the museum to subsume any function an artwork might have once had (e.g., documentary, religious) within the overarching framework of the aesthetic.

The characterization of objects as "art" or "artifact" that has underpinned much of the anthropological and art historical writing about Aboriginal cultural production thus returns as a fundamental means of interpreting the display at the NGC. On the one hand, the display of objects in splendid isolation throughout the exhibition privileges the kind of aestheticizing aura that Rushing is wary of in his assessment of the 1941 *Indian Art of the United States* exhibition. Many of the

clothing items—the richly beaded Blackfoot bodice and Nakoda suit strips displayed alongside the Paul Kane paintings, for example—can only be displayed flat, reinforcing their decorative qualities and diminishing the vital connection between such objects and the ceremonies for which they were produced. The enclosing of most of these objects in Plexiglas cases further foregrounds their interest as visually striking objects, as treasures of the museum rather than as valued components of a complex, living culture. Many writers on the presentation of Aboriginal objects argue that the dominance of the visual in the museum subsumes the multisensory nature of the aesthetic encounter with such ceremonial objects in use (Jessup, 2002). Elements of touch, sound, taste, smell, and sight were integral to the experience of most historical Aboriginal objects, and some museums of ethnography and anthropology have attempted to display their collections in ways that include more than one mode of apperception. As a response to the continuing dominance of the salvage paradigm in the discourse of anthropological display, the inclusion of songs, stories, and smells not only situates objects in the context of their possible uses, but also affords an opportunity for historical objects to be linked to living communities, rather than be viewed as artifacts of a distant past.

From the opposite standpoint, the presentation of Aboriginal objects in proximity to Western objects within the context of the art gallery produces an entirely new set of associations than had heretofore been possible. Unlike the 1927 exhibition *West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, the Aboriginal objects in *Art of this Land* are displayed in a manner virtually identical to the Euro-Canadian paintings and sculptures: three-dimensional objects are placed on pedestals and under Plexiglas, two-dimensional objects in frames. In this reading of the display, the visual aesthetic of Aboriginal objects is foregrounded in order for greater ease of comparison with Euro-Canadian art, a view that makes introducing works of historical Aboriginal production into the narrative of Canadian art history that much easier. By erasing the elements that situate objects within the context of specific and diverse lived cultures and emphasizing through strategies of display a visual rhetoric that fits more easily within the aesthetic discourse of the museum, Aboriginal objects can be given the attributes of art and are more readily incorporated into the discourse of art history, with all the attendant status of such an inclusion. The underlying presupposition of such a mode of incorporation is that objects produced by all Aboriginal societies have their own complex aesthetic systems, which deserve to be recognized and celebrated with the same intellectual seriousness as Western fine art objects. The key distinction between this view and that of the formalist view of Modernist art critics outlined earlier is that the terms of aesthetic evaluation to which Aboriginal objects would be subject would have to be specific to the producing culture; the identification of “affinities” between historical Aboriginal objects and key masterpieces of Euro–North American modern art must be entirely rejected from the evaluative process.

The development of such a mode of aesthetic evaluation is just beginning and must still address the fundamental use-value that attaches to ceremonial and other

objects. One avenue worthy of exploration is a reconfiguration of the manner in which Western art is evaluated, paying increasing attention to the functions of artworks as spiritual, historical, or educational objects rather than focusing exclusively on their aesthetic character. For now, the presentation of Aboriginal objects within the art museum seeks to integrate such objects in the display as works of art without disturbing the methodological assumptions of the discipline of art history. Yet the potential for rupture still exists: as in the *Paul Kane and the Plains Artists* room, Aboriginal objects can rhetorically as well as literally intrude into the viewing space of the Euro-Canadian paintings and sculptures that remain the dominant components of Canadian art history, so their introduction into spaces conventionally occupied by Euro-Canadian artists holds the potential for a reconsideration of the terms of the dominant narrative.

Here, an interesting point of comparison can be found within the Gallery itself, in the display of Inuit art, located one floor below the Canadian and Aboriginal galleries in a well-appointed room of its own. The art of the Inuit has a vastly different history in terms of both aesthetic developments and its relationship to mainstream Euro-Canadian art institutions. The well-known printmaking techniques of artists in Cape Dorset and elsewhere were the brainchild of James Houston, a Euro-Canadian artist and writer who introduced the art trade into a declining northern community in the late 1950s to help its citizens achieve a measure of economic independence (Hessel, 1998). The popularity of the prints and carvings produced by this and other Inuit communities was almost instantaneous and managed to secure an active and widespread network of collectors, who in turn lobbied for recognition of these art forms by mainstream galleries in Canada and the United States. The aesthetic character of work produced by the Inuit has since become internationally celebrated, and important collections can be found at the National Gallery as well as at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, which has been actively collecting Inuit sculpture and prints since the mid-1950s. The art of other Aboriginal nations, on the other hand, has not benefited from such recognition and has for the most part been viewed as curios or as quaint folk arts produced by a disappearing culture. The placement of the National Gallery's Inuit collection in a space virtually invisible to most visitors, however, can be seen to locate the work as separate but equal and allows for the perpetuation of work that is traditional in conception and execution.

What, then, is the future for the galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art at the National Gallery of Canada? As one of the few institutions in Canada and elsewhere that has sought to integrate the production of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures,⁵ the Gallery is knowingly entering into uncharted waters. A federal institution, it has a mandate to "preserv[e] and promot[e] the heritage of Canada and all its peoples" (Canada, 1990), including the material culture of the First Peoples, much of which entered into the collections of Western museums around the same time as the new Dominion was systematically eliminating the producers of those objects. The exhibition *Art of this Land* is thus significant on many levels: it has brought historical Aboriginal works into the National Gallery virtually for the

first time since 1927, it presents these objects as having aesthetic as well as historical value, and it has visually expanded the conception of “Canadian” cultural production from the sole purview of artists of Euro-Canadian descent to one that includes the more long-standing production of Canada’s First Peoples. While the acknowledgment of the importance of Aboriginal material culture is admirable, the display of Canadian and Aboriginal art in these galleries is not a complete success. Much of the Aboriginal work included in the exhibition is ceremonial in nature and can only be truly understood in the context of its use. The privileging of the visual that characterizes the art museum effectively erases the multisensory experience these objects demand, requiring them to conform to Western ways of seeing.

The new galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art at the National Gallery of Canada are not without their problems, but they provide an entry point into a discussion of the construction of art historical narratives and permit a rethinking of the distinctions between “art” and “artifact” that have preoccupied scholars for the past 20 years. The inclusion of Aboriginal objects in its permanent exhibitions is a necessary step for the Gallery at this time: it has been mandated by Aboriginal groups, artists, and scholars, and for the most part, these groups appear to be satisfied with the content and manner of the display. What such a display engenders is a rethinking of the categories of Aboriginal art and Canadian art; the practice of art history as it occurs in the museum; and, now that Aboriginal objects are “in” the art gallery, a consideration of the implications of this presence for the production of a critical dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Kim Sawchuk for all her editorial suggestions and encouragement, as well as the three anonymous reviewers whose comments helped me focus my argument.

Notes

1. Participants in the working group were Stephen Augustine, hereditary chief of the Mi’kmaq nation and acting curator of Eastern Maritimes Ethnology, Canadian Museum of Civilization; François-Marc Gagnon, director, Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowski Institute for Studies in Canadian Art, Concordia University; Tom Hill, director, Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, Ontario; Gerald McMaster, at that time deputy assistant director for Cultural Resources, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.; Ruth B. Phillips, then director, University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology; Marie Routledge, then associate curator of Inuit Art, National Gallery of Canada; and Judy Thompson, curator of Western Subarctic Ethnology, Canadian Museum of Civilization. There were two major consultations with this working group. The project was spearheaded by Denise Leclerc, associate curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery, with the assistance of Greg Hill, who at the time was assistant curator of Modern Canadian Art and who is currently assistant curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery. Also participating in the working group was Charles Hill, curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery, and representatives from Exhibitions and Installations, Design, Education, Public Affairs and Cybermuse. The two main meetings of the working group were held on March 4, 2001, and March 24, 2002.
2. The nomenclature is somewhat confusing: the exhibition *Art of this Land* encompasses the whole of the display in the galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art. On the National Gallery’s handout

map and website, <http://www.gallery.ca>, the space itself is titled "Galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal Art," but the first room of these galleries contains the main title "Art of this Land," and there is also reference on the website to the exhibition *Art of this Land*.

3. The exhibition catalogue states: "The purpose of [this exhibition] . . . is to mingle for the first time the art work of the Canadian West Coast tribes with that of our more sophisticated artists in an endeavour to analyze their relationships to one another, if such exist, and particularly to enable this primitive and interesting art to take a definite place as one of the most valuable of Canada's artistic productions" (*Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art*, 1927, p. 2).
4. The predominance of West Coast societies in histories of First Nations cultural production is reflected in its inclusion at the beginning of Newton MacTavish's *Fine Arts in Canada* of 1925 (originally published by Macmillan Company of Canada, Toronto).
5. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa has a permanent exhibit *Made in New Zealand* that incorporates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal objects; similar strategies are being explored in several museums in Australia and at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

References

- Bal, Mieke. (1996). Telling, showing, showing off. *Double exposures: The subject of cultural analysis*. (pp. 13-56) New York, NY: Routledge.
- Belton, Robert. (2001). *Sights of resistance: Approaches to Canadian visual culture*. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press.
- Berlo, Janet, & Phillips, Ruth B. (Eds.). (1998). *Native North American art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Canada. (1990). *Museums Act*, c.3. Assented to January 30, 1990.
- Clifford, James. (1987). Of other peoples: Beyond the 'salvage' paradigm. In Hal Foster (Ed.), *Discussions in contemporary culture* no. 1. (pp. 121-130). Seattle, WA: Bay Press.
- Clifford, James. (1988). On collecting art and culture. In *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature and art* (pp. 215-251). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cole, Douglas. (1985). *Captured heritage: The scramble for northwest coast artefacts*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Exhibition of Canadian west coast art: Native and modern*. (1927). Ottawa, ON: National Gallery of Canada.
- Ferguson, Bruce. Exhibition rhetorics. In Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, & Sandy Nairne (Eds.), *Thinking about exhibitions* (pp. 175-190). New York, NY: Routledge, 1999.
- Harper, J. Russell. (1966). *Painting in Canada: A history*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Hessel, Ingo. (1998). *Inuit art: An introduction*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Jessup, Linda, with Bagg, Shannon (Eds.). (2002). *On aboriginal representation in the gallery*. Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- MacTavish, Newton. (1925). *The fine arts in Canada*. Toronto, ON: Macmillan Company of Canada.
- Murray, Joan. (1999). *Canadian art in the twentieth century*. Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press. National Gallery of Canada. [Website]. URL: <http://www.gallery.ca> [February 21, 2006].
- Nemiroff, Diana. (1992). Modernism, nationalism, and beyond: A critical history of exhibitions of First Nations art. In Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, & Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Eds.), *Land spirit power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* (pp.16-41). Ottawa, ON: National Gallery of Canada.

- Newlands, Anne (2000). *Canadian art: From its beginnings to 2000*. Willowdale, ON: Firefly.
- Phillips, Ruth B. (1998). *Trading identities: The souvenir in Native North American art from the northeast, 1700-1900*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press & Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Reid, Dennis. (1973). *A concise history of Canadian painting*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Rushing, W. Jackson. (1992). Marketing the affinity of the primitive and the modern: René d'Harnoncourt and "Indian Art of the United States." In Janet Berlo (Ed.), *The early years of Native American art history* (pp. 191-236). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press & Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.
- Whitelaw, Anne. (2000). "Whiffs of balsam, pine and spruce": Art museums and the production of a "Canadian" aesthetic. In Jody Berland & Shelley Hornstein (Eds.), *Capital culture: A reader on modernist legacies, state institutions, and the value(s) of art* (pp. 122-137). Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.