

Keep first nations culture out of art's 'melting pot'

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ABSTRACT

[...] as in the case of natural history museums in the U.S., Canadian museums historically viewed first nations as fated to fade out under the mightier influence of western industrialism and market economies, leaving their material culture as curiosities and singular witnesses to their former monarchy over the land.

FULL TEXT

The faculty of arts at the University of British Columbia is a vibrant community of scholars whose expertise ranges from the humanities to creative and performing arts and social sciences. Here we continue a series of essays that aim to deepen our understanding of the world in which we live, and offer provocative and informed views on cultural issues.

-Nancy Gallini, Dean of Arts, UBC MOA director

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Canada is often contrasted to the United States by its different approach to the incorporation of immigrants. Canada, so the argument goes, following its multicultural stand, encourages immigrants to preserve and share their cultural heritage under the general umbrella of an all encompassing mosaic-like Canadian identity, while the United States, using the metaphor of the 'melting pot', expects a high degree of conformity with core American values and the history that has shaped them.

These different policies have, until recently, had little effect on the way that first nations or Native Americans are represented in the museums and art galleries of the two countries. In the U.S., Native American art was divided into "material culture" – a sort of catch-all, folksy or unsophisticated ethnic art – and fine art, usually defined by western standards of beauty and technical virtuosity.

Material culture has usually been warehoused in American natural history museums, while the best pieces were reserved for fine art museums. In Canada, however, first nation works were often institutionalized more into general-purpose museums along with the arts and cultures of other societies from around the world.

Toronto's ROM, Montreal's McCord and Calgary's Glenbow museums are all cases in point. Nevertheless, as in the case of natural history museums in the U.S., Canadian museums historically viewed first nations as fated to fade out under the mightier influence of western industrialism and market economies, leaving their material culture as curiosities and singular witnesses to their former monarchy over the land. As in nature, evolution was irresistible, leaving only the strong and most adaptable to survive.

Many decades later, first nations culture has not disappeared, but has adapted to new conditions in diverse and creative ways, and their societies' success has made museums and galleries scramble to represent them more appropriately. The United States now has a National Museum of the American Indian, while Canada's National Gallery recently created new curatorial positions and adopted a more proactive position in collecting first nation works for display. In the process, material culture has suddenly and mysteriously become recast as art, and the victims of history have been made its heroes.

These new positions can be looked at in two ways. On the one hand, the elevation of material culture into art can be explained as part of the progressive development of a more mature art history and taken to demonstrate the

continual validity of old ways of dividing and seeing the world. Alternatively, this shift can be seen as fundamentally transgressive, demanding a comprehensive rethinking of western museums and galleries and the racial typologising of which some have been guilty.

At this point, American practices begin to sharply divide themselves from Canadian, though both may ultimately have similar effects. The creation of a Native American national museum separates Native American works from those of the rest of society and therefore preserves the 'melting pot' analogy by excluding the exception, much like the way Native Americans have been segregated through the reservation system.

In contrast, recent Canadian moves threaten to incorporate first nation works within a western view of what constitutes art, in not too dissimilar a fashion from the way first nations were once expected to become socially assimilated.

What both views ignore, is that contemporary societies are not only multicultural, but are increasingly characterized by complex intercultural relationships. Communities do not exist in simple isolation side by side with each other, but interpenetrate, borrow, remix and re-express themselves as part of wider nation states.

If we accept this new character of societies, we must also admit to the possibility that we need new kinds of museums, galleries and cultural centres. Institutions which don't valorize objects by reference to those who produced them, or seek to ignore and domesticate their uniqueness and expressive vitality by burying them under western categories, but which embrace the unique, fluid, ever-changing creative expressions that our increasingly intercultural worlds inevitably generate.

We might be spared the fate of the 'melting pot' for the rich, spicy, medley of the stew, a kind of Trinidadian calahoo, that it holds.

Credit: Anthony Shelton; Special To The Sun

Illustration

Photo;; Caption:

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