

POLITICAL HISTORY, HIJACKED MUSEUMS

by Dan Gallacher, Curator emeritus, Canadian Museum of Civilization

How can curators safeguard their institution from becoming a place for displaying words rather than exhibiting objects, from opportunists insinuating political narratives into the exhibitions? Two high profile examples of dogma crowding out depiction in museum galleries are currently underway in Toronto and Winnipeg. Vocal proponents, using the museums literally as a platforms, are relying upon Homeric tales to provoke controversy and thereby attention for their oft-repeated ideas, their writings, and their scholarly vibes.

At the Royal Ontario Museum this winter and spring, there is a four-part series of “debates” led by three distinguished Canadian political historians and, at their mercy, five accomplished political polemicists who do better in discussing current happenings than events of the past. As seen in the *Globe and Mail* reprint below, the ROM is going to be a battleground where various departed – saints or sinners - are resurrected to stand in history’s dock yet again while their newest prosecutors or defenders argue into the night.

And who are on trial here in downtown Toronto? Why the Queen, waves of immigrants, Trudeau, Riel What in Heaven’s name have these personalities got to do with the ROM’s collections or records? After all, this museum features only “decorative and pictorial arts” in its Canadian history gallery – hardly the stuff of “HISTORY WARS”, main theme of these debates. I can see it now: the three professors emeriti over brandy at the U of T faculty club next door convincing an eager young ROM marketer that visitors will pour in through the doors, ignore the tired old regular displays, and jostle for auditorium seats to witness the greatest verbal conflict since Sampson smote the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass – history wars, indeed.

Well, if the ROM offers evenings of mock battles to boost its attendance or lighting-up its image instead of relying upon gallery tours or learned lectures on material culture, what of the upcoming Museum for Human Rights taking shape in Manitoba? Without having doors yet to open at its construction site, officials already are fending-off attackers by the dozen. Here is another case of words over objects, but not merely as a spring talkfest. In this case, its proposed theme structures or storylines are coming under siege. In the words of Gail Asper, CMHR trustee and sparkplug, “... only something as graphic as a well-done museum could bring these stories to life 12 different permanent galleries / zones, several dedicated to not just recounting the past but to reflecting on present human rights issues in Canada and around the world in order to educate and engage for the future.” Plainly, she and her colleagues have continuous dark dramas and virtual sufferings in mind. Reminds me of the following quote:

The story of the myth changes but the characters are always the same: the Aggrieved on one side, righteous, thirsting for justice, and Those to Blame, cruel and uncomprehending, on the other. (Gavin, n.d.)

Still, just as it’s unfair to prejudge the long-term effects of “History Wars” debates and the like on the ROM itself, one cannot guess how well the Human Rights Museum will do in handling visitor expectations or providing them hope for civilization once its doors open. So far most critics are cutting it no slack.

Whether the CMHR’s vision ultimately proves on target or cockeyed, at least its financial back appears covered. Already the founders have won a major victory; the organization is designated a “national museum” with both capital and operating funding partly secured. After all, during the past decade, no federal or provincial political party wanted to appear indifferent to “human rights”, particularly when there were regional and other political factors at stake, too. But let’s look further for how this new cultural entity aims at gathering public support and gaining our affection: the Friends of the CMHR are fundraising in a big way – at least as indicated by ads such as that in the *Globe and Mail* shown here. A pretty standard appeal, expect for where it says, “You can help us change humanity”. Museums make a lot of claims for the impacts of their collections, exhibits, or programmes, but not on that scale. And that in turn forces the question: Is the CMHR really better called a Centre or a Foundation than a Museum? The last-mentioned preserves, analyses, and interprets the inanimate whereas the others rely upon revelation and recruitment to their ideals, often in pronounced animated ways. Certainly the latter approach is the ROM’s new-found technique in holding these debates, while it is going to be the CMHR’s stock in trade.

Political history belongs in museums, but not as a highlight. Its place, because it is so wordy, is in the bookstore or Internet site where its subject matter can be dealt with in depth. Displays like debates or lectures, no matter how entertaining, are narrow, fleeting treatments of complex matters. Visitor surveys show people on average read text panels for only eleven seconds - about 75 words in fact. Objects on display in showcases or in period settings demand little from visitors for understanding; they are intrinsically able to reveal their nature and purpose with the need for very few words of explanation. But without lengthy discourse, how would one fairly portray all sides of a human rights issue, or whether or not the Queen is good for Canada? The encroachment of political history into museums is not the only risk they face for being hijacked, however; interest groups constantly pushing to make them “relevant” to the local community, or bureaucrats demanding that above all that they become “cost effective” organizations are other current hazards that create large headaches for curators merely trying to preserve and interpret parts of lost worlds.