

Culture

Chinese Galleries, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

Edwina Taborsky



Volume 7, Number 2, 1987

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078969ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078969ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Taborsky, E. (1987). Review of [*Chinese Galleries*, Royal Ontario Museum,
Toronto]. *Culture*, 7(2), 64–65. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078969ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society /
Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1987

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit
(including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be
viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal,
Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to
promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

fabrication des vêtements. Les séquences spatiales facilitent aux visiteurs la découverte des procédés dans l'utilisation des peaux, des tendons et des os recyclés.

Ce voyage dans le temps joint à l'énumération des matières que propose l'exposition a une qualité scientifique indéniable bien que la présentation des objets apparaisse statique. Il faut admettre qu'il n'y a guère de stimulants visuels et sonores pour animer les personnages, les vêtements ou les situations. L'exposition dans son ensemble est quelque peu figée. Pourtant, en s'inspirant des présentations actuelles dans le domaine du vêtement contemporain, le design visuel aurait pu se libérer d'une certaine monotonie.

Toutefois, on perçoit tout au long des graphiques, des cartes et des photographies ainsi que dans le choix des objets, une recherche approfondie et sérieuse due aux conservatrices Betty Issenman et Catherine Rankin. Les textes sont fouillés, riches d'information, pertinents, mais ils souffrent cependant de longueurs. L'ambiance nordique n'est pas assez bien rendue. Pourtant, l'agrandissement photographique qui accueille le visiteur à l'entrée laissait croire à une certaine ampleur dans la présentation des exhibits ainsi qu'à un déploiement important de moyens qui n'a cependant pas eu lieu. De nombreuses photographies sont suspendues aux murs, mais malheureusement leur format trop petit n'a pas de réel effet médiatique sur le visiteur.

Quant à la lecture des sujets proposés à notre curiosité, ce survol trop rapide des diverses régions ne fait pas suffisamment ressortir les particularités, les différences, voire les similitudes entre Groenlandais, Sibériens, Inuits d'Alaska et ceux du Canada.

Une publication d'envergure devait compléter l'exposition. Toutefois, près de deux mois après l'inauguration, ce catalogue est toujours attendu par les spécialistes et les amateurs du Nord auxquels cette exposition est, à mon avis, destinée. Le grand public profitera tout de même, à coup sûr, d'une bien agréable découverte!

Chinese Galleries, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

by *Edwina Taborsky*
York University

The new Chinese galleries of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Toronto, are an excellent example of the museological concepts which form the basic structure of this newly renovated museum.

On entering the museum, the visitor is immediately drawn to a large and impressive display situated in the

foyer; the Chinese galleries are easily visible to its right. This central display, called "Mankind Discovering," is the key statement of the ROM's definition of a museum—as based on the active and ongoing research of the material world. This research is divided into four actions: (1) framing the hypothesis; (2) fieldwork which gathers data; (3) analysis of this data; and (4) the synthesis, which relates the data to the hypothesis, and finally, communicates it to others.

In this display, the museum is vividly presented as a centre of intense activity, of exploring, questioning, defining, redefining and communicating hypotheses about the material world. Within the display, one sees research activities based around preparing a skin for study, tracking animal behaviour with electronic signals, tracing textile patterns and traditions, analyzing wine goblets and lifestyles—and many more. The display ends by suggesting that research never ends and, further, that a "hypothesis is never true, but must be kept open to further questioning, modification and exploration."

This powerful definition of the museum as not a storage site for material objects, but an active centre for the study and exploration of these objects and their environments is followed through in the displays in the new Chinese galleries. These galleries, when finished, will present the dynasties from the Neolithic period to 1911¹.

In the Chinese galleries, a key factor of the exhibit design is that the research and analysis are communicated by both pictorial and written information. An attempt is made to firmly place the object in its sociohistorical context. This usage of a number of media forms (various material forms, textual comments and illustrative graphics), which are all taken from an original source, is a predominant factor in the displays. For example, a porcelain vase is shown, with textual comments written during the same period which comment on the designs. These are supplemented graphics from the same time period.

Before entering the main galleries, brief yet succinct curatorial comments and guidelines point out key sociohistorical factors for the period. Once inside the gallery proper curatorial comments continue, but only as discreet guidelines. Labels simply do not list reference data, but relate the object to society and mention key factors in the patterns, production and usage of the object. At all times, the object remains dominant.

The architectural structure of the different exhibit halls is specifically designed to help move the visitor conceptually from one display area to another. For instance, one of the Song/Yuan Dynasties' displays is about the daily life of the common people. It uses a stone floor, light wood, and open space, to help convey a sense of a busy, interactive public environment. Another

Song/Yuan display is darker and carpeted, and focuses on a more intense examination of the actual material nature of the object, rather than its contextual usage and points out how these objects were made, specific design patterns, materials and foreign influences. The Ming/Qing gallery uses a stone floor and a dark atmosphere to show the household furnishings of an elite household, with series of furnished rooms. The Ming tomb is left on a stone floor, in full light and space, to give the strength of its physical presence full exposure.

A final and important factor in the display design is that they are meant to be changed, possibly every six months. This is not for conservation requirements, but because a clear attempt is being made to develop a “clientele” of regular visitors. There is a strong commitment to the ongoing communication of the results of research on these objects to the public.

In the Song/Yuan gallery, which focuses on the daily life of the common people, objects are not necessarily displayed as ceramic masterpieces, but rather by function and usage. Separate displays concentrate on religion, heat and light, food, toys, wine and tea—the basic aspects of everyday life. Another Song/Yuan display focuses on the style of mirrors of that period, showing the flower patterns on the back, relating them to similar patterns on clothing and other material forms. Again, objects are enhanced by expressive writings and illustrations from the period and by precise curatorial comments. And, it works beautifully. The displays are alive and vibrant and leave one, quite literally, looking for more.

The Ming/Qing gallery shows a series of separate rooms of an elite household including the bedroom, reception hall, sitting room and scholar’s study. The design and usage of the furnishings are well explained. The separation into rooms gives one an immediate feeling of comprehension and participation. Another Ming/Qing display is titled: “Fragile Dreams on Porcelain” and explains how the illustrations on porcelain represent the tentative wishes, dreams and hopes of people. Another, “Plots and Pots,” outlines the anecdotal folktales of the period, which are illustrated on these pots. The displays are both exploring the object in its sociohistorical context (the rooms) and exploring the actual material and artistic content of the object.

Yet, there is still room for displays which are less contextually framed and are focused only on the material and type of object. For example, a series of Ming/Qing objects are arranged by material: rhinoceros horn, ivory, jade, lacquer. In the same area, there is a Qing dynasty display of snuff bottles. Introductory text panels to these areas outline the contextual usage of these pieces. But the display is simply a number of well-lit rows of these elegant objects, permitted to stand on the strength of their own artistic beauty.

There are no current publications for these displays, though some may come later, and the museum is currently working on completing the rest of the halls.

The ROM, in its recent renovation, is attempting to present the museum as an active research centre. This research is not confined to scholarly texts, but is being presented in the public galleries. The galleries are not storage sites, but sites of ongoing communication with the public. These new Chinese galleries are excellent examples of achieving precisely these goals.

NOTE

1. The design team consisted of Patty Proctor, Curatorial Fellow, Far Eastern Department; Michael Peters, Exhibit Designer; and Kathryn Pankowski, Exhibit Programmer.