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# The Exhibition as a Medium for the Study and Teaching of History

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## THE EXHIBITION AS A MEDIUM FOR THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF HISTORY

BY MARTIN BALDWIN  
*The Art Gallery of Toronto*

It has been suggested that before I go into my subject I should make a few general remarks about the introduction of visual techniques in presenting historical material. Not being an historian myself I have to fall back on personal recollections of the teaching of history. For me, apart from certain romantic associations with King Arthur, the Battle of Waterloo, and a desire to help King Harold, it was not until I was introduced to ancient history and a text-book that was full of illustrations of Greek sculpture, landscape, and architecture, that history began to have any significance. Even then I doubt if I had any realization either of time-scale or time-sequence and certainly none of the interplay of the various cultures which were considered important. For me, up to the time of the Crusades, history was a fine series of adventures with swords and spears waving in all directions, including Runnymede, followed by a very confusing interlude where everybody got killed in the Wars of the Roses; with another high point about Queen Elizabeth's time and then a successive degeneration into dry and meaningless politics; which, you will note, is a complete change of focus. It was not until I began to study architecture at the university that I found that these events which seemed to occur without any environment actually took place in varying forms of cultivated landscapes, cities, and buildings. Unless the teaching of history has greatly changed, which I suppose it has since my day, that same state of airy confusion could probably be found in most matriculants today. It seems to me vitally necessary that in teaching history you must link it to the earth and I mean by this not the map-geography of the countries and continents but the actual physical environment which cultivated people from time immemorial have erected to shelter the kind of civilization they are evolving. We have only to think of the extraordinary difference between the visible shape of Westminster Abbey and St. Pauls Cathedral for a clear illustration of my meaning. To do this it is desirable that historians themselves should know something about it, and the material to illustrate this environment must also be available. We have a good deal of it in photographic and reproduction form in use as circulating exhibitions for just this purpose at the Art Gallery of Toronto.

The further suggestion has been made that I say something about the use of an art gallery or museum for educational purposes. Both are, of course, valuable aids to the scholar and both have what neither the archives, nor the lecture room, nor the text-book, nor the Reference Library have, an appeal and a duty to the lay public. The Art Gallery is as much, if not more, concerned in gaining the interest of the lay public who will then come generally of its own accord, than in the scholar or the student whose interest will naturally draw him there if the material is good enough. What we try to do, in as stimulating and varied a way as possible, is to reiterate the truth that nothing goes on in this world unless it is intimately linked to its environment; that this environment

has been created both by and for people like themselves and that unless it receives their critical attention it will be either out of date or inevitably changed and changed probably to their added discomfort. Our other dominant purpose, the recognition of the qualities which contribute to make an object, whether it be a picture, a pot, or a city, tend towards being a work of art, is too long and complicated, as well as being slightly beside the point, to dwell on here.

The exhibition entitled "The Founding of Eastern Canada," prepared by the Art Gallery of Toronto, was an attempt to present the development of Eastern Canada and the Maritime Provinces from their first discovery as a vast unknown land to their establishment as a political entity under the Act of Confederation in 1867. The field was large—frankly too large to be fully covered—but rather than isolate any single aspect for complete presentation, it was decided to take in the whole of Eastern Canada, for it was here that the various cultures transplanted to this country had time to take root, to adjust themselves to their surroundings, and to develop to the point where some act of unity, not only for the East, but as the event proved, for Canada as a whole, became a necessity.

Many aspects of this story have been told before, but this was the first attempt to tell it as the combined effort, over a period of four hundred years, of millions of men and women, priests, adventurers, gentlemen and peasants, ship-builders and artisans, traders, fishermen and farmers, soldiers and governors who, generation after generation, and wave after wave, crossed the Atlantic, and fought and worked to plant in Eastern Canada a new European civilization.

We presented this as it was seen through their own eyes and made with their hands, for, with the exception of the photographs, everything in this exhibition was made within the period—not necessarily contemporary with the event illustrated, and, as is very often the case, not with photographic accuracy, for many of the pictures exhibited both the artist's selective vision and that of his engraver in far-away Europe. None-the-less, these examples of wishful thinking are valuable, for they show, if not the facts, the way the men of the period wished the facts to be. The photographs which, in many cases, supplemented illustrations of the same subjects and, for the rest, showed buildings and landscapes illustrating the different cultures which have contributed to the settlement, actually presented the facts as they are now with scientific detachment. The series illustrating town and village planning showed how lasting the first layout can be; for in no case has it been appreciably changed. The buildings lining the streets, for the most part, have been replaced, but the streets themselves, the frame-work on which the towns were built, have scarcely been altered.

The enormous volume of prints, water colours, and drawings coming under the collective head of *Canadians*, as a general rule, does not date further back than the middle of the eighteenth century and corresponds with the rapidly increasing interest in reproductive printing of that time, and with the British conquest. On the other hand, both French Canada and the mother country seemed comparatively unconcerned with the story of "*Nouvelle France*," and the *Canadiens* instead went steadily about the improvement of actual living conditions in their own way. For this reason we included objects in daily use, some of which date back to the French régime, and all of which show its firmly

established character. Judging from the comparative difficulty in collecting similar objects both in the Maritimes and Ontario, people in Quebec, as is perhaps natural, realize to a far greater extent than elsewhere the value of these objects and the necessity of their preservation.

The exhibition was more concerned in showing the differing and varying qualities of the settlements throughout its period than in historical sequence, and in fact both its character and that of the material used rendered such a sequence difficult. It was arranged, however, in the approximately historical order of Discovery and Exploration, Immigration, Settlement, and Co-ordination.

### DISCOVERY AND EXPLORATION

This section set out the motives and the probing processes of the explorers, which resulted in opening the country to the later settlers, the development of the missions, and the fur trade. All three of these activities are still in full progress.

Columbus, Cabot, Cartier, all searched for the Indies, China, and Japan. Following them a host of adventurers, piratical traders, swarmed to the Americas in quest of its riches, prepared, it must be admitted, to lay down their own lives and those of their companions in the search. They perished in hundreds and brought disaster and death to the ancient Indian way of life. Nothing could express their Eldorado better than the group of objects, products of Mexican, Peruvian, Chinese, and Indian civilization which formed the gateway to this exhibition; for these represent the dominant hope of those intrepid men—a new short route to the Far East or, failing that, new cities, always just beyond the next bend in the river, richer far than those already plundered by the Spaniards in the South.

A series of contemporary maps showed the gradual emergence of the continent of North America, which by 1750, in its general aspect, was pretty accurately plotted. Diagrams of the explorations showed the French convergence on the St. Lawrence which was the gateway to the West, in contrast to the Dutch and English occupation of the coast-line to the south with its short rivers leading to the mountains and, far to the north, the English probing into Hudson Bay in the unending search for the North-West Passage. As the hope of finding gold in Canada diminished, the great trade in furs took its place and with it, in the front line of exploration, came the missions which, from the first, were a highly organized conception with established bases or mother houses, and advanced posts almost on military lines. From the first the missions tried to lead the Indians to a more settled way of life and a few objects here showed the cross-blending of Indian and European habits of design. So, too, with the fur trade, whose organization followed military precedent even more closely, often with weapons to back up the usual barter articles. Their trading posts were forts, their barter articles, guns, axe heads, beads, and silver. Finally, we showed some hint of the primitive methods of transportation by land and water.

### IMMIGRATION

Here a series of map diagrams showed the flow of various tides of immigration, and the locations of the respective settlements. The

prints and photographs give an idea of the environment and architectural styles with which the settlers were familiar at home and which formed the natural starting point for buildings—town, homestead, church, and farm—in the new country. Here too were illustrations of the kind of ships which carried the settlers.

#### THE SETTLEMENTS

This, the main body of the exhibition, was divided into three sections to correspond with French Canada, the Maritime Provinces, and Upper Canada. In each was shown the architecture, the landscape, the crafts, and cities and towns in various stages of development. In contrast to the previous sections which dealt with exploration, exploitation, and the missions—all antecedents to the coming of the settlers and all with the implied promise of settlement to come—here was the fabric which the settlers made for themselves—first in its rude beginnings, then, as the population multiplied, rapidly taking root with the old ideas conforming to the new conditions. Almost to the beginning of the nineteenth century this was a pioneer civilization with each settlement grimly concerned in its own preservation and establishment. With the exception of the lumber and fur trades, both pioneer activities, though with well-defined routes to the main ports, the settlements were self-supporting and what trade there was dealt only in necessities. The ports and carrying places showed a steady development from the earliest times, a development which was greatly accelerated, as the wave of immigration of the 1820's, larger than all the others, swept into the country, settled down and began, by its very weight of numbers, the last and modern stage of development.

#### CO-ORDINATION

It was striking to see how quickly this new country, up to 1815 only sparsely populated, took on the aspects of the developments going on at the same time in England and the United States, as the great wave of immigration following the Napoleonic Wars flowed into it and transformed it in a score of years into a commercial community. The export of furs, lumber, and wheat rose to new proportions, as did too the importation of finished goods. Manufacture also expanded and internal trade and commerce soon congested the old transportation system, the rivers and rudimentary roads. The building of canals started at the turn of the century, greatly increased after 1820, and was well on the way to completion when their rival the railroad was ushered onto the scene. The new land companies went into the business of immigration as a commercial venture, particularly in the Eastern Townships and central Ontario, sometimes in direct competition with the government. Military and private settlement, though always continuous, was hereafter comparatively small in proportion. In consequence the surveyor and the engineer left their mark on the country, and their ideas of land division and town planning dominate the country landscape and the older towns of Ontario today. Schools, churches, and public buildings sprang up to meet the demands of the new population and to house the local governments. This flood of new complex activity with its rival and often conflicting interests was the driving force which

impelled the governments of Upper and Lower Canada and of the Maritime Provinces to envisage, to discuss, and finally to evolve, the Confederation not only of Eastern Canada itself but of Canada as a whole.

So far, what I have said is a transcript of what we expected, in general terms, the exhibition to bring out. What follows are the conclusions which have been brought home to me after studying the exhibition during the month it was hanging and watching its effect on those who visited it.

There were, in all, nearly seven hundred items in the exhibition, spread through six galleries and the corridors, ranging from such large objects as cannons, doors, and chests of drawers to silhouettes and photographs. The result was that the average visitor either came away with a strong but only general impression of the variety and development of Eastern Canadian culture or was attracted and held by a single phase of it. If the exhibition were to be repeated a far more drastic selection could well be enforced. The general effect, on the other hand, was an advantage for anyone who had time to study, for the large quantity of material afforded all sorts of unexpected side-lights on our forefathers' characters and ideas about life and started trains of speculation as nothing else could.

In particular, certain facts emerged, a few of which I should like to bring to your attention. The first of these is the contrast between the self-contained outlook of the French settlers and the consciousness of a world outside to draw from of the English. The French Canadians made practically no pictures of their life in Canada; even after the conquest the pictures are the work of Englishmen commenting on a new experience. On the other hand, the French, from the start, seem to develop as much as possible a completely organized life. They started their own crafts. Weaving, of course, was not confined to them; but silver-smithing, wood-carving, furniture-making of the finer quality, and, in particular, the lavish ornamentation of their churches and the use of stone and heavy timber in their buildings, indicate a far more self-contained and independent attitude towards the permanency of their settlement in a selected spot than is apparent elsewhere in Canada. The British, United Empire Loyalist, and American settlements, until the 1830's at least, built much slighter buildings and imported, either with them or later, the articles the French made or did without. Not until commercial manufacture was widespread in Canada was the importation of household goods checked.

Another contrast is in the method of land settlement. The French used the waterways, inland and on the coasts, as highways. Their settlement was comparatively small in numbers, paternal in organization, and, at first, slow in increase. As a result, the long, narrow, strip farms, each with its water frontage, becomes characteristic; and so firmly does it become the framework of their lives that it persists in many places where today the original pure French settlement is well diluted.

English-speaking settlement in Ontario and the Eastern Townships, at any rate, was much more precipitous in time and volume, and without the opportunity of such rational development so characteristic of the French. The military engineer and surveyor came on the scene with

the settlers and imposed on them his geometrical idea of land distribution, as one cuts and distributes cake into squares, regardless of topographical or physiographical controls inherent in the land to be distributed. Rocky or fertile soil, flat or hilly country, the meanderings of streams and the natural easy course of future roads were matters of complete indifference to him, if not to the settlers themselves, who showed, within the limits allowed them, a natural preference. In reasonably flat and fertile country, the surveyors' plan of land division and roads survived, but around Magog in the Eastern Townships, the alternation of rough and smooth country, together with the existence of old well-established frontier tracks has done much to render the surveyors' ideal checker-board a patch-work dream. The arbitrary rectangular road system of Ontario is entirely due to this ideal of the surveyors and the present expensive re-siting of our main highway system can be laid to their door.

So, too, in town planning: Montreal and Quebec are the only cities in Canada which have as their nucleus the slowly developed growth so characteristic of the medieval European city. Montreal in the eighteenth century was a stockaded town, built to the edges of a sort of low whale-back hill, parallel to the river. The shape was dictated by the necessity for defence, and its arrangement by the domination of the church, of which it was the parish, and by the necessity for storehouses as close to the river bank as possible. This nucleus is submerged in the modern city but can be distinctly seen in aeroplane photographs. The old street system is still there, although almost every early French building has perished.

Quebec, which by the way was not fortified in 1685, still carries within its nineteenth-century fortifications all the amenities of the medieval town plan. On the beach facing Lévis was the old trading town with stone houses and narrow streets; from it, where the cliff was practicable, a road led to the upper town. There the Governor's fortified house, the Cathedral, and the religious communities and hospitals were situated, each with their gardens and dependencies. These buildings were here before the streets and the tracks to them, as the town grew, became lined with close-packed houses. But in Quebec today we still have almost the only example of a town which has not only the narrow, snaky streets and irregular squares of the medieval city, but has also still preserved the private open spaces and gardens of the large corporations and communities of the seventeenth century. In Montreal, as is general elsewhere, due to financial pressure, these open areas have vanished.

The towns founded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century by the English-speaking settlers take quite a different conformation. Their nucleus is always the result of conscious planning and always starts from the idea of a rectangular block. Sometimes, as at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Saint John, N.B., and Perth, Ontario, the rectangles are square. At Halifax, Toronto, Shelburne, and Charlottetown they are oblong, but all are sufficiently large to permit the buildings to face on all the four streets of their perimeter, in contrast to the later development of long narrow blocks with buildings facing only the long sides. These towns seem to have been regarded, not as Montreal and Quebec appear to be—complete self-contained organisms—but as adjuncts to another purpose: Halifax, for instance, as a permanent camp for the military

base it was meant to be. An early plan shows it ringed by a series of five-sided forts. These were never built and the defence system was changed in the 1770's to the citadel above and behind the town with a series of mutually supporting forts on the islands in the harbour. Halifax and Toronto have long since spread far beyond the original town sites, but Niagara-on-the-Lake has not yet completely occupied the area of its original plan. In most cases one or two blocks were reserved for official purposes and buildings in the middle of the town. The curious octagonal town plan of Goderich of about 1830, with its unfulfilled counterparts in the geometric plan of Cornwall and in a series of similar town plans for Cape Breton Island, appears to follow the fashion set by Major L'Enfant's plan for the building of Washington which, in turn, derives from the eighteenth-century *tour-de-force* of the town, palace, and gardens of Versailles. The cult of the octagon in the second quarter of the nineteenth century is a mystery to me, but we have, at that date, with the Goderich town plan, a number of octagonal houses and barns, octagonal christening mugs and dining tables, and octagonal designs on patch-work quilts. The idea did not last long, but its incidence would be a subject of entertaining research.

The villages grew up, both in French Canada and elsewhere, simply as a cluster of houses lining the highway. The French villages are generally found at the river mouth, or, along the St. Lawrence, at a good landing place, and where the road forks in the centre of the town you will find a church. Elsewhere most of the villages have kept their main streets broad, as did too the towns of Charlottetown, Niagara-on-the-Lake, and Saint John. Toronto and Halifax did not, but in spite of the United Empire Loyalist immigration, the village built around a square green so common in Connecticut and along the south shore of Lake Erie is very scarce. Colbourne on the Kingston Road east of Cobourg is the only example I know.

The architecture of French Canada derives directly from the seventeenth and eighteenth century ideas of building in France itself, and this habit persisted, at least in the country, well into the middle of the nineteenth century. In the cities, probably because of the steady growth of trading establishments managed by people with English or American antecedents, the old French one or two-storey building, with its steep roof and dormer windows parallel to the street and high, sturdy chimneys, gave place, at first, to three-storey buildings with comparatively flat roofs, with a slightly larger but still consistent scale, and in the traditional English colonial design. Architectural design, however, soon became more wayward and fanciful, and the new Notre Dame in Montreal and Holy Trinity Church in Toronto, built in the 1830's and 1840's mark the introduction of the Gothic revival. Numbers of drawings of scenes, both in Montreal and Quebec, of successive dates show this development. The architecture of the English-speaking settlements throughout Canada is much more closely linked with that of the American colonies than directly with England. New England settlers account for this in the Maritimes, and United Empire Loyalists, and American land settlers in Ontario and the Eastern Townships.

So far I have dealt only with factual evidence but there was a wealth of implication as well. For instance, as evidence of the importance of the lumber trade, when the Prince of Wales came here in 1861 he was welcomed time after time with lumber arches across the city streets,



and taken down timber slides and chutes on log rafts all over the place. These feats find their way with pride into the prints of the time.

What is, perhaps, an understandable characteristic is the constant tendency to make the scenes which appear in the drawings, both larger in scale and better ordered than they actually were. This tendency increased toward the end of the period and with the introduction of the railways we have a succession of "first locomotives," "newest railroad trips," "longest bridges," and "largest ships" which has a familiar echo today.

The canals received much less attention, probably because they came earlier and were an older invention; though their builders made many pictorial records of the progress of this work. The extreme romanticism of the 1850's became very evident in the comparison of prints purporting to show various aspects of the Canadian scene and photographs taken of the places themselves.

Some of the omissions were, I think, significant. We had extreme difficulty in finding pictorial records of the state of the first settlements. In fact, there were only three illustrations which showed stumps. The scenes, too, show no evidence of the litter which habitually surrounds our cities and villages, and I wonder whether this is a habit which has come in since Confederation. Fires, too, were suppressed; though they must have proved a constant menace, judging by the number of fire buckets we could have borrowed for the show. We could find no photographs of early stations or of town streets; buildings, yes; and aeroplane photographs of the towns themselves—but no counterpart of the charming prints made in the 1820's and 1830's of Montreal, Toronto, Quebec, and other places. We found photos of early locomotives but the only railway carriage was the observation car used for the Prince of Wales in 1861.

As to sources, most of the pictorial material came from the Coverdale Collection at the Manoir Richelieu and from other private collections. We found a great store of more factual material, such as maps, plans, designs for ships and canals in the Public Archives in Ottawa. Objects like furniture, silver, weaving, and china were generally in private hands, though the Montreal Art Association, the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, and the Royal Ontario Museum were valuable sources.

We acquired about two hundred photographs, most of them 16×20; those dealing with landscapes and town plans came from the R.C.A.F. Reference Library in Ottawa. Those illustrating buildings themselves: in Ontario from the School of Architecture, University of Toronto; in Quebec from Edgar Garipey, photographer in Montreal; and in the Maritimes from the various government publicity departments. These are now our property and can be circulated for exhibition in whole or in part.

The National Film Board is producing a 16 m.m. film in colour with a sound-track commentary, which was made from a selection of the material in the exhibition, plus an animated map showing the location and density of the settlement from the seventeenth century to 1867 which, I hope, will be both interesting and instructive.

Finally, I think the exhibition, all of which has been carefully recorded, has proved that there is a vast store of material, as yet comparatively unexplored or analysed, available for research not only for light on the great political events of the time, but for greater knowledge

and interest in the trends of ideas and habits of living of the great body of Canadian people. It has also opened fields for detailed research and exposition, not only for each of the provinces involved, but in the field of regional planning, of geography in relation to settlement; of architecture and such kindred subjects.

The exhibition was a research into the ideas dominating the creation and ordering of a new environment, and into the influences which have laid their mark on it. It was a beginning—not an end.

A knowledge of history is essential to everyone who will have a hand in the shaping of the organized life of this country to a new and better form as the vindication of our claim that our way is better than that which our enemies are trying to impose on us. To my mind this is the essential value of historical study—from it we can estimate more accurately and with a longer view the relative values and urgency of the many problems with which we are now and will be faced. These problems are as gravely concerned with the origin, quality, and growth of the artificial shell within which germinate and bear fruit all the man-made ideas which constitute organized society, as they are with any other aspects of history. To my mind, perhaps naturally, even more so. The proper appreciation of the problems of modern regional planning, town and city re-organization, new roads, the growth of modern industry and transportation are all inseparably bound up and influenced by the natural and artificially modified environment in which they are planted—and if it served no other purpose this exhibition called this necessary study out of obscurity into the open.

I realize that this account has probably created no visual image either of the materials we used or of the manner of their use—which is just one more piece of evidence that visual material properly integrated, is essential in studying and teaching history.

#### DISCUSSION

*Mr. Adair* said that, in regard to the fact that more objects of historic importance are found in French Canada than elsewhere in Canada, he thought this was due to greater conservatism rather than to a greater appreciation of these objects as the speaker had suggested. This was most striking in regard to wood-carvings in the churches, of which the curés often had little knowledge, but which they preserved through custom.

He suggested also that the prevalence of objects of local manufacture in New France was due largely to the poverty of the community, which made it difficult for them to import things from abroad. This fact is again strikingly illustrated in the wood-carvings. The French Canadians were forced to work in the more difficult medium of wood, because they could not obtain the material for the elaborate plaster work then prevalent in Europe.

In referring to the McCord Museum in Montreal, *Mr. Adair* suggested that, by withdrawing closely related material from larger exhibitions for the purpose of illustrating a particular point, and so making it the centre of a small display, greater interest can be developed and better historical results obtained.

*The Abbé Maheux* said that early documents record the coming to New France of many artisans and tradesmen rather than farmers. He

gave an example of the poverty of the people in New France by referring to the Ursuline Order. Because of the vows they had taken, the members of the Order could accept no money for teaching. They had, therefore, to engage in other work, so they turned to the creation of works of art, which they sold. The people were poor, but, since they could not put the money they earned in a bank, which did not exist, they spent it in buying things which they used, particularly the works of art and craft.

*Mr. Brebner* mentioned the museum in Saint John, N.B., as a source for the kind of material to which Mr. Baldwin had referred, particularly eighteenth-century silver, china, furniture, etc. In regard to the type of exhibition, Mr. Brebner described recent developments in the United States in the technique of visual education, in which the number of articles on display had been drastically reduced, and the attention of the visitor carefully directed during his tour of the museum.

Mr. Baldwin said that he had made experiments in this technique, but that it was very expensive, and that it was necessary, for its success, to have really important objects, worthy of the concentrated attention of the visitor.

*Mr. Kenney*, referring to the pictorial material in the Public Archives, said that some 55,000 pictures had already been catalogued. He said that no good study had yet been made of this pictorial material. Illustrating the need for further work on this collection, Mr. Kenney referred to a picture of a town which he thought contained in it a good representation of a Durham boat. This picture was not catalogued under the title of "Durham Boat," and Mr. Kenney gave this as an example of the difficulty of locating illustrative material on some miscellaneous topic in a large collection, even though the collection is well catalogued. He urged workers in the field of Canadian history to give more attention to pictorial material, and to make available information which they had on the subject.