

***The Comfortable Arts: Traditional Spinning and Weaving in Canada.* By Dorothy K. Burnham (Ottawa : National Gallery of Canada, National Museums of Canada, 1987. xviii + 238 pp., introduction, bibliography, illustrations, photographs, \$19.95.)**

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and if you can't, don't get heatable — just use your header's mitt!

And we would strongly recommend that you start by reading the Introduction carefully, and looking up the words cited there. The Dictionary makes no concessions to the popular appeal of its subject; it is placed squarely in the central tradition of scholarly English lexicography. But as you look up the lists of words used to exemplify the points made, the wordstock will always tempt you further afield. The discussion of the coastal lexicon invites you to look up *brandies*, *ground*, *growler*, *gulch*, *ledge*, *run*, *sunker* and *tickle*. We lasted as far as *run*, which gives cross-references to *reach* and *rattle*; the search for *rattle* went astray when we encountered the noun *randy* on the previous page, and so we never got to *tickle* at all. Look it up yourself.

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The Comfortable Arts: Traditional Spinning and Weaving in Canada

By Dorothy K. Burnham

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In 1981 the National Gallery organized an exhibition under the direction of Dorothy K. Burnham that featured a wide array of traditional textiles from across the country. Although consisting primarily of handweaving such as coverlets, blankets and cloth, a sampling of other types of textiles was also included. To accompany this exhibition, an elaborate catalogue was prepared: *The Comfortable Arts*.

To any scholar researching Canadian textile traditions, the publications of Dorothy Burnham and her late husband, Harold, are standard reference works. Although being based at the Royal Ontario Museum has tended to limit the Burnham's field research to Ontario and Quebec, their publications have always attempted to at least touch on traditions in other parts of the country. Both as an exhibit and publication, *The Comfortable Arts* is no exception, with sections on textiles created by the French, Loyalists, Scots, Irish, English, Icelandic, Hutterite, Ukrainian and Doukhobor settlers, as well as by the Native Peoples. One of the book's limitations, however, was the fact that materials included for presentation could only be those already housed in existing museum collections. This was primarily because of constraints of time: Mrs. Burnham had only ninety days to traverse the country and secure artifacts for this exhibit. Thus, those geographic regions better researched by museums are more represented than those where fieldwork is only beginning.

The thematic organization of this catalogue most likely followed that of the exhibit, and is by ethnic group. This is far from ideal, given the early contact among various peoples. Divisions in the book, then, are quite arbitrary, and some classes of artifacts do not fit neatly into ethnic categories. For example, the initial chapter on the work of Native Peoples is followed by a section on braiding by Native Peoples and the French, and then by a chapter on French traditions. Since braiding is not clearly French or Native, this arbitrary section was needed. Other problems arise, for example, in trying to distinguish between what is a Loyalist tradition as opposed to a German or English practice. Indeed, some of the coverlets woven by Samuel Fry, an Ontario weaver who migrated from the Pennsylvania German region, are described in the Loyalist section, while a blanket of his is placed in the Scottish, Irish and English chapter. A simple organization by textile type, while not as trendy as

the focus on ethnic groups, would have made better sense.

I could argue with other minor points. The Codroy Valley, Newfoundland blanket described was certainly woven by Zella O'Quinn, not "Oquinn", the common "Irishization" of the Acadian French surname Aucoin in the area. Although only a few examples of knitting are included in the exhibit, I would disagree with Mrs. Burnham that such functional knitting is not an art form. Anyone who has researched — or practiced — knitting realizes how inaccurate this assertion is. This genre has been neglected, I suspect, partly because the artifacts created are not readily considered as a "decorative art" — as an elaborate coverlet would — and partly because the craft survives today. We tend to elevate those daily crafts to the status of "art" that are no longer in common practice at the time of our research.

The Comfortable Arts serves its purpose well as an exhibit catalogue, for it contains

good introductions to the various traditions featured in the exhibit, as well as fine illustrations of the actual artifacts. However, with a closer look it becomes obvious that many of the objects described were first illustrated in the Burnham's earlier and now classic *"Keep Me Warm One Night": Early Handweaving in Eastern Canada*. Certainly there are additions, but if a researcher is looking for one standard work on the topic, then the earlier volume is certainly the one to consult. A reference work and an exhibit catalogue are different published genres, and *The Comfortable Arts* is certainly the latter. While it adds to our knowledge of Canadian textile creations, it still does not supersede the earlier work that ultimately made this exhibit possible.

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