

## Culture



**Julia D. HARRISON, Co-ordinating Curator, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, The Glenbow Museum, Calgary, January 15 - May 1; Ottawa, under the auspices of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, July 1 - November 6, 1988**

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Volume 8, Number 1, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078802ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078802ar>

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### 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

Halpin, M. (1988). Review of [Julia D. HARRISON, Co-ordinating Curator, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, The Glenbow Museum, Calgary, January 15 - May 1; Ottawa, under the auspices of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, July 1 - November 6, 1988]. *Culture*, 8(1), 89-93. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078802ar>

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Julia D. HARRISON, Co-ordinating Curator, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, The Glenbow Museum, Calgary, January 15 - May 1; Ottawa, under the auspices of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, July 1 - November 6, 1988

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*What is the spirit that sings? It is the spirit of Canada's Native people which was heard for centuries before the Europeans came and continues to be heard today. It is also a spirit that will sing to generations to come. (Label from The Spirit Sings Orientation Gallery.)*

## The Exhibition

The way visitors behave in museums suggests that they regard them as secular churches, and nowhere in my recent experience has this been more evident than in the Glenbow's Olympic extravaganza, *The Spirit Sings*, which I visited in early April (after the Games). In company with other reverent visitors, some wearing acoustiguides and listening to a taped message, I moved in a slow and attentive procession through six exhibition halls, viewing some 650 Significant Early Native Canadian Treasures presented in 156 exhibition cases built for the occasion. As we moved from hall to hall and culture area to culture area, the artifacts, the colour scheme, and the taped songs performed by native singers changed, cueing our attention to regional differences in the material expressions of Canada's first peoples. Some of us were walking erect and reading the writings on the walls, but most of us were in various other postures and attitudes, stooping, bending, squatting, and peering in order to see what were truly wonderful objects displayed, all too often, in dim light and at knee and waist level and identified as to their particularities in small and difficult-to-read labels. But these are minor complaints. Most of my co-visitors seemed not to mind the required exertions, for the things we were witnessing were outstanding examples of human craftsman-

ship. Seldom have I seen a more attentive and reverent group of museum goers, and from this perspective, *The Spirit Sings* must be accounted a success.

Co-ordinating Curator Julia Harrison, and her assistant Beth Carter, worked with a team of six guest curators, Ruth Whitehead (East Coast), Ruth Phillips (Northern Woodlands), Ted Brassier (Northern Plains), Judy Thompson (Western Subarctic), Bernadette Driscoll (Arctic), and Martine Reid (Northwest Coast), to organize the exhibition. The curators were assisted in the task of locating European pieces by Christian Feest of Vienna, who acted as a consultant. The regional specialists selected the artifacts and wrote the catalogue entries, exhibition scripts, and essays on their regions in an accompanying book. (Both of the exhibition publications are also being reviewed for this journal.)

There are significant differences in the numbers of artifacts from which each curator could make a selection, depending upon both the artifact inventory of the cultures involved, and the time of European settlement of the region in relationship to the so-called Museum Age of the late 19th century. Reid, for example, had an estimated 350,000 Northwest Coast pieces from which to choose, while the numbers of Micmac, Maliseet, and, especially, Beothuk objects that have been preserved and were available for Whitehead's selection are pitifully low, estimated at a mere 3,000. Indeed, almost all of the objects identified as Beothuk are from burials, including the only known whole piece of adult clothing, a legging found wrapped around a four-year old child like a blanket.

The exhibition was large, occupying some 15,000 square feet, and divided into separate halls for each of the six culture areas represented which, in order of presentation, were East Coast, Northern Woodlands, Northern Plains, Western Subarctic, Arctic, and Northwest Coast. The attentive reader will notice here a significant omission: the peoples, artifacts, and cultures of the Canadian Plateau (the Interior Salish, Nicola, and Kootenay) were not there. While their collected and preserved material objects are few, and Harrison said in an interview that no regional specialist was available (although in five years, one could have been trained), more relevant reasons for their exclusion, I suspect, are that

early materials from the Plateau are not known to exist in European collections, and those that are known from Canadian and American collections were not thought to qualify as "treasures" (of which more later).

The exhibition cases, made of painted wood and glass, and their crowded arrangement, evoked a Victorian mood, one quite in keeping with the old-fashioned style of the exhibition. Except for the taped native music, no special effects or modern materials were used. This was a show of rare and wonderful treasures, and one of its messages was the sheer abundance of the Canadian materials the Glenbow was able to repatriate. To a curator, another message was the amount of sheer *work* involved in locating these objects and arranging to borrow and transport them. In museological terms, just being capable enough to *present* these objects was an accomplishment of the highest order; special effects weren't needed. And, indeed, there is something about the straightforwardness and honesty of the presentation; something about the metamessage "Look at all this stuff" that I liked.

Something I questioned was the arrangement of the exhibition. The decision to insert the Inuit between the Western Subarctic and the Northwest Coast, so that the visitors would leave with the spectacular objects from the Coast in their minds, seemed misguided. The Inuit hall was simply so different in ethos from all the others, and so spectacular in its own right, that it certainly could have held its own in last place.

The curators brought back to Canada photographs and information about some three to four times the numbers of Canadian objects held in foreign hands than those included in the exhibition. These materials will be duplicated and made available to researchers in special archives at both the Glenbow and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. In this respect, the exhibition must also be considered a success.

The pieces selected for this show were, of course, not ordinary objects; they were the most "significant" Canadian materials the curators could find. Significant, Harrison told me, meant 1)early, 2)visually pleasing, and 3)of known provenience. Things of this kind are, of course, treated differently from mere objects, and some of the pieces in *The Spirit Sings* were hand-carried to Canada by expensive couriers and all were installed at the Glenbow under the most exacting conditions of lighting, temperature, and humidity. Other of the objects selected by the guest curators were simply too precious to be allowed to travel under any circumstances.

## *The Lubicon Issue*

And still others, of course, were withheld from the exhibition for political reasons. Something that our academic colleagues often fail to appreciate are the manifold political pressures by which museum workers are inevitably constrained, and how very difficult it is to satisfy all of our audiences and sponsors. It is, therefore (I think), important in an exhibition review to assess how well a museum's staff has managed such pressures.

According to the official Glenbow position, some twelve museums refused to lend some 140 objects to the exhibition out of support for the Lubicon Lake Cree (who called for a boycott of the exhibition as a way of publicizing their unsettled land claims), and the exhibition was not significantly affected by their withdrawal. Duncan Cameron, Director of the Glenbow, is quoted as saying "There isn't a Mona Lisa in this show. There are no objects so unique that nothing else would do. We had an archival inventory of about 5,000 objects from which we made a shopping list of about 1,000. That gave us plenty of room to obtain 650, which was more than we originally intended to show" (Godfrey, 1988:C12). Harrison adds that if there had been any significant gaps in the show, "I know I would have heard from the curators" (loc. cit.). On the other hand, John Goddard (1988:20) reports that twenty-three museums honoured the boycott; and, according to curator Martine Reid, the fifty-odd Northwest Coast pieces that were withdrawn from the show *did* hurt the integrity of her section, including as they did, for example, all but one piece of rare Tlingit warrior gear.

But whether or not the boycott 'hurt' the exhibition is not a real issue. No museum exhibition in Canada has ever received more publicity, nor will the world soon forget the cause of the Lubicon Lake Cree (whether or not the boycott has *helped* their cause is yet to be seen).

There is a less publicized aspect to this affair that, it seems to me, merits further consideration. It can be introduced by two observations. First, even though Glenbow officials knew about the boycott some three years before the exhibition opened, they chose to proceed as planned, rather than, for example, to address the political dimension of museumized objects in the show itself; second, to quote Feest, "...the oil companies will laugh all the way to the bank at the recollection of the droll dog-fight between the little ones: the Lubicon and the museums" (1987: 63). Both of these observations point to a particular reality about the relationships

between museums and their financial sponsors, a reality referred to by Michael Ames, Director of the Museum of Anthropology, in the following words:

But where are we if we can't accept government money, or sponsorship money? It is perfectly acceptable to complain, if you want to, about what corporations are doing. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't accept their financial sponsorship. We couldn't operate without sponsorship anymore. That's the way the world has gone. I'd love clean money, but there isn't any clean money anymore (Vanguard, 1988: 16).

The Glenbow Museum is perhaps the most successful museum in Canada in attracting corporate money (Shell Canada Ltd. contributed 1.1 million dollars to *The Spirit Sings*). And all of the others are under increasing pressure to do likewise, for public monies are drying up. It is for this reason, I believe, that museum directors are increasingly asserting their right to be (or appear to be) apolitical or "professional" in their exhibition policies. Were museologists to engage, as university academics are still free to do, in public discourse about matters of social justice, they would risk alienating corporate sponsors (and government sponsors, as well, but the government strings already put upon exhibition funding is another story); or, even worse, risk becoming corporate spokespersons themselves, once overt political messaging through exhibitions in public institutions were legitimized.

### *The Museum Object*

Never before have these rare objects, which remain as invaluable evidence of the roots of Native cultures, been brought together. More than ninety lenders in more than twenty countries have loaned over 600 Indian and Inuit artifacts to the Glenbow Museum so that you can experience this unprecedented exhibition (*The Spirit Sings* brochure).

Surely, there must be some connection between the rarity of the objects, the expense of mounting this exhibition, and the corporate sponsor? Let me briefly, and somewhat offhandedly, review the naming of the museum object, which has changed over the last century in accord with the changing ideology of the museum enterprise and the changing definition of the curator, the key museum actor. When Boas redefined curators as research scientists, *curios* in their turn were redefined as *specimens*,

sources of scientific data; with the virtual disappearance of research as a significant museum activity, and the emergence of curators as museologists, objects became *artifacts*; with the subsequent loss of a theoretical anthropological focus in the discourse about object, the decontextualized object became *art*, as it is in the exhibition under review; and now that art is no longer a definable category (seemingly disappearing back into life -- a theme which might well have been explored in *The Spirit Sings*), objects are becoming *cultural properties* or, in a term increasingly used, especially by the media, *treasures*. It is important to note here, as well, that these originally Canadian objects are now considered to be the national treasures of the foreign countries in which they currently reside.

Although treasures are normally thought of as objects made of precious metals, I find it quite delicious to consider the materials out of which these particular treasures were made: birchbark, spruce root, metal nails, resin caulking, plant-fibre cordage, porcupine quills, caribou hides, sinew, red ochre, guillemot claws, bone, organic dyes, intestines, caribou long-bones, animal teeth, walrus ivory, wool, silk brocade ribbons, silk thread, glass beads, cotton thread, silver, metal beads, mink skins, horsehair, velvet, brass beads, sateen, copper, sequins, paper, cardboard, metal hooks and eyes, tinsel braid, moosehair, aniline dyes, metal buttons, ash-splints, sweetgrass, waxed twine, argillite, beaver dewclaws, cherrybark, metal cones, animal hair, glass, clay, limestone, antler, shell beads, cheesecloth, wire, paint, deerskin, wild duckskin, eagle feathers, metal staples, stroud, cattail reeds, sandstone, elk skin, weasel fur, hackle feathers, antelope skin, human hair, brass tacks, elk horn, deer hooves, bear claws, buffalo horn, canvas, bird quills, otter fur, native copper, mountain-sheep horn, eleagnus seeds, dentalia, bird bone, babiche, plastic beads, sealskin, loon's beak, wolf fur, wolverine fur, caribou fur, reindeer fur, ivory, nephrite, quartz, whalebone, maidenhair fern, surf grass, bear grass, mountain-goat wool, nettle fibre, sea-otter fur, puffin beaks, mountain-goat horn, abalone shell, iron, halotis shell, mica, flicker feathers, sea-otter teeth, graphite, basalt, opercula, whale baleen, and various kinds of wood.

### *Museums and Social Relevance*

Harrison raises the question as to whether a museum can be both socially relevant and apolitical at the same time:

The staff of the museum fundamentally believed that the messages in the exhibition were socially relevant and that the production of *The Spirit Sings* was a socially responsible action. In more global terms the museum was (and is) committed to the idea that museums must remain independent of external political pressures (n.d.).

In what ways, then, might we think of *The Spirit Sings* as socially responsible? Harrison (loc. cit.) cites the comments of visitors that their stereotypes of Canadian Indians were changed as a result of the museum experience. "Visitors speak of being moved by the cultural richness that they did not know existed; of being chagrined at their lack of knowledge and understanding of native cultures; of their determination to take a more open and progressive posture in their attitudes and support for native people's claims. Most often the messages that people take away [from] *The Spirit Sings* are contemporary even though the objects are historical." This is, and has long been, the ideology under which museums present their representations of Others--that information about cultural diversity leads to increased tolerance, respect, and social action. However, that museum visiting actually changes people's attitudes has, to my knowledge, never been scientifically demonstrated.

How else might *The Spirit Sings* have been socially relevant in the closing years of the twentieth century? Certainly one way would have been to put Native people in the positions of curators, not merely advisors, and permit them to choose the objects that were to be in the exhibition, and to write the contextualizing labels and essays. As it was, the curators were hired as independent contractors or borrowed from other museums; although they were chosen in part for their knowledge of European collections, they had the benefit, as Native curators would have had, of Christian Feest's expert and intimate knowledge of what there was in Europe.

What characterizes the advanced discourse of our discipline is, it seems to me, the related issues of the nature of cultural representations of the Other, whether in ethnographies or exhibitions, and the hidden power relations that underlie the assumption of the right to represent (c.f. Clifford, 1987 and Dominguez, 1987). The theme statement for *The Spirit Sings* with which Harrison introduces the catalogue of the exhibition (to be quoted in part below), makes it clear that what has been going on is Us collecting and defining Them. Perhaps it is past time for Them to define themselves (see also Ames, 1987):

The exhibition itself explored the physical, cosmological, and artistic realms of the native populations of Canada at the time of early contact with Europeans. The collected objects, when linked with the observations recorded by the newcomers and with the aboriginal myths and legends they heard, reflect the way indigenous peoples conceptualized the world, and in turn, transformed that view into an aesthetic expression. The exhibition also included objects made in response to the arrival of European populations, and emphasized the adaptive processes involved. Integral to the exhibition were the concepts of wholeness and unity: people shared the world with every other living form and physical element around them. "Life" was as real in the spiritual domain as in the corporeal, and much activity and creative expression were an acknowledgement of the continuity between these parts of the whole (Harrison, 1988: 7).

Not only is this more about Us--collecting objects, myths, observations, interpreting the Native world view, and defining it as aesthetic--than it is about Them, it is very close to a Noble Savage statement. In place of the abbreviated origin myths that were written on the walls in order to demonstrate that "Life" in both the natural and spiritual worlds was connected and unified, what else might the messages of this exhibition have been?

What was actually *demonstrated* in this exhibition were the changing relationships between Native peoples and their material world as revealed in the objects they made between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. What was *demonstrated* in the exhibition was an amazing process of the transformation of natural and imported materials into the necessities and finery of life. The curators, accordingly, might have revealed to the visitors just *how* all these materials were collected and processed, and by *whom*, especially since most of the work of making that created the exhibited objects was done by women. For, even though we saw men's boats, tools, weapons, paintings, and carvings throughout the exhibition, by far the greater number of objects presented were the clothing, bags, sheaths, and other containers of life and goods that women made.

And such finery they made for themselves, their husbands, their children, and, in some regions, their dogs and horses! What strutting and preening must have been part of native life; what personages they must have considered themselves to be when wearing all these feathers and quills and beads and skins and satins and silks and ribbons and things

that sparkled and shone and tinkled and moved. What a desire to "shine" these things reveal. To be fair, this is, as a minor theme, present in the exhibition, especially in the Northern Woodlands halls, but it is overshadowed by the more abstract and male-dominated shamanic and cosmological messages. The relationship between object and cosmology is much more difficult to conceive and to present convincingly in an exhibition than the more concrete relationship between an object, its making, and its use. Unfortunately, many curators think that the more abstract the message, the more academically respectable the endeavour.

As a result, we often miss the real significance of objects. For example, had the curatorial committee chosen a more concrete and object-oriented theme, they might have discovered and been able to present more tangible and significant similarities between the Native peoples across Canada than have been documented in ethnographies, and added thereby to ethnological theory. Instead, they have used ethnological clichés about the unity of man and nature to contextualize this important collection of objects. We can only hope that some colleague in either Calgary or Ottawa was able to spend enough time in this exhibition to examine the objects from a Canadian, rather than an areal perspective, in order to take further advantage of the Glenbow's effort in bringing all of these rare objects together.

### Conclusion

For many reasons, *The Spirit Sings* is probably the last exhibition of its kind. Because of the politicization of the museum object, the delicacy of old ones, and the great costs involved in borrowing and insuring them, we are not likely to see the likes of these in Canada again. Instead of being the last of its kind, however, had the Glenbow staff taken full advantage of the opportunity they created, especially by asking and training if necessary, Native people to be curators, it could have been the first of its kind.

And, for certain, the political context would have, in that eventuality, been different. And, equally certain, the native spirit would have sung a different song.

### NOTES

1. The full text of the conversation between Peter Gzowski, Michael Ames, and Bruce Trigger on CBC's "Morningside" radio show on the opening day of *The Spirit Sings* is reproduced in *Vanguard* 1988:15-18, as is a description of *Revisions*, an anti-exhibit of contemporary native art that was occasioned by, and opened a week before, the Glenbow show.

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