

## Culture



# Julia HARRISON, *Metis*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 1985

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# Muséologie / Museum Review

Julia HARRISON, *Metis*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 1985.

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When I included a unit on Metis in a course on Canadian native peoples several years ago I quickly learned that there were few materials available, and many of those were obscure or out of print. This exhibit and the associated publications, marking the 100th anniversary of the Northwest Rebellion, should help to fill that gap. METIS, is "the first major exhibition to document the lives of the Metis in Canada"; it was curated by Julia Harrison and opened at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in March 1985.

The exhibit was sponsored by Gulf Canada Limited, which provided a grant of \$125,000 for field collection of artifacts, most of which will remain in the permanent collection of the Glenbow, giving that Museum the world's largest collection of documented Metis artifacts. The National Museum of Man provided a \$40,000 research grant, and the province of Alberta and the city of Calgary also supported the development of the exhibit.

The Glenbow exhibit includes numerous small artifacts and photographs displayed on pine board fence sections, three large dioramas (a red river cart in a buffalo hunting camp, a scrip allotment tent, and a cabin interior), and two videotaped excerpts from interviews with Metis from the research for the exhibit. The smaller artifacts include many examples of fine sewing, bead and embroidery work, as well as hand-crafted wooden tools and furniture. Unfortunately many of the objects are barely described at all in the labels for the exhibit; this contributes to a feeling of spare elegance in the display, but must be seen as a disservice to interested visitors. Despite this criticism, the displays should inform any visitor of the origin of

the Metis and major events in their history, and should also give a sense of the current vitality and political concerns of Metis in Canada. I personally found the interview excerpts the most interesting part of the exhibit, and wished that more extensive use had been made of them.

To complement and interpret the exhibit, Harrison has also written METIS: A PEOPLE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS, a handsome 160 page illustrated book based on the research for the exhibit, which was published by Douglas & McIntyre (\$24.95). It covers the material in the show thoroughly, and will be appreciated by anyone interested in the Metis as well as by those who have seen the exhibit. The book is organized historically, and emphasizes the events that shaped facets of Metis lifestyle and social traditions. The text moves between descriptions of greater historical events, with information from documents, and excerpts from letters and personal accounts of individual lives. While other scholars will no doubt disagree with some points, the book is well worth considering as a text, though it is rather pricey for a paperback. The press has found an interesting solution to the problem of footnotes reducing the interest of non-academic readers by cluttering the text: notes are all in a final section, located by page number and a fragment of text, with no numbers in the text at all. There is also a 24-page illustrated bilingual pamphlet available at the Museum (\$4.50); though well-presented and interesting, it is unreferenced and will not satisfy an academic interest.

The exhibit was at the Glenbow until October 1985, and a portion will later appear in Saskatoon (8 November 1985 to 3 January 1986), Winnipeg (17 January to 9 March), Montreal (28 March through 18 May), and Edmonton (6 June through 20 July 1986). A photographic exhibition produced by Hugh Dempsey is to be circulated via the provincial Metis Associations in smaller community centres.