

FOLKLORE AND THE MUSEUM

FOLKLORE STUDIES AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MAN, OTTAWA, CANADA

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Background

It was the work and interests of Marius Barbeau, the late dean of folkloristics in Canada, which were most instrumental in making what is now known as the National Museum of Man an important base for folklore studies in this country. A separate Folklore Division for the Museum was not established until 1966, however, and in 1970 the Division changed its name to the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies in order to reflect more accurately the widening scope of its research and related activities.

At the present time, the Centre forms one of five divisions or units which together constitute the National Museum of Man. The other four are Archaeology, Ethnology, History, and the Canadian War Museum. The National Museum of Man itself is a component of a much larger complex -- a government corporation known as the National Museums of Canada which includes, in addition to the National Museum of Man, the National Museum of Natural Sciences, the National Gallery, and the National Museum of Science and Technology. Within this structural framework a host of common services are maintained to which most units have access: library facilities, photo labs and processing, design and display services, publications, education and extension, typing pool, and several others. In addition to the services and facilities that are available within the Museum complex itself, the Museum's folklorists together with other researchers have ready access to many of the resources and facilities offered by other agencies of the Canadian Government in the capital area (eg. the National Film Board, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, the Translation Bureau of the Secretary of State, the National Library, the Public Archives, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, central computer services, and so forth).

The Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies is currently housed in a building just outside the city limits in Ottawa's west end where it occupies seven offices, two sound rooms, and four storage-archive rooms (manuscript materials, tapes, discs and "La Salle Marius Barbeau"). In addition to these, temperature controlled storage areas for the Centre's collections of artifacts are found adjacent to the Centre's work areas and elsewhere in the city.

The day-to-day activities of the Centre are currently in the hands of seven permanent workers: four professional folklorists (the Chief of the Centre and three section heads: French, Germano-Scandinavian, and Slavic and East European), an administrative secretary, an archivist, and a cataloguer. This permanent, full-time nucleus is augmented by about four on-site assistants who are employed on a temporary basis and, in the summers, by university students under the Government's special summer student employment program. The Centre is also directly responsible for the administration of an extensive outside contract program which permits the Centre to engage the services of specialists, field workers, field assistants, transcribers, and so on.

Scope of Activities

The activities of the Centre are devoted to the scientific investigation, documentation, preservation and diffusion of materials relating to all manifestations of folklore, folklife and folk culture in Canada. The bewildering variety of ethnic groups found in Canada today offers a rich yet barely explored source for folkloristic research as well as national pride. For this reason, the Centre's established areas of folklore enquiry have, in recent years, been supplemented by the initiation of a special research program devoted to the investigation of folklore among Canada's non-aboriginal, minority ethnic groups.

In brief, then, the Centre:

1. functions as the country's leading folklore research center, an important source of information, and a unique national repository of folklore materials which includes Canada's richest collection of field recordings;
2. focuses its attention on the varied traditions of a population composed of approximately forty distinct ethnic groups scattered over three million square miles;
3. counts among its responsibilities the need to make a positive contribution to international folklore scholarship, stimulate the further development of folklore studies in Canada, as well as to disseminate information and materials concerning Canada's folklore heritage, and educate the public at large.

The Work of a Full-time, Permanent Folklorist at the National Museum of Man in Ottawa

In view of the Centre's immense scope of attention, it is theoretically a rather simple matter for the Museum and its Centre for Folk Culture Studies to absorb the special interests of almost any folklorist as long as his (or her) field of interest is oriented toward the Canadian experience and supplements rather than duplicates the work of others already on staff at the Centre. In actual practice, however, there are certain priorities established by the Centre, and additional professional staff is hired only on the basis of such priorities if and when suitable positions are approved by the Government's funding authorities.

Once his services are engaged by the Museum, the folklorist will find himself faced by a tremendous challenge. Because he is generally hired for his special field or area of interest, he is largely free to do "his own thing" -- a situation that simultaneously presupposes the incumbent's ability to accept the burden of responsibility for everything that he does. Under the general supervision of Chief of the Centre, and in keeping with the general goals and aims of the Museum at large and the Centre in particular, the full-time, permanent folklorist is encouraged to conduct and pursue his own specialty in a manner that will contribute to the established program of research and related activities. Accordingly, he will be expected to direct and initiate a variety of projects, to take charge of those that are directly linked to his special field of enquiry, to participate in the Museum's exhibits program and in its general educational activities.

(by writing popular and/or scientific materials for publication, by accepting public speaking engagements, etc.), handle requests for information that relate to his area, assume some of the administrative burden common to all Governmental operations, and so forth. Finally, he will need to formulate and establish his own short-term and long-term priorities in order to conserve his talents and limited energies and avoid having them expended on the many rather unimportant matters which from time to time appear to engulf him and to distract him from his goals.

The absence of a teaching load and the concomitant syndromes that are special to university-based folkloristics on this continent permits the Museum-based folklorist to perform his duties in a kind of splendid isolation. At the same time, he will find that gradually much of his effort will be geared and devoted to the Museum's display program; his field work will tend to emphasize material manifestations of folk culture (rather than or in addition to verbal lore) and he will be requested to help and advise in the creation of exhibit techniques that will illustrate in visual, concrete, tangible, and artifactual terms the traditional interests of folkloristics in general and the specifics of his own specialty in particular. The folklorist-in-the-museum will be surprised to discover that the task is not insurmountable and remarkably rewarding. Moreover, as he feels his way through the complexities and occasional frustrations of operations within a large museum complex he will gradually become more and more convinced of the enormous potential of folkloristics within the museum and channel his work in the direction of the realization of this potential.