

First Peoples of Canada: Masterworks from the Canadian Museum of Civilization.* Jean-Luc Pilon and Nicholette Prince, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 167 pp.

Reviewed by Brooke Penaloza Patzak

This volume documents a traveling exhibition of artifacts from the Canadian Museum of Civilization that has, in fact, never been exhibited as such in its country of nascence.¹ Released in October of 2013 by the University of Toronto Press with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Book Fund, the volume was edited by exhibition organizers Nicholette Prince (former Curator of Plateau Ethnology) and Jean-Luc Pilon (Curator of Ontario Archaeology). The medium format softcover is an affordably priced and printed, solid reference-quality book. The 150 objects of which the exhibition is composed represent more than 10,000 years of material culture produced by the Métis, First Nations and Inuit people of Canada.

The introduction, written by Prince and Pilon, describe their objective as offering a more thorough understanding of the historical and the contemporary cultures of the Canadian First Peoples and the geography of that country. They also offer some insight into their process of exhibition development. Inaugurated by a reciprocal agreement between the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Museum of China, the exhibition was originally shown at the Imperial City Beijing Art Museum in 2008 before going on to Hannover, Germany; Osaka, Japan; and ending in 2011 at the Museo Nacional de las Culturas in Mexico City, Mexico. In terms of book structure and organization it is furthermore gratifying to find that the editor's denotation of "masterworks" as based on a complex of craftsmanship, materials, aesthetic qualities and symbolic considerations is carried through and expanded in the descriptions that accompany the objects in the second portion of the book.

The opening essay, co-written by Prince, Pilon and Ian Dyck, offers a brief history of the institution and collection, both of which trace their beginnings to the mid 1800s. Over the course of its existence, the institution has been known by different names—among these the Victoria Memorial Museum and the National Museum of Man—and its earliest objective was the collection and exhibition of rocks and minerals. The first exhibition of aboriginal materials (1 museum case to be exact) was held in the early 1860s. According to the authors, a major objective of the museum has been the collection and exhibition of artifacts that represent Canadians of First Nations heritage as well as the many other ethnic groups that have been active in producing the nation's history and cultural diversity.

The following essay, written by former museum Director of Ethnology and Cultural Studies Andrea Laforet, offers a frank and interesting discussion of the history of the anthropology division and the development of the museum's relationship with First Nations groups. In a survey that ranges from the 1910 establishment of the department up until now, Laforet traces the efforts jointly undertaken by the museum and First Nations people to systematically

* This editorially reviewed contribution was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on April 14, 2014. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

document aboriginal culture during the last half of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Her discussion also touches on the ways in which objects of culture reside within the museum setting, the re-establishment of Aboriginal contact with those objects, the repatriation of human remains and material culture, and the involvement of First Nations representatives in exhibition planning. The author's discussion of the last two aspects, the rise of which she dates to the 1980s, renders this one of the more engrossing essays in the volume. She describes the import of this process and the role of public programs supporting this exhibition strategy. With an understanding of First Nations artifacts as deeply meaningful on both local and national levels, Laforet furthermore indicates the role of policy in museum practice and the significance of digitization in providing some amount of access to museum collections.

Written by archeologist Eldon Yellowhorn, the final essay is likewise one of the stronger in the volume. It begins with a coherent introduction to terms that spans from the 1876 Indian Act to the current lack of acknowledgment for the designation First Nations. This is followed by a discussion of historical and contemporary definitions of Indian, Inuit and Métis as based on geographic and legal designations, and a compelling passage on the functionality of these.

The highlight of the volume is undoubtedly the 130 pages dedicated to full-color images of the objects accompanied by short descriptions that are depicted against neutral backgrounds and range from a 10,000-11,000 year old projectile point made of jasper, to a brass heeled knife thought to be the result of 18th century trade with Russia, and a wall hanging made by contemporary Inuit artist Victoria Mamnguqsualuk. The object titles are straightforward visual descriptions, which follow no given format and may include: Indigenous use; material and style (in relation to history of use, trade context, form) and a discussion of how these relate to object functionality; mythological, historical and/or contemporary context; and maker or collector. It is furthermore worth noting that the authors do not shy away from asserting "unknown" when necessary, an editorial and curatorial decision that serves to commend rather than detract from the scholarship.

The single detractor of the volume is that the very basic index that catalogs the objects unfortunately fails to account for the texts, thus thwarting straightforward correlation between the the two and resulting in an unnecessary disjuncture. That aside, the accessible and visually appealing volume will—if the range of the exhibition's travels should be any indication—be of interest to a broad spectrum that reaches beyond First Nations members and academics in the fields of anthropology, history and museology to a much broader readership.

Note

1. In December 2013, the museum was renamed again, becoming the Canadian Museum of History.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v8i1.12762>