

Pictures and History: The Art Museum and the Visual Arts Archives

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The pictorial arts are collected for many reasons. Among the numerous public and private institutions which collect pictorial art are the art museum or gallery which specializes in the "fine arts," and the pictorial archives which specializes in "documentary art." The Oxford English Dictionary defines each as follows: a "museum" is "a building... used as a repository for the preservation and exhibition of objects illustrative of antiquities, natural history, fine and industrial art, or some particular branch of any of these subjects" and "art" is the "skilful production of the beautiful in visible forms," whereas an "archives" is "a place in which public records or other important documents are kept" and a "document" is "something written or otherwise inscribed which furnishes evidence or information upon any subject, such as a manuscript, title-deed, tombstone, coin, picture, etc." Clearly there is some overlap of territory for the museum and the archives in their roles as preservers of heritage, but there is also clearly some difference of focus. In the arena of pictorial art, the art museum focuses on "art" with its connotations of taste, beauty, and creative excellence, whereas the archives focuses on the "document" with its inherent evidential, informational, or historical value. But are these distinctions clear either in fact or in practice? Is any example of pictorial art ever wholly "art" or wholly a "document"? And where should it find a home — in a museum or in an archives? The answers to these questions are neither simple nor clear-cut, and so, in this paper, I propose to examine the overlapping interests of the art museum and the pictorial archives in the larger search for the historical and cultural "roots" of a people. In this search, I will use the examples of two institutions with Canadian pictorial art collections, the National Gallery of Canada and the Public Archives of Canada.

Both the National Gallery and Public Archives are products of the surge of nationalistic sentiments and nation-building that followed on the heels of Confederation, arising from what Canadian historian, Adam Shortt, referred to in his diary as "the necessity for a thorough presentation of the facts of history which will give at once unity and inspiration to the people of Canada."¹ The Public Archives of Canada was created in 1872 in response to a petition supported by the Quebec Literary and Historical Society to gather, classify, and make Canadian records

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1 Ian E. Wilson, "Shortt and Doughty: the Cultural Role of the Public Archives of Canada" (A paper prepared for the Canadian Historical Association, 5 June 1972), p. 7.

available to researchers. In 1874, the Secretary of State created a Keeper of the Records to preserve official government documents. Only in 1903 were the two roles of Archivist and Keeper combined as the Dominion Archivist within the Department of Agriculture, following a recommendation of a Commission on Public Records of 1898. The National Gallery of Canada came into existence a few years after the Public Archives on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition of the newly-formed Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in March 1880, when the then Governor General, the Marquis of Lorne, announced that "each academician has agreed to give a diploma picture as a condition of his appointment, to be presented to the Government, to form the nucleus of a national gallery at Ottawa, which it is hoped will soon become worthy of the Dominion."²

While the government may have provided the young Dominion with the trappings of cultural institutions, it did not provide the encouragement, the direction, or the financial resources to bring these noble intentions to fruition. There were other and more pressing priorities in the young nation. The early history of the Public Archives under Brymner was, according to Ian Wilson, "characterized by a succession of false starts and gropings, by plans never fully carried out, and, generally, by lack of government interest."³ Similarly, Jean Sutherland Boggs said of the National Gallery that "The Lornes' enthusiasm fell on decidedly barren ground."⁴ The Public Archives of Canada really only began to come into its own with the succession of Arthur Doughty to the role of Dominion Archivist after 1903. The National Gallery, until then little more than a room of indifferent diploma pictures donated by Academicians housed above a more popular Government fisheries exhibit, began to awaken from its dormant state with the creation in 1907, at the instigation of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, of an advisory committee of laymen known as the Advisory Arts Council. Eric Brown, hired as curator in 1910, subsequently became the Gallery's first director in 1913. The driving force behind the National Gallery in these first years, Sir Edmund Walker, a Toronto banker who was chairman of the Advisory Arts Council, was also a member of the Historical Manuscripts Commission associated with the Public Archives, which had been created in 1907, the same year as the Advisory Arts Council.

This almost parallel historical development of the two institutions culminated in the long-awaited arrival of their legislated mandates. The Public Archives Act of 1912 (an unamended act under which the PAC still operates) made the Archives a separate department reporting to the Secretary of State and, in essence, a national department of history "consisting of all such public records, documents and other historical material of every kind, nature and description as, under the provision of this Act, or under the authority of any order in council made by virtue thereof, are placed under the care, custody and control of the Dominion Archivist."⁵ The National Gallery Act of 1913 severed the Gallery from a vague and problematic association with the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, and defined its objectives as "the encouragement and cultivation of correct artistic taste and Canadian interest in the fine arts, the promotion of the interests generally of art in Canada; the exhibition

2 Jean Sutherland Boggs, *The National Gallery of Canada* (Toronto, 1971), p. 1.

3 Wilson, "Shortt and Doughty," p. 8.

4 Boggs, *The National Gallery of Canada*, p. 2.

5 Public Archives of Canada Act, 1912.

of works of art under the auspices of the Board or of art societies or otherwise; the custody and preservation of the works of art contributed ... by the members of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts ... the acquiring by purchase, lease, devise or otherwise of pictures, statuary, works of art and other similar property."⁶ In essence, the National Gallery was to be a national department of fine arts. Equipped with these new legislated mandates, with regular annual appropriations from the government (though the exigencies of World War I were soon to rob both institutions of almost all financial support), and with new physical quarters (the Archives after 1906 in the new Archives Building on Sussex Drive, now the Canadian War Museum; the Gallery after 1912 in the new Victoria Memorial Museum), both institutions found themselves with more solid foundations on which to build.

The early acquisitions policy of the National Gallery was directed exclusively toward the pictorial arts whereas that of the Public Archives was predominantly in the realm of textual records. Early in this century, however, the scope of the collections of the Public Archives broadened to include pictorial records:

When Dr. Arthur Doughty was appointed Dominion Archivist in 1903, the Public Archives Collections of books, manuscripts and maps were housed in one room, while the pictorial material did not fill more than one portfolio. In planning for future development, Dr. Doughty recognized the necessity of increasing the latter collection, and, without any encouragement from his Departmental superiors made an immediate start in this direction, one of his first efforts being to acquire several large original drawings of Montreal and other well-known places by George Heriot, at a total cost of less than three hundred dollars (today they would be worth at least ten times as much). He reported the find to his Minister, who had no sympathy with such 'fads,' refused to examine the drawings or to approve of their purchase. Fortunately, a colleague of this Minister, of different tastes, purchased the drawings and hung them on the walls of his office. Shortly afterwards, the other Minister happened to visit his colleague, saw the pictures (without knowing that they were the very ones he had refused to buy), praised them, and declared that they should belong to Canada.⁷

By 1906 the Minister in charge of the Archives Branch had given official authorization to expend money for the purchase of paintings, drawings, and prints reflecting Canadian life, and as early as 1907 three divisions of the Archives were recognized, one for manuscripts, one for maps, and one for prints. The aim of the department was to meet the legitimate needs of all *bona fide* investigators of Canadian history, and so the collection of pictorial art was built on broad lines, including portraits of historical and government personalities, of historical events including modern interpretations of early history by contemporary Canadian artists such as Jefferys and Reid (whom Doughty actively encouraged to depict such themes), pictures relating to aboriginal populations, and views of places. The 1925 *Catalogue of Pictures including Paintings, Drawings and Prints in the Public*

6 National Gallery of Canada Act, 1913.

7 J.C. Webster, "Introduction," *Catalogue of the John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection (Pictorial Section)*, New Brunswick Museum (Saint John, 1939), p. i.

Archives of Canada contains two quotations, one by Doughty in his "Preface" and one by James F. Kenney in his "Introduction", which are indicative of the significance they attached to this growing pictorial collection:

One chief difficulty in appreciating much of our earlier story is the difference in appearance of the country then and now. We are so accustomed to Canada as we see it now, and as we move in it, that we are hardly conscious of the fact that what are to us to-day thriving cities and familiar scenes, formed, only a few years ago, part of a vast wilderness untrodden by the foot of the white man. It is here that illustrations associated with the beginnings and the advance of our civilization prove such valuable aids, since they permit one to obtain a connected and systematized view of our development.⁸

and:

The little boy who did not understand how the Battle of the Plains of Abraham could have been fought on the top of a rock on which stood the city of Quebec had his difficulty solved when he saw landscapes of eighteenth-century Quebec and its environs.⁹

Doughty's early interest in school texts and his dismay at the dull and lifeless way in which history was being taught led him to explore ways in which copies of pictorial archival material could be made available for use in the classroom. Following a suggestion in 1922 by Dr. J.C. Webster of the New Brunswick Museum, the Archives prepared several series of lantern slides which could be borrowed by teachers, an activity in which the National Gallery was also engaged by this period. By the time of the publication of the 1925 *Catalogue*, the collection at the Archives amounted to as many as twenty-five thousand items, prints being in the majority but also encompassing oil paintings, watercolours, drawings, photographs, and book illustrations, some of which were "of very great artistic as well as historical importance."¹⁰ Dr. Doughty was then able to declare with confidence that "the pictures in this department have done more than anything else to start people investigating about Canada."¹¹ It is interesting to note that Kenney remarked in his "Introduction" that the department preserves contemporary portraits, landscapes, and views of important events, with the same care as those of the past, in order to serve the future equally with the present. The same policy followed today has complex ramifications that will be discussed later.

The shared water was being further muddied, this time by the National Gallery, which during the First World War actively encouraged the activities of the Canadian War Memorials Committee to provide a visual record of Canadian participation in the war, a project that was clearly documentary in intent and the products of which were primarily of historical rather than aesthetic value. In 1921 the National Gallery of Canada received on deposit the large and accomplished war records which Lord

8 Arthur G. Doughty, "Preface," *Catalogue of Pictures including Paintings, Drawings, and Prints in the Public Archives of Canada* (Ottawa: 1925-26).

9 James F. Kenney, "Introduction," *Catalogue of Pictures including Paintings, Drawings, and Prints in the Public Archives of Canada* (Ottawa: 1925-26), p. xii.

10 Kenney, "Introduction," p. i.

11 Wilson, "Shortt and Doughty," p. 21.

Beaverbrook and the Canadian War Memorials Committee had amassed in London. One wonders why the Public Archives, which had been actively collecting photographs, prints, and posters related to the Great War, did not also attempt to have these documentary war works deposited in its custody, for:

Once the wars were over, most of this material found little response anywhere and was bundled into the vaults of reluctant galleries and museums, there to be neglected for years; because good or bad, it was identified as art before it could be processed as document? Was it because archives laid no claim?¹²

All the Public Archives seems to have done in this regard was to sponsor some proposals for a war museum adjoining the Archives Building to house both its war trophies, posters, maps, and other war records and the National Gallery and its war paintings collection. These proposals were not supported by the National Gallery which wanted to maintain control of its own collections, and nothing came of the plans. During the Second World War, the National Gallery was again closely involved in the creation of Canadian war art records and these were again deposited at the National Gallery. Finally in 1971, apparently in recognition that war collections did not really fit into its mandate or collections, the National Gallery transferred the war collections, except for a handful of works of "superior" quality suitable for its collections, to the Canadian War Museum.

It was a somewhat **peripheral** element of the First World War Memorials collection that finally brought the National Gallery and the Public Archives into open conflict, a conflict that perhaps first raised the issue of fine versus documentary art in the two institutions. At the instigation of Sir Edmund Walker and the National Gallery, Lord Beaverbrook had succeeded in acquiring as part of the Canadian War Memorials five British master paintings that had nothing whatever to do with the war, but which were of considerable significance to Canada: the "Portrait of Sir Alexander Mackenzie," the explorer, by Thomas Lawrence; the "Portrait of Sir John Franklin," the explorer, by Thomas Phillips (now thought to be neither by Phillips nor of Franklin); the "Portrait of Lord Amherst," first Governor General of British North America, by Joshua Reynolds; the "Portrait of Joseph Brant," the Loyalist chief of the Six Nations, by George Romney; and finally the "Death of General Wolfe" by Benjamin West. These were deposited with the War Memorials at the National Gallery of Canada and hung on its walls from 1920 until 1925. In July of 1925, when the Public Archives was preparing to open a new wing of its building, Arthur Doughty instigated the issuance of an Order-in-Council claiming that four of these paintings, namely the Lawrence, Reynolds, Romney, and West, had originally been intended for deposit at the Public Archives and ordering their immediate transfer to that institution. (The National Gallery had already given the Public Archives a good copy of the "Death of General Wolfe," which, it must be said, is an historically inaccurate depiction of events on the Plains of Abraham.) The director and trustees of the National Gallery moved quickly to defend their rightful custodianship of the four paintings, Brown declaring in a letter to trustee F.J. Shepherd that "the pictures in question are obviously of such great artistic

12 Hugh A. Taylor, "Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist," *The Roles of Documentary Art in Understanding a Cultural Heritage* (Proceedings of a Conference held at the Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 31 October 1980), p. 11.



Benjamin West (1738-1820), The Death of General Wolfe ... Published as the Act Directs, January 1st, 1776, engraving: 425 x 597 mm., engraved by William Woollett (1735-1785), published by Woollett, Boydell & Ryland, London England. Possibly the most famous print ever published, Woollett's Death of Wolfe was reproduced by the thousand in England, and other copies were published throughout Europe by various engravers in succeeding decades. The original painting by Benjamin West was once held by the Public Archives of Canada, but was transferred by Order-in-Council to the National Gallery of Canada in 1925. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-7761.

importance as to put them entirely outside the category of mere public records.”¹³ (Of the four pictures they stood to lose, the Gallery officials considered the Benjamin West to have the least artistic merit and hence to be the most dispensable — the same painting is now thought to be one of the greatest treasures of the National Gallery of Canada!) Before the Gallery was able to demonstrate that the claims made on behalf of the Public Archives in the Order-in-Council were unfounded, considerable pressure was brought to bear through the Acting Minister of Public Works, a vocal opponent of the National Gallery under whose jurisdiction the Gallery fell during the absence of the Minister. Gallery director Eric Brown was threatened with dismissal unless he complied with the Order-in-Council, and the four paintings were removed from the Gallery's walls and taken to the Archives Building. The National Gallery

13 National Gallery of Canada Archives, Eric Brown, National Gallery of Canada, to F.J. Shepherd, Montreal, 29 July 1925.

continued to protest and finally succeeded three years later, in 1928, in having another Order-in-Council issued by which the paintings were returned to its custody. West's "Death of General Wolfe" was left on loan at the Public Archives as a compromise and was only returned to the National Gallery in 1938, thirteen years after its departure.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the subsequent history of the National Gallery of Canada and the Public Archives of Canada has been typified by an adversarial relationship. For the most part, the shared arena has been large enough for two institutions with differing mandates and limited resources to coexist peaceably and, indeed, there are numerous instances where the two institutions have operated in concert to meet the objectives of one, the other, or both. This cooperation has taken many forms over the years. Works of art in the collection of the National Gallery thought to be of greater value to an historical collection have from time to time been transferred or loaned indefinitely to the Public Archives. A work by John Hammond entitled "The Landing of the Duke of York at Quebec" which had been purchased in 1909, for example, was transferred to the Archives when another painting by Hammond which was more suitable to the Gallery's collection took its place. There have been instances of recommendations from one institution to the other for purchases or gifts of works of art, as in 1978, when a curator at the National Gallery discovered two important portraits of Inuit figures by Angelica Kauffmann in the possession of a London dealer and recommended them for acquisition to the Picture Division of the Public Archives, which subsequently did acquire them. Prospective donors of works of art are also frequently directed from one institution to the other. An important precedent was set in 1970 when the National Gallery and the Public Archives used their combined influence to secure special government funds for the acquisition of the notable collection of Canadiana which had been assembled by W.H. Coverdale, the president of Canada Steamship Lines, to grace the walls of the Manoir Richelieu, the company hotel at Murray Bay, Quebec. As J. Russell Harper, noted Canadian art historian and then consultant to the National Gallery, stated in a report on the collection:

I suggest that while forty years ago it was still possible to acquire such a collection as that of the Manoir Richelieu and the Sigmund Samuel Collection, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, any thought of going out to buy a similar collection now piece by piece is sheer nonsense. Canadian, American and English collectors have exhausted the supply. Once the collection is broken up, the majority of the items will go into American hands and be lost to the country. A wonderful example of national short-sightedness in not purchasing when the opportunity arose can be cited in the case of Paul Kane's Indian sketches of the 1840s. After trying for years to sell to the government of Canada or a Canadian collector, the family finally sold them to a Texas oil multimillionaire; they will not return to Canada. This collection is, from my viewpoint, a part of the very fibre of Canada. It would be tragic to see it lost to Canada."¹⁴

14 *Ibid.*, J. Russell Harper, Alexandria, Ontario, "Report on the Manoir Richelieu Collection," to J.S. Boggs, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 25 June 1970.

Together the National Gallery and the Public Archives kept this important collection in Canada, and, after some considerable soul-searching and negotiation (not without some rancour) over criteria for division, deposited the majority of the nearly two thousand items in the collection of the Picture Division of the Public Archives, while sixty-two oils and watercolours were allocated to the National Gallery to strengthen its collections of early watercolour painters and topographical artists. Cooperation has also taken the form of loans of works from one collection to exhibitions sponsored by the other, including extensive loans from the PAC's vital collections of Canadiana to the National Gallery's 1967 Exhibition *A Pageant of Canada*. In one recent case, the two institutions combined to coproduce the 1981 exhibition *Canada in the Graphic Arts 1556-1977*. There is, in addition, a constant flow of information sharing for collection documentation, research for exhibitions, and publications between the two institutions.

The nature of the relationship between the collections policies of the National Gallery and those of the Public Archives' Picture Division was succinctly stated by Wilfred I. Smith, then Acting Dominion Archivist, at the time of the negotiations regarding the division of the Coverdale collection, in a letter to the Gallery's chief curator, Robert Hubbard, in August 1970:

Our interests have overlapped yours only in a relatively small area and there I think we have agreed generally that the National Gallery is concerned primarily with artistic excellence — items as works of art — while the Public Archives is concerned primarily with contemporary visual representation — items as documentary evidence.¹⁵

But the very words "I think we have agreed generally" suggest just how blurry and ill-defined the boundary between fine and documentary art is and the extent to which the dealings of the two institutions on this shared "boundary" have been handled in an *ad hoc* or situational manner. Indeed, in the last decade, the issue of overlapping collections mandates has again become contentious. The Public Archives, for its part, has acquired and exhibited non-representational art dealing with non-Canadian subjects, notably works by Karl May. The National Gallery meanwhile has moved in a significant way into collecting works by artists such as Thomas Davies, Charles Forrest, Peter Rindisbacher, George Heriot, J.E. Woolford, James Pattison Cockburn, and many others traditionally seen as in the purview of documentary art and already collected in large numbers by the Public Archives. In my opinion, these "overlaps," which are occasionally the cause of bitterness between the institutions, are not aberrations, but arise of necessity from the fact that both institutions collect pictorial art works, some of which form part of *both* our artistic heritage *and* our historical heritage.

In light of these conflicts over time, I would suggest that we might profitably examine the respective if sometimes overlapping roles of the art museum and the pictorial archives as repositories of our cultural heritage. In particular, this is necessary to challenge two generally-accepted but faulty notions that I think lie behind the existing "understanding": one, that the art gallery gets what is excellent and the archives gets what is second-rate; and two, that pictorial art is a dubious

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Wilfred I. Smith, Public Archives of Canada, to Robert H. Hubbard, National Gallery of Canada, 10 August 1970.



Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834), "Buffalo Hunting In The Summer," c. 1825, watercolour, pen and ink; 240 x 440 mm. This work was originally collected by David Bushnell, Jr., not because of its artistic merit, but as a specimen of ethnographic documentary interest, and was for a long period of time part of the collection of the Peabody Museum of Ethnology. Rindisbacher, once an unknown, has since the publication of the book about him in 1970, become one of the most admired of the West's early artists. Courtesy: Bushnell Collection, Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-114472.

subject for an archival collection, a kind of awkward child of the archival world. Many questions must be asked, even though few may find clear answers: What characteristics give one example of visual art its aesthetic value, while another example is to be valued for its documentary aspects? On what basis can we make a separation between form and content, in an effort to ensure that a particular art work finds its way into the collection where its particular value will be maximized? Once it is preserved in these collections, what must the art museum or art archives do to fulfil their other objectives of making the work accessible to the researcher and to the public; specifically, what sort of documentation and/or finding aids can satisfactorily provide access to visual art resources, and what will be our policies of outreach in these areas of loans, exhibitions, and publications? In a cursory examination of these problems, I cannot hope to provide solutions, but I do hope to demonstrate that the art museum and the pictorial archives are often metaphorically "in the same boat" and can possibly row in the same direction.

Hugh Taylor, in his paper "Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist," argues that the dichotomy between form and content, between art and communication, is in fact a post-Renaissance, post-print concept. When one thinks of early visual art works such as cave paintings, Greek vases, medieval illuminations, or even a very famous "documentary" art work like the Bayeux Tapestry, it is easy to agree with him that the distinction between art and a document is not so easy to

make. The picture, perhaps only after the gesture and the sound, is a very early form of communication. Yet the advent of the printed media somehow compromised the reliability of pictorial art as a means of communication and today we are still seeking answers to questions posed by the dichotomy of form and content.

Most of us [archives] have examples of these charming pieces in our repositories, but are not too certain how they fit into our scheme of values. If they are 'good,' should they go to an art gallery; and if they are not 'good,' what kind of rating can we give them? I think there is a small voice in all of us which says: 'You can't really trust those painter chaps!'¹⁶

In spite of this distrust of the visual image, we are all visual beings and we all recognize the power of the richly-evocative image to materialize another cultural/historical time and place that is a link in the chain of our own history and experience. We should recognize that in any collection of art, be it historical or archival, both form and content are significant, and that it is necessary to keep this in mind when defining an explicit scope and direction for our collections. If the view is too narrow, a documentary art archives is likely to end up being little more than a sad accumulation of dark-suited portraits and Currier-and-Ives prints, whereas an art gallery collection will run the risk of being a hollow pageant with selections dictated by arbitrary external, as opposed to culturally-rooted, criteria.

I will not dwell on criteria for the acquisition by an art gallery of works of art as cultural assets, since I think that the concept of artistic excellence or "the progress of the arts" internationally and nationally is fundamental to it and generally well understood as such. Documentary content may be entirely irrelevant to the painting as a work of art — a painting by a Canadian artist need not depict Canada, indeed it may not even be representational — but documentary content is seldom irrelevant to the painting as an archival material. How then do works of art meet the criteria of archival materials, criteria which it must be remembered grew organically out of the collection of textual (not pictorial) materials (with their attendant characteristics of the sanctity of the series and original order, *respect de fonds*, and provenance)?

One criterion is that of the authenticity of the document based on the concept of the unbroken history of control over it. Clearly few works of art being considered for acquisition as archival materials meet this criterion in any way. Indeed, it is common that accessions to archival art collections such as the PAC's Picture Division come into the collection without a specific context, as works of unknown origin or authorship, in the hope that research and subsequent growth in the collections will provide a context for them. Naturally this problem also exists in art galleries, but it is functionally less problematical as art galleries are often less dependent on gifts as a means of acquisition and because they tend consciously to fill gaps in the collection, in a sense creating their own imposed art historical context for the objects collected. For the archives, unusual problems of authenticity may also arise. When, for example, modern paintings of historical subjects have been commissioned, such as those produced by C.W. Jefferys, George Reid, Goerges Delfosse, or Adam Sherriff Scott, what value do these paintings have as historical documents? Healthy imaginations supplemented with a few historical references may produce very evocative images, but they are certainly not authentic images.

16 H.A. Taylor, "Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist," p. 1

A second criterion is informational or evidential value. To be recognized as a document of archival interest, a work of art must in some demonstrable way enhance our understanding, factual or emotional, of our country and its history. It must be seen as a statement of some reality. The problems of subjectivity and of intentional distortion which are present in any sort of document are perhaps even thornier in the case of a visual document. Is it possible to resolve the potential conflict between picture-making and document, between form and content? How much is the initial choice of subject dictated by taste or by some propagandistic intent? It can be argued, for example, that certain watercolours painted by British military officers in Canada, reflecting as they do the imperial aspirations of Great Britain, present a rather rosy view of life in the colony simply by avoiding the depiction of the harsh, the seamy, and the unpleasant sides of its life. How much is the evidential value of what is depicted compromised by the intervention of artistic styles, such as formal conventions of composition? A "history" picture such as Benjamin West's "Death of General Wolfe" is certainly a dramatic icon based on a historical event, but it is anything but historically accurate; rather, it is an exercise in picture-making and propaganda, deifying the British national hero by placing him in the role of the dying Christ of the "Pieta," surrounded by his "disciples" in the form of men (including a richly-appointed Indian) who were not likely present at his death. How much is the documentary value of an art work impaired by this inevitable selection, omission, and addition on the part of the artist, or by the selection, omission, and addition of successive artists? Should an archives collect only "on the spot" works, as opposed to "studio paintings" which may be developed from them resulting in more grandiose but less truthful depictions of external reality? In the case of mass-produced prints adapted from an original sketch, how valuable are these distant relatives as documents? While engravings and lithographs are desirable and necessary to an archival collection, original oil and watercolour sketches executed on the spot are vastly more so. What about the issue of genre paintings, such as Clarence Gagnon's "Maria Chapdelaine" series, with their apparently accurate description of place and period but which Hugh Taylor suggests are the "pictorial counterpart of literary manuscripts?"¹⁷

These questions do not lend themselves to trite answers or inflexible rules — each case must be viewed in its own light. The visual accuracy of Legaré's stark paintings of the cholera epidemic in Quebec may be questioned, but in such a case the subjective and personal statement of truth *is* valuable as a record. In a sense, in transcending convention, schema, and form, the finest artists often provide at one and the same time the most personal *and* the most truthful statement of "fact." It must be emphasized that only through understanding the history of art and its peculiar methodology can one bring a particular work of art into focus in terms of either its aesthetic or documentary value. Form and content are intermeshed in the art work, but if one knows the artistic conventions operating in the work one has the tools to assess its documentary value or lack thereof. Evidential value also depends very heavily on who is looking for it. Above-ground archaeologists may use landscapes to understand city development; sketches and paintings of buildings may be an additional source of information to preservationists and architectural historians in re-creating historic buildings and interiors; even genre paintings may

17 *Ibid.* p. 11

provide some information about the way others lived in faraway times and places. When establishing an acquisitions policy, the archivist must understand not only the visual artifacts, but also anticipate the requirements of researchers.

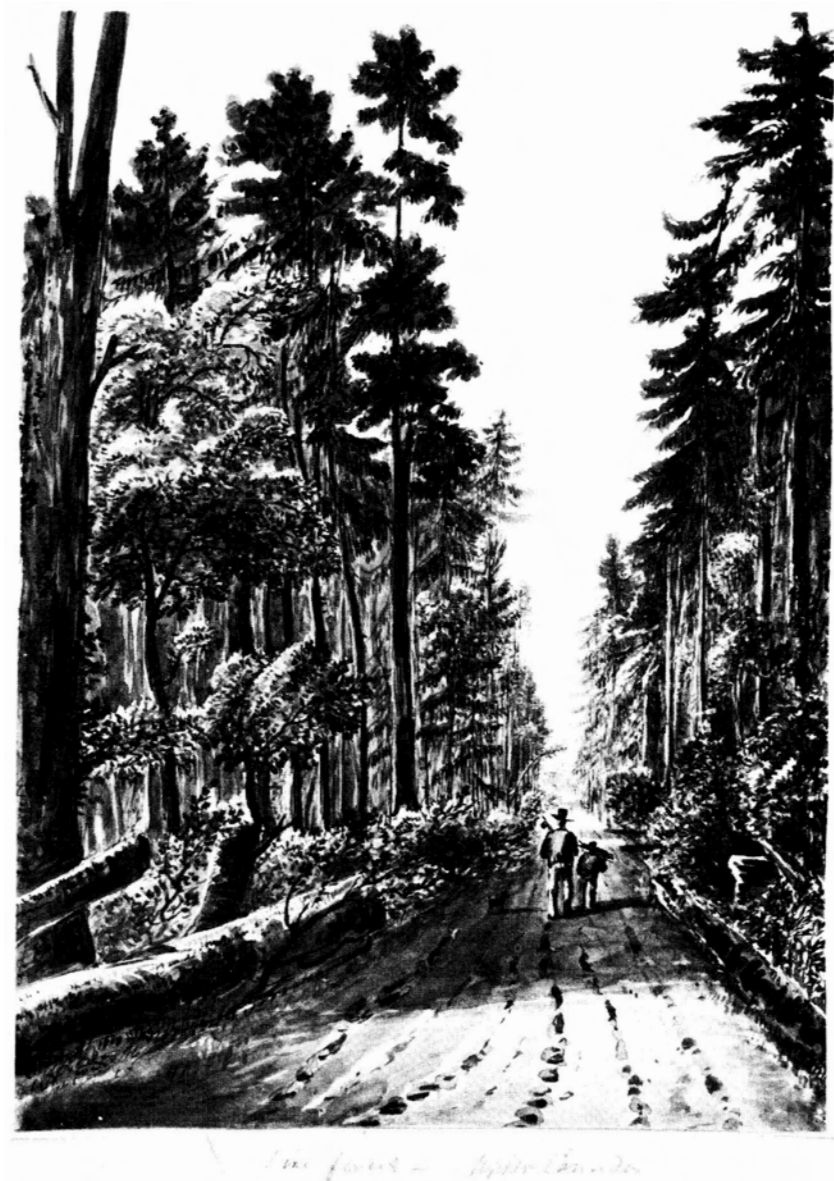
Hugh Taylor suggests that, since visual art is by its nature conceptual, documentary art cannot be true or false, but only more or less reliable for the formation of descriptions. But that is not to suggest that archivists should seek out only the "reliable," leaving the "beautiful" to the art museum. Taylor recommends a broad approach to acquisition in a visual arts archives based on the inseparability of form and content:

Clearly we must try to distinguish between an artist's personal record expressed through the painting in non-representational terms, or a work of art which has no point of reference with the world of appearances, and the kind of documentary art which seeks primarily to record, using this expression in its widest sense to encompass paintings which may only remotely look like their subjects but express other qualities, in particular the creation of profound generalized statements about their subjects.¹⁸

I suspect that a new, younger generation of art archivists who are no longer content to sit passively in their archives awaiting donations of second-rate art works would heartily endorse this conclusion. It would be unrealistic to mandate "fine" art exclusively to the art gallery and "documentary" art exclusively to the visual arts archives when such delineations are so difficult to make and when so many examples of visual art possess qualities of interest to both kinds of collections. Nor would it be realistic to merge such institutions as the National Gallery of Canada and the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada, since each brings a different focus to the formation of its collections and different strengths to the interpretation and exhibition of its resulting collection. The fact that the two mandates occasionally overlap does not diminish the *raison d'être* for the two collections.

A final consideration in the development of acquisition criteria is the place of folk art in our archives and museums. The significance of folk art in our cultural heritage is perhaps too little recognized by either the art gallery or the visual arts archives. All social history is weak when it comes to the habits, work, dress, attitudes, and religious life of the working class. People who work with their hands keep few diaries, write few letters, keep few possessions through successive generations, and, until recently, have seldom been the subject of the scholar. In the absence of written history about the lives of ordinary people, the objects of their own creation for their own use may well serve as important clues about them. Paintings and drawings, however naive or primitive, may be the most obvious source of historical information (local events, disasters, personalities, town views), but other examples of folk art — decorated furniture, quilts, rugs, samplers, pottery, baskets — inform us of group taste and group participation in traditional regional activities. In addition, the craft traditions — sign painting, smithing, furniture making, gravestone carving — attest to the existence of certain businesses and their role in the local economy. These objects are also frequently exemplary in the aesthetic sense. Museums and archives which wish to record the cultural history of more than just

18 *Ibid.* p. 10



James Pattison Cockburn (1778-1847), "Between Kingston and York," c. 1830, watercolour: 370 x 270 mm. A military man and Royal Artillery officer, Cockburn was a prolific draughtsman and a well-known author. Only in the mid-twentieth century did his artistic skills begin to be appreciated as part of Canada's cultural heritage. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, C-12632.

the rich and powerful classes ought to consider the preservation and proper interpretation of folk art traditions.

Having briefly examined what the art museum and the art archives could collect, I now turn in a general way to the problem of what the museum and the archives should do to make the material they preserve accessible to researchers and the public. The problem of developing a language to document visual art resources has long plagued all institutions which collect pictorial art in its many forms. The medium resists words and verbal description, and if a picture is worth a thousand words, it will undoubtedly take a thousand words to describe it. Archivists and curators who recognize the cultural power and significance of the visual image must learn together to verbally describe pictorial content. We must work together to develop documentation parameters, subject indexing guides, and thesauri of standard terms to describe art in words, a need which has become ever more urgent in the new world of automated systems of retrieval, whether they be verbal databases or image banks like videodisc. Art galleries and visual art archives must share their respective strengths in a shared methodology. The art historian can help the art archivist understand the place of his or her collections in the continuum of art history, making the information of the document accessible within the intent of the art. In return, the archivist can expand the curator's understanding of content and the importance of information retrieval by subject:

In iconography archivists have a great deal to learn from our colleagues, the art curators. At the same time I would suggest that the present methods of identification and cataloguing of works of art by curators are curiously literary and oriented towards externals. Entries tell us a great deal about the physical nature of the painting as artifact, the exhibits in which it has featured, and (if possible) its impeccable record of provenance, yet there is often little about the work itself beyond its title or caption, which may be less than helpful.¹⁹

The fuller use of the historical perspective will also broaden the history of art to include more detailed studies of art in Canadian communities. Such studies may rescue individual art works, artists, and art movements from the oblivion imposed by a national or international art world's "superstar" mentality. Certainly there is a wealth of information in textual archival sources concerning pictorial artifacts which both the art gallery and the archives can utilize in their research related to artists, organizations, communities, and events.

The problem of making our visual art collections accessible to the public is manifested not only in the documentation about them we choose to keep and retrieve, but also in the interpretive function represented by our exhibitions and publications. Art galleries have typically been more active than archives in this area since they are always equipped with exhibition space and because they view their collections with the intention of exhibition. If galleries have a shortcoming in this area, it arises as a by-product of their emphasis on form over content, in the credo that "the works speak for themselves." To speak to a broad public, works of art often need a little help. For their part, archives have to some degree suffered from the engrained archival role of being passive recorders and collectors, the view of their

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 13.

holdings as study collections frequently being compounded by the lack of exhibition space and budgets. If there is a lesson to be learned by either type of institution in the area of interpretation of collections, it is perhaps best embodied in the remarks made by Canadian artist Alex Colville at the end of the two day conference "The Roles of Documentary Art in Understanding a Cultural Heritage," when he suggested that

museums and art galleries have a responsibility to provide more text, more supplementary information about the things we present to our audiences. Whereas it has been popular to believe that being didactic is an elitist activity, perhaps what is more elitist is not to provide greater assistance to our audiences to know and understand more.²⁰

In conclusion, I would suggest that in spite of some conflict of mandates, art galleries and visual arts archives are fellow travellers by virtue of the special nature of the medium they preserve and the peculiarities of methodology that it implies. In pursuing the acquisition of Canadian visual art collections, both the National Gallery of Canada and the Public Archives of Canada have acknowledged the concept that the expression of truth as it relates to one's own sphere embodied in images we can recognize as our own, both as Canadians and as human beings, is of very great importance. As Michael Bell argues in his paper "Why Look at this Stuff?" visual artifacts can serve as a guide to the reconstruction of intangible values of the past and can contribute to an understanding which hopefully will enable future generations to set their own environment and national problems in a perspective that will soon press for solution.

Visual images form a continuum with our own imaginative responses to our contemporary environment. They will if their currency can be increased help to prevent the destruction of many of the elements of our cultural landscape and increase our collective sense of common cultural values and respect for the varieties of cultural values that constitute the cultural whole of Canada.²¹

As our collections grow, as research continues, and as exhibitions and publications proliferate, the art museum and the visual arts archives are working in their respective areas of strength to bring such images into intelligent currency to engender a lively sense of the Canadian experience, past, present, and future. By collecting pictorial art, the art museum and the visual arts archives preserve, with different foci, the active visual memory, and in making these collections accessible and understandable they pursue a common goal which, simply stated, is visual literacy.

20 Mary Sparling, "Introduction," *The Roles of Documentary Art in Understanding a Cultural Heritage*, p. iii.

21 Michael Bell, "Why Look at this Stuff?," *The Roles of Documentary Art in Understanding a Cultural Heritage*, p. 40.