

## *Exhibitions*

**Carl Rungius: Painter of the Western Wilderness.** E.J. HART and JON WHYTE. Organized by the Glenbow Museum, sponsored by Texaco Canada, and supported by the Canada Council, the City of Calgary, and the Province of Alberta. Catalogue available. (Art Exhibition Series, Number 3. ISBN 0-919224-45-8.) On view at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 2 November 1985 to 2 March 1986.

*Carl Rungius: Painter of the Western Wilderness* could not help but be of overwhelming interest to anyone interested in the landscape and wildlife of the Canadian Rockies in the early part of the twentieth century. This exhibition was the first major retrospective showing of Rungius's work. The exhibition offered a stunning display of paintings, posters, and drawings that together showed the depth and scope of his work. In all, 125 pieces were used to tell the story of Rungius and the Rockies, a number which surely went a long way toward satisfying the appetite of Western Canadians for material on Rungius. The exhibition owed a large debt to the thorough collecting habits and generosity of the Glenbow's founder, Eric Harvie, as the majority of the works had been in his private collection. The organizers also borrowed from a wide range of public and private sources, including public museums throughout the United States. The Glenbow and its sponsors are to be commended for mounting such a massive showing of Rungius's works.

The exhibition began with a general introduction and biographical sketch of the artist, followed by seven sections meant to touch upon the most important influences and periods of his life and career. In sequence, these are: "The Young Artist;" "Early Travels;" "The Artist Illustrator;" "Wyoming Round-up;" "Rungius of the Rockies;" "The Gallery of Wild Animal Paintings;" and "The Old Bull." Each of the sections was introduced by a brief text and, when possible, facsimile photographs of Rungius intended to illustrate the essence of the section. In some ways these photos were about all that brought relief from the vast number of paintings and drawings in the display areas. The viewer did not at this point know whether this limited use of photographic material was intentional or whether it reflects the scarcity of available photographs.

It is difficult, if not heretical, in Southern Alberta to bring any criticism to bear on an artist who is as well known and admired as Carl Rungius. In all fairness, the exhibition was designed to be as popular as possible. It undoubtedly reached a wide audience. However, from the perspective of the dynamics of display and interpretation, the exhibition suffered from several flaws. Simply stated, there was too much to view and not enough interpretation. Perhaps the organizers should have asked themselves at what

point in an exhibition has the viewer seen enough? Does volume diminish impact, and if so, how can this problem be prevented? One purpose of the exhibition was to convey through Rungius's work the cultural heritage of the Canadian Rockies. Yet, after viewing 125 works of art the viewer remains curiously uninformed. It would seem that the root of this problem is the limited use of artifacts and material from the Rungius Papers at the Glenbow. The ability of artifacts and archival sources to provide a broader interpretive framework for the story being told through the paintings seems to have been seriously downplayed. Very often artifacts and archival documents bring the exhibit to life for the average viewer. It therefore seems critical that the coordination between the organizers, art historians, and archivists should have been close.

Evidence that such cooperation could not have been the case in this instance is provided by the only three examples of artifacts on display here. Of particular interest was the re-creation of what appeared to be a studio of Carl Rungius. It was set up in the middle of a large display area so that it could be viewed from all angles and could not possibly be missed. However intriguing this presentation was, the viewer has no idea what it actually depicts. Are the items on display props? Are they authentic items that once belonged to Rungius? Was the display a replica of the Rungius studio in Banff? There were no captions or archival documents to relieve this puzzlement. It was equally fruitless to consult the catalogue. No mention of these items nor of any of the other artifacts is made.

Disappointment also awaits the viewer in each of the two display cases used in the exhibition. One shows various items of a personal nature, such as a pipe, that the viewer can only assume were owned by Rungius. Also on display were books containing illustrations done by Rungius but, even with nose pressed to the glass, the viewer cannot decipher the titles of the books. Should the viewer have been knowledgeable enough to have known without looking? With difficulty the title page of *In the Shadow of Mt. McKinley* by William Beach can be discerned through the layers of glass and tissue paper. The other extraneous items such as a mug and a medallion are perhaps self-explanatory by their very presence. No other explanation is offered.

Interspersed with the paintings in the seventh and final section of the exhibition is an array of posters done by Rungius which advertises "Trail Riders Hiking in the Rockies." These fascinating documents provide some variety after such a large number of paintings. Even here, no explanation is given for the reasons why Rungius was illustrating this subject. For many of those attending the exhibit, one would suspect that the posters would have been of keen interest. Once again, we are left wondering. The books, posters, and artifacts provide little more than a glimpse of the man. A viewer could not help but feel that dimensions of the artist and his involvement in the local culture (which archival materials might have revealed) are simply hinted at, never explored.

It is felt in certain circles that the work of Carl Rungius speaks for itself and for the geographical area and historical era in which it was created. This is, to a point, true. However, it seems odd that in the face of such a volume of material the viewer can emerge with so many unanswered questions about what has just been seen. The catalogue contributes nothing more to our understanding. It does provide a comprehensive list of the works on display and contains a small number of black and white reproductions of the paintings.

This exhibition represents a missed opportunity to infuse a further dimension into the documentation and interpretation of the artist, the era, and the art. Through greater use of

artifacts and proper identification and explanation of those that were used, viewer appreciation could have been significantly improved. Equally important is the need for archival sources in displays of this type. For an exhibition of this scope, art, artifact, and archival document are needed to communicate the story line to the public. To focus on the former to the near exclusion of the latter two deprives the viewing public of the best opportunity to learn, to enjoy, and to appreciate.

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**An Atlantic Album: Photography from 1870-1920.** Organized by the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax) and the National Film Board (Atlantic Studio, Halifax). Viewed at the Public Archives of Canada in October 1985. Catalogue: **An Atlantic Album: Photographs of the Atlantic Provinces before 1920.** SCOTT ROBSON and SHELAGH MACKENZIE. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited, 1985. ISBN 0-920852-40-8 \$19.95.

This is an exciting exhibition for archivists, labour and social historians, and historians of photography. It shows 150 photographs uniformly mounted and displayed against a dark brown background, chosen from a number of large and small collections in the Maritimes. It is the first exhibition ever compiled from the many surviving historical photographs of this area.

The genesis of the exhibition was a National Film Board production entitled *Fixed in Time: A Victorian Album*, which was directed by Shelagh Mackenzie. Mary Sparling, Director of the Art Gallery of Mount Saint Vincent University, suggested to Ms Mackenzie that an exhibition should be set up from the photographs on which the film was based. She agreed, and a group of people, among whom was Scott Robson of the Nova Scotia Museum, put together four touring exhibitions, each of which had thirty-five frames filled with Notman photographs and thirty-five empty frames which the exhibitors could fill with historical photographs collected from people in their own communities. The four exhibitions circulated throughout the Atlantic Provinces as *The Past in Focus: A Community Album before 1920*. They gathered a wealth of photographs from the archives and attics of the Maritimes. *An Atlantic Album* is a distillation of these treasures.

The exhibition is organized around three themes: "Places," "Portraits," and "Activities." The two sections on "Places" show rural and urban views and the facades and interiors of different buildings. The "Portraits" section shows people posed both in the formal settings of the studio and snapped on location against a natural background. The "Activities" section shows people both at work and enjoying themselves at sporting and social events.

Among the latter are many views of people at play which are particularly informative for the social historian. The straw-hatted girls hamming it up on a ridge pole around 1900 in Fredericton, for example, give a somewhat different perspective from the stereotypical picture of the Victorian woman, while the interior view of Dr. McLaughlin's "dental parlour" in 1910, with its wicker furniture and potted palm, tell us a great deal about popular acceptance of Lister's discoveries in medical hygiene.