

St. Patrick Street in Ottawa. Finally, a limited-edition Warhol serigraph of *Wayne Gretzky*, salutes the entrepreneurial instincts of one Vancouver art dealer who, in a marriage of art and mammon, enlisted the aid of a brokerage house to sell the series to Canadian investors.

The exhibition succeeds in presenting the material in an orderly and comprehensible manner, despite lighting difficulties in the temporary installation area and the necessity to glaze oil paintings as a security measure. One cannot help observing, however, that the National Archives is altogether too modest in the discreet explanations it has attached to each of these works. Without a guided tour (which could be arranged upon request for interested groups), there are few hints in the captions of the detective drama that lies behind the display—overseas contacts, negotiated purchases, generous donations, new historical insights and a retinue of unexpected attributions that comes only from hard-slogging research. The published catalogue chronicles the whole fascinating saga with 200 illustrations and twelve colour plates integrated in the text. It will be a welcome addition to the literature of earlier exhibitions, such as the *Image of Canada: Documentary Watercolours and Drawings from the Permanent Collection of the Public Archives of Canada* (1972) and *The Painted Past: Selected Paintings from the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada* (1984), as well as the three travelling displays that supplied the material for the “Records of our History” series (reviewed in *Archivaria* 23, 171-173). With new attributions to its credit, and work of this quality, it is time that the National Archives made a larger point of its contribution to the study of art and history in this country.

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Plague to AIDS: Lessons from our Past. MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE. Mounted at the Academy of Medicine, Toronto. 9 May — 30 November 1990. 39 p. catalogue.

“Plague to AIDS: Lessons from our Past” is a travelling exhibit which will be visiting museums in Ontario and the West. Although small, the exhibition makes a strong statement. Museum objects, photographic and textual records, and videotapes are used to support a persuasive argument: that infectious diseases are much more than biological phenomena. The exhibition suggests that diseases are and always have been socially constituted realities, both in the way they have been established and spread, and in the way they have been understood and dealt with. Furthermore, being the locus of disease, society has the responsibility to recognize and alleviate its fear and hatred of the victims of infectious diseases. This didactic aim is clear in Linda Dale’s introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue: “Our society’s response to AIDS has combined fear, compassion, and denial . . . A comparison between past and present might increase our understanding of today’s response to AIDS and prod us to test critically the assumptions underlying those actions and emotions.”

Being thus ambitious, the exhibit has strengths and inevitable weaknesses. The title itself is an example. On the one hand, the title “Plague to AIDS” promises more than it delivers. The exhibit is divided into three parts: an introductory section, a case study of the plague, and a look at the history of cultural, medical and political responses to infectious diseases focusing on AIDS. Epidemic diseases of the intervening centuries are represented only briefly; “Plague and AIDS” would be a truer title. On the other hand,

the actual title establishes the exhibit's compelling theme of historical continuity. Epidemic diseases have afflicted humans for centuries, people have responded to them in emotional ways, and medical practices have always been related to contemporary ways of thinking and judging. With such a strong theme, the exhibition is able to touch on these important ideas. Rather than a detailed catalogue of illnesses, "Plague to AIDS" may be viewed as a short essay on human injustice.

The exhibition's display elements should be considered in light of both its didactic approach and its requirement of portability. On sleek grey display panels, effective graphics are combined with a strong narrative text. The artifacts are simply presented in plain cases. The historical context and use of the artifacts are described with a minimum of detail in the captions. Viewers who wish more information must consult the catalogue.

The choice of artifacts illustrates how the exhibition's moral message is enhanced by its physical aspects. Curator Felicity Pope explains in the catalogue that she met the challenge of creating a travelling exhibition by subordinating the artifacts to its theme. "Plague to AIDS" does not attempt to display more objects than could fit into a small room or be discussed in fifteen pages of catalogue text. This is not to say that the artifacts merely elaborate the central argument. Rather, as Pope explains, they have meanings at several levels: while all artifacts necessarily represent something of the social practices of their time, in this exhibition, they were selected because they also possess qualities that elicit a strong emotional response in the viewer. The curator hopes that, thus "awakened," viewers will be more receptive to the exhibit's message of tolerance and awareness of AIDS and its sufferers.

To this end, the exhibition uses a wide variety of artifacts. Consider, for instance, the display case containing a stuffed rat and a model airplane. These objects are described as representing different historical means by which infectious diseases (plague and AIDS, respectively) have been transported widely and have thus attained devastating proportions. Presented this way, in surprising juxtaposition, the artifacts attain symbolic importance. Their ordinariness makes them frightening because they remind viewers of how common and portable fatal infectious diseases have been throughout history. Thus, the theme of historical continuity is developed at different levels in a small display case.

Such an approach has been used effectively in the selection of museum artifacts such as rats and planes, or cautery irons and condoms. Archivists may wonder how the approach relates to the choice of archival records on display in the exhibition. If we analyse the use of records in light of the archival concepts of evidential value and informational value, we see that the *evidence* which archival documents provide about the activities of their creators is not the criterion for inclusion. Some documents are displayed for their informational value; they provide background insights, details or illustrations of the topic at hand. For example, a 1912 image showing a sick young man refusing to enter a sanatorium, is clearly intended by the curator to be meaningful not because it enlightens us about some photographer's work, but because it informs a discussion of public fear in the face of disease. Its emotional impact, immediacy and poignancy, also help to drive home the information conveyed.

Even the informational value of some of the archival records is downplayed in the exhibition, however. Some records are displayed so that the viewer's focus is directed to

their physical form. For instance, a handwritten minute-book of the York Board of Health does not seem out of place alongside “traditional” museum artifacts such as medical instruments. In this context, the dusty old pages of the book reveal medical practices and abilities more through their appearance than through their text. The curator has recognized that, like other artifacts, an archival record is a tangible relic, a link with our past. The “Plague to AIDS” exhibition reminds archivists that as long as a record can be removed from its original context and used in displays, the record also possesses what may be called “artifactual value.” It can engage people’s emotions because it *appears* beautiful, dusty or even frightening.

Keeping in mind the exhibition’s approach to artifacts, several questions arise about the overall presentation. If artifacts were chosen because they could provoke a reaction, some of the choices seem surprisingly tame. The Canadian Gay Archives, for example, could have supplied AIDS posters that were much more forceful. Equally striking is the number of groups inadequately represented in the exhibition. The interpretation of medicine as it has applied to epidemics narrowly emphasizes the rise of public and “scientific” medicine. While allowing technology and drugs to be displayed, such an emphasis tends to ignore the long-standing, “low-tech” contribution of women as caregivers in nursing wards and homes. This is especially surprising, since the exhibition tries to emphasize historical continuity. As well, the focus on AIDS as a disease of homosexual men may lead people to underestimate its presence in other communities.

The focus on AIDS, however, enables the exhibition to perform an important task. It locates the syndrome in an historical context, as another in the long list of epidemics, the effects of which have been worsened by a frightened and ignorant host society. It is to be hoped that, by deliberately engaging viewers’ emotions and arguing a strong historical case, “Plague to AIDS” will help to combat fear and ignorance today.

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