

Exhibition Reviews

“My Face is a well-written page, Maggie”: Images of the McCormick Home 1892-1992. WOMEN’S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION ARCHIVES. London, Ontario. 2 October 1992 - 12 February 1993. 8 p. catalogue.

In the last several years, the study of health care in an historical context has flourished. The popularity of the history of medicine, of nursing, and of related health care fields is evidence of this. A recent exhibit mounted to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the McCormick Home, a senior citizens’ residence located in London, Ontario, is contributing to the interest in this field of historical study. It traces the growth and development of the McCormick Home during its first century—a century that has been described as a *well-written page* in the handsome exhibit catalogue. The exhibition, as a whole, demonstrates that health care facilities, such as the McCormick Home, have an important place in the social fabric of our society and are worthy of historical study.

Central to the success of this exhibit (and indeed any exhibit) is the attention paid to design—intellectual, technical, or aesthetic. The various themes were well chosen and well researched in order to represent adequately 100 years of history on twelve panels that, at the same time, would be of interest to the “passer-by” audience. While the exhibit is largely chronological in its progression, each panel represents a theme to depict the major or most interesting events and activities of that time. To establish a solid foundation, the viewer is first introduced to the *McCormick Family* and the idea of a “home for the aged,” which originated in 1874: *The Beginning* (although the home did not become a reality until 1892). The next panels—the *Early Years 1895-1928* and the *Depression and War 1929-1945*—trace the growing pains of the home during difficult times. While retaining the chronological progression, the following sections are more thematic: the *Home in the Headlines* outlines a horrendous fire at the home; *Keeping Active* profiles various activities at the home such as day-trips, painting, quilting, and card playing. *Volunteering* and the *Home in the Community* are prominent components of the exhibit that illustrate the important link between the institution and the surrounding society. Finally, *Growth and Rebuilding 1946-1967* and *The Home Today* represent the most recent changes at the home.

The archivist of the Women's Christian Association Archives carefully selected a broad cross section of archival records. It was marvelous to see correspondence, annual reports, minutes, policies, rules, and posters included in this exhibit, in addition to photographs. Too often archivists display an excessive number of photographs (and artifacts), giving the viewer the wrong impression of archives. This broad cross section communicates to viewers that textual records can be both interesting and attractive. Textual records were well chosen to reflect the theme of the panels. Interesting passages in correspondence, minutes, or rules were reproduced and enlarged, a technique which proved to be a successful vehicle in attracting the viewer's attention. Photographs were also chosen to reflect each panel's theme. Many photographs were acquired from outside of the Archives' holdings. Indeed, the exhibit was not designed around existing holdings; rather, photographic resources were sought elsewhere to complement predetermined themes. The explicit captions associated with each image indicated that the individual photographs had been well researched.

The technical design of the exhibit in terms of the physical structures and the layout was quite impressive for an institution the size of the Women's Christian Association Archives. Other small archives should be encouraged by this example. The images and textual documents were mounted on twelve attractive, elevated panels, each measuring four feet by eight feet. The panels were covered with a cream coloured fabric and framed in pine, then connected to form a circuitous structure. Aesthetics proved to be as important as the intellectual and physical design characteristics. Careful attention was paid to the layout, which served to capture the eye and lead it around each panel. Many techniques were employed, such as the defining of relationships between items through careful juxtaposition or the use of linking arrows or colour. Images and textual records were reproduced in colour or on textured or coloured papers, again demonstrating the importance of augmenting the visual experience. While purists may argue that such reproductions or highlighting techniques distort the original documents, such a sacrifice is warranted given the audience of this particular exhibit, passers-by in high-use public areas.

An informative eight-page catalogue accompanies *My Face is a well-written page, Maggie": Images of the McCormick Home 1892-1992*. It provides a preamble to the exhibit, acknowledgements, a meticulously documented list of exhibits, and a list of the locations at which the exhibit will be mounted.

This exhibit is seeking wide community exposure—bringing the archives to the community instead of attempting to bring the community to the archives. In addition to Parkwood Hospital, a local church and two very large and busy malls in London are other venues at which this exhibit was seen. It is the quintessential outreach tool, reinforcing the idea that health care facilities (and their archives) are an integral part of our social fabric.

The Women's Christian Association Archives must be commended for this excellent exhibit. It is professional, aesthetically pleasing, and based on sound research; the outreach initiative is particularly noteworthy.

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