

Exhibition Reviews

North: Landscape of the Imagination/Le nord: paysage imaginaire. NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA. Mounted at the National Library of Canada, Ottawa, 28 October 1993 - 27 March 1994. 50 p. catalogue. ISBN 0-662-59931-4.

There is an indisputable link between landscape and art. It is the land that shapes the artist's perceptions, and in the North, the quite dramatic impact of the Arctic and sub-arctic environments has inspired its residents and challenged those who visited these regions. This is the predominant theme explored in the National Library of Canada's exhibition *North: Landscape of the Imagination*. Through an examination of the forms and variety of artistic interpretation of the North and their effects on Canadians, the curators of this exhibition hoped to represent the influences that both the reality and the concept of the North have had on northerners and those who believe our country is shaped by its northern nature. Inspired in part by a trip to the Northwest Territories and the Yukon by several National Library staff, as well as the suggestions of northern librarians, and coinciding with the International Year of the World's Indigenous People in 1993, it was a timely subject for an exhibition.

One of the strengths of the exhibition was its ability to transport the visitor from the static display cases to that place, real or imagined, which has inspired so many over the years. An example from among the many sculptures, images, and written words demonstrating the power of art to deeply affect one is found in a poem created by a man for whom this mystical place was home. Uvavnuq, an Igloolik Inuit, relayed his poem to Knud Rasmussen, who wrote it down in the early part of the twentieth century:

The Great Sea has set me
 In motion
 Set me adrift
 And I move as a weed in
 the river.
 The arch of sky
 And mightiness of storms
 Encompasses me,
 And I am left
 Trembling with joy.

Despite the successful effort to portray the impact of the North on its own artists and those many southerners who have been influenced by the magnetic attraction of the region, the curators could not adequately explain two thousand years of history in a land mass comprising two-fifths the total area of Canada as well as describing its inhabitants who possess tremendous cultural diversity. The exhibition was divided into four major periods: pre-contact; early history, 1500 to 1900; the first half of the twentieth century; and the modern period, 1950 to 1993. Imagine, if you will, a similar attempt to produce an exhibition on the "South." Is it not presumptuous to try to encapsulate so much in a single exhibition? While there is no quarrel with the intent to focus on the North through an "artist's eye," the authors surrounded this with a deluge of other themes, thus diluting the original message. This foiled attempt to cover such a wide agenda was the only real drawback of the exhibition—but it was a major flaw.

As for the physical lay-out of the exhibition, the captions were detailed and informative, the lighting was excellent, the variety and quality of items on display was unparalleled in a single venue. In total, it was visually pleasing with an interesting blend of arts and crafts, photographs, and text from significant literary works. The interjection of sound, the music and stories told of, about, and by Northern inhabitants, also helped to set the appropriate atmosphere. This feature also reinforced the important oral tradition of the Dene, Inuit, and Indian peoples of the North. The useful catalogue accompanying the exhibition offered greater opportunity to summarize the historical development described above, with each chapter containing a bibliography of other suggested readings about the era or aspect of culture under discussion. The inspired selection of the photograph of a fiord on Baffin Island used on the poster and the cover of the booklet powerfully conveys the juxtaposition between the various themes, such as harmony and struggle, imagination and reality, or forbidding frontier and homeland.

The National Library also commissioned the production of a sixteen minute video, allowing the exhibition an opportunity to have an impact on a larger audience. The video did capture the spirit of the main themes as well as making the useful point about the mission of the National Library to hold "visions in the national repository of ideas." The efforts of Carol Martin to coordinate and mount the exhibition deserves special mention. Coordination of material gathered from such a wide range of contributors—Steuben Glass, various museums, galleries, art dealers, artists, and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs—was a herculean task. In addition, the quality and depth of research is obvious; the only quibble on this front would be the lack of archival documentation, which would have added useful history about the development of the arts in the North. Although the National Archives of Canada was acknowledged, there was no obvious archival material on display. The highlight of the exhibition was the artwork itself. Inspired by northern birds, animals, rocks, and sky, the simplicity of lines and the economy of composition served to reinforce the connection between place and imagination. The combination of works by such renowned artists as Glenn Gould, the Group of Seven, James Houston, and Peter Pitsulak, among many others, in one location made this a memorable experience.

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