

and the Greedy Eighties. Will Chris Smith, the new Secretary of State for National Heritage, address the situation? It seems most unlikely that the new Labour government will do anything to relieve the aristocracy of their taxes, even if it would benefit the museums of the nation. Canadians would do well to ensure that the principle of donation of cultural property for tax exemption is never eroded.

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Treasured Memories – A National Archives of Canada Exhibition Celebrating 125 Years. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA. Ottawa, Ontario. May 1997 - 2000.

“Treasured Memories” is the new permanent exhibition curated by archivist Martin Tétrault to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the National Archives of Canada (NA). Upon entering, you are immediately surrounded by bright red and blue walls, hushed music, and that intangible sense of the sacred that often accompanies exhibitions of historical material. Along the right wall in the first room, pools of shimmering light illuminate single precious documents, which are supported on pyramidal structures. Along the left wall, brief text panels recount the history of the NA, state its mandate, and list its leaders. Ahead looms an interactive computer terminal next to a rare and exquisite eighteenth-century painting, *Portrait of Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow* (christened Brant), an excellent juxtaposition of means of communications, new technology vs. history.

The mandate of the National Archives of Canada is to acquire, preserve, and make available the records of the country’s history and to act as the collective memory for the nation. At its most basic, this exhibition illustrates how over the past century and a quarter, the staff of the NA has faithfully, and with great attention to detail, acquired and preserved fascinating, historically significant, and often beautiful documents. The records selected for this exhibition are outstanding in their quality and in their importance to Canadian history. The curator is to be commended on his choices, as he has clearly selected documents which are the highlights of the NA’s holdings.

My first problem arose, however, when I tried to find the focus of this exhibition. Is it about the history of the National Archives for its 125th birthday, or is it about the history of the country in which the NA grew up? Other questions came to mind: How do these treasures reflect the history of the NA itself? What difference did each Dominion or National Archivist make to the collection of these treasures? The history of the institution would make a fascinating study and I admit to being slightly disappointed that there were only two text panels in the introductory area which focus on this. Why did Arthur



Portrait of Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow (Christianized Brant), 1710, by Jan Verelst (ca. 1648-1734), Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 64.5 cm, National Archives of Canada (C-92419).

Doughty deserve the “mug” shot and not, say, Wilfrid Smith? Perhaps a history of the National Archives itself was considered to be too self-reflective and less interesting to the viewing public than a selection of treasures.

Secondly, the title, “Treasured Memories,” is neither thematic nor chronological in nature, and does not allude to what the NA does, or has done over the past 125 years. It alludes to the records themselves, which are clearly accorded a “sacred” status. Although I have no qualms about these records being treasures, considered so for their rarity and historical significance, I would imagine very few Canadians hold the Rebellion of 1837-38 as a treasured memory, or, for that matter, the hanging of Riel.

The exhibition is divided into four chronological sections, using large scale blue panels to indicate the time period covered: The Early Years 1565-1759; From the Conquest to Confederation 1760-1867; The First Century of Confederation 1867-1967; and Towards the Year 2000 and Beyond. The text on these panels is, however, too imprecise and lacks both content and context to inform the viewer how these largely unrelated records are connected, why they were acquired, why they have “treasure” status, and how they fit into the holdings of the NA. For example the introductory panel explains the grouping of documents thus: “Discover some of the oldest documents preserved at the National Archives. They relate to exploration, encounters with the First Nations, and the distribution of power.”

These two sentences introduce documents that illustrate and reveal the turmoil and upheaval of nearly two hundred years, but the questions raised are not answered. What about the distribution of power? In a previous exhibition, *Aboriginal Portraits*, the curators directly addressed the power distribution between Native people and Europeans. While there is some mention in the labels as to why, when, how, and for what purpose these records were acquired, they do not really give enough detail. How do they relate to the subject headings? This lack of context is true for all the dividing text panels.

The highlight of the exhibition, besides the excellent selection of records, is the interactive terminals located throughout the exhibition. These pull together detailed descriptions and images of other holdings that are not included in the exhibition. This is an informative and attractive educational tool, which added significantly to my understanding of the types of records an archive would collect, and a sense of the broader holdings of the NA. But why only two? Why no access to the NA’s web site? And why delineate between media of records?

While I have some concerns about context and historical background, I am also concerned about the physical display of the documents. I was surprised by the lack of focused light on the records, the use of grids over the lights (which create a distracting pattern on the surface of the documents), and the multiple shelves which hindered the light from illuminating the items on the bottom. Also, while the thematic display cases (the Rebellion of 1837, women’s suffrage, famous Canadians) were good intellectual groupings of documents,



Portrait of Oscar Peterson, 16 October 1984, by Harry E. Palmer, Silver-gelatin print, National Archives of Canada (PA-182399).

their placement within the cases is quite disorderly. The text labels are inadequately placed in relation to the records, so the viewer is constantly maneuvering to see them. In addition, I question some of the display techniques, such as the lack of frames for watercolours and the vertical display of some of the more fragile images. I assume these items will be the ones to be rotated as mentioned in the promotional brochure, which, in itself, is a highlight. It is well-designed and beautifully printed, displaying some of the more captivating images from the exhibition.

There is also a new approach to the exhibition design. The rooms burst with primary colours, creating a refreshing change from the more sombre choices usually assigned to archival exhibitions. Sometimes it works, such as Oscar Peterson framed in sunny yellow, sometimes it does not, as the painting by

Mary Riter Hamilton seemed lost in its grey frame. The use of pyramidal stands in the beginning of the exhibition are a welcome change from the usual display cases, but perhaps they could hold more than one item, so we are not left with the back of the stand as part of the display.

I also question the way in which facsimiles and “modern prints” are used, as I believe that this detracts from the concept of the treasure by removing the rare, unique, fragile connotations associated with originals. While I can appreciate that not all documents should be displayed, this point needed clarification to allow the viewer to understand the difference between an original archival document and a facsimile. And if the use of facsimiles is acceptable practice, and is explained, why not add more? Why not use facsimiles of the other three Indian Kings that cannot be exhibited? This way their context is not lost. Why not include a whole group of cartoons from Andre Pijet’s series on the Montréal Canadiens and the Stanley Cup? Why not use more video copies of treasured film footage?

My final comment is about the last section, “Towards the Year 2000 and Beyond.” While I enjoyed the display of audio-visual materials both new and obsolete, I would have liked more information on the new Gatineau Preservation Building, of which there is only one oversized unidentified photograph at the exit. As the official storehouse for these treasures, this building plays a significant role in the future of the NA, and warrants a display unto itself. And what about some more information on those 29,582 gigabytes of radar imagery?

In conclusion, I realize the limitations for staff trying to assemble an exhibition that seeks to cover close to five hundred years of history, while trying to address 125 years as a collecting institution and I commend them for their bravery. The value of this exhibition lies in the curator’s strong selection of images and in the interesting and unusual exhibition design. Its weaknesses are a lack of thematic narrative and contextual information.

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