

Exhibition Reviews



Hiding in Plain Sight: Discovering the Métis Nation in the Collection of Library and Archives Canada. LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA. 11 February–22 April 2016. Curated by BETH GREENHORN, AL BENOIT, WILLIAM BENOIT, and CAROLYN COOK.

The exhibition *Hiding in Plain Sight*, presented in the lobby of Library and Archives Canada (LAC) at 395 Wellington Street in Ottawa earlier this year, provided visitors with a rare opportunity to view items from LAC's collection of materials on the Métis, the second largest of three main Aboriginal groups in Canada. Developed by LAC in collaboration with the Métis National Council and the Manitoba Métis Federation, the exhibition was intended to broaden public awareness of the history of the Métis Nation and to highlight the collection in the hope of encouraging more comprehensive research of a community that has largely been marginalized. The exhibition follows major efforts at LAC in recent years to expand the cataloguing and digitization of items containing Métis content.

The Métis are descendants of First Nations women and European men involved in the fur trade. Having been marginalized by both groups, they emerged as a distinct people in Canada's western regions during the 18th and 19th centuries. Métis communities were established mainly in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories, and to a lesser extent in British Columbia, Ontario, Minnesota, Montana, and North Dakota. After the Métis resistance at Red River in 1869–1870 and in Saskatchewan in 1885, it became dangerous for Métis to identify themselves publicly as such, and they survived as a group by blending into the background. The exhibition highlighted aspects of their neglected history through 52 reproductions of archival and other items, including photographs, watercolours, and oil paintings. The dates of the images ranged from ca. 1822 (Peter Rindisbacher, *Indian Hunters Pursuing the Buffalo in the Early Spring*) to 1956 (Rosemary Gilliat Eaton, *Pierre Paquin, La Broquerie, Manitoba*). The 38 reproductions of photographs were copied

from albumen and silver gelatin prints, cellulose nitrate and glass plate negatives, and colour slides.

The lobby of Library and Archives Canada presents numerous display challenges, including limited wall space and a sunken area originally intended for seating. The curators, Beth Greenhorn, Al Benoit (Manitoba Métis Federation), William Benoit, and Carolyn Cook, were able to overcome these constraints by dividing the presentation into two independent, easily navigable display areas. The east wall of the lobby was covered with four large panels, each featuring multiple images, and the sunken area was used to accommodate six free-standing panels, with images and explanatory text presented on both sides. The text on the free-standing panels matched the information provided on the wall panels. This repetition was a sensible choice, as it allowed visitors to enter the exhibition in either one of the two display areas.

The first of the wall panels, entitled “Who Are the Métis,” featured background information about the Métis, along with reproductions of 10 photographs (by Robert Bell, Humphrey Lloyd Hime, Charles Horetzky, O. Rolfson, and members of the Royal Engineers) and two oil paintings (by Frances Ann Hopkins and Edward Roper). The second and third panels, entitled “Identifying the Métis,” explored that theme through 20 images (including photographs by Robert Bell and Charles Horetzky; a lithograph and a watercolour by Peter Rindisbacher; watercolours by William Armstrong and Berdoe Amherst Wilkinson; oil paintings by William G.R. Hind and Frances Ann Hopkins; and a woodcut by W.J. Phillips). The fourth panel invited viewers to search for Métis content in 11 images (by H.S. Spence, Humphrey Lloyd Hime, Robert Bell, Lachlan Taylor Burwash, Rosemary Gilliat Eaton, and a member of the Royal Engineers) through indicators such as original title, dress, profession, and location. Along with textual information relevant to Métis history and culture in Canada, each panel included basic facts, such as title, artist, and medium, for the displayed images. The selection was varied and effectively conveyed the continuing challenge of identifying and documenting Métis content.

The wall panels featured a wide variety of scenes from daily life, and the free-standing panels in the lower area displayed individual and group portraits exclusively. Among them were images of well-known figures, including Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel, and representations of more obscure Métis, such as George MacPherson and his family. The curators of the exhibition were diligent about providing important background information throughout, not only on the Métis Nation but also on each of the individual items displayed. For the portraits shown on the free-standing panels, each work was accompanied by a label identifying the title, photographer, medium, LAC catalogue number, and, in some instances, a brief biographical note on the person or persons depicted. The sunken area of the lobby also included

a digital flipbook, which allowed visitors to access additional Métis-related documentation within six subject areas: “Mapping Canada,” “The Fur Trade,” “The Battle of Seven Oaks,” “The Buffalo Hunt,” “Nationhood,” and “Scrip” (Métis legal tender). Although not ideally positioned for visibility and access, the digital display provided numerous details about the Métis not found on the various text panels and was a worthwhile addition. For those unable to view the exhibition first-hand, the images and the material presented on the flipbook are scheduled to be added to the LAC website in the late fall of 2016.

As well as providing viewers with an opportunity to learn more about Métis history and culture, the exhibition allowed visitors to see reproductions of works by several accomplished 19th-century artists working in Canada. Chief among them were Peter Rindisbacher, a Swiss-born artist who specialized in depicting First Nations peoples in western Canada and the United States in the 1820s and 1830s; Humphrey Lloyd Hime, a photographer on the 1858 Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition, the first of its kind in Canada to use photography; William G.R. Hind, a widely travelled artist who produced numerous sketches while following the old fur traders’ trails across the Prairies in 1861–1862; Frances Ann Hopkins, who sketched extensively while canoeing along the fur-trading routes with her husband, Edward Hopkins, an official of the Hudson’s Bay Company, in the 1860s; and Charles Horetzky, a surveyor and photographer who produced numerous images of the western territories during the 1870s. All these artists deserve more study, and it is therefore reassuring to know that important examples of their work are accessible at LAC.

The lobby of Library and Archives Canada has been used occasionally for exhibitions over the past several years, and *Hiding in Plain Sight* is on many levels a compelling model for future presentations. Despite the shortcomings of showing reproductions rather than originals, the exhibition was well designed, attractively presented, and successful in using archival materials as a means of fostering a better understanding of Métis history and culture. Most important, *Hiding in Plain Sight* represents a significant step in redressing the longstanding cultural marginalization of the Métis, a neglect that has also been evident within Canada’s archival community, including such journals as *Archivaria*, where commentary on Indigenous archives has been sporadic at best. LAC deserves high marks for increasing the visibility of its collection of Métis materials. It is hoped these efforts will ultimately encourage more comprehensive research into Métis and Indigenous materials held in collections throughout Canada.

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