

Exhibition Review



Treasures and Tales: Queen's Early Collections. AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, KINGSTON, ON, 27 August–4 December 2016. Curated by ALICIA BOUTILIER and DEIRDRE BRYDEN.

Provenance is a key concept both in the art world and in archives, and archivists know that this central organizing principle is essential to the understanding of archival records. The exhibition *Treasures and Tales: Queen's Early Collections*¹ underscored the further importance of provenance as a lens through which to understand the historical development of the institutions that house art and archival collections. Co-curators Alicia Boutilier (Curator of Canadian Historical Art, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario) and Deirdre Bryden (University Records Archivist, Queen's University Archives, Kingston) took advantage of the university's 175th anniversary to showcase some remarkable objects in the holdings of each institution and to explore how the university's collections came to be assembled through donations from professors, alumni, and friends of Queen's from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century. The curators' approach successfully allowed them to display a wide-ranging group of objects of local, national, and international interest, which demonstrated the origins – and scope – of their holdings in a relatively small amount of space.

Queen's University² was founded in 1841 by the Presbyterians of Upper Canada, and its collections originated 28 years later with the donation of an

- 1 Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC), Exhibitions: *Treasures and Tales: Queen's Early Collections*, accessed 1 December 2016, <http://agnes.queensu.ca/exhibition/treasures-and-tales>.
- 2 Established by royal charter in 1841, the school was known as Queen's College at Kingston until 1912, when it formally separated from the Presbyterian Church in Canada and officially changed its name to Queen's University at Kingston. *Queen's Encyclopedia*, s.v. "History of Queen's: An Overview," accessed 7 January 2017, <http://www.queensu.ca/encyclopedia/h/history-queens-overview>.



Treasures and Tales – First Gallery. Photograph by Paul Litherland, 2016.

illuminated manuscript. The late-15th-century *Book of Meditations*, which was donated to the library by John Brown in 1869 and which was included in *Treasures and Tales*,³ was the first item to be given to enhance learning and research at Queen's. Soon, a large assortment of literary and historical material – along with ethnographic, geological, and biological specimens – would be housed in various spaces across the university, including the library and a handful of early museums. The archival collections continued to be under the purview of the library until Charles Beer became the university's first archivist in 1960. Until the mid-20th century, the university's art collection comprised mostly portraits. An art foundation was created in 1940 with the aim of establishing a collection for the enrichment of students, faculty, and the wider Kingston community.⁴ Art acquired through the activities of the foundation, and through subsequent bequests, was eventually housed in the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, which opened in September 1957.

3 AEAC, *Treasures and Tales*, "Unknown Artist, *Book of Meditations*, possibly 1490, leather-bound manuscript book," accessed 1 December 2016, http://agnes.queensu.ca/microsites/treasures-and-tales/meditations_main.html.

4 Ralph Allen, "Introduction," *Permanent Collection, 1968, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University at Kingston* (Kingston, ON: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1968), 1; AEAC, *Treasures and Tales*, "Tom Thomson, *First Snow*, 1916, oil on cardboard," accessed 1 December 2016, https://agnes.queensu.ca/microsites/treasures-and-tales/firstsnow_main.html.

Given the loose organizing principle of the exhibition, the curators had free rein to assemble a group of disparate objects that highlighted the diversity and richness of their respective collections. The exhibition was mounted in two gallery spaces, which were joined by an installation by the contemporary artist Ciara Phillips. Commissioned as part of the 175th anniversary year programming,⁵ Phillips's installation invited the visitor to reflect on the university's past and on its future as an institution for the creation and preservation of cultural heritage.

The first gallery featured items of compelling Canadiana, including extraordinary works of Indigenous art and paintings by Tom Thomson and two members of the Group of Seven. The majority of objects in this room were acquired as the result of the colonial and commercial expansion into the Canadian North. The gallery was dominated by spectacular mammoth and walrus tusks decorated with engravings by Guy Kakarook and/or Joe Austin. They were acquired by Henrietta Constantine and Inspector Charles Constantine of the North-West Mounted Police, who was deployed to the Yukon during the Klondike gold rush. The tusks, which feature depictions of villages, wildlife, and landscapes, were part of a large collection of Western Subarctic art and artifacts amassed by the Constantines while they were living in the Yukon. Following her husband's death, Henrietta Constantine moved to Kingston, where she befriended Agnes Etherington. The tusks, along with dozens of other works of art from Constantine's collection, were purchased for the university using funds left to it by Etherington's brother to support the arts.⁶

The right side of the gallery featured items created and collected by agents of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC): a late-19th-century babiche bag created by an unknown K'asho Got'ine (Hare) artist from the Northwest Territories' Mackenzie River delta area, donated to Queen's University by Robert Hamilton, the inspecting chief factor of the company; and five photographs of Inuit and Cree taken by A.A. Chesterfield, an HBC clerk who worked at trading posts at Moose Factory, Ontario, Fort George (near present-day Chisasibi, Quebec), and Great Whale River (now known as Kuujjuarapik, Quebec) in the first few years of the 20th century. Neither Hamilton nor Chesterfield had a personal connection to the university, but their collections came to it as a result of their religious affiliation.

Complementing this gallery's records of nation building through colonialism and trade were objects that reflect the construction of national identity. The left-hand wall featured three small oil sketches of the Canadian wilderness

5 AEAC, Exhibitions: *Ciara Phillips: Comrade Objects*, accessed 1 December 2016, <http://agnes.queensu.ca/exhibition/ciara-phillips-comrade-objects>.

6 AEAC, *Treasures and Tales*, "Guy Kakarook and/or Joe Austin (attributed), *Engraved Mammoth Tusk*, around 1896, ivory and pigment," accessed 1 December 2016, http://agnes.queensu.ca/microsites/treasures-and-tales/tusk_main.html.



Treasures and Tales – Second Gallery. Photograph by Paul Litherland, 2016.

by Tom Thomson, which were flanked by scenes of rural and village life by Group of Seven artists Arthur Lismer and A.J. Casson. These emblematic Canadian landscapes were donated to the university as part of a concerted effort to build a significant art collection. Sir Sandford Fleming, the architect of the intercontinental railroad (a symbol of national unity) and university chancellor, was featured through the pin he designed in 1884 for presentation to Annie Fowler and Eliza Fitzgerald, the first women to graduate from Queen's University in Arts. Finally, the connection to the Commonwealth and the country's – as well as the university's – ties to the British monarchy were illustrated with the inclusion of the handwritten score for the anthem composed by Healey Willan for use at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

The items in the second gallery did not share the thematic cohesion of the first room; instead, they were a rather eclectic assortment of items created locally and in far-flung locales that demonstrated the breadth and depth of the art centre's and archives' holdings. Items in this gallery included, among other treasures, architectural drawings made by the secretary of the university's first board of trustees; a beaver-fur top hat made by a Kingston-based furrier, which was used by the drama department; illuminated manuscripts, including the *Book of Meditations* donated in 1869; an ancient Egyptian stone bowl; and 21 late-19th-century boomerangs, part of a collection that was initially held in the university's ethnological museum. Brought together, these disparate items formed something of a latter-day cabinet of curiosities. As such, however, there was little resonance between the items selected, and the variety did not offer a great deal of opportunity for in-depth understanding of individual objects.

For each of the idiosyncratic items on display, brief details about their donors and history were provided, and viewers were directed to in-gallery tablets or the exhibition's website for further information.⁷ This website provided an answer to the question "How did this object come to Queen's?" by expanding on the text provided in the gallery and presenting the stories of the items, the donors, and their connection to the university. Additional contextualizing images were posted on the website for many of the items, including portraits of the donors, key buildings, and related archival documents. Not all of the material displayed in the gallery was represented on the website, however, and the images provided offered only one view of an item, which did not always depict the objects fully. The viewer was also unable to zoom in to see the detail in the images. This was unfortunate, particularly in the case of the engraved tusks⁸ and for the "Casket," compiled by Walter Hawkins ca. 1830–40.⁹ For the tusks, only the mammoth tusk was shown on the website, and it was shown at a distance, making the engravings impossible to see clearly. In the case of the "Casket," thumbnails of the 188 pages of the two volumes were displayed but the viewer could not enlarge the pages in order to view the content properly or otherwise flip virtually through the books. This was a missed opportunity to enrich the visitor's experience and understanding of the items on display.

This exhibit was a successful example of collaboration between allied institutions. While the curators at the art centre frequently draw upon documents from the archives in the creation of their exhibits, the nature of the collaboration here was different. Typically, archival documents are used to supplement the artistic works on display and are not generally the focal points of exhibitions.¹⁰ Whereas the curators tend to use materials from archives to support the works of art from their own collection, in this case the archival and the artistic were on equal footing, with the distinction between the documentary and the artistic being broken down. However, the modes of display in

7 AEAC, *Treasures and Tales*, accessed 1 December 2016, <http://agnes.queensu.ca/microsites/treasures-and-tales/index.html>.

8 AEAC, *Treasures and Tales*, "Guy Kakarook and/or Joe Austin (attributed), *Engraved Mammoth Tusk*, around 1896, ivory and pigment," accessed 1 December 2016, http://agnes.queensu.ca/microsites/treasures-and-tales/tusk_main.html.

9 AEAC, *Treasures and Tales*, "Walter Hawkins's Casket," accessed 1 December 2016, http://agnes.queensu.ca/microsites/treasures-and-tales/casket_info.html.

10 Recent shows at the AEAC that have featured material from the archives include *Vera Frenkel's String Games* (30 July–11 December 2011) and *The Artist Herself: Self-Portraits by Canadian Historical Women Artists* (2 May–9 August 2015). An exception to this, for which archival material formed the substantive part of the material displayed, was an exhibit focusing on Isabel McLaughlin, curated by Heather Home, the Public Services/Private Records Archivist at the university. See Rodney G.S. Carter, review of *Isabel McLaughlin (1903–2002): Painter, Patron, Philanthropist*, mounted at the Samuel J. Zacks Gallery, AEAC, Kingston, ON, 9 July–30 September 2007, *Archivaria* 65 (Spring 2008): 195–99.

the gallery setting inevitably led to aestheticization of the records and diminishment of their documentary power. In some instances, the home of the items on display was not obvious, raising the question of whether an object could be housed in either the art centre or the archives. This led the viewer to wonder how distinctions between aesthetic and documentary items were initially made when the early collections were divided up and what factors went into determining the most appropriate repository, be it the gallery, archives, or the university's rare books and special collections library (which was not represented in this exhibit).

Treasures and Tales examined the origins of the university's collections and offered an interesting investigation into the history of collecting while taking the opportunity to exhibit a number of marvellous items that do not often get displayed. It illustrated how, in the university's early years, the collections came about through diverse gifts from donors and patrons, some of whom had only tangential connections to the university, and how items were given because they were believed to have pedagogical value that would enhance Queen's reputation. From the university's eclectic beginnings, the collections coalesced with the professionalization of the institutions responsible for caring for the treasures and in the resulting development of collecting focuses. Through its emphasis on the provenance of the items on display, the exhibit celebrated the generous benefactors who helped build the collection, the gallery, and the archives, which preserve the artifacts and documents, and the university's rich history as an educational institution.

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