

REVIEWS: OTHER MEDIA
DAVID T. MCNAB, EDITOR

METIS

Curator: Julia D. Harrison
Glenbow Museum, Calgary¹

"Long overdue" is the first comment which should be made in any evaluation of this exhibit. Opened in 1985 to coincide to the day with the centenary of the proclamation of the Metis provisional government at Batoche on 19 March 1885, this is the first major museum exhibit devoted exclusively to Metis culture and history. Curator Julia Harrison has done a masterful job of bringing together the most comprehensive collection of Metis artifacts ever seen in Canada. A wide array of strikingly beautiful and evocative pieces has been assembled including particularly fine examples of quillwork and silkwork, as well as more prosaic, yet nonetheless meaningful, artifacts such as the seneca root digging stick with a related commentary on video tape.

Significantly, the exhibit avoids a common failure among museums which exhibit only items from an apparently static "traditional" culture, while ignoring the developments inherent in Native cultures as dynamic systems constantly adapting to new challenges (Medicine, 1972:27; Borhegyi, 1964: 124). The Metis exhibit does include materials from the post 1885 period, through the two World Wars and up to the present.

The mixed heritage of the Metis is indeed difficult to define stylistically, but the exhibit has succeeded in demonstrating one of its main themes: that the Metis style is homogenous only in its flamboyance. Individual tastes are evidenced as being eclectic, divergent and accommodative of many Native and non-Native elements.

In contrast to many previous museum approaches, the exhibit also makes a rare attempt to draw attention to the religious syncretism of the Metis. Rosaries and other Christian symbols are exhibited in context with the elbow pipe, a central object from Native religious tradition.

A large part of the success of this exhibit can be attributed to an unidentified designer who has demonstrated admirable restraint in ensuring that the design of cases and label copy does not overpower the artifacts themselves. To a remarkable degree, the artifacts have been exhibited without the distancing effect or glass between the viewer and the object. This allows the objects to exert their full impact on the viewer who thereby gains a greater sense of intimacy with them. In particular, several tailored and finely decorated leather jackets are displayed in as accessible a fashion as can be found in museums anywhere. Illustrative material by contemporary artists and photographers is effectively used to provide an important sense of context. Finally, the supporting structure of skinned vertical logs and rough-sawn horizontal lumber provide

an appropriately rugged and simple backdrop which unifies the entire exhibit.

All of these characteristics are readily apparent, making the Metis exhibit an important one and well worth the price of admission. Unfortunately, however, as cultural analysis or material history, the exhibit does disappoint on a number of different levels. Perhaps its most glaring flaw is the inclusion (as the very first element of the exhibit) of a "reputed" fragment of the "rope that hanged Riel".

At the outset of this critique it should be clarified that museum exhibits can never be portrayed as being value-free or apolitical (Cannizzo, 1982; Schlereth, 1984:45). By their very nature, museums reflect social and scientific biases and convey to the public significant values about the objects they collect and exhibit. Beyond this, Native people have often been critical of museums for what are perceived to be colonialist symbol manipulation and even racist approaches to the objects under the control of these non-Native institutions (Johnson, 1973; Nason, 1973:23).

For many years museums have given undue prominence to objects such as "Riel's leg shackles", a "lock of Riel's hair", and "the rope that hanged Riel" (which, if all the reputed sections were pieced together now, would probably stretch from Batoche to Regina!). The political symbolism of leg shackles, shorn hair, and garrotes must not be overlooked. From the Native perspective, all of these exhibits can be viewed as manifestly colonialist statements arising out of a tendency, conscious or otherwise, to manipulate the sometimes extremely powerful symbolism connected with certain artifacts to portray perceptions of non-Native superiority and dominance. It is highly unlikely that the Metis would consider this piece of rope to be an important artifact for illustrating their culture.

As an admitted "relic" (which by definition has no heuristic value), the decision to include this object in the exhibit, much less in the first prominent location, is evidence, not about Metis culture, but of serious misjudgement. The intention hinted at in the accompanying label copy (which museum visitors are notorious for ignoring), that this symbol of the death of one man should not be projected onto an entire people, is forcefully negated by the object itself. In addition, it should have been patently obvious to the exhibit organisers that this relic would be an all too tempting target for media attention. For an indication of this we need only observe the exhibit announcement in the Winnipeg Free Press which devotes the entire three column inches to the rope and sets it all off with the bold headline: "Show has part of the rope used to hang Riel".² Despite benign intent, the resulting effect clearly proves that museum exhibits can indeed be "agents of cultural domination" (Cannizzo, 1982:18-19).

Another major disappointment is a frustrating lack of specific data provided on the artifacts themselves. The exhibit label copy all too often leaves unsaid what is crucial for the study of material culture: i.e. the time period, provenance and history of ownership. Whether this was the result of a deliberate choice, or simply a function of the typically poor documentation on ethnological objects, we are left to ponder unaided. This failure is compounded in the two publications accompanying the exhibit (Glenbow Museum, 1985; Harrison, 1985).

It is lamentable that the opportunity to produce a detailed catalogue of the artifacts on display was ignored in favour of derivative and oversimplistic commentary based upon traditional textual sources. One example of the naive approach characterising the publications is the attribution of Metis reluctance to engage in large-scale farming solely to their preference for "the freer life on the western prairies". Although the more extensive of the two does half-heartedly qualify this assertion, the majority of visitors to the exhibit, who would likely purchase only the less expensive commentary, would be uninformed that ecological, economic and ethno-political conditions were significant factors militating against Metis success at agriculture. Scholars claiming to study the material history of the Metis should not be allowed to ignore so easily the material conditions of the situation.

Indeed, what was sorely needed was an analysis of Metis material history utilising the primary artifactual materials collected (Schlereth, 1982), not merely an oversimplistic rehash of the secondary sources which are already widely available. One might ask, Where is the artifact in all this? We look in vain for any new information derived from research on the artifacts, either in the publications or in the exhibit itself. If museum curators are not to engage in material history, who might we expect to do so? Certainly the traditional academic historians have consistently failed to utilise the primary material evidence or artifacts (Ibid., 13-14).

Another important question raised by the Metis exhibit was not followed up satisfactorily. Label copy and the publications (Harrison, 1985:31) do intimate that many of the pieces on display were in fact produced strictly for sale - that is, for the "ethnographic trade" - and not for use by the Metis themselves. In fact, much Native material in museum collections is composed of this type of secondary artifact. Tourist, or "airport art" (Graburn, 1967:33) production commenced surprisingly soon after Natives encountered Europeans (Cole, 1985 : 5FF). We might ask, What is the significance of this production for trade versus production for their own use? What are the differences and/or similarities between the two technologies? Indeed, What can we really learn about Metis culture from objects that were produced to satisfy the demands of an alien market? The exhibit does not help us answer these important questions.

The like-new state of many of the artifacts on display in many ways also prevents the viewer from making a connection between the object and actual Metis experience. The resulting tendency to focus only on the skills and aesthetics of Metis artisans, and not on the real functions these artifacts may have played in Metis culture, has led many museum critics to devalue such exhibits. The overwhelming stress on artistic achievement in museum exhibits has too often come at the expense of attention to the basic economic foundations of Native societies (Cannizzo, 1982:5). Although it is intimated that fancywork produced for sale on the ethnographic market was eventually also adopted for use by the Metis themselves, we are presented with little concrete information on provenance that would substantiate this claim. Again, the lack of data on the objects displayed prevents the viewer from determining their true context. Did these items come directly from a Metis parlour, or indirectly from a

Metis artisan working on a commission, through a Victorian cabinet of curiosities, and only then into the exhibit case? If artifacts have value because they are "fossilised ideas" (Deetz, 1967:45), then the idea behind an object produced specifically for sale must certainly be different than that behind something produced for one's own use. The former cannot uncritically be substituted for the latter in any serious attempt to learn about the culture of the artisan. In order to avoid this problem, more emphasis should have been placed on the vernacular (or folk) tradition as opposed to the elite (or market oriented) objects. Sharpened focus on individual artifacts such as the Seneca root digger or individual farming tools would have provided better insight into Metis culture.

One of the essential values of museum collections is their comparative power. We are told - again, not shown - that Metis crafts have relationships to Algonquian beadwork and to mission school-derived French embroidery, and that the Metis considered themselves distinct from both traditions. Nowhere are we presented with the material evidence for comparison which would demonstrate these concepts. Again, too much reliance is placed on words, rather than on the real objects - a primary failure for any museum exhibit.

Finally, the Metis exhibit also partially fails in its attempt to demonstrate a cultural renaissance among the Metis. By the standards established in the earlier sections of the exhibit, the contemporary craft items displayed are clearly lifeless and derivative. They are hardly evidence of a modern resurgence of Metis culture as presented. More effective in this regard, however, are the original paintings by Metis artist, Don Robertson, and the audio-visual materials on current Metis activity.

In summary, this long overdue exhibit on the Metis experience is a timely event in this, the centennial of the struggle at Batoche. Despite the rich collection of artifacts, however, it is seriously marred by the ill-advised prominence of a powerful symbol representing the colonized status of the Metis. As well, the frustrating lack of data on the artifacts prevents us from learning what we might have expected from such an exhibit. An overreliance of textual sources rather than on artifactual and comparative evidence reveals what seems to be a lack of interest in analysing the actual material culture of the Metis. If there is indeed "more to Metis culture than beadwork" as the accompanying booklet asserts, we have not been enlightened as successfully as we might have hoped.

If museum curators fail to employ the methods of material history, then museum collections and exhibits of Native materials may turn out to be little better than useless in promoting a deeper understanding of Native culture and history.

Despite its shortcomings, however, the Metis exhibit is without doubt well worth seeing and, fortunately, will be travelling to various parts of the country in the next year. Hopefully, this is merely the first step in initiating a true study of Metis material culture.

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NOTES

1. The exhibition schedule is: Glenbow Museum, Calgary from March 19 to October 6, 1985; Diefenbaker Centre, Saskatoon from November 8, 1985 to January 3, 1986; Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature, Winnipeg from January 17 to March 9, 1986; McCord Museum, Montreal from March 28 to May 18, 1986; and Provincial Museum of Alberta from June 6 to July 20, 1986.
2. Anon., "Backstage", *Winnipeg Free Press* (15 Feb. 1985).

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