

The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, a Decade Later:  
A Case Study of the McCord Museum of Canadian History

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“If we are not distinct here, then where in the hell are we distinct?” This was the reaction of Assembly of First Nations Chief, Georges Erasmus, upon the announcement by the premiers and the Prime Minister, in 1989, that Canada proudly claimed the English and French as its two distinct founding peoples.<sup>1</sup> Erasmus echoed the indignation felt by Native Canadians at continued slights by the federal and provincial governments. A year earlier, this frustration on the part of Canada’s Native peoples at being left out of the story of a modern Canada came to a head in the cultural sphere with the boycott of the Glenbow Museum’s *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples* (1988). The debate surrounding this exhibition drew international attention to the socioeconomic and –cultural realities of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and national criticism of the ways in which museums represented their cultures and histories as though these were relics of a long-distant past. Following closely on the heels of this exhibition, the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations established the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, a collaboration initiated largely to address the concerns of Aboriginal people vis-à-vis the institution of the museum.

The Task Force comprised more than twenty-five museum professionals as well as members of Native communities from across Canada. The objective of the Task Force was to identify the specific areas of conflict in the relationship between museums and Aboriginal people, and to recommend solutions and lasting policies for dealing with these disagreements. For two years, Task Force members consulted representatives of

museums and Native groups to provide “a national perspective on the needs and aspirations of First Peoples with regard to museums and cultural collections.”<sup>ii</sup> After receiving submissions from various stakeholders, and following close review of the opinions expressed at national conferences, the Task Force revealed its findings in a widely-distributed report, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* (1992).

The Task Force report identified three crucial areas most in need of reform: increased involvement of Aboriginal people in the interpretation of their cultures and histories by public institutions, repatriation of artefacts and human remains, and improved access to museum collections by Aboriginal people. The report focused particularly on the need to increase the agency and voice of Native people in institutional representations of their cultures, beginning with exhibition planning, and extending to the development of funding programs, the participation of Aboriginal people on museum boards, and their employment at all levels of museum operation.<sup>iii</sup> Of paramount importance was the universal acknowledgement of “the conceptual knowledge and approaches characteristic of First Peoples.”<sup>iv</sup>

Did the extensive discussion and evaluation of the issues by the Task Force translate into concrete changes in the operations of Canadian museums with respect to Aboriginal issues? Lee-Ann Martin, co-ordinator of the Task Force, believes that its most significant effect was the development of a framework to help non-Native museums work with Native communities. The Task Force broke new ground, according to Martin, overcoming barriers to collaboration from both museums and Aboriginal groups; the

latter hesitant to work with the former because of the history of colonialist anthropological and archaeological interventions in their communities.<sup>v</sup>

The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples and its report have fallen out of the public eye after their initial prominence and international acclaim, but they still play an important underlying role in Canadian museums. I will discuss the effects of the Task Force's recommendations on one institution, the McCord Museum of Canadian History. The McCord has made many policy and exhibition revisions since the late 1980s, and it is my premise that the Museum's acceptance and acknowledgement of the Task Force make it a useful case study. This discussion will focus on the increased involvement of Aboriginal people in the planning and interpretation of exhibitions at the McCord. To assess the changes in exhibition priorities at the McCord, the institution's attitudes underlying two in-house exhibitions dealing with Aboriginal material culture: *Ivalu: Traditions of Inuit Clothing*, from 1988, before the Task Force, and *Across Borders: Beadwork in Iroquois Life* from 1999, offer an informative comparison. Additionally, I will examine the efforts taken by the McCord at liaison with Native communities in the Montreal area.

This paper is based on my recently-completed Master's thesis. My sources include archives of the Canadian Museums Association and the McCord Museum, and personal interviews with co-chair of the Task Force, Tom Hill; Task Force co-ordinator, Lee-Ann Martin; and from the McCord Museum, Moira McCaffrey, Betty Kobayashi Issenman, and Dolorès Contré Migwans.

The McCord Museum of Canadian History, located in downtown Montreal, is a well-respected and comprehensive museum dedicated mainly to nineteenth-century

Canadian history. It also has an important collection of pan-Canadian Aboriginal material, due to the collecting interests of its founder, David Ross McCord (1844-1930). The McCord Museum emphasizes an inclusive approach to history, and from its earliest days assumed that accurate preservation of Canada's true historical record must include representations from British, French, and Native communities. Throughout its history, the McCord has added to its important collection of historical Aboriginal material culture. Particularly relevant to this study, the McCord was directly associated with the controversy surrounding *The Spirit Sings*, as it refused to support the boycott of the Calgary exhibition, lending dozens of items to the Glenbow Museum, despite the protests of Montreal-area Native groups. This participation led to the resignation of Honorary Curator, renowned archaeologist and author, Bruce Trigger, who remained vocal in his denunciation of the McCord's attitude toward Aboriginal rights over their own cultural property.

An examination of the McCord immediately before the conflicts of the late 1980s and the appearance of the Task Force report reveals a museum whose exhibitions focused on nineteenth-century Canadian decorative arts, photography, and portraiture. The only large-scale presentation concerning Aboriginal peoples mounted by the McCord itself in the last half of the 1980s was *Ivalu: Traditions of Inuit Clothing* (1988) organized by the McCord and guest-curated by Betty Issenman with Catherine Rankin.<sup>vi</sup> Curator Issenman recalls several important oversights on the part of McCord staff and management concerning *Ivalu*. From initial reticence to fund this exhibition dealing with Inuit clothing production from prehistoric times to the present, to careless mistakes allowed to remain in the tardily-published exhibition catalogue, Issenman describes a

frustrating curatorial experience with a less-than-willing institution whose staff were sometimes unprofessional and occasionally downright rude.

*Ivalu* opened in Montreal while *The Spirit Sings* was still on display in Calgary. The timing of these exhibitions dealing with Aboriginal cultures, combined with the bad press over Professor Trigger's resignation, obliged McCord management to reconsider its position regarding the representation of Native cultures within its walls. In mid-1989, the Museum was given a three-year opportunity for theoretical contemplation as it underwent major physical renovations. Administrative changes occurred as well, with Moira McCaffrey, an associate member of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, becoming part of the McCord team in 1990 as the first Curator of Ethnology and Archaeology. During these same years, the Task Force was also preparing its report, hoping to influence policy in museums across the country.

When the McCord Museum reopened in 1992, it was altogether a revitalized institution, with a new emphasis on the interpretation of Native cultures and histories. Of the five inaugural exhibitions, three dealt with Native cultures: *A Village Called Hochelaga*; *Names and Lives in Nunavik*; and *Marks of the Micmac [Mi'gmaq] Nation*. The curatorial team decided to mount three separate exhibitions depicting different Aboriginal groups "in order to better represent the diversity of Native cultures in Canada."<sup>vii</sup> In his introductory comments to the catalogue for these exhibitions, then-director Luke Rombout sent a clear message, mirroring almost exactly the recommendations of the Task Force Report. "At a time when Native issues figure prominently in the political debates of this country," wrote Rombout, "it is clear that our Museum has an increasingly important role to play in making accessible the cultural

heritage and contemporary visions of the First Nations and, in so doing, generating in-depth dialogue with Native people. In our discussions with representatives of Native communities,” he continued, “we came to realize that a new museological approach to the display of Native artefacts was called for. We were asked repeatedly to ensure that our displays link the past to the present and acknowledge the ongoing vitality of Native cultures.”<sup>viii</sup>

The McCord’s altered approach to the presentation of Native cultures can be seen not only in the post-1992 programming at the Museum, but also in one of the McCord’s high-profile exhibitions, *Across Borders: Beadwork in Iroquois Life* (1999). Representatives of the Iroquois were involved in all aspects of the exhibition, and approval of the different facets of the exhibition was reached by consensus. Two of the six members of the curatorial team were from nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, and beadworkers from Kahnawake and the Tuscarora Nation in New York, two historic centres of commercial beadwork production, were instrumental in shaping the exhibition.<sup>ix</sup> *Across Borders* demonstrates a successful collaborative effort among stakeholders from within the museum and academic worlds and the First Nations communities, all of who were aware of, and determined to follow, the recommendations of the Task Force report.<sup>x</sup>

In this evaluation of the McCord Museum’s accommodation of Task Force priorities, the Museum falls short in the area of integrating Aboriginal staff into its various levels of operation. Despite government funding programs and employment equity initiatives for hiring people of Aboriginal ancestry<sup>xi</sup>, the McCord counts only one permanent staff member who is Native. Dolorès Contré Migwans is the Assistant to

Native Programs at the McCord. She was hired in 1999 as the coordinator of an outreach team with a mandate to present aspects of Native cultures to youth groups and to encourage young people to visit the McCord.<sup>xii</sup> Currently, Migwans also acts as a cultural liaison officer to various Aboriginal communities, conducts research for the departments of Ethnology, and Research and Exhibitions (where she works in close collaboration with McCaffrey), and continues to develop educational programming at the Museum. Her current long-term projects include working out, with McCaffrey, a policy detailing the McCord's accessibility and services to Aboriginal people. Migwans' future hopes for the projected First Peoples Gallery include plans to involve Native people in the gallery's development and also to enlist Native businesspeople as investors. Migwans believes that integrating Aboriginal consultants and collaborators into the historical, business-oriented, and even spiritual aspects of the First Peoples Gallery will give Native peoples a greater sense of ownership of their heritage, as presented at the McCord.<sup>xiii</sup> When asked about her patience at the seemingly slow pace of change at the McCord, and her diplomacy at bringing about those changes, Migwans smiles and says that the way to change things is "petit à petit; sans faire peur à personne."<sup>xiv</sup>

While the McCord Museum has increased its collaboration with Aboriginal community members and scholars in the presentation of individual exhibitions and has modernized its development of educational programming, the few Aboriginal staff and the absence of Native board members are cause for concern. Thirteen years after the appearance of the Task Force report, there is not one member of the Board of Trustees who is of Native ancestry. If no one of Aboriginal ancestry is a member of the governance structure of the McCord, it becomes difficult for the Museum to guarantee a

long-term commitment to, and to take responsibility for, safeguarding Aboriginal issues should they lose importance in the public eye or the political arena.

According to Victoria Dickenson, Executive Director of the McCord, the Board of Trustees recently established a governance working group and is beginning to look at its composition in relation to the community it serves. She writes: “The McCord is conscious not only of the question of representation from the Aboriginal community but also from cultural communities that are part of Montreal’s and Canada’s more recent history. It is something that we will be bringing to the governance working group... The McCord Board is open to change and growth, but change in social institutions is often slower than many wish!”<sup>xv</sup>

One of the main purposes of a museum’s Board of Trustees is to raise funds. The McCord Museum’s reflections on the representativeness of its Board is frustrated by concurrent financial concerns that mirror those voiced by Royal Ontario Museum Curator of Ethnology, Trudy Nicks. At the Canadian Museums Association’s 2002 annual conference, Nicks suggested that museums are placing more emphasis on “who can raise money rather than who can represent communities.”<sup>xvi</sup> Gerald Conaty, Senior Ethnology Curator at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, where First Nations’ representation on the Board is actively encouraged, notes that fundraising for the Glenbow is not often undertaken in Aboriginal communities as these communities usually have serious local economic problems that must be their first consideration.<sup>xvii</sup> Many of Canada’s Aboriginal communities, however, can boast of members with important ties to industry and with influential professional, political, or cultural networking contacts.<sup>xviii</sup>

Although the McCord has not implemented every recommendation made by the Task Force, the Museum has made significant alterations to its exhibition planning and has increasingly included the histories and cultural production of Aboriginal peoples in its permanent collection. The McCord has also provided Aboriginal perspectives by recruiting visiting curators and First Nations consultants, and by instituting innovative and varied educational programming. Canadian museums with Native ethnographic collections but with little Native involvement now have the opportunity to examine the work of Dolorès Migwans, not only in educational development, but also as a model of how to establish liaisons with local Aboriginal communities and how to integrate different voices into the daily management of the museum. While one need not be Native to represent Native cultures in a museum setting, a personal connection to the Aboriginal community undoubtedly provides an added, albeit intangible, depth of perspective.

It is obvious that the McCord has welcomed and internalized the Task Force recommendations, progressing far beyond former entrenched exhibition planning and display policies. As Moira McCaffrey cautions, however, there is still considerable antagonism between indigenous groups and museums: neither every museum nor every Aboriginal community is interested in working collaboratively. A dozen years of goodwill cannot erase centuries of colonial collection practices, but McCaffrey is encouraged by the considerable efforts she witnesses of people welcoming the opportunity to work together to ensure inclusionary practices. However, much remains to be done to assuage worries of territorial encroachment on both sides. Museums must be sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal communities, and Aboriginal communities must be

patient with the sometimes maddeningly slow pace of change in museums and other cultural institutions.<sup>xix</sup> As an elder once told Lee-Ann Martin, co-ordinator of the Task Force: thousands of years ago, the people sitting near the glaciers did not realize they were melting. It is only in retrospect that we realize the immense changes taking place.

The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples has shed much light on the problems of the representation of Aboriginal cultures and histories in Canada and around the world. It is imperative that the progress made, as witnessed at the McCord Museum, not lose pace, and continued study of these questions will ensure the issues raised by the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples remain in the forefront of the Canadian museum world.

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<sup>i</sup> CBC Radio, “Nothing to Celebrate,” *Morningside with Peter Gzowski*, (16 October 1989) CBC Online Archives <<http://archives.cbc.ca/400d.asp?id=1-73-516-2439>>, Accessed 3 July 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples*, (Ottawa: Canadian Museums Association and Assembly of First Nations, 1992), 4.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 8-9.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>v</sup> Lee-Ann Martin, interview by author, Gatineau, Quebec, 10 May 2004.

<sup>vi</sup> The exhibition *Inuit Hands: Samples of Arctic Survival* was mounted by guest curator Catherine Rankin for the McCord, but was shown only at the Stewart Hall Art Gallery, Pointe Claire, and the Fleming Museum, Burlington, Vermont, see McCord Museum, *Annual Report 1986-1987*, 39.

<sup>vii</sup> Moira McCaffrey, “Introduction.” in *Wrapped in the Colours of the Earth: Cultural Heritage of the First Nations*, eds. Moira McCaffrey et al., (Montreal: McCord Museum of Canadian History, 1992), 37. [exhibition catalogue]

<sup>viii</sup> Luke Rombout, “Preface” in McCaffrey et al, 11.

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<sup>ix</sup> Moira McCaffrey, "Crossing New Borders to Exhibit Iroquois Tourist Art," in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, eds. Linda Jessup with Shannon Bagg, (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002).

<sup>x</sup> This is not to suggest that stakeholders cannot belong to *both* the museum *and* the Aboriginal communities.

<sup>xi</sup> See Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada, "Partnering," (2003), <<http://www.ahrdcc.com/partnerships/>>, Accessed 27 July 2003; Canada Council for the Arts, "Grant Programs: Aboriginal Peoples Secretariat," (2002), <<http://www.canadacouncil.ca/grants/Aboriginalarts/default.asp>>, Accessed July 5, 2003; and Canadian Heritage, "Museums Assistance Program," (September 2003) <[http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pam-map/index\\_e.cfm](http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pam-map/index_e.cfm)>, Accessed 25 May 2004. See also Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, "Arts and Culture," *Services for First Nations People: A Government of Canada Guide*, (April 2004), <[http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/sg/sg7\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/sg/sg7_e.html)>, Accessed 2 June 2004.

<sup>xii</sup> McCord Museum, "Communiqué," n.d.

<sup>xiii</sup> Dolorès Contré Migwans, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, 18 May 2004 and personal communication, 8 July 2004.

<sup>xiv</sup> Migwans, interview by author, 18 May 2004.

<sup>xv</sup> Victoria Dickenson, "Re: graduate thesis on McCord and First Nations: query on Board of Trustees," E-mail to author, 25 May 2004.

<sup>xvi</sup> Cited in Quyen Hoang, "First Nations People Mining the Museum: A Case Study of Change at the Glenbow Museum," M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 2003, 31.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>xviii</sup> See Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, "Aboriginal People Profiles," (2004), <[http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ks/3000\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ks/3000_e.html)>, Accessed 20 February 2004.

<sup>xix</sup> Moira McCaffrey, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, 6 May 2004.