Placing Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Canada

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ABSTRACT Abstract: In 2003, the National Gallery of Canada opened its new galleries of Canadian and Aboriginal art. Through an analysis of the narrative of the display, this article explores the implications of the introduction of historical Aboriginal objects into the exhibition of Canadian art both for the evaluation of Aboriginal cultural production as art and for the construction of the discourse of Canadian art history. Although there are moments of rupture in the galleries’ narrative, the introduction of Aboriginal objects does little to question the aesthetic assumption of the art museum, which frames all works within its walls in terms of Western conceptions of artistic value.

Résumé : En 2003, le Musée des Beaux-Arts du Canada a ouvert ses nouvelles salles d'exposition d'art canadien et autochtone. À partir d'une analyse de la trame narrative dans le processus d'exposition, cet essai explore les conséquences que peuvent avoir l'introduction d'objets historiques autochtones dans le contexte d'art canadien. Ceci, afin d'évaluer la production autochtone en tant qu'œuvre d'art et afin de développer un discours canadien en ce qui a trait à l'histoire de l'art. Quoiqu'il y ait des instances de rupture dans ce récit, l'insertion d'objets autochtones remet peu en question l'hypothèse esthétique du musée qui situe toutes les œuvres qui s'y retrouvent dans un contexte de valeur artistique occidental.
On the National Gallery of Canada’s website, under the heading of “Compelling Vision,” it is stated, “The National Gallery of Canada strives to provide Canadians with a sense of identity with and pride in Canada’s rich visual-arts heritage” (About NGC 2007). Apparently Native art does not fall within the definition of Canada’s visual-arts heritage. Granted, much has transpired between the time the National Gallery of Canada opened, the time the gallery purchased these works, and when this statement was written. Another contemporary Native art exhibition, “Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art,” was hosted by the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1998. Canada's national soccer team program has met with disappointing results in the qualifying rounds of play in the CONCACAF zone that lead to World Cup qualification. Canada has not appeared in the World Cup tournament since 1986 and more recent performances place Canada well down in the FIFA world rankings. In this paper, I engage in performative inquiry to explore my identities through experiencing different places of Canada and practicing visual art. Three key moments occur during the Aboriginal art are part of the oldest continuous living culture in world history, with Australian Aborigines having settled on the Australian continent somewhere between 60,000 and 80,000 years ago. Evidence of Aboriginal culture is found in the rock art, which so far has been dated back at least 20,000 years, while archaeology has dated ancient campsites back to 50,000 to 65,000 years. Contemporary Aboriginal art is considered to start at the desert community of Papunya in 1971, when senior desert men began to paint their cultural stories using modern materials. This was prompted by school teacher Geoffrey Bardon requesting that school children paint their own stories, leading the senior men to open up their deeply held cultural knowledge to outside observers. The National Gallery of Canada (French: Musée des beaux-arts du Canada), located in the capital city of Ottawa, Ontario, is Canada's premier art gallery.[1]. The Gallery is now housed in a glass and granite building on Sussex Drive with a notable view of the Canadian Parliament buildings on Parliament Hill. The building was designed by Moshe Safdie and opened in 1988.[2] The Gallery's former director, Jean Sutherland Boggs, was chosen especially by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to oversee construction of the national gallery and museums.[3]. ^ National Gallery of Canada: Canadian & Aboriginal Art Archived 2007-08-18 at the Wayback Machine. ^ National Gallery of Canada: Past Exhibitions Archived 2007-08-19 at the Wayback Machine.