

Between the covers of the museum

You no longer have to leave your chair to see some of Canada's most intriguing

BY REBECCA CALDWELL

The book's title is *The Museum Called Canada*, but an apt alternative could have been *Canada's Museums: The Good Bits*. Canadians Sara Angel and Charlotte Gray have combed through the country's museums, archives, art galleries, private collections and even natural landmarks for their striking and ambitious artifact-based history structured like an institution, taking readers on a secret, innovative tour that includes treasures often tucked away from tourists' eyes.

Published by Random House Canada, *The Museum Called Canada* is certainly one of the best-looking books produced in the country's publishing history. Aside from the gorgeously photographed images worthy of Vogue magazine

and their accompanying short, easily digestible texts reading like the smart sidebars of academic texts, the museum conceit infuses the book with a chic that is self-conscious without being annoying: The cover is mocked up to be an archive box from a museum, some front pages showing the entranceway to a museum, a coat-check room and the elevator. The 25 "rooms" (that is, chapters) are organized thematically, not chronologically, and cover everything from Canada's ice age to its position in the modern global village.

Continuing with the museum lingo, Angel would be the book's curator. The publisher of Toronto's Otherwise Editions came upon the concept in August, 2000, when she was the guest speaker at a museum-studies program at the Royal Ontario Museum. While Angel was talk-

ing about her recent book *Canada: Our Century*, a history of the nation told through photographs, a woman in the audience told her that museology could use a similar treatment.

"It was really one of those ah-ha moments that people talk about. I remember leaving and thinking, 'How could we represent something like this?' " Angel recalled over lunch last month at a Toronto hotel.

The more Angel thought about it, the more she became convinced that a book might actually be more effective in displaying Canada's artifacts than museums, not just because you can read it in your own space and at your own pace, but because the book has the potential to add more layers and perspectives to understanding Canada.

"It's rare that there's a museum

artifacts



JOHN HRNYIUK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Sara Angel (left) and Charlotte Gray: curators of a different kind.

exhibit that has a contextualization for the artifacts that one is seeing — by that I mean the photographs, the background history and other images that can really round out the story," said Angel. "That's where I thought, a book can do that, why not build that museum?"

Angel says that from the outset the only person she imagined writing the essays using one object as the focal point of each of the rooms was Charlotte Gray, a renowned academic and author with a documented love for unconventional histories: Her most recent book, *Canada: A Portrait in Letters*, for example, was an epistolary history of the country through the letters of citizens such as Louis Riel, Emily Carr, Lester B. Pearson and Glenn Gould.

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'Weird and quirky and amazing'

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Gray was delighted with the idea of acting as the museum's ur-visitor.

"It was just such an intriguing concept, and such a good way of exploring history and museology," said Gray. "I didn't have to slug through Canadian history getting all the facts in, I could just focus on one object and describe it in more detail, and really say something interesting about it: Why you don't know about this object, what happened to the object after it was cast off by its original owner."

Angel and a team of five core researchers spent months visiting 200 of the country's historical holdings, either in person or via special Internet sites, looking for the 432 artifacts that would eventually make it into the *Museum's* pages. Like any curator, she had specific aims: She was looking for items that reflected key historical periods, but they also had to be unique. And, "although I solicited expert opinions to lead me in certain directions, ultimately it was how I thought the images resonated," says Angel about the objects she eventually settled on. "Things like the draft of the BNA Act with John A. Macdonald's doodles on it, or a sketch that William Van Horne had done of Macdonald, most likely during the time of the Pacific scandal. I just thought they were weird and quirky and amazing, but someone else can have a completely different opinion as to what should have gone into the book."

Out of this material, Gray was then requested to write about what interested her, be it black ore discovered by explorer Martin Frobisher, artist and raconteur E. Pauline Johnson's on-stage costume, cartographer Sir William Logan's odometer or Pabulum, an invention of Dr. Fred Tisdall and Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children.

"I selected the images the same way I select what I want to write books about: a gut instinct of empathy with the subjects and what they represented," said Gray. "And always, is there enough to write a 1,200-word essay of interest?"

Her gut instinct led her to some refreshing choices, such as an unsung East Coast landmark over the typical Drumheller, Alta., dinosaur for the section The Fossil Foyer.

"I didn't want to rewrite dinosaurs, and dinosaurs have been done to death, but I was all set to write about Albertasaurus when I came across the wonderful place in Nova Scotia called the Joggins Fossil Cliffs where you walk on the fossils," Gray said. "It's world-famous everywhere, except Canada. Darwin did nature studies there."

Some of Gray's favourite finds include General James Wolfe's copy of Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, found in the Generals' Collection room. The marginalia Wolfe scribbled on his copy of the famous work that was manna for the Romantic poets, particularly the underlined phrase "the paths of glory lead but to the grave," persuaded legend, if not fact, to claim that Wolfe uttered the poem before the fateful Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759.

Then there are the Trap Room's birth records of Hudson's Bay Company employee Peter Fidler's children by his "country wife" Mary, a Cree whose story, like many of those who married white traders, has often been absent from traditional historical records.

"You get underneath the broad themes of Canadian history and understand that history is a collection of individual lives," said Gray.

Like any museum, *The Museum Called Canada* has a couple of dimly lit corners. Both world wars were placed in one room, for instance, a result of there simply being too many things to choose from to represent the 20th century. Then there is the historian's age-old conundrum of too little material, resulting in a bias toward documenting items made by cultures that valued manufacture and preservation.

The inclusion of the Yuquot Whaler's Shrine adds an ironic aside to this latter problem. One of the relatively few native artifacts included in *The Museum Called Canada*, a mysterious Nootka Indian monument from a small island off Vancouver Island is represented by a 1903 photo. The shrine's purpose is unknown, and modern historians can't visit it to conduct more research, since its current home is a storage room in New York's American Museum of Natural History.

Gray sees the photograph itself as the artifact, a representation of attitudes toward native peoples. Angel says the struggle to find suitable images is a reality of working with material culture.

"All we could do is work as carefully as possible with experts to make sure we were touching on the key things and ask, are we neglecting something? And we were really careful about doing that," said Angel.