

Canada's Homeless Portrait Gallery

A historic collection falls victim to economic and intellectual uncertainty.

CHARLOTTE GRAY

LOCKED IN A HIGH-TECH STORAGE and laboratory facility in western Quebec, way beyond the sightlines of Parliament Hill, is a most intriguing collection. Inside Vault 34 at the Library and Archives Canada Preservation Centre, dozens of paintings are hung on rolling art racks, about one foot apart. Between cold cement walls, under brutal fluorescent lighting, a helpful curator rolls them out for the occasional visitor.

Eighteenth-century British soldiers rub shoulders with 20th-century musicians. Along with unsophisticated depictions painted "in the style of" or "from the school of," there are works by well-known artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Jerry Grey and Frederick Varley. There are the "Indian kings": life-size images of four North American Indian leaders who visited the court of Queen Anne in 1710 and were painted in ceremonial dress by Jan Verelst. The collection also boasts thousands of Karsh prints and negatives, in which heroic individuals loom out of deep shadows.

Some of the subjects are recognizable, particularly politicians such as Wilfrid Laurier and Pierre Trudeau. Others are anonymous individuals or groups caught by photographers on the beach at Lake Winnipeg, or around a prairie grain table, or at sewing machines. You don't have to spend much time examining the oils, watercolours, busts, statues, photographs, engravings and prints to realize that the motive underlining the core acquisitions of this collection is not their aesthetic appeal (although that is present) or even the fame of the subject. It is all about history. This is a visual record of men and women who have shaped and continue to shape the history and culture of Canada.

The sprawling collection originated in the omnivorous appetite for historical materials of Arthur George Doughty, a dapper, gregarious English immigrant who held the position of Dominion Archivist from 1904 to 1935. Disturbed at the neglect of Canada's documentary heritage, Doughty scoured salesrooms and importuned private collectors for material to lodge in a national archive. Doughty was a friend of Mackenzie King (he may have introduced King to spiritualism), and with King's encouragement he acquired manuscripts, including government records, transcripts of key documents in British and French archives,



private papers and maps. But Doughty did not stop at written material. He also scooped up flags and trophies, posters and works of art.

The National Archives (which became Library and Archives Canada, or LAC, in 2004, when the National Archives and the National Library merged) evolved a small program to look after portraits amassed by Doughty and his successors, but the collection did not have a clear identity until 2001, when the Portrait Gallery of Canada was created. Today, the portraits occupy storage space in Gatineau, while the Portrait Gallery of Canada has a dedicated website, a staff of 26 and half a floor in the LAC building in downtown Ottawa. However, the portrait collection is still treated as archival material: it is embedded in the rest of LAC's vast collection, available only to researchers. The past seven years have seen a prolonged and expensive effort to find a permanent display space for the collection. But the culture-phobic Harper Conservatives never warmed to the idea. First they distorted the process; then, last month, they declared the whole project "on ice."

As artwork, the quality of the pieces runs from exquisite to appalling. But as historical artifacts, each item is part of a larger story—often several larger stories. Here are the sketchbooks of George Back, the British naval officer who was part of the second overland expedition to find the Northwest Passage in 1825–26. On one small page, Back caught the likeness of Egheechololte, a fur-clad Dogrib Indian with a quizzical expression. The collection also includes an 1819 miniature of shy young Demasduit, one of the last of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland, and a watercolour from the 1840s of an anonymous young African-Canadian boy in Nova Scotia, wearing a smartly buttoned jacket and

a cheeky smile. In Vault 34, an entire side of one of those rolling partitions is occupied by a 1904 full-length, Whistleresque portrait by Wilhelm Heinrich Funk of Grace Julia Lady Drummond, an imperious figure in full-length satin gown, who was the first president of the Montreal Council of Women. And carefully placed on its back in a specially constructed box is a Joe Fafard sculpture of David Suzuki, Canada's most famous environmental scientist.

As a viewer, you lock eyes with the subject and the questions begin. What did Egheechololte think of the young naval officer who asked him to pose? Why is the young Nova Scotian so dressed up? Did Lady Drummond, a grande dame from the Square Mile, support the suffrage campaign? "People are always fascinated by other individuals," comments Dr. Ruth Phillips, professor of art history at Carleton University and Canada Research Chair in Modern Culture. "Portraits engage you."

The portrait collection comprises more than 20,000 works of art, 4 million photographs, 10,000 medallions and philatelic works, and several thousand caricatures. There is a disproportionate number of fine watercolours executed by the wives of British officers and Hudson Bay factors. Until recently, works by amateur artists in an unfashionable medium had little appeal for art collectors, public or private. This meant they were within the chronically stretched and utterly risible LAC acquisition budget.

There are treasures here. Eva Major-Marothy, the portrait gallery's senior curator in charge of acquisitions and research, says that the collection "compares very favourably with other portrait gallery collections." What makes it unique in the portrait gallery world, she suggests, "is our focus not just on the rich and famous but on men and women from all walks of life who have contributed and continue to contribute to building Canada." So why will these treasures, which are public property, remain locked away? The answer to that question is part political, but also part existential—the whole issue of why Canadians, and particularly Canadian governments, flight shy of large statements about our culture and our history.

FIRST, THE POLITICS. IN 2001, THE LIBERAL government of Jean Chrétien announced that a new portrait gallery of Canada would be established, in which portraits from the LAC and other collections would be showcased. The Chrétien proposal was part of a larger federal effort to reinforce a Canadian sense of identity—an increasing concern as the country's ethnic mix grew more diverse

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and regional tensions more acute. The choice of location was inspired: it would be installed in the former American embassy, an elegant Beaux Arts-style building opposite Ottawa's Peace Tower. A design competition for the building's renovation was held, a budget allocated, a prominent British architect—Edward Jones—chosen, plans were drawn, the interior was stripped, \$11 million was spent... but before the bulldozers moved in to dig a hole for an addition, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper was elected. The new government was not enthusiastic about either cultural initiatives (cuts to museums and arts programs began almost immediately) or investment in the national capital. Plans ground to a halt.

But the idea of a national portrait gallery has international momentum. Portrait galleries elsewhere attract thousands of visitors each year. In 2005, the National Portrait Gallery in London was Britain's tenth most popular tourist attraction: one and a half million people visited it. Washington's National Portrait Gallery shares a glorious mid-19th-century Greek Revival building with the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the first two years since the building reopened in July 2006, after a \$6 million restoration, nearly two million people walked through its doors. A new building for Australia's National Portrait Gallery will open to great fanfare in Canberra this month. Why is Canada so reluctant to display its collection?

In November 2007, the Conservative government stated that it was not reluctant: it wanted to take a different approach that reflected its preference for the private sector and decentralization. It announced a competition, in which commercial developers in Canada's nine largest cities could bid for the right to build a home for the portrait collection by 2012. The deadline for bids was last May; developers in three cities, Calgary, Edmonton and Ottawa, are known to have made submissions.

The competition enraged the proposed gallery's supporters, who accused the government of selling national treasures to the highest bidder and tipping it toward the prime minister's political base. When James Moore, the new minister of Canadian heritage, announced recently that the whole process had been suspended because of the current economic turmoil, there was a grin sense of relief. The idea behind the competition and the process itself were badly flawed. Better no gallery at all, at least for the present, than the wrong building in the wrong city for the wrong reasons.

However, alongside these political squabbles, there is the existential source of uncertainty about the proposed gallery. What is a portrait gallery for? Why does Canada need such an institution? Is it about art or history? And who qualifies for inclusion? Some critics fear that a portrait gallery of Canada will simply reflect governing elites from the past. Jeff Spalding, director of Calgary's Glenbow Museum, argues that a collection of artworks acquired for their historical interest "cannot be a physical manifestation of the nation or reflect today's reality. The nation is *not* in Ottawa, and doesn't reside in the national capital or a national collection. This is about Old Canada versus New Canada."

Other observers are concerned that it could be too oriented to central Canada, and too con-

ventional in its choice of what goes on the walls. Margaret Conrad, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies at the University of New Brunswick, wants to see a portrait gallery built. But she points out that "the biggest pitfalls in a gallery purporting to deal with the 'Canadian' experience is lack of balance regionally and culturally. There is also the danger of trying not to offend. The gallery should be edgy, thought provoking."

NONE OF THE ISSUES IN THE PORTRAIT GALLERY of Canada debate—centre versus regions, history versus art—are new. Exactly the same questions emerged when the idea of a national portrait gallery was raised in the 1850s in the Westminster parliament. Several British members of Parliament protested that such an institution would cost too much, and only Londoners would visit it. Members of the House of Lords worried about who would be included. (However, their concern was the opposite of Jeff Spalding's. A certain Lord Ellenborough wanted to see only toffs on the walls, not "railway men, rich grocers, speculators and wealthy Regent Street tradesmen.") There was also unease that the portraits would be of mediocre quality, since all the really good stuff might remain in ducal palaces.

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But the British proposal had a powerful advocate: the prime minister. Lord Palmerston grasped the most important function of any portrait gallery. "When we read history," he intoned, "it is merely a record of abstract names." Portraits could bring history alive. London's National Portrait Gallery, which opened in 1856, was the first state-sponsored gallery devoted exclusively to the collection and display of portraits of nation-builders, and it remains the model against which all subsequent portrait galleries compare themselves. Like the Portrait Gallery of Canada, "history, not art, was the National Portrait Gallery's governing principle," in the words of historian David Cannadine, former chair of the NPG's trustees and author of a brief history of the gallery. Its founding trustees announced that their key criterion for accepting portraits, whether by purchase, donation or bequest, would be "the celebrity of the person represented rather than... the merit of the artist."

Today, the British gallery is located in a splendid Florentine Renaissance-style building off London's Trafalgar Square. However, it is a very different institution from the one envisaged by its founders, whose tastes were weighted heavily toward stuffy oil paintings of monarchs, politicians and military heroes. "During the 150 years of its existence," writes Cannadine, "the notion of what constitutes a nation's history and the identity of the people who make it has significantly evolved and broadened." The Great Men of History theory (espoused by historian Thomas Carlyle, who was an early NPG trustee) has been discredited and the NPG's definition of history makers, and appropriate depictions, is far more inclusive. Among the NPG's most popular portraits are a video image of football player David Beckham and a DNA depiction of physiologist Sir John Sulston, who won the Nobel Prize for his work on the human genome project, as well as

more conventional (and quite unflattering) portraits of Sir Paul McCartney and Germaine Greer.

But one crucial distinction continues to differentiate the National Portrait Gallery in London and the national portrait gallery in Canada. The British *believe* in their history. The British gallery was the creation of a confident people, points out David Cannadine, "at the peak of their prosperity and power, who possessed a deep desire to commemorate and celebrate the stirring and reassuring national past." Since then Britain has evolved from being the world's greatest imperial power to a more modest European state, but the NPG continues to relish its role as an institution that celebrates history and those who have contributed to it.

In contrast, contemporary Canada is a country that, although wealthy, stable and influential, is a middle power with a gnawing sense of insecurity. We have never done much to celebrate its history, for fear of keeping old schisms alive. Compulsory high school courses in Canadian history have been dropped from curricula in all provinces except three. Academics, as historian Jack Granatstein frequently complains, have carved Canada's history up into micro slices of social or regional history. Museums, federal and provincial, that explore the

past in various ways are chronically underfunded. Each Canada Day, the Dominion Institute publishes a poll that reveals how few Canadians know such basic historical facts as the name of the first prime minister of

Canada. A proposed Canadian history centre, to be established in the former Ottawa train station, lasted exactly six months before it was quietly killed in 2004.

Bruce Phillips voices an opinion (echoed by many historians and museologists) that none of the federal museums in the national capital, including the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Canada Science and Technology Museum, the Canadian Museum of Nature and the National Gallery of Canada, gives a more or less linear narrative of Canadian history that will engage visitors. (The Canadian Museum of Civilization has the "History Hall" and the "Biography Hall," but neither reveals the diversity of the shared past.) There may be no master narrative in Canadian history, acknowledges Phillips, "but there is an entity called Canada which a portrait gallery can reflect."

Anyone who goes to the portrait gallery's website is quickly disabused of the idea that the collection is simply a national pantheon. "The portrait gallery is about all Canadians," Lily Kolton, the gallery's director general, insists in the short video that welcomes visitors to the gallery's website. "Yes, we have the stories and the faces of Sir John A. Macdonald and Margaret Atwood, but we're also going to tell the stories of others, such as the First Nations, the immigrants, the voyageurs." However, those individual faces, drawn from Canada's smorgasbord of regions and ethnic groups, are placed in a larger context. "By presenting a unique visual history," Kolton insists in interviews, casual conversations and public lectures, "the gallery reflects the values that link Canadians across the country."

The blueprints for the portrait gallery that would have occupied the former American embassy indicate what this might mean in practice. Six main galleries followed a chronological framework, with names that, superficially, seem to come straight out

of an old-fashioned history textbook ("Becoming Canadians" covering the Confederation years; "Rising Voices" focusing on the 1950s through the 1970s). Yet this was not a straightforward, celebratory story of nation building. Kohn hoped "to create layers inside this thematic approach, illustrating people at the bottom of the power structure as well as at the top. It will be an unsettling experience for the visitor—and it will make us unique among portrait galleries."

Joan Schwartz, associate professor in the department of art at Queen's University, commented: "A really exciting aspect of the Canadian initiative was that this was not the Dead White Guys gallery. It was about all Canadians who have made this country great, as well as the great Canadians who made this country."

The first gallery, for example, was called "Facing the Other" and included "the earliest unique representations" of contacts from the 16th century between First Nations and newcomers. Ruth Phillips, who was guest curator for the aboriginal component of the portrait gallery, points out that "there is an inherent tension between an ideal model of pluralism and the singularity of the construct of nation." So the gallery made it clear that, when Europeans first arrived on these shores, they encountered highly diverse, complex and sophisticated societies with their own traditions for representing identity—traditions that included dance and music. Some of these would have been represented, alongside more conventional two-dimensional images. The rest of the galleries featured both famous faces and portraits of people who did not share the backgrounds or values of the government or military elites. "There were different threads throughout," explains

Phillips. "A visitor would have been able to follow stories from their region, group or gender."

As visitors approached contemporary works displayed in the final gallery, they would have seen "portraits that are about portraiture itself," explains Eva Major-Marothy, "and the issue of Canadian identity." The gallery has already embarked on a program of commissions, matching prominent Canadians with artists of distinction. Nominations for the subjects were invited from the public. But the collection also includes the edgy stuff that Margaret Conrad wants. A recent acquisition is "Group of Sixty-Seven," by Vancouver artist Jin-me Yoon, who is of Korean descent. Jin-me Yoon photographed 67 Korean-Canadian citizens looking into her camera against a backdrop of a Lauren Harris painting of a lake. Then she photographed the same 67 subjects, as they turned their backs to the camera and gazed at an Emily Carr painting of trees. There were 67 subjects, explained the artist, because 1967 was the year that Ottawa dropped a particularly obnoxious restriction against Asian immigration into Canada. The juxtaposition of iconic Canadian images and Korean immigrants, suggests Major-Marothy, prompts the question: where do we belong?

But before the Portrait Gallery of Canada can answer that question for Canadians, a post-meltdown federal government will have to rise above purely political considerations and dare to face the question itself. Canada has a fascinating collection of portraits, but will we ever see it? LAC staff today talk bravely of a "post-modern portrait gallery, unconfined by four walls," that relies on its web presence and special shows organized at other museums and institutions. Nothing, however,

can replace the rich experience of a whole building thronged with faces from yesterday and today. For academics such as Joan Schwartz, it makes no sense to separate a portrait from the contextual material that accompanies it. "There is a superb album that belonged to Thomas Evans Blackburn of photographs of the building of the Grand Trunk Railway between 1858 and 1861. It includes pictures of workers and managers alongside images of landscapes. What are you going to do? Take it apart?"

At the same time, there would be more visitors to a portrait gallery in Ottawa that tells, through images, a larger national story, because the national capital gets more tourists looking for that experience than any other Canadian city. In Fredericton, Margaret Conrad believes that a portrait gallery of Canada located in the national capital "would add more focus to the national show."

Visitors to Ottawa who drive west down Wellington Street soon realize that this is a country with a profound disregard for any national show that includes our history. On their right is the Gothic splendour of our Parliament buildings. On their left is a line of buildings that should be a smiling and historic streetscape—except that every third tooth has been punched out. The old railway station, once scheduled to be the Canada History Centre, remains virtually unoccupied. The windows of the former American embassy are dark. A heritage building that was once a Bank of Montreal branch and is now owned by the Department of Public Works, is shuttered and unused. Edith Wharton once described the United States as "a land that has undertaken to get on without a past." The description fits Canada even better. **LEE**