

Museums and Photography: Some Observations

By **Carol Payne**



Carol Payne is associate professor of Art History at Carleton University and a former curator at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. She is author of *The Official Picture: The NFB's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-1971* (2013) and co-editor with Andrea Kunard of *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* (2011).

Thanks to Andrea Kunard for editorial suggestions.

Today, photographs are fundamental tools through which museums manage collections, provide didactic information, promote themselves and engage audiences; just as visitors often participate in museums through a camera lens and social media. Photography is a mainstay in Canadian museums. The Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, for example, fosters an awareness of the thousands of immigrants who arrived in Halifax through photographic portraits; *Sight Unseen*, the current Canadian Museum of Human Rights exhibition, paradoxically, uses smart phone cameras and new software applications to make visual displays accessible to the seeing-impaired; and across the country digital photographs document myriad object collections, making them available in-house and online.

As the most popular form of visual media in the early twenty-first century, photography is enmeshed in the art, culture, history and science practices that are at the core of museum missions. Museums and other cultural institutions as well as citywide festivals increasingly feature photographs themselves as key forms of expression, communication and cultural meaning.

I offer a few observations on the history of photography collections and new developments in Canadian museums and photography in this essay. I'll explore a

few examples and tendencies and hope that these preliminary remarks will draw attention to the growing and dynamic relationship between Canadian museums and photographs at this important moment.

“Museum Latecomers”

The current surge of photography exhibitions, festivals and collections is a relatively recent international phenomenon. British scholars Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton recently noted, “Photographs are museum latecomers”; they generally “occupied an ambiguous space between institutional and personal property, between historical document and transient or disposable record, both materially and intellectually.”¹ Although there were a few notable exceptions, including the Museum of Modern Art and the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography; museums usually treated photographs as lowly, utilitarian documents. They were valued for their semblance of factuality rather than as objects inherently worthy of collection, display and analysis.

By the 1960s and 1970s, museums — particularly art museums — began to collect and exhibit photographs more purposefully. This newfound interest reflected the contemporary introduction of photography as a studio practice

Top: Watson, Edith S., 1861-1943. Image of an iceberg taken from a small handmade album of a trip to Newfoundland and Labrador in the summer of 1913. Photo: Library and Archives Canada.

Bottom: Entrance to the exhibition *Where are the children?*. Photo: Owen Melenka, Glenbow, Calgary.



in art schools and the art market's unequivocal embrace of photography at the time. The Victoria & Albert Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Centre Pompidou's Musée national d'art moderne and the Museum Folkwang were among the many art and cultural history museums that established curatorial collections of photography at the time.² The link between photographic practice and art museums (as well as the discipline of art history more broadly) shaped the ways that photographs have been presented and understood for years. Although photography is a remarkably interdisciplinary and largely vernacular medium with applications ranging from surveillance images to personal mementos to photojournalism and advertising, it has more often been presented by museums strictly as a form of personal aesthetic expression. Museums approached photography through conventional art historical methods, emphasizing technique, proposing a formal language distinct to the photograph, and establishing a canon of heroic individual photographers. Even New York's International Center of Photography, an institution dedicated to documentary images and photojournalism, for many years approached photography through the tenets of Art History. Often the rich current critical debates around photography — from such academics and public intellectuals as Roland Barthes,



Pierre Bourdieu, Susan Sontag, John Tagg, Martha Rosler and many others — were at odds with art photography collections.

Developing Canadian Photography Collections and Exhibitions

In Canada, photography's relationship with the museum since the 1960s has reflected some aspects of the international history sketched above while departing from the emphasis on art historical approaches in others. As Andrea Kunard and I discussed in the 2011 collected volume *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada*, the three most influential federal collections of photography have been Library and Archives Canada (LAC), the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (CMCP).³

With holdings of more than 20 million photographic objects, LAC is easily one of the largest collections of photography in the country.⁴ LAC has also shaped the study of historic photography in Canada by advocating for a social historical approach that embraces a wide range of photographic practices including the vernacular.⁵ In this way, it has challenged the hegemony of art historical approaches to the photograph. Its online exhibitions as well as periodic physical displays and publications have provided models for the treatment of photographs as important historic artefacts. Its influence is seen, to name just three examples, in exhibitions at The Rooms in St. John's, Newfoundland; the extensive collection of Montreal's McCord Museum; and recent exhibitions at Presentation House in Vancouver.

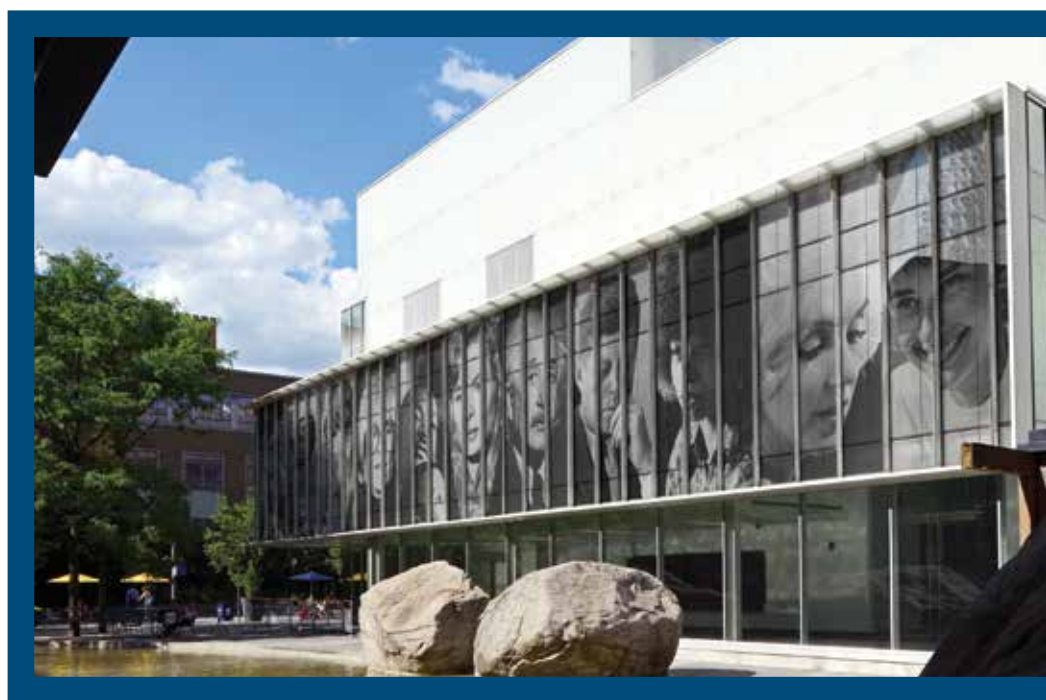
In 1967 the NGC established a Photographs Collection.⁶ Modelled in part after the Museum of Modern Art and the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, it has been in many respects a classic art museum collection of photography. International in scope, it has particular strengths in British and French photography of the nineteenth

century and American photography of the twentieth century; however, the collection extends beyond those regions and includes Canadian photographic practice seen within an international context. Early in its history, the NGC — under founding curator of photography, James Borcoman — chose to collect extensively within the work of individual photographers. As a result, it has amassed a valuable collection for teaching and research.

The CMCP was established as a museum in 1985;⁷ however, it originated in the National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division, which in turn was established in 1941.⁸ Beginning in the 1960s, the National Film Board developed an ambitious photography exhibition, touring and publications programs. This work was expanded by the CMCP, which promoted the work of Canadian photographers — both documentarians and photo-based artists — in a collection of about 160,000 photographs and photo-based works. From 1992 to 2006, CMCP was located in a purpose-built space along the Rideau Canal in Ottawa and is now housed at the NGC.

While federal institutions held a great deal of sway, regional museums, galleries and artist-run centres have also

shaped the photography collections and exhibitions since the 1970s. Presentation House (Vancouver), the Banff Centre, the Photographers Gallery in Saskatoon (now Paved Art + New Media), Toronto's Gallery 44 and the Toronto Photographers Workshop, the Montreal centres Vox and Dazibão and Quebec City's Vu are among the most influential regional photography centres. Major urban art museums — including the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal — also began developing important collections of photography in these years; while such institutions devoted to history as the Glenbow Museum and the now Canadian Museum of History began to present their archival photographic collections more extensively. In these years, the burgeoning international reputations of contemporary Canadian photo-based artists also impacted collecting practices. They include the work of such Vancouver-based photo conceptualists as Jeff Wall, Ken Lum and Stan Douglas as well as that of Jin-me Yoon; photo-based reflections on the body and gender formation by such Quebec-based artists as Sorel Cohen, Evergon and Genevieve Cadieux; and Lynne Cohen's well known contemplations on artifice and deception in human-made environments.



Photography and the Museum Now

Today, photography has an unquestioned position in Canadian museums and other cultural institutions. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine any exhibiting and collecting institution that does not take the communicative power and cultural meaning of photographic representation seriously. Numerous institutions, events and organizations across the country have contributed to the photograph's recent heightened profile.

Renewed interest in diverse photographic forms and new approaches are seen in an array of smaller institutions across the country. Many of those participating in the Virtual Museum of Canada's *Community Memories* initiative, for example, use photographs to tell their own local stories.

Innovatively, photographs are also being used increasingly by museums and organizations to return historic settler photographs of Indigenous peoples to the descendants of those represented. This is seen, for example, in the ground-breaking work of Onondaga photographer and curator Jeff Thomas. His touring exhibition about residential schools, *Where are the Children?*, for the Legacy of Hope Foundation, revisited historic images in order to draw attention to the devastating impact of the residential school experience on Indigenous peoples. Similarly, Project Naming, a well-known collaboration between LAC and various Inuit communities has reframed hundreds of photographs from the archives' vast collection from Inuit perspectives. More recently, settler museums across the country have also begun engaging in related 'photographic returns'

Photo: Ryerson Centre
façade. © Ryerson Image
Centre.



projects, which involve the collaboration of local indigenous communities. An example is the Whyte Museum of the Rockies' "Recognizing Relations" collaboration with the ȩyāǰé Nakoda people.

Recent urban festivals dedicated to photography have also done much to draw attention to the photograph as a cultural object through the participation of collecting and exhibiting institutions. Montreal's biennial *Mois de la Photo*, established in 1989 by the artist-run centre Vox, has been a forerunner, establishing an international reputation as a major venue for exhibitions. In Toronto, the Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival was founded in 1997 with a group of twenty small exhibitions. Like 'Mois..,' Contact now has earned a major international reputation. In its 20th year, Contact 2016 features about 200 exhibitions with all of the city's major institutions — including the Art Gallery of Ontario — participating.

Two recent institutional changes have also heightened photography's museological profile in Canada. In 2012, Ryerson University opened the Ryerson Image Centre (RIC), a collecting, teaching, research and exhibiting institution dedicated to photography and new media. RIC's extensive holdings include the Black Star collection of almost 300,000 news images and the Berenice Abbott Archive. RIC's mandate and collecting policy have extended beyond conventional art historical approaches to include an array of media and vernacular images.

In late November 2015, the NGC announced the establishment of the Canadian Photography Institute (CPI) "as a global leader in the field of photographic studies and offer an active program, accessible collection, research hub and digital portal for academic and public engagement."⁹ The CPI will be an umbrella for photographic holdings already amassed by the NGC and CMCP as well as the new acquisition of works from the Archive of Modern Conflict (AMC), a collection of photography

amassed by David Thomson, chairman of the Thomson Reuters news agency. The AMC, which contains a diverse range of photojournalism and vernacular photography, pushes the NGC and CMCP collections in new directions.

While the full impact of the CPI is just unfolding now, it is clear that this venture, the ongoing programs at RIC, Mois de la Photo, Contact and other recent activities across the country demonstrate that the photograph, once a "museum latecomer" has now fully arrived at the Canadian museum. **M**

Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton, "Between Art and Information: Towards a Collecting History of Photographs," in Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton, eds. *Photographs, Museums, Collections: Between Art and Information*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 14, 12.
2. Photographs are also, of course, included in history, ethnography, and science museums; however, until relatively recently, these institutions typically used photography as documents rather than as objects of interest unto themselves. Recent work by historians is recognizing those hidden histories. See Edwards and Morton, eds. *Photographs, Museums, Collections*.
3. Andrea Kunard and Carol Payne, "Writing Photography in Canada: A Historiography," in Payne and Kunard, eds. *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 232-236.
4. Joan M. Schwartz, "The National Archives of Canada," *History of Photography. Special Issue on Photography in Canada*. Ed. Joan M. Schwartz. (Summer 1996): 166-71.
5. Kunard and Payne, "Writing Photography in Canada," 232-234.
6. Ann W. Thomas, "The National Gallery of Canada," *History of Photography. Special Issue on Photography in Canada*. Ed. Joan M. Schwartz. (Summer 1996): 171-74.
7. Martha Langford, "The Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography," *History of Photography. Special Issue on Photography in Canada*. Ed. Joan M. Schwartz. (Summer 1996): 174-80.
8. Carol Payne, *The Official Picture: The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-71* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).
9. <http://www.gallery.ca/cpi/>