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# CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION

**Ottawa, Canada**

## **A Sensory Ethnography**

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As the visitor approaches the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, he notices that it is reminiscent of the natural formations of the Canadian landscape. After purchasing a ticket, he enters the museum's first exhibit, the Grand Hall. A plethora of sensoria immediately tickle the visitor's senses, as the Grand Hall's physical features create a sensational backdrop against which Aboriginal totem poles stretch far into the distance. The immense floor-to-ceiling windows create the impression of a vast, open landscape and exploit the natural sunlight while reducing the need for artificial lighting. In other words, the museum's surroundings create a lens through which one can peer into the past, as the subtleties of the space are profoundly sensorial and recreate the natural contexts from which the artifacts were taken.

As the museumgoer strolls through the Grand Hall, he stops at a 1913 totem pole from the Nuxalk village of Tallio and learns that its high, carved archway once served as a doorway to a house, thanks to a corresponding photograph and explanatory plaque. Close by, the visitor marvels at an 1870 Kwahsuh totem pole, and soon learn that its two empty boxes, one in the middle and another at the top, were designed to commemorate an Aboriginal chief of wolf descent from Angidah on the river Nass. These experiences in the Grand Hall are further heightened by the sounds of rushing water and the chirping of birds, museological techniques that create a most inviting atmosphere.

Similar to the Grand Hall, the Pacific Coast Aboriginal gallery also uses natural imagery for optimal effect. The environment is reconstructed through an abundance of lush green foliage that cascades over a dimly lit space. Lighting is used minimally to transport the visitor to another time and place. The floor is cool, uneven and textured much like that of a forest untouched by European settlers. Sunlight streams through thick branches and an Indian flute whispers in the background as the visitor approaches a sixteen and a half foot cedar dugout canoe that is perched next to pieces of driftwood on a makeshift riverbank. Nearby, life-sized mannequins draped in fur hold quivers and straw baskets as an Amerindian dance is projected onto a rock wall overhead. The use of visual, auditory and tactile cues creates a shifting sense of time that displays the objects as closely as possible to their original contexts.

The Pacific Coast Aboriginal gallery also houses four life-sized reconstructions of archaeological excavations of the Tsimshian people from Prince Rupert Harbour. The first excavation depicts Tsimshian wall art and highlights the differences between petroglyphs, carved images, and pictographs, painted images; ladders descend into the site, tools are scattered on the ground, and a water cooler is perched nearby. A parallel site features a stone hearth, a camera on a tripod, and a dusty knapsack, as if the workers were taking a break from their fieldwork. Nearby, a wet site contains several hoses to wash dirt off objects that are then freeze-dried to lessen the damaging effects of moisture. Next to the sites is a cross-section of ground layered with shells, fossils, and peat, on top of which a collapsed totem pole is in the midst of being hoisted up by a crane.

Upon exiting the gallery, the visitor makes his way toward Canada Hall, which promises to trace one thousand years of history. He is immediately plunged into a different era when he encounters Vikings perched over a boat on a shore dotted by coniferous trees, boulders and driftwood. Nearby, a massive merchant ship looms beneath a brilliant blue sky, beckoning the visitor to explore the landscape just as sixteenth and seventeenth century explorers once did. As the visitor succumbs to his curiosity, he enters the ship's dank hull and sees a dying fisherman lying in between barrels and whale harpoons. A 1584 Whaling Station next awaits, where giant slabs of whale blubber lie on wooden planks while fat is boiled and rendered in massive cauldrons over a searing flame. The station's bloodstained tables and bubbling cauldrons recreate the somber atmosphere of a whaling station on the Atlantic seaboard. The visitor

continues to make his way through Canada Hall and notices a dimly lit lantern above the doorway of the mid-eighteenth century Louisbourg Inn. As he enters the inn, he is struck by a most welcoming ambiance; red-orange embers glow in a stone hearth, and a broom and bucket are perched in the corner. Chairs are scattered around a table on which the contents of bowls are spilled next to used, greasy spoons.

Canada Hall's impressive size and feigned authenticity create a most sensorially inviting gallery. The cobblestoned courtyards in New France Square, the clouds of sawdust in the Maritime Shipyard, the massive drill in the Oil Patch, and the lumber shanty in the Timber Trade each reflect a vital part of Canadian history. What is most memorable for the museumgoer, however, are the exhibits in which touch plays a central role in the museum experience. Next to an overturned birch bark canoe draped with animal pelts and surrounded by paddles is a fur trader. He plays a recorder, oblivious to the scrutinizing gaze of visitors. Opposite the fur-trader, the visitor is invited to touch six animal pelts, such as beaver pelt and minx fur, and to guess their origins. The fur trade exhibit provides the visitor with a unique opportunity to experience history through touch; apart from a rare emphasis on aroma in the museum's reconstruction of St. Onuphrius Church from Smoky Lane, Alberta, whose authentic pews and altar still smell of wood and incense, the exhibits rely heavily on sight, sound, and touch to create the museum's sensescape.

Sound, lighting, and movement are most effectively used to bridge together past and present in Canada Hall. Montgomery's Tavern and the Chinese Hand Laundry exhibits are especially sensorial in this regard. Reconstructed to depict the socio-political strife of December 1837 in Upper Canada that followed the defeat of the British in the American Revolution, Montgomery's Tavern projects the silhouettes of rebels on a curtain as they hoist their pitchforks and shovels in the air. Two British soldiers eat pickles, eggs and cheese around a wooden table as they anxiously watch the action unfurl through the drawn curtains. The Chinese Hand Laundry engages the visitor's senses in a similar fashion as well. The space teems with life as the visitor tours the various corners of the Laundromat. A radio plays in the background while men work away, thus giving the space an authentic, lived-in appearance. The silhouette of a man chatters away lively behind a white sheet that has been hung up to dry.

The visitor eventually reaches Ontario Street, where life-sized reconstructions generate an impressive streetscape. Ontario Street attempts to recreate the atmosphere and energy of emerging cities in the Western interior during the late nineteenth century. As the visitor strolls down the street, he hears the rhythmic clicking of horses' hooves and the squeaking of cart's wheels on the cobblestoned street. Nearby, a maple tree's leaves turn from green to red to symbolize the gradual change of seasons, a surprisingly powerful sensory technique to symbolize the passage of time. Shadows dance beneath a lamppost, making one's stroll down the street a heightened sensory journey.

The objects sold in the city's stores are innovatively displayed in store windows. The window of Albert Carr & Co. displays china, glass, earthenware, and a picture of Queen Victoria for historical reference. Next door, Millinery & Fancy Dry Goods uses its window space to advertise ladies gloves, fans, and hats. Upstairs, Stephenson's Dentist's windows are lit to attract business. At the far end of the street, a Victorian house's life-sized rooms display artifacts and cultural customs of the period. The visitor first enters an ornately decorated Victorian parlor, in which an afternoon tea is being served in china teacups. A settee, chaise, and a collection of elaborate antiques and family heirlooms adorn the space. A lavish carpet covers the floor and a carved fireplace serves as the focal point of the room. Next to the parlor, an emerald dining room houses a pewter teapot, a cascading chandelier, and a chocolate cake that is ready to be served. Across the hall, the patriarch's study is displayed in all of its authentic grandeur. An ornately carved fireplace illuminates papers and correspondence that are scattered on a heavy mahogany desk. Yesterday's newspaper, the *Globe*, lies in the waste bin. As the visitor peers into each room, he cannot help but get the sense that the home is still inhabited. In this regard, the seemingly authentic, life-sized Ontario Street exhibit paves new avenues of exploration.

As the visitor's journey comes to an end, he leaves the museum and weaves his way through a sea of vibrant begonias and poppies. He turns to gaze at Parliament Hill across the Ottawa River as the sun begins to set over the nation's capital, content with his sensory journey. Although he will never be able to experience Canadian history exactly as it was, he can now re-experience it through the senses.