

**Toronto's Cultural Renaissance:  
Courting Public Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum**

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**July 29, 2008**

## Foreward

The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies has taken on an engagement to publish a series of reports on the best practices of Toronto's cultural institutions. To address the richness and diversity of Toronto's museum culture, the Robarts Centre has established a working group of graduate students from political science and culture and communication to research and map the exciting transformations to the Royal Ontario Museum, the Hockey Hall of Fame, the McMichael Gallery and the Powerplant. These institutions, both popular and elite, highly commercialized and iconic, differ enormously in the size and complexity of their collections. Some are privately owned and others are public institutions.

With hundreds of millions of dollars spent on modernizing and expanding the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Royal Ontario Museum and other institutions, what are we to make of these dramatic changes to the way we understand Toronto's public culture? Toronto's cultural institutions are shaped by complex mandates driven by governance structures, commercial needs, educational outreach, and curatorial vision. Each institution is struggling to reach out to highly diverse publics, and this attempt to connect strategically with Toronto's multicultural communities has triggered a process to democratize their programming to an unprecedented degree.

Culture provides a unique lens through which to look at who we are becoming and reveal Torontonians' ideas about accessibility and representation, identity and authenticity, citizenship, and ways of seeing. As well culture points to a second reality. In today's globalized world modern culture is found as much outside on the street and in public places as on the walls of curated exhibitions and visiting artworks.

Special thanks go to Jessica Kelly for her excellent and stimulating report on the Royal Ontario Museum's 'new crystal age' and its attempt to transform itself into a modern agora.

These reports will be available at [www.robarts.yorku.ca](http://www.robarts.yorku.ca). In 2009, we plan to enter a second phase of mapping and tracking Toronto's cultural scene through an exploration of the city's many festivals and their major significance for Torontonians.

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July 8, 2008

For more information on other reports and further studies of the Public Culture Working Group please contact the Co-Chairs, Daniel Drache ([drache@yorku.ca](mailto:drache@yorku.ca)) and Warren Crichlow ([WCrichlow@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:WCrichlow@edu.yorku.ca)) at York University.

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\* All photos in the report are the author’s own.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) is a powerful case study of the reinvention of a traditional museum amidst contemporary social changes. In an effort to revitalize its public image and its collections, the ROM has taken on some drastic transformations. Recent years have witnessed a transition in museum policies towards a more contemporary and publicly engaged character, not to mention one of the most dramatic architectural unveilings the city of Toronto has seen yet. The changes are aimed at integrating the ROM into the urban fabric of Toronto and building on a reputation of international excellence in an age of global competition; but also the ROM aims to become a ‘new museum,’ reflective of and responsive to a ‘new public.’ The ROM’s current Director and CEO, William Thorsell, sees the museum as the ‘new agora’ in society, a new cultural commons where assembly, debate, and discussion can take place. How is this being achieved?

Architectural transformations and gallery renovations have played a large role in reinvigorating the presentation of the ROM’s collections and have expanded the museum’s capacity for hosting travelling and temporary exhibitions. The establishment of the Institute for Contemporary Culture has added a cosmopolitan flair to the ROM’s traditional mandates. By hosting exhibitions that are clearly meant to engage with contemporary issues and historical controversies, the ROM has taken political, at times moral, stances in its public image. However, many of the museum’s *permanent* collections have not received a critical reassessment of their implicit narratives, allowing histories of colonialism and exploitation to remain unexamined. This potentially excludes audiences through a lack of representation and voice.

At the ROM, outreach and accessibility programming to under-represented or marginalized audiences has been vigorously pursued at the same time that new generations of wealthy patrons have been sought after. The idea of the ‘agora’ clearly guides these outreach activities and the museum is certainly moving towards the formation of a more diverse and inclusive museum community and constituency. However, vestiges of elitisms and exclusivity remain at the highest levels of authority within the ROM. Its governance structures are populated by the wealthy, educated, and privileged, while private sector funding has become the bread and butter of museum operations and expansions.

The ‘democratization’ of the ROM has only gone so far and it still faces many challenges if the museum is to become a ‘new agora.’ The dramatic transformations that have taken place in recent years at the ROM have taken place too quickly and pushed the museum in too many directions at the expense of a serious engagement with public culture. In seeking to become a ‘new museum,’ it has failed to reconcile historical aspects and narratives embedded in the ‘old museum.’ Bridging the gap between its past and its present may prove to be the ROM’s most challenging and important task in establishing itself as the ‘new agora’ in society.

## **1 INTRODUCTION – THE MUSEUM IN CONTEXT**

Until recently the ROM had cultivated a public image of being stuffy, conventional, and out of touch with modern social practices. It was seen as a place visited mainly by schoolchildren and tourists, as an institution having little interaction with the diversity of the modern world and the vibrancy of its surrounding community. In many ways, it has become apparent that contemporary public culture no longer responds as it once it did to ‘exclusive’ cultural institutions steeped in privileged class practices, nor to ‘traditional’ collections and presentations of artifacts.

Society has increasingly demanded that museums open up their governance, educational, and curatorial practices to interact with and be responsive to a broader public. An increasingly multicultural and globalized public has fostered a shift in social values, which seeks to dismantle paternalistic educational structures that may marginalize and distort cultural histories. In Toronto, where over half the population claims origin outside of the country, the ‘outsider’ or ‘other’ is now determinant in public culture, representing and constituting ‘new’ audiences. Peoples previously marginalized from Western museum culture are increasingly visible and vocal, demanding not just images of themselves and markers of their history, but also representations, which are controlled and produced by representatives of their community (Mackey 1995). Museological experiments in representation can thus be initiated through public pressure, in addition to being internally generated through institutional policies.

Responding to cultural sensitivities is no longer simply a matter of political correctness, but rather is fundamental in establishing and maintaining new audiences. Also, securing present day and future patrons for the museum in an increasingly

competitive environment of cultural and entertainment options is a central challenge and concern for the ROM. Museums must compete with other modern forms of entertainment and non-traditional institutions that cater to public culture. They must carve out a niche within public perception and imagination that validates and celebrates the museum as an important social institution.

Looking at the ROM's operations and mandates, its curatorial practices and outreach programs, one can gain an understanding of how the institution views its relationship to and role in public culture. The purpose of this analysis is to reach an understanding of the ROM's place within contemporary public culture in Toronto and to assess the institution's motives and capacities for engaging with the public. It is divided into several sections and will proceed as follows.

First, the ROM is physically and geographically situated within Toronto's urban landscape, its architectural and spatial elements are placed before the public eye and the public body for examination and scrutiny. The notion of the 'agora' is explored for its importance to cities, both as a place of public assembly and as a tool for revitalization of urban communities and streetscapes. Secondly, the internal environment, its curatorial mandates, and practices are examined in terms of engagements with natural and cultural histories, the presentation of 'difficult knowledge,' collaborations with community, and the incorporation of a new contemporary mandate. The third section will evaluate the ROM's educational, outreach, and marketing practices through a critical lens and assess its strategies for engaging with the public at large. Patronage and governance structures are also examined with an eye towards both past and present practices. Which 'publics' are targeted by the ROM? Who constitutes its community and constituents?

I feel it is important to say something about myself before I set out on this analytical task. As a social and political scientist, I recognize the importance that cultural institutions have in the formation and continuation of shared identity and history. Recognizing that globalization has a strong impact on the cultural terrain of the world, it is interesting to note how many museums and galleries have attempted to become more international. Nevertheless, *public interactions* with these institutions continue to occur at the local level, leading us to examine not only the images that a museum projects to the world but also its relationship with the local community. In addition, a museum's politics and pedagogical approaches reveal biases about culture, knowledge, and history – biases that must be critically examined if democratization is to occur and a broader public engaged with. From these perspectives, I attempt to make some educated observations and constructive criticisms about museum engagements with public culture in Toronto. I hope the reader will find the following pages stimulating and sufficiently comprehensive for such an endeavour.

## **2 SPACE, PLACE, AND ARCHITECTURE**

The ROM is situated at the corner of Queen's Park and Bloor Street, a location of historical and geographical significance in Toronto's urban landscape. Its proximity to the University of Toronto, the Provincial Legislature, and Philosopher's Walk place the ROM at the heart of one of the city's most dynamic communities. Its strong architectural presence has always provoked and encouraged public debate. With various renovations and expansions taking place over time, the ROM has also engaged with the public by revitalizing its presence on the streetscape. Nothing in the ROM's history, however,



could compare to its most recent transformation: a \$270 million dollar expansion and renovation project known as *Renaissance ROM*, one of the most ambitious and drastic architectural transformations the city of Toronto has seen yet.

The changes are aimed at allowing the ROM to host larger travelling exhibitions, expand its educational and community programming, increase accessibility, and restore historic buildings. Upon completion of *Renaissance ROM*, the museum will have renovated roughly 75 percent of the public spaces in the historic buildings and have added an additional 80,000 square feet resulting in 27 new, refurbished and redesigned galleries ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). Visitor capacity is also to expand from its current 750,000 to just over a million visitors a year to 1.6 million when renovations are complete in 2008 (Mackey 1995)).

However, interior renovations have captured the public's attention to a lesser extent than the transformation to the ROM's exterior. For this project a bold statement in architecture was sought that would launch the ROM onto the world stage of contemporary design. A global competition for the project began in 2001, and submissions from some of the world's most renowned and revered architects were received. In the end, it was Daniel Libeskind's crystalline design, based on a three-dimensional Star-of-David, which was accepted. Construction began in the spring of 2003, and the public watched patiently as massive steel beams were erected at impossible angles above the city streets.



*Approaching from the west, the Crystal dominates the urban landscape of Bloor Street and commands the attention of passers-by.*

The unveiling of the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal in June of 2007 was accompanied by all the pomp and ceremony of a national holiday with well-known Canadian entertainers and musicians, a lights show and fireworks, and festivities in the street. Named in honour of Mr. Lee-Chin and his \$30 million dollar gift to the *Renaissance ROM* project, the Lee-Chin name has been etched into the architectural and philanthropic memory of Toronto. Visitor attendance to the Museum for the month following its re-opening almost doubled compared to the three years preceding the construction reaching over 80,000 visitors (ROM 07/30/2007). The Crystal's impact on the urban environment has been significant, launching critics and admirers into impassioned debate about the relationship between architecture and the public. Lisa Rochon, a leading architectural and cultural critic in Toronto, has called it "hard, aggressive and in your

face...[cantilevering] dangerously over the street, shifting the ground from under our feet” (Rochon). Her impression of the construction is that it represents “the exaltation of one architect, one man, one individual” (ibid) and that it failed to account for the existing culture and street life of the neighbourhood. My own excursions to the ROM have been influenced by this critical debate, and I took special care to look and listen for its presence among museum visitors.

Viewing the ROM from the west one is struck immediately by its intruding yet seemingly organic presence on the streetscape. Visiting on one cold January afternoon, the throngs of families and tourists lining up in the hundreds to enter the museum were equally impressive. Being the “natural listener” that I am, I took in the conversations around me, which expressed diverse opinions and impressions of the ROM’s newest and most distinct architectural feature. “It’s a monstrosity,” said one middle-aged woman. “I wonder how much it cost?” said a man in his 30s. “Mommy, why is the building broken?” asked a young boy.

There is a general ambivalence about the new construction. Some people say they like it because it makes the ROM distinctive. For William Thorsell, current Director and CEO of the ROM and the man who is steering the ROM’s transformation, the discussion, debate, and passion provoked by the Crystal is evidence of its architectural success. His own interpretation of the Crystal’s significance is nestled between the criticisms and accolades, resting on a belief in the power of architecture.

Architecture is the most public of the arts, and among the most permanent. Cultural institutions have a responsibility to be vigorous patrons of architecture, pushing boundaries, empowering genius – creating art rather than simply collecting and presenting it (Thorsell 05/03/2007).



*Opened in 1933 and hailed as a “masterpiece of architecture,” the east entrance (facing Queen’s Park) served as the museum’s main entrance for years and is the first structure encountered by visitors emerging from the ‘Museum’ subway station. Note that the Crystal not even visible from this angle.*



*Saturday morning visitors wait to enter the ROM through the new north entrance located on Bloor Street. Visitors cannot avoid confrontation with the architecture, and jagged mirror-like windows reflect the ‘public image’ back to onlookers.*

However, for some, pushing the boundaries of museum architecture can provoke a sense of unease and even suspicion among the public. As one observer of museum architecture has stated, “to make [the museum] palatial, pompous or grand is to build up a kind of psychological barrier to its greatest use” (Richard Bach quoted in McClellan 2003: 21). This “greatest use” is to provide a common public space for the education and enrichment of society regardless of one’s statute or position in life. Thus, the ‘accessibility’ of architecture is a key concern for its impact on the public.

## 2.1 EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The most favourable appraisals of the ROM’s renovations have been based on unique design elements of the Crystal. There are several gallery spaces housed within the Crystal, which are characterized by angled windows and ceilings that never converge at right angles. The result is a dynamic and sometimes disorienting space. It was interesting to overhear some children and even adults exclaim their physical disorientation due to the unusual angles of the gallery spaces within the Crystal. One little girl was afraid of ‘going over the edge’ while another woman refused to approach a window because her perception of the space made her feel ill.

The Stair of Wonders is another unique design feature – a composition of folded planes, light boxes, and viewing galleries that ascends four stories. What would otherwise be ancillary circulation space is utilized for the display of museum objects also offering a vantage point from which to appreciate the Crystal’s architectural intricacies. Another unique perspective of the Crystal is found in ‘Spirit House,’ formed at the point where all of the Crystal’s five crystalline shapes unite. The space soars vertically from

two levels below ground to four levels above ground, with criss-crossing bridges on each level that connect the galleries from east to west. On the main floor, a contemplative lounge includes chairs custom-designed by architect Daniel Libeskind.

The Spirit House, although created as a place of silence and reflection for visitors, serves to house the faces and names of the ROM's most generous donors, collectively named the 'New Century Founders'. A \$5 million dollar minimum donation will get your name in this 'house of spirit,' and while the intention of the space is to provide a place for contemplation, my attention was diverted by the presence of these patrons, hauntingly real in their portrayal.



*Residents of the 'Spirit House' – glowing, airbrushed images of donors exude a sort of magic-realism, dominating and distracting the visitor in a space intended for contemplation. Front and centre, Michael Lee-Chin*

It is apparent that through *Renaissance ROM* much of the interior renovations are aimed at expanding its capacity to host travelling exhibitions. Significant gallery space is reserved now for temporary exhibitions such as the Garfield Weston<sup>1</sup> Exhibition Hall located in the newly renovated lower level of the ROM. With over 17,000 square feet of floor space and 17-foot high ceilings, this expansive gallery space hosts all of the museum's major exhibitions and is considered Canada's largest gallery for temporary exhibitions ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)).



*Stair of Wonders – viewed from above, uses transitional space within the museum and displays ‘traditional’ objects within a contemporary form.*

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<sup>1</sup> Willard Garfield Weston was a Canadian businessman in the early twentieth century and creator of Associated British Foods. Subsequent generations of the family have established a foundation that gives generously to many Canadian and British cultural and educational institutions.



*Stair of Wonders – a strategically placed window provides children with an eye-level view of a world of miniatures, allowing for a close inspection of the ‘marching line.’*



*Spirit House – looking down, through the core of the Crystal from a third-story walkway, to the main level lounge. The Libeskind chair gleams from below.*



Many of the ROM's old galleries have also been modified and expanded, breathing new life into the presentation of its collections and changing the flow between gallery spaces. As one reviewer stated,

This is what the ROM desperately needed as previous renovations had all but destroyed the original flows between galleries, subdivided its great halls, and buried intricate historic stone details. With four existing galleries newly renovated, the interior is no longer dark and maze-like as windows have been stripped of their blackout paint, ceilings have been pulled down and walls removed to create a beautiful open and naturally lit space" (Stanwick 2007: 126).

Entering the museum, one's eye is immediately drawn to the vaulted and expansive central 'court'. The Crystal's internal structure angles upwards to meet the ROM's original brick edifice, providing grand cross-sectional views of both old and new architectures, and establishing a grand space where public and private events can be held. On any given day people will meet, mingle, and relax in this area. It serves as the 'commons' within the museum's space, offering comfortable places to sit amidst the grandeur of century-old brick and the icy clean white walls of the Crystal. This contrast and juxtaposition of space follows the visitor throughout the museum. As people weave their way in and out of different galleries there is a constant flux of exposure to 'old' and 'new,' catching the viewer somewhere between reverence and inspiration.

In assessing the architectural and spatial elements of the ROM, it is clear that the public realm is to be experienced *inside* the museum as opposed to outside and on the surrounding streetscape. One must pay a price of admission (\$20 for an adult) to experience the 'commons,' or the 'agora' as Thorsell would imagine it.



*Old meets new in the Gloria Chen Court, original structure of brick and stone is met by the abstract internal angles of the Crystal.*

## 2.2 ROM AS THE “NEW AGORA”

The ROM’s current Director and CEO, William Thorsell, sees the role of the museum as the ‘New Agora’ in society. “Museums have become defining elements of great cities – multi-faceted, layered and complex places bound up with the community in a myriad of ways, accessible and transparent on the street – thus the new Agora, the new common space, the new city square” (Thorsell 05/03/2007). He attributes this trend in museum culture in part to institutional survival, to strategies aimed at generating revenue in light of declines in government operational support; but also, he feels these changes reflect the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves, prompting a sort of social responsibility. In his words,

Our societies have become segmented and particularized in a world of increasing mobility and technological change. In our major cities, the Western Canon appeals to a declining plurality of the population. We no longer meet most of our neighbours in the town hall or through the common prayer book. In the multi-cultural and technologically decentralized societies of the West, adult encounters with the exploding diversity of the city tend to occur in commuter trains, shopping malls, media and to some degree, the workplace – at a distance...[Further] we may well live in a Global Village, but through immigration to our major cities, we experience the Global Village as a Globe of Villages – our own city as a physical patchwork of distinct cultures – delightful in many ways, but also a fracturing of common ground where we actually live our lives. In this context, we need new shared space – places of encounter – a new Commons – a new Agora. ...Our new community centres must be cosmopolitan centres – and museums should be among the best of them (Thorsell 05/03/2007).

The ROM's attempt to become the new cultural commons has been met with both enthusiasm and skepticism. While many welcome a revival of cultural institutions, for some, the ROM has been overly aggressive in its promotion as a center of culture in the community. A tension clearly exists between providing public space for the agora and determining what aspects of public culture constitute the agora. Does the ROM take too large a role in defining, and thereby confining public culture, or is it assisting in the liberation and 'rediscovery' of it?

The idea of the 'agora' emerged out of ancient Athenian society. In this tradition, it was an open space in a town where people would assemble to participate in the marketplace, to debate and discuss matters of science and society, and it was the birthplace of the early principles and practices of democracy. Modern society is sorely lacking in such spaces, especially in North America. In many parts of Europe, Latin America, and Asia public squares, *zocalos*, and plazas are still very common, and it is not unusual to find major museums within close proximity to such places of public gathering. In a more recent historical sense, urban centers such as Toronto have often failed to plan

for such spaces, and it is only recently that municipal revitalization plans have paid attention to the import and impact of lively public cultural.

The work of Richard Florida (2002) has been especially influential for many North American cities in this regard. His argument that the activities of the ‘creative class’ are foundational for the revitalization of urban centers has captured the attention and imagination of many politicians and institutions, especially cultural institutions. Critics of Florida argue that his conception of ‘culture’ is flawed, too focused on cosmopolitan and privileged publics and not inclusive of the social totality of the urban environment. The transformation of the ROM embodies this tension in many ways, provoking debates on whose culture is represented and given voice through the institution and its relationship with the community.

### 2.3 TENSIONS WITH COMMUNITY

Although the renovations and expansions are aimed at “integrating the ROM into the urban fabric of Toronto” (ROM website), one wonders how the ROM’s account and vision of “urban fabric” interacts with other diverse perceptions of the urban reality. Is its architectural transformation more of an imposition on public culture rather than an articulation of it? An example of this tension is in Thorsell’s commitment to minimalist exterior landscaping. This involves limiting the types of activities and commercial presence in the museum’s immediate surroundings. A restriction on hot dog cart and food vendor operations in front of the Crystal (Gray 2007) could be seen as part of the institution’s attempt to maintain an image of minimalism in its street presence. Yet anyone who spends time wandering the urban landscapes of Toronto knows that hot dog

stands are a quintessential part of street culture. This simple example illustrates the tensions present in integrating new and bold statements of architecture and “culture” into the urban landscape.

Another example of the ROM’s tension with its urban community emerged out of a plan to redevelop the site at 90 Queen’s Park, known as ROM South, in partnership with a third party. In 2005, a plan for a 46-story luxury condominium building surfaced and was met with vocal opposition from community members. The ROM dropped the plan in response to local outcry and, although currently exploring alternative development plans for the site, has expressed that if it enters into any agreement to develop the site with a partner, the “process will start with community consultation in an effort to find a proposal that creates a consensus on what should be done” ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). Certainly, any future developments for the ROM’s urban presence will be subject to scrutiny and debate, but this is only appropriate within the context of expanding and changing public institutions.

The sheer magnitude of architectural changes at the ROM prompts the visitor to engage physically, intellectually, and emotionally with the institution. Contrast, conflict, and juxtaposition are at the core of these engagements. The ROM’s curatorial, education, and governance mandates also reflect this tension, the challenge to simultaneously represent and reveal what is ancient and abstract, traditional and contemporary in museum institutions. The following sections will examine both how the ROM attempts to address and bridge these contrasts and to what extent public culture is a determining influence or a passive recipient of these transformations and representations.

### 3 THE INNER WORLD: MUSEOLOGICAL AND CURATORIAL ELEMENTS

The establishment of the ROM's collections can be traced to the late nineteenth century when scientific knowledge and the exotic world of archaeology were being revealed as spectacular 'discoveries' to the public en masse. The ROM's collections mandate "to document human cultures and the natural diversity of Ontario, Canada, and the world" evolved out of this history. As such, it encompasses two global mandates: one as a universal museum of cultures, the other as an authority in natural history.<sup>2</sup> With over six million objects in its permanent collection, the ROM can say a lot about our natural and cultural world. However, *how* these narratives are presented can be just as important as *what* is being presented.

#### 3.1 THE POWER OF DISPLAY

Tensions always emerge through the displaying of objects. What is visible and what is hidden to the museum visitor is determined by museum staff and as such reflects their authority and control in revealing knowledge. A decision regarding what is visible and how it is made to be so can be highly controversial and contested. As Ashley (2005) points out, the act of display is an act of power. As part of *Renaissance ROM*, all six million artifacts in the museum's collection are eventually to be placed on display, marking an unprecedented revealing of 'hidden knowledge' – a gesture towards democratization of access. Yet it is also an act that sets out to reveal history, the order of nature and human cultures, and in doing so affects its telling to the public. As such, the

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<sup>2</sup> The following collections are currently considered core areas for collection at the ROM: Canadian art, decorative arts, and historical documents; material culture and art of Aboriginal Peoples of Canada; Near Eastern and Asian arts and archaeology, specifically China, Islam/Middle East, Egypt/Nubia, Japan, Korea, and South Asia; textiles and accessories; Western decorative arts, gold and silver, and arms and armour; Biodiversity, Earth Sciences, specifically minerals and gemstones; and Palaeobiology, specifically dinosaurs and other fossil vertebrates (ROM website).

ROM must cultivate and maintain a consciousness of the stories told by its collections, even if those stories prove to be ‘difficult.’ Other tensions that are present within the display of objects may hover more around implicit claims of truth regarding histories and culture. Determining which aspects and acts of history to emphasize may omit certain ‘truths’ while enhancing others.

Museums have historically been venues for the cultivation and practice of civic values and national pride and have been used as venues for public policy, shaping public perceptions of political and social needs. Some Marxist political scholars would refer to such institutions as hegemonic, reinforcing the unconscious bias by which we live through overt communications and its way of being in the world (Ashley 2005).

Museums have traditionally been places where citizens “have met, conversed, been instructed, or otherwise engaged in rituals through which their rights and duties as citizens have been enacted” (Bennett 2007: 121). They are places where class divisions have been portrayed; where the ‘public’ can be endowed with a certain level of cultural knowledge, sophistication, and education in the practices of civic virtue (McClellan 2003). Thus, we see a historically determined role for the museum in the formation and expression of the ‘public’ values that are articulated by the ruling classes.

Methods of presentation and arrangement of objects within the museum space have given rise to particular forms of what Bennett calls ‘civic seeing’ where “civic lessons are embodied in those arrangements [and] are to be seen, understood, and performed by the museum’s visitors” (Bennett 2007: 121). Differing ideas about how collections should be presented reflect personal as well as societal preferences for learning and contemplation. Some may advocate isolation and silence as necessary for

contemplation and respite, perhaps indicating a preference for pedagogies based on introspection, self-awareness, and individualism. Others may feel that museums should serve the public through active involvement in their everyday lives, favouring pedagogical methods that are more experiential, hands-on, and interactive (McClellan 2003). Many museums have sought to blend the two approaches incorporating appreciation for an object and the revealing of its history through educational programming (ibid). The ROM is a clear example of the latter approach combining a strong educational focus with a curatorial mandate to display world-class collections of natural and cultural histories. As a result, the ROM makes statements to the public regarding science and society, backed by institutional prestige and authority. An assessment of these statements, or appraisals, of nature and culture is presented in the following pages.

### 3.2 APPRAISALS OF NATURE

The new James and Louise Temerty<sup>3</sup> Gallery of Dinosaurs and Mammals, located in the second floor gallery space of the Crystal, one of the most highly anticipated openings in the museum's history, has been met with great public enthusiasm and interest. Its opening, timed just before the 2007-08 holiday season, brought in an average daily attendance of just over six thousand visitors, the highest the museum had ever experienced for its annual holiday program and the highest daily average since the June 2007 architectural opening of the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal (ROM 01/07/2008). The attention was certainly not without merit. The contrast of ancient bones set against the

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<sup>3</sup> James Temerty is Chairman of Northland Power Inc., and serves as Chairman on the ROM Board of Governors. His wife Louise is Facilities Director for Northland Power and sits on the Board of Governors for the Stephen Leacock Foundation for Children.



Crystal's dramatic and contemporary angles is striking and seems to bring out an organic geometry within the bones themselves. Many pieces are displayed in such a way as to give 360-degree views with some larger pieces being hung dramatically from the ceiling. People are clearly captivated by the objects and the gallery space, and on a busy Saturday afternoon, the rooms buzzed with animated discussion. In my mind, the gallery successfully debunks conventional images of inert and academic bone exhibits and is one of the ROM's finest examples of its 'renaissance,' merging the historical and contemporary, the ancient and the abstract.

The natural history galleries are especially popular with the younger crowds and emphasize interactivity in their curatorial approaches. The Bird Gallery, Interactive Biodiversity Gallery, Reptile Gallery, Bat Cave, and the CIBC Discovery Center provide spaces for children to be especially hands-on, "unearthing" dinosaur bones in small sandboxes, making pencil rubbings of fossils, and dressing up in costumes from different historical and cultural eras.



*Ancient meets abstract in the Temerty Gallery of Dinosaurs and Mammals*



*Dizzying angles and delicate dinosaurs – the contemporary context of this ‘Crystal’ gallery provides space for the mingling of art and science*



*Kids get down and dirty in hands-on interactive galleries*

The Biodiversity Gallery features a number of exhibits that aim to educate visitors about ‘biodiversity in their backyards’ with information on native plant and animal species and composting. All of these areas feature lots of small nooks and crannies for young ones to explore, offering them unique and up-close perspectives of the exhibits. The overall effect of these approaches to presentation is to bring the natural world into contemporary relief showing the continuities between and evolution of modern day species and demonstrating the presence of the natural world in our daily lives. However, with the exception of the Biodiversity Gallery, little content links human beings to the natural world. Future gallery endeavours however will seek to fill this gap.

### 3.2.1 *Conflict in nature*

The relationship between human society and nature will be highlighted and explored in the soon to be unveiled *Schad Gallery for Biodiversity: Life in Crisis*, which will provide opportunity for visitors to reflect on the increasingly precarious health of our planet's ecosystem. The Schad Gallery will engage with issues such as climate change, species extinction and endangerment, as well as human beings' role in maintaining or destroying environmental balance and well-being. The presentation of such knowledge should stimulate lively debate and discussion around the validity and accuracy of scientific predictions, the responsibility and role of human society, and prospects for the future of the planet.

It is interesting to note that although the ROM is engaging with contemporary issues like the human role in environmental degradation, it may not be completely self-conscious of its historical political and moral positions vis-à-vis such issues. For example, the ROM's mineral, gem, and meteorite collections, considered one of the finest in North America, will soon be housed in the refurbished space of the museum's Weston wing (to be named the Teck Cominco<sup>4</sup> Suite of Earth Sciences Galleries), abutting the Schad Gallery. The new gallery space will display approximately 3,300 specimens, "contextualized and illuminated by interactive audiovisual stations, video exhibits and historical records on Canada's mining industry" ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). It will be revealing to see whether the ROM can balance telling a history of mining (one of the most environmentally destructive human practices) with a telling of increasing environmental precariousness.

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<sup>4</sup> Teck Cominco is a diversified mining company, headquartered in Vancouver, Canada. They are a significant producer of copper, zinc, metallurgical coal, and specialty metals and have interests in several oil sands development assets in Alberta.

The presentation of natural history can seem innocuous – there may not be much room for controversy in a room full of bones and stones; but in revealing the underlying order of nature, conflicts may develop over interpretations of evolution, science, progress, and religion. The study of the natural world is not strictly objective. Nature is also studied in relation to human society where differing interpretations of nature are rooted in cultural and social biases. Clearly one of the most revealing cases of this tension lies in the work of Charles Darwin who revolutionized understandings of the natural world and man’s place within it, challenging the core beliefs and authority of the Church and state. The museum’s recent hosting of *Darwin: The Evolution Revolution* illustrates how his work is still controversial today.

The exhibition, which features artifacts, writings, and discoveries connected to Darwin’s work, is an intimate look at the man and the controversy that ensued from his theorizations. The exhibition, which was put together by the American Museum of Natural History in New York, encountered significant sponsorship difficulties in its travels through several American cities, an indication of enduring tensions between science and religion. Upon reaching Toronto, a similar situation ensued, and it was not until William Thorsell’s impassioned plea to the corporate community that sponsors finally came forward.<sup>5</sup>

One wonders what additional controversies may emerge through the presentation of natural history and scientific knowledge. The Schad Gallery is certainly a promising endeavour in the museological presentation of scientific knowledge – one that seeks to place humans squarely within the natural world instead of passive observers of it. How

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Marie Bountrogianni, President and Executive Director of ROM Governors, April 16, 2008.

the ROM chooses to reveal such knowledge will demonstrate their perceptions of ‘public opinion’ and will no doubt stimulate public debate on one of the most controversial issues of our time – the environment. At the same time, the juxtaposition of these contemporary concerns with galleries containing the relics and history of mining will reveal whether the ROM is conscious of the need to address tensions inherent in its collection and whether it can and will engage the public in debates about the human role, both past and present, in the degradation of the environment.

### 3.3 APPRAISALS OF CULTURE

The ROM’s other global mandate is to present the cultures of the world. The risks implicit in this mandate have made themselves apparent over the years as controversies and sensitivities have surfaced due to the ROM’s presentation of cultural knowledge and history. Situated in one of the world’s most culturally diverse cities, the ROM is also faced with the responsibility and challenge to reflect a diverse public. Presenting ‘culture’ is an act intertwined with the politics of representation, history, and identity. As a state-sanctioned public institution, the ROM must align itself with Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism, a social narrative that is not without its criticisms.

One critique of multiculturalism is that it maintains the idea that being British Canadian is the norm, while other Canadians are viewed as “multicultural” in relation to them. It has also been argued that multiculturalism promotes a fragmentation and diminishing of cultures, where they are constructed from folkloric, culinary, and artistic remnants (Mackey 1995). Museums are particularly culpable in the last regard as their task is often to display cultural objects of historical significance. A fine line exists

between presenting ‘spectacles’ of culture versus providing ‘testaments’ to them. Representation and voice is a key concern in these debates, and while the ROM has attempted to incorporate and include various communities in the process of representing cultures in a museum setting, there are enduring representations of ‘otherness’ as well as histories of colonialism and imperialism that challenge the ROM’s ability to capture cultural narrative. Exhibits often risk ‘freezing’ culture in historical moments disallowing expressions of dynamism and evolution in a culture’s narrative.

A broader perspective regarding the presence of world cultures at the ROM is that they are not only reflected in the collections, but also through the attendance and patronage of living cultural communities. As a result, the ROM plays host to a variety of cultural events that cater to specific ethnic groups within the city. Indeed, the various diasporas that are present in Toronto often facilitate the ROM’s global reputation and marketing. Nevertheless, just as cultural histories are compartmentalized at the ROM, cultural events at the museum typically celebrate one culture at a time, as separate and distinct from others. A familiar concern regarding national policies of multiculturalism emerges in such contexts. As Kylie Message (2006) observes,

The increasing preference for replacing singular museums with a series of discrete cultural centres that speak to particular communities may reiterate national policies of multiculturalism and global practices of cultural diversity, whereby difference is tolerated (and thus contained), culture is increasingly tied to tradition and heritage (as a commodity attractive to cultural tourism), but where cross-cultural encounter and accounts of difficult historical events may be avoided.

The ROM may be at risk for this ‘commodification’ effect. Continual engagement with communities in the portrayal and representation of cultures may help to avert this, but if the ‘new agora’ is to emerge and a “globe of isolated villages” is to be avoided, the ROM

must make an effort to engage the public in cross-cultural dialogue through its exhibits and events.

### 3.3.1 *“Difficult knowledge” – presentation of cultural histories*

When presenting cultural histories there may be a tendency to romanticize, valorize, or otherwise sanitize the experiences and representations of particular aspects of a culture.

‘Difficult knowledge’ may be construed as knowledge that is deemed controversial, incomprehensible, or evoking negative emotion or response (Bonnell & Simon 2007).

The viewer’s experience of ‘difficulty’ will vary according to many factors such as “time and place, gender and generation, political orientation or ethnic and/or national background” (ibid 2007: 67). The ROM’s engagements with ‘difficult knowledge’ tend to be limited to temporary and travelling exhibitions. Within their permanent cultural galleries, such engagements are harder to come across, even though much of the ROM’s collections implicitly reflect cultures of imperialism, colonialism, and cultural repression. Some examples follow.

The prominence of Asian cultural artifacts on the main floor (Japan, China, and Korea) is a testament to the ROM’s history of acquisitions. Christian missionaries and other privileged travellers from the West journeyed through Asia and exported significant amounts of artifacts and cultural objects during the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

William Charles White, a missionary with the Church of England and an aspiring archaeologist and collector, sent a steady stream of valuables to the museum’s vaults during a time when China was in a state of civil unrest. Correspondence between White and the ROM’s first director Charles Currelly, spoke of the need to capitalize on China’s



internal vulnerability in order to export antiquities (Dickson 1986). These transactions and exportations are considered a stain on the ROM's history, reminiscent of an imperialist past. Yet while subject to public scrutiny and disdain, the conspiratorial activities of these two men secured a vast collection of Chinese antiquities for the ROM, one of the finest collections in the world.

The Canada gallery, by limiting its focus to a particular historical period (from first European contact through to Confederation in 1867) isolates Canadian culture in an era dominated by imperialism and racial discrimination. The placard outside the Canada gallery reads, "Pervaded by a Eurocentrism reflecting the origins of most early immigrants, pioneering Canada nevertheless participated in the broader international realm as a trading nation. This eventually helped to foster a climate that supports the cultural and ethnic diversity of today's Canadian society." This statement clearly avoids any recognition of the disjunction between foreign policies of international engagement and cooperation, and domestic practices of cultural exclusion and discrimination that characterized much of Canadian history. While the 'other' is implied in the statement as being fundamental to the formation of "today's Canadian society," 'they' are still clearly omitted from the narrative of the collections. "Cultural and ethnic diversity" is situated as something that grew out of the 'enlightenment' of European immigrants as they engaged increasingly with international markets. It says nothing of the intense struggles for recognition and rights that many cultures had to initiate within Canadian borders.

In addition, the 'diversity' articulated by such statements says nothing about the peoples that existed in Canada prior to European contact. While the First Peoples Gallery is located directly across the hall from the Canada gallery, the history of the First Peoples

is not drawn out to sufficiently expose or problematize their particular experience of colonialism and loss of their cultural practices. Similar to the Canada gallery, it seeks to capture a way of life that is historically fixed yet finds enduring representation through cultural objects, activities, and art.

The ROM seems more effective in engaging with ‘difficult knowledge’ through its temporary exhibitions, often soliciting the assistance and collaboration of community representatives in addition to professional museum and curatorial staff. One such example is this year’s *Out from Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember*, an exhibit exploring Canadian disability history, a topic rarely discussed publicly, let alone in a museum. A display of thirteen diverse objects reveals a “rich and nuanced history that pays tribute to the resilience, creativity, and the civic and cultural contributions of Canadians with disabilities” (ROM 04/02/2008). The exhibitions also made a point of revealing the historical systematic exploitation of the disabled for their cheap (or free) labour, the social stigmas assigned to disabled persons, as well as historical perceptions of disability as a social disorder. The exhibition was the first of its kind in Canada and was produced in collaboration with students, scholars, and alumni from Ryerson University, curated by faculty members from Ryerson University’s School of Disability Studies.

### 3.3.2 *Community collaboration*

The trend towards community collaboration is partly historical, resulting from eruptions of public disdain for certain representations in past ROM exhibits; but such collaborations may also be indicative of a shift in museological and curatorial practices

that emphasize and value the knowledge of living communities, incorporating them not only into exhibition display but also into museum events and outreach. One example of this is the recent *Roots to Rhythm: Caribana Art Exhibit* unveiled to coincide with Caribana celebrations in the city. Featuring the work of twenty four African-Canadian artists, the exhibit seeks to display the rich culture and heritage of African-Canadians in addition to their struggles and differences ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). Making organizational linkages with cultural festivals such as Caribana is one of the ways in which the ROM is extending its reach out into the community. It is increasingly important, not only for the accessibility of the exhibits, but also the political and social legitimacy of the institution, to collaborate with communities and constituencies that may be affected by the museum's exhibits and activities.

Another example of community collaboration was with *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom!* exhibition (2002-2003). It featured a multimedia exhibition that interpreted the story of the escape of Black slaves from the United States to Canada through the early 1800s and the urban experience of Underground Railroad settlers in Toronto. Throughout the development process of this exhibition, key stakeholders were asked to sit on a consultative committee that would direct the production of the exhibit, specifically African-Canadians were asked to join. The committee pushed for a non-typical museum exhibition technique – a story-telling mode with a holographic female narrator in a dramatic theatre setting. Audiences were presented not so much with knowledge through artifacts and objects but with experience through story. What emerged from the *Underground Railroad* production was a very

public project with great symbolic meaning to the minority group it depicted (Ashley 2005).

The community collaboration was a direct result of the controversy created by the ROM's earlier exhibit *Into the Heart of Africa* in 1989-1990, which was condemned by many African-Canadians as a perpetuation of dominant culture racism (Ashley 2005). The exhibit attempted to present colonialism in a reflexive and critical way by focusing on the worldview of the colonialist collectors of the objects. In this way, the curator sought to implicate the colonizer and the colonized as part of a shared history that is without a doubt 'difficult.' Designing exhibitions to support visitors in the recognition that a 'difficult' exhibition implicates the self is an important challenge in engaging with and stimulating debate in public culture (Bonnell & Simon 2007). However, it must be done carefully and with an eye to accessibility and understanding of the 'uneducated' viewer who may not immediately understand the implicit messages.

The provocative images, relatively inaccessible and incomprehensible sub-text, and hidden irony of the *Heart of Africa* exhibition elicited outrage and accusations of racism from black individuals and organizations in Toronto (Mackey 1995). In addition to the controversial content, the museum hired a white Canadian anthropologist to curate the show, despite Toronto's large African-Canadian population, and consultation with the black community only took place after the exhibit had already been completed (ibid). The museum defended the curator and essentially took the position that the black community had misinterpreted the exhibit. For weeks, protests took place outside the ROM until the museum took legal action, winning a bid for an injunction to keep protesters away, resulting in the arrest of eleven protesters by police (Mackey 1995).

This particular incident tells something of the variation in ‘civic seeing’ and the experiencing of ‘difficult knowledge’ – variation that is tied to the particular experiences, histories, biases, references, and desires of the viewer. The presentation of cultural history should reveal more than a contained and controlled institutional vision. It should illuminate the dynamism, fluidity, and tensions of a world of viewpoints – an unending and continually renewed sense of creation. As Bonnell and Simon have observed,

Museums function as institutions of social memory with a potential public role in constituting what members of any given society understand as their cultural heritage...beyond knowledge acquisition and admiration of what is institutionally preserved and presented as valuable heritage, needed are practices of social memory that conceive of cultural inheritance as a process requiring the commitment to critically engage a past that is both inspiring and despairing (2007: 65).

Thus, the presentation of ‘difficult’ histories and knowledge is fundamental to the preservation and continual re-creation of cultural narrative and should not be overlooked or understated in a museum context. The challenge for the ROM, specifically with regard to establishing itself as a ‘new agora,’ is to do more in its permanent cultural galleries to draw out the implicit debates of their collections thus facilitating confrontation and debate on critical cultural narratives, enriching and empowering cultural memory to include a more comprehensive and complete historical images.

### *3.3.3 Incorporating contemporary art – new mandate for a new museum*

The recent transformations at the ROM have expanded the museum not only in terms of physical space but also in terms of curatorial mandate, including temporary exhibits that engage with contemporary social issues and incorporate works from the contemporary art world. The recently established Institute for Contemporary Culture (ICC) uses a small

gallery space located at the pinnacle of the Crystal. The ICC displays modern day (re)interpretations of cultural issues through contemporary art and is a new avenue for extending the ROM's public 'reach'. The ICC explores current cultural issues through exhibitions of art, lectures, film series, and informal gatherings. Its main gallery space (also known as the Roloff Beny<sup>6</sup> Gallery) is the 'final destination' in the visitor's exploration of the Crystal galleries. As a large, flexible multimedia gallery, the space is made dramatic by the converging angles of the crystal's peak and large geometric windows looking out on to Bloor Street four floors below – a contemporary house for a contemporary mandate.

The ICC is the ROM's "window on contemporary society," where the new encounters the historical and anthropological. As such, the ICC explores the "continuity and discontinuity of cultures" – their relationship across space and time, to each other, and the natural world ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). The ICC's curatorial approach is meant to complement and enhance the ROM's historical collections and give relevancy and context to history through contemporary experiences and interpretation of the historical. The ICC has also played host to some of the more controversial exhibitions at the ROM in recent years thereby encouraging encounters with 'difficult knowledge' and having a key role to play in the museum's engagement with contemporary public culture.

*DARFUR/DARFUR*, a nine day exhibition in September of 2007, was a multimedia exhibition consisting of over 150 haunting images of village and refugee life in Darfur, including bombing, military response, and intimate portraits of those trying to

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<sup>6</sup> Roloff Beny was a painter, print maker, and internationally acclaimed photographer, originally from Medicine Hat, Alberta, known for his photographic essays exploring his native Canada, Japan, India, Northern Europe and the ruins of Greece and North Africa.

survive the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Edited projections appeared on the outer façade of the Crystal, accompanied by traditional Sudanese music, from dusk to 11:00 pm every evening. This display approach brought content to the exterior of the museum, into the streets, the implicit message being that public awareness of the conflict was urgently needed. A similar approach for public engagement was used in *General Idea's AIDS Sculpture*, brought to the ROM through ICC initiative just in time to celebrate the sixteenth International AIDS Conference in Toronto in the fall on 2006. The six-foot, graffiti-covered sculpture was put on display on the ROM Plaza, at the southwest corner of Bloor Street West and Queen's Park. This was another signal from the ROM that a particular issue needed to be discussed by the public. In more hegemonic interpretations of museum engagement, such signals may indicate a lesson in civility and social responsibility taking place, but clearly, the ROM is subject to its own lessons and takes cues from the public as well as giving them.

Taking political, at times moral, stances in its public image, the ROM is clearly seeking to engage with issues that it sees as affecting contemporary culture and social consciousness. The message is that the ROM is not a relic of the past but an active participant and conveyor of the present, engaging not only a local or national public, but also an international and global public. In this way, the ROM is acting out not only its institutional role as a venue for civic education and public encounter, but also as a place for reflection, debate, and confrontation with the everyday condition of humankind. This act of praxis, of encounter between past and present, between tradition and modernity, stimulates the museum as a cultural center, but it can also create tensions for the museum as an institution. Some visitors may resonate more with traditional collections and

museological approaches while others may involve themselves more in the contemporary aspects of the ROM's programming and exhibitions. Finding the balance between reverence and appreciation of the past, experimentation, and vigor for the future may prove to be the ROM's most challenging task.

#### **4 BUILDING FUTURE PUBLICS: EDUCATION, OUTREACH AND MARKETING**

The ROM is marketed as a place for everyone, a true public institution; but what is this 'public' and who constitutes it? The public within the museum context cannot be conceived as a universal, idealized category of viewers. There is no 'pure' specimen of museum visitor that is untouched by controversy, conflict, and struggle. The notion of the public is further complicated within the context of Toronto's modern social reality, which is characterized by plural, fragmented, and hybrid social identities and groups. This is not only reflected in cultural heritage and practice but also through identities of gender, race, education and skill level, economic class, physical ability, and geographic location.

The changes that have taken place at the ROM, both architecturally and in its curatorial mandates and practices, are all aimed at presenting a 'new museum' that is reflective of a 'new public.' Appealing to this 'new public' requires the ROM to re-evaluate its educational programming, marketing, and outreach activities so that the institution can be responsive to its visitors' needs and tastes. While the ROM emphasizes certain social aesthetics and activities in its programming, marketing, and fundraising – aesthetics and activities it deems reflective of Toronto public culture – it has broadened



its target audience in a number of ways. No longer is it enough to foster elite audiences with fancy events and prestigious exhibits. The ROM is clearly moving towards the formation of a more diverse and inclusive museum community and constituency. The following sections elaborate on this trend.

#### 4.1 ACCESSIBILITY

Reaching out and bridging the gap between different socio-economic classes is often equally if not more challenging than bridging different cultures. However, recent announcements at the ROM have indicated a strong policy commitment to ensuring access for those who may be excluded due to financial reasons. Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty recently announced the ROM's Community Access Network, or ROM CAN, an innovative new program providing free Museum tickets directly to communities and individuals who may not otherwise visit the Museum. The program is partnered with United Way Toronto and the Institute for Canadian Citizenship. The Institute has also spearheaded a program that will provide new citizens of Canada with free year-long family passes to six of Toronto's major cultural institutions including the Art Gallery of Ontario, Gardiner Museum, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Ontario Science Centre, Royal Ontario Museum, and the Textile Museum of Canada (Metro 4/10/2008). Communities that will benefit from ROM CAN through United Way Toronto include at-risk-youth, seniors on fixed incomes, aboriginal people, abused women, and physically or mentally disabled people (ROM 04/20/2008). The ROM aims to increase accessibility in a number of other ways offering free or reduced admission at various times during the week. Also, beginning in the spring of 2008 all full-time students attending a post-

secondary institution in Canada will receive free admission on Tuesdays. Funding for ROM CAN is valued at over \$1.3 million per year. Whether these efforts are succeeding in drawing in a more diverse public is up for debate, and it may be some time before results are visible.

Accessibility has become more comprehensive in its meaning in the twenty-first century. For museum institutions such as the ROM there is increasing pressure and demand to extend notions of accessibility beyond mere admission. One of the main goals of *Renaissance ROM* is to showcase the collections in more “comprehensive and dynamic ways” and to make “an effort to create greater intimacy between the visitor and objects in order to reveal the context and meaning of objects” ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)).

Throughout the various galleries, visitors are given the opportunity to engage with objects in a numbers of ways. Audio tours, multimedia, digital media, live musicians, as well as ‘hands-on’ interactive exhibits allow more than the visitor’s sense of sight to be engaged when encountering museum objects, enriching understanding, and contextualizing the objects in different ways for visitors.

Making the building and exhibits accessible for people with physical disabilities has also become a priority for the ROM. In addition to being wheelchair accessible, the museum’s ‘wayfinding’ system includes Braille and tactile elements. The ROM offers visitors complimentary wheelchairs, large-format floor plans, captioning of the digital donor wall, sign language podcasts, descriptive audio guides, tactile elements in the galleries, and increased seating throughout the Museum. In the future, the ROM will work towards expanding its accessibility offerings to include a tactile-tour for visitors who are visually impaired and the addition of tactile models to accompany the museum’s

descriptive audio tour. Such efforts to increase accessibility at the ROM are strategies supportive of increasing museum attendance and patronage but also enhance its public image as an inclusive institution.

## 4.2 YOUTH PROGRAMMING

In many ways, the ROM has been building its future public from its start – its founding director Charles Trick Currelly, an early adherent of the concept of the child-centered museum, planned it that way (Mak 1996). The ROM views itself as a place for public education and bases its commitment to this practice on the “belief in the role of the museums as centres for lifelong learning” ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). A wide range of educational activities for adults and youth has sprung out of this commitment and has been designed to reflect multiple learning styles and levels of interest. Some of these activities include school visit programs and children’s programs; university teaching cross appointments and external teaching activities; lectures, classes, and seminars for adults; community tours or travel; cultural, artistic, and/or community events; interactive exhibits, and the use of new media and other technology-based delivery vehicles.

The ROM’s school programming is well established and renowned. Most people who have grown up in the Toronto area can recall at least one field trip to the museum in their school days. Educational programming also extends beyond the walls of the ROM through “Travelling Education Kits” created for individual classes or whole schools. Beyond classroom curricula are the museum’s *ROMkids* programs, aimed at engaging with children and youth sixteen and under, these include a Saturday Morning Club, Summer Club and March Break Camp. ROM Family Weekends offer programming,

music, and special events that aim to entertain the whole family. For example, a flutist known as the Crystal Pied Piper along with several other musicians work to engage young audiences with cultural history, drawing them into various gallery spaces to learn the history of music, art, and customs from different cultures. I witnessed the Pied Piper entice youngsters throughout the ROM with his flute music and colourful character, leading them into the gallery of Ancient Greece where a fellow musician (a harp player) played the attentive youngsters the oldest known song in the world. The children were clearly caught up in the magic of this experience, as were several parents who stood a safe distance back. At the same time, aspiring artists were busy sketching the timeless lines and curves of Greco-Roman artifacts into their drawing books.

In my mind, this experience came the closest to evoking the essence of the agora. Although a small, intimate, and temporal occurrence, the effect was a real sense of shared learning and exchange that brought together young and old. Perhaps with children at the heart of educational programming, the ROM can cultivate a space for public learning and interaction that is cross-cultural, cross-generational, dynamic, and non-threatening – a truly modern conception of agora.



*Musicians are used to enhance intimacy and understanding of world histories and cultures*

#### 4.3 ADULT PROGRAMMING

*ROMLife* is the museum’s adult programming, which offers lectures, courses, and events related to museum collections and cultural events. Some adult programs may be only tangentially related to the collections and exhibits, focusing instead on developing a society around the museum, promoting specific forms of knowledge, and encouraging certain behavioural and social norms. ‘Connecting for Singles,’ part of *ROMLife* programming, is one such example. The Connecting programs “offer an alternative to the bar scene; singles can meet new people and enjoy an engaging speaker every month” ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). Program topics include improving social and communication skills, how to pick a wine, etc. The educational element in such programming could be viewed

as a type of ‘civility lesson,’ echoing the ROM’s elitist past as a venue for endowing the public with ‘state- or elite-sanctioned’ sophistication and civic behaviour.

Indeed, a good part of the ROM’s renaissance has been a marketing of upscale events, programming, and amenities that might appeal to the discerning cultural consumer. The clearest example of this is the Crystal Five (C5) restaurant, located in the penthouse of the Lee-Chin Crystal. Offering “an exhilarating station from which to view Toronto’s magnificence,” the restaurant plays host to private functions and meetings offering, “superlative gastronomic experiences and a sophisticated lounge environment” ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). Its lounge boasts that it is the “most chic place in the city to unwind” and has even concocted its own martini, the ROMtini, as its signature beverage.

The ROM’s ‘public’ is broadening through its educational, outreach, and marketing practices. With an eye towards the cultural, economic, and social diversity of the modern public, the ROM has made conscious efforts to be more inclusive, accessible, and representative. However, while the ROM has broadened its conception of the museum community, it has also deepened its reach into the lifestyles of the wealthy by appealing to the cosmopolitan tastes of the nouveaux riche. This type of manoeuvre is hardly surprising given the cost of running a museum of the ROM’s size and scope, and it is entirely in line with the ROM’s history of patronage and governance (see appendix A for a brief history of the ROM’s social and institutional origins).

#### 4.4 PATRONAGE AT THE ROM

The tradition of private sponsorship remains an integral part of the ROM’s modern identity, if somewhat nuanced. The Michael Lee-Chin Crystal is the most prominent

display of this at the ROM, but gallery walls and tribute halls are inscribed with the names of many other private donors who have given generously to the ROM over the years. In terms of non-government revenue, the ROM receives forty-five percent through membership and foundation funding, twenty-one percent through admission fees, thirteen percent through programming, fourteen percent through museum sales, and six percent through other sources ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). Clearly, fundraising and membership is a crucial source of revenue for the ROM. The ROM has expanded its efforts to build future philanthropists by courting cosmopolitan culture in Toronto and beyond. The Young Patrons' Circle (YPC), which was launched in the fall of 2005, is an effort to establish the next generation of donors. Providing unique access to the ROM and the opportunity to meet other young professionals from diverse career, social, and business circles, the program aims to foster the next generation of philanthropy at the ROM and cultivate enthusiasm for the institution among younger crowds ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)).

The YPC is modelled after similar and very successful initiatives at both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. The YPC has established ties with the MoMA's Junior Associates program, and plans are now in place for an annual reciprocal program. Most YPC members are in their thirties but eligibility runs the range of nineteen to forty four years, with a standard two-cardholder membership costing \$1,000 per year (ROM 03/29/2006). One of the YPC's most successful events has been PROM, a retro inspired fundraising party that seeks to "reflect the new ROM by having a party that suits new tastes" (ibid). Catering to the city's 'glitterati' with a ticket price of \$125, PROM is one of Toronto's most exclusive parties.

While this new patronage may reflect the tastes of a contemporary and cosmopolitan nature, an element of old-fashioned elitism is entrenched in the courting of patrons for the ROM. This is perhaps an inescapable and necessary component to museum funding as public financial support has been dwindling, but tensions around representation and voice must be acknowledged in such a scenario. Dependence on corporate and private patronage for financial support and donations, and the accompanying need to reward those gifts with public recognition through plaques or naming of buildings, compels many museums to live in the shadow of their aristocratic and elitist history (McClellan 2007). For some this exclusivity is intimidating, for others it is alluring (Bennett 1995). In addition, those who gave generously to the founding of the ROM, historically, were guaranteed a say in its governance. ROM directors and Board members have traditionally been drawn from the upper echelons of society; bankers, industrialists, investors, professors, government officials, and other members of 'high society.' This may add another layer of skepticism regarding the ROM's ability to be representative of the public at large.

#### 4.5 GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

The ROM, as an agency of the Ontario Ministry of Culture, has certain obligations to the government for its governance, fiscal, and to some extent curatorial practices, thus a certain amount of state authority is entrenched in the museum, reminiscent of the museum's traditional 'hegemonic' functions. With increasing reliance on private sector funding, the balance between public and private interests at the ROM is an important consideration, and the governance structure of the ROM clearly reflects this tension.



The Board of Trustees is the ROM's public Board, responsible for the conduct of the museum and vested with legal and financial responsibilities to the provincial government. Consisting of twenty-one trustees (volunteer positions) – fifteen appointed by the provincial government, three who are ex-officio members<sup>7</sup>, and three who are elected by ROM members – the majority of the trustees are CEOs, lawyers, university professors, and members of the professional class. The Board's primary responsibility is to develop and monitor two levels of policy at the ROM: governance policies, which articulate the museum's mandate, vision, values, and objectives and define the limits of executive authority, as well as policies regarding key institutional and museological issues. The Board sets strategic priorities including broad curatorial and operational priorities while focusing on intended long-term impacts (i.e. ends), not on the administrative or programming means of attaining these ends. It also "strives to maintain an awareness of social and economic factors affecting the communities served by the ROM" ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)).

The Board of Governors is the ROM's private sector Board and is responsible for the long-term financial health, growth, and management of its financial assets (endowments, capital and flow-through funds). In addition to fundraising activities, the Governors have been recently mandated to oversee content and communications (including the ROM newsletter and digital media) in close contact and collaboration with museum marketing staff.<sup>8</sup> ROM Governors are expected to contribute a certain level of financial support to the ROM typically through the Royal Patrons Circle, a donor group

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<sup>7</sup> The three ex-officio members of the Board of Trustees are the Chair of the Governing Council of the University of Toronto, the President of the University of Toronto, and the Director/CEO of the ROM.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Marie Bountrogianni, President and Executive Director of the ROM Governors, April 16, 2008.

that requires a minimum annual donation of \$1500. There are thirty-three governors who, like the Board of Trustees, are drawn from the ranks of CEOs but more specifically from industry, business, and financial sectors.

There are also thirteen Senior Managers who oversee all aspects of museum work, from collections management to finances to visitor services. They ensure that the ROM is managed according to the museum's mission and objectives, Board policy, and the "accepted standards of the larger museum community" ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). Beyond these particular governance bodies, lays a staff of hundreds and a well-established core of volunteers that ensure the ROM runs smoothly. At the helm of this mammoth organization is the Director and CEO who is accountable to the Board for the organization and financial performance of the ROM in fulfilling its vision and objectives. The director's performance is inextricably linked to the ROM's performance and will inevitably shape and guide its progress. The current Director and CEO, William Thorsell was appointed in 2000 and has guided the ROM through its most dramatic and controversial transformations.

Looking at the members of the ROM's governance structure and the key decision makers in regards to the museum's direction and connection with the public, one is struck by the maintenance of elitist standards for membership. On the surface, the presence of women, visible minorities, and foreign-born Canadians in Board membership may indicate a fairly representational and 'progressive' side to the ROM's governance structure, but closer examination reveals their common link – wealth, higher educational attainment, and social prestige. This makes one wonder what issues, concerns, and desires are being voiced at the heart of the ROM. What aesthetics are represented by this

membership? How is diversity interpreted and represented by the ROM's governance and patronage, and what perspectives regarding the important social issues of our time are being expressed? In other words, whose voice is being heard by the ROM?

## 5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this report has been to illuminate the best practices of the ROM in its engagements with the public. Radical changes to its architectural and spatial presence have been accompanied by more subtle experimentations in curatorial and museological practices. Active outreach to new and/or marginalized audiences demonstrates that the ROM is seeking to engage with and cultivate a society around the museum that is diverse, cosmopolitan, contemporary, and multicultural. Nevertheless, in many ways the ROM has a tenuous relationship with the public. The drastic transformations that have taken place in recent years have accelerated the ROM too quickly in a certain trajectory at the expense of its responsiveness and attentiveness to public culture.

As McClellan (2003) has observed, modern museums are often guided by ideals of public service and democratic access, a sort of “utopian optimism” that joins people together through a shared past and common love for art (or history). This “utopian optimism” can blind institutions to fragmented, difficult, and broad interpretations and experiences of history and culture. The ‘new agora’ cannot afford to be blind in this manner, and the ROM must work to address the inconsistencies between its policies and practices of inclusion and democratization. Related to the project of the ‘new agora,’ Kylie Message (2006) has observed that museums in the modern era seek to function more like cultural centres, acting as a political agent playing an advocacy role in the reconstruction of cultural identity and promotion of cross-cultural dialogue. “Discourses of the ‘new museum’ – of access, democracy, the recognition of cultural diversity – might break with the museum’s traditional project of civic reform and succeed in offering

an alternative and effective framework of cultural production and engagement” (Message 2006).

Building museum publics in the twenty-first century will require a deepening of democratization in every level of museum functioning. Its statements of science must increasingly reflect the emerging debates on the biological limits of progress and the tenuous relationship that humans have with their environment while also continuing its founding mandate of documenting and researching the natural history of the world. Its statements of society must become more self-reflective, understanding that the ROM’s institutional history is intertwined with significant portions of ‘difficult knowledge’ in world cultural history and drawing it out sufficiently to illuminate the past and enlighten the present. Without any critical assessment and presentation of these difficult histories, the cultural narratives that are present will remain problematic and incomplete.

Nevertheless, the ROM has moved decisively in the direction of inclusiveness by increasing its accessibility, collaborating with community, and experimenting with curatorial practices. In addition, programming and events have revitalized the ROM as a place for learning, socializing, and celebrating; but is the museum the ‘new agora’? Perhaps not yet, although as the city continues to engage with the notion of a ‘cultural renaissance’ we may see more cultural institutions attempt to re-engage with the public through bold statements in architecture, experimental and cosmopolitan programming, and democratizing access. This fall’s re-opening of the Art Gallery of Ontario is certainly an indication of a trend.

Still in order to evoke the ‘agora’ and the desire, indeed the social need, for space that is truly open to the public, one must look to the streets where we see the public

image. Enclosing the public within any building or institution will inevitably alter its presence and consciousness. The museum must almost turn itself inside out in order to truly build a ‘new agora’ – bring its knowledge to the streets, outside of its walls, adorning its architecture. It is still in the streets where public culture lives, and engaging with Bloor Street culture and community will be an important determinant of the ROM’s ability to become an agora. So far, the ROM’s engagements with its urban environment, both architecturally and politically, have been controversial at best and detrimental to its community relations at worst. The starkness of its new architecture and lack of an exterior commons creates little space and opportunity for the agora to establish itself around the museum.

These challenges represent opportunities for further democratization. The transformation of the ROM is incomplete and the ‘Crystal Age’ is still being written. What choices the museum makes in terms of its engagements with the public will determine whether the ROM and public culture will travel along similar trajectories and create a ‘new agora’ or whether the divisions created through the institutionalization of culture will perpetuate the exclusion of voices from the museum’s public realm.

## APPENDIX A – A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROM

The idea for the museum grew out of the imagination and dedication of several key community members and educators from the University of Toronto who sought to establish a world class scientific and educational institution. The ROM was to be the successor to the University Museum and its ties to the U of T, which were administrative and material in nature, were maintained until 1968 when the museum was formally divided from the University (Dickson 1986). In addition to its university affiliations, several Canadian associations and institutions aided in the establishment of the ROM's natural histories collection, including the Geological Survey of Canada, the Ontario Bureau of Mines, and the Toronto Naturalists' Club (ibid). The bulk of its cultural collections were largely a result of generous donations and diligent explorations by individuals funded through the patronage of prominent members of the Toronto upper class.

Sir Byron Edmund Walker is considered one of the main driving forces behind the campaign to establish a world-class museum in Toronto; he also took part in the foundation and direction of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the University of Toronto (Dickson 1986, [www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)). In 1907, when he became President of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, he was able to wield considerable influence and resources for the project. Using his affiliations with the U of T, he positioned himself within a community of like minds who considered a museum a necessary academic institution in an age of scientific education (Dickson 1986).

One of those like minds was Charles T. Currelly. First in Egypt, and later in Crete and Asia Minor, he began collecting for people in Britain and Canada, including Sir Edmund Walker. With money provided by private donors, the University of Toronto, and the Government of Ontario, Currelly began collecting for the museum before it had even been formally established, often accumulating significant debt in the process (Dickson 1986). In Eileen Mak's interpretation, Currelly's acquisitions allowed "Toronto's very wealthy [the license that] allowed them to perceive of Toronto as an international metropolitan centre, [a conviction that in turn] ensured the ROM victory in the struggle for the financial and moral support of the province" (Mak 1996: 47). Currelly became the central figure around which the museum's early acquisitions occurred. Records of his correspondence attest to his courting of the Toronto elite, and his extensive travels and connections around the world, as well as his loyal donors, ensured that his ambitions for a large and varied collection would be realized.

Some wealthy families have maintained their patronage ties to the museum throughout multiple generations, as in the cases of the Samuel and Eaton families. Sigmund Samuel was a key individual for acquiring pieces for the ancient Greek collection as well as a large collection of Canadian prints, paintings, maps, and artifacts. He helped fund the building of a separate Canadiana Gallery for the ROM and funded the addition of a new wing to the museum in 1958. Through the establishment of a trust fund he bequeathed to the ROM, the Canadian collections have continued to grow to this day. Subsequent generations of the Samuel family have continued the tradition of philanthropy, giving generously to the Gallery Development Campaign of the 1980s and 1990s enabling the Museum to complete the Samuel European Galleries. They also funded the complete refurbishment of the Currelly Gallery, finished in 1997. The space

was re-named the Samuel Hall-Currelly Gallery because of this donation ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)).

The Eaton family was instrumental in establishing and supporting the ROM in its early years. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the T. Eaton Company donated a wide-range of pieces, from European decorative arts to Canadian textiles to gems to African art. Today, Nicole Eaton maintains the family's involvement at the ROM. In the 1980s, she played a fundamental role in raising funds for ROM galleries, and improving the Museum's financial self-sufficiency. She was also instrumental in the creation of the Institute for Contemporary Culture ([www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca)).



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Marie Bountrogianni, President and Executive Director of ROM Governors, April 16, 2008.

### About the author

Jessica landed in Toronto last fall to complete a master's degree in political science at York University. Her recent academic interests have revolved around citizenship, labour, and precarious existences with particular attention to the experiences of international migrants. Recognizing the cultural dimension of these social and economic flows, and supported by studies of anthropology and history, Jessica has cultivated a strong awareness of the power of historical knowledge and creative expression for continuity and dynamism of social and cultural identities. It is her hope that this report contributes to a better understanding of modern cultural engagements within a globalized city such as Toronto. She plans to settle temporarily in Toronto to explore a career in citizenship and labour studies, and to continue to explore the city's cultural life.

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Comments and feedback are welcome.